# GIVING VOICE:

# EXPLORING THE SCHOOL-BASED CARE EXPERIENCES OF

# AT-RISK YOUTH

by
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# Abstract

This qualitative study was designed to analyze the perspectives of at-risk students regarding their experiences with educators whom they believe demonstrated care toward them during their school history. The theoretical framework for this study comes from a merging of Noddings' Ethic of Care as teacher practice with the work of others who have developed categorizations of care from a student perspective. In order to give the experiences of the research participants meaning and value, the study used a phenomenological approach. The research findings describe care as resulting from the existence of nine inter-related aspects of teacher behaviour that are described thematically under two broad organizers: care as collaborative actions and care as personal attributes. This research has implications for educators seeking to enhance the school experiences of at-risk youth.

**Keywords:** ethic of care; at-risk youth; schools; connectedness

# Dedication

To Tammy, Ashley, Jaryd and Dominic. I owe you all so much. Your love and support throughout this journey made it possible and worth doing.

# Acknowledgements

I owe so much to the many scholars who have offered support and guidance to me along the way.

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# Chapter 1.

# Introduction

Trying to determine a specific path for research can be a great challenge. Questions of competence, interest and relevance of the research abound. Can I do this? What am I interested in? What are the questions I might ask? Do they matter? Like most graduate students, while I contemplated these questions, I experienced moments of great doubt, intense focus and unexplained malaise. An original idea for a research project quickly fizzled as I realized it was not likely to hold my interest over the long term. As I had done a great deal of work to get to that point, I told myself I had go back to the drawing board and find a question and a process that really mattered to me. "What do I really care about?," I asked myself. Having heard so many young people tell me that teachers don't care about them I have long been curious what that really meant. These few words alone don't provide the full picture, or tell the full story of what led them to draw that conclusion. In delving into the literature I soon realized that there is a great deal written on the issue of care; however, the term is rarely defined and the voices of youth, especially those at-risk, are seldom heard. At last, I thought, a topic I really care about. In this chapter I outline some personal reflections on care, introduce two foundational concepts—care and at-risk youth—and establish the research problem and question.

## Personal Reflections on Care

For many years I have tried to figure out what it meant to "care". It seems such a powerful word; so ubiquitous as to be beyond need of definition. I have always been sensitive to the existence of care in my life; aware when it was there

and when it was not. I have also tried to be attuned to times when it was or was not in existence for those around me. Before going any further it is important that I step back and explore this from a personal perspective. As will be seen in subsequent chapters I ask some intensely personal questions of my participants. It seems fitting to open with an intensely personal exploration of my own experiences related to care. This provides context to the reader, frames my research as personal and is in keeping with the traditions of the phenomenological approach I have chosen.

In my childhood, I felt care from my mother and experienced distance from my father. At the time I didn't question it, judge it, celebrate its presence or bemoan its absence. In fact I was hardly aware of its existence in any tangible way. As best as I remember I just accepted that sometimes it was there and sometimes it wasn't. My recollection is that my mother saw her mission in life as child rearing. Although she never said it, I think she also believed she could do it very well. Raised in a working class family with the resulting financial challenges, she found herself raising six children in similar circumstances. Yet she was determined to do everything she could to make all six as successful as possible. By any measure, she succeeded. She died far too young, but lived long enough to see all six of her children succeed. In her later years she found delight in pointing out that all of her children were "successful", more so than many children from other families who had been blessed with more. This pride did not carry over to other aspects of her life; she was not a proud woman generally, certainly not proud of her own life accomplishments outside of family. She was always tremendously embarrassed about her economic circumstances, to the point she suffered extreme depression.

When it came to her children, it was clear that mother was proud that she cared enough to do her very best for them. Ironically, after we were all grown and gone, my mother attempted suicide through an overdose of pills. The attempt was not successful. Later, while in the hospital, she told me she was sorry she

had done it and that she did not really know why she did it. She said she would never try anything like that again. "I can't," she said. "I realized that if I went now I would not be able to watch your children grow into wonderful, caring people." This was several years before I had children of my own. My mother lived for another 15 years and she did get to see my children grow into wonderful young people. I have always wondered how a woman so burdened with much of life could care so much for others. She was not a strong woman, but she was a caring woman. For many years I have wondered if perhaps she cared too much. Is it possible, I have long wondered, to put care for others in the place of care for self? If mother is any indication, I think probably it is. But this selfless act is perhaps the best gift one can give. At the same time I have wondered why care seemed to so often be women's work. Why is so much of this burden laid at their feet?

I am aware that I have ignored my father in all of this. I say my mother cared, that my father was distant. My father was always there, home every night but rarely, it seemed, was he present. Determined to do what he could to provide for his family and hampered by demons of his own, his life often seemed dark. I never determined the source of this darkness but take comfort knowing that in later years this terrible cloud lifted. Unlike my mother, whose demons were silent and unseen to us children, for most of his life, my father's demons were there for the world to see—in the form of alcohol and anger. While he was often angry, he rarely acted on the anger. His preferred response was to find solace in alcohol. My mother acted as a buffer between us children and our father, keeping us away when needed and letting us know when it was safe to go near. When possible, she constructed finely orchestrated family activities that provided a façade of an intact family. Somehow every Christmas my father could be sober and happy for several days. Of course, the New Year brought in an entirely new season. During this time I recall feeling intense anger towards my father, especially when his drinking meant he had lost another job and we were back to

square one. In my youth I made the assumption (wrongly as it turned out) that all of this meant he didn't care; after all, if he did we wouldn't have had to go through all that we did.

In my teenage years my hostility towards my father was palpable. I distanced myself from my family, seeking refuge in the families around me that represented idealized notions of what family should be about. This hostility lingered in me for many years, coupled with an arrogance that knew no bounds. I seemed to look for every opportunity to show myself, and anyone who was watching, that I was not like my father.

Thankfully, and for reasons I cannot really explain, my father changed dramatically. Or maybe I changed. Regardless, I learned in early adulthood that in fact my father did care—intensely. When I was in my late teens my father quit drinking—cold turkey—and until he retired years later he held the same job. He was devoted to my mother, to our family and to his friends at work. I am sure people who knew him in these years would have been shocked to find out about the years that had gone before. For many years he was there for all of us, showing the entire family profound care. There are many examples of this, but one story in particular stands out in my mind. It occurred when my then girlfriend, now wife, Tammy, and I were travelling to visit my parents. We were a young, newly dating, couple with a car barely held together by duct tape and coat hangers. About 200 km from our destination, the car broke down in a small town. Not knowing what to do, and literally having no mechanical abilities, I called my father. Over the phone he diagnosed the likely problem, loaded up the needed tools into his car, bought the needed parts and drove to our location to repair the car in the dead of night. Once the car was repaired, he bought us dinner and talked glowingly to Tammy about how proud he was of me. "The first to ever go to university, heck one of the first to graduate high school", he laughed. I had never heard him say any of these things before. While he was speaking to Tammy I listened as if he were speaking directly to me. When he was done, I

startled him by saying thanks. He seemed to have forgotten I was there. No matter, he said it and I appreciated it. Afterwards we followed him to Kamloops. Along the way I realized people care in different ways. In the silence that accompanied the trip I recall saying to Tammy, "maybe he cared the whole time." She replied, "Perhaps, and maybe you didn't care enough to notice." "Perhaps you're right." I said as we both smiled and I wiped a tear from my eye.

After years of hostility and resentment toward my family, and particularly my father, I enjoyed several "good" years. We visited often. While my mother wasn't able to travel my father made great efforts to visit, especially after my children, Ashley and Jaryd, were born. He called often, having found a kindred spirit in Tammy. Many times he would call and if I answered the telephone he would say a quick hello and ask if Tammy was there. This, of course, seemed perfectly fitting as she was my care conduit. It was she who took me home, encouraged me to reach out, work to accept my family as they were, not as I wished they were. Through her care I was able to do this. When my father later got Alzheimer's at far too young an age I was able to become a care-giver, albeit not as frequently as I would have liked. Still, I made every effort to be there for him, sit with him, read to him. For hours we would sit, often with him staring at me. I wondered what he saw, I know what I saw.

They are both gone now. Their lives of hardship best remembered, not for the trials, but for the great gifts they were able to give their children. Statistically, none of us should have "made it"; but we all did. We have been through much, yet we are held together, bonded by a care and affection for each other that we all treasure. We know where it came from and we hope to pass it on.

School, of course, provides another context in which to explore care. For me school was always a refuge from whatever else might be happening in the hectic world that unfolded amidst the above circumstances. From as far back as I can remember school was a positive experience. I don't think anyone else in my family would say the same thing about their school experiences. It seems to me

they tolerated it; some doing well, some barely getting by. But for me it was an escape, a place with teachers and books and friends. Here there was affirmation that I had ability, I could pass tests, I could read books, I could make friends. I used to love to show off any new knowledge to my parents. I recall once driving down the main street of town soon after learning to read and telling my parents that I could read every word on every sign along the way—and I did. I must have been completely obnoxious. In all of my elementary years, I only recall one teacher, in Grade 2, that I did not like.

In Grade 5, my teacher, Mr. Gordon, was the principal of the school. In those days both the rules and punishment could be quite harsh. I recall receiving the strap (3 lashes on each hand) for crossing the arbitrary line that separated the boy's play area from the girl's play area. The day after I received the strap, Mr. Gordon, announced to the class that he was organizing a week-long exchange to Bamfield on western Vancouver Island. Only the 10 best students that applied would be able to go on the trip. With my hands still stinging from the strap I was the first one to raise my hand to let him know I wanted to go on the trip. I still recall the stunned look of Mr. Gordon when he saw my hand shoot up.

In high school I recall teachers playing a significant role in my life. Mrs. Behardien, the drama teacher, nurtured my love of theatre. Mr. Noakes the Social Studies teacher would stay after class and talk Canadian History with me. Mr. McGill, a Business Education teacher that I barely knew, came up to me one day and told me about a job opportunity that I might be interested in. I could go on, there were others who showed great care and many to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude.

While I have positive memories of most teachers, I have to be honest and say that friendships at school were a much more powerful influence on me. While I was largely running from my home circumstances I found a welcome reception among peers. One of the great things about growing up in a small city is that kids from all walks of life end up at the same school. This, I believe, enriches the lives

of everyone much more so than in schools which cater to a more specific part of the socioeconomic ladder. This diverse group meant I had a large group of eclectic friends that accepted everything about me. None of them cared that I came from the wrong side of the tracks. In this setting, my insecurities became irrelevant. Of course I soon realized that we all had the usual youthful insecurities and that we were all drawn together for mutual support. Among friends care to one another was modelled, aspirations were nurtured and to be different was okay. As a result, many of the friends I made in those years are still my closest friends.

As I look back and wonder why I have kept some friendships while others have gone by the wayside, I realize there was one common denominator. My lifelong friends are those who invited me into their family, who knew that I was struggling within my own family, and who offered me care and comfort within their home. These friends, Bruce, Paul and Gordon, intuitively provided sanctuary in the confines of their own imperfect lives. Their families provided great care to me. Gordon's parents always seemed eager to have me around for meals, for camping trips or just to hang out in the family room. Paul's parents were much more focused—through them I learned how to play Crib, how to debate world events and how to plan for a future I could control. They invited me for weekends at their cabin and engaged me in long challenging conversations. I still recall being surprised that they thought I might have anything worthwhile to say. Bruce's parents were like surrogate parents to me. When I needed a suit for grad, they graciously bought it for me. When I needed a well paying job to pay for my university education, Bruce's father found it for me. Through all of these experiences I was able to be cared for in the years I was retreating from care within my own family. While these acts of kindness and care could have hastened my withdrawal from my family, they in fact did the opposite. They subtly encouraged me to go back into my own family to look for the care that was there. I was made safe and when I was able, I went back and found the care that was

held within my family all along. It also made me aware that for care to be complete it must be reciprocated. This occurred most clearly when in his later years, after Bruce's mother died and my own parents had passed, I was able to invite his father to be part of my own family. He had his own children, but no extended family, no grandchildren and few close friends. We invited him into our family—insisting that he join us at family holidays, visiting often and making him an honorary, and very special, grandparent to my two children. I realize now that because I received such tremendous care I was able to give some back. When I was asked to give the eulogy at his funeral I was deeply honoured. With Paul's and Gordon's parents listening I felt as though I could speak to all of them, thanking them all for what they had done—not only for me, but I knew, for many others to whom they provided equal amounts of care.

Entering the adult world almost always means some abrupt departures from earlier experience. My abrupt departure took the form of the well paying job I referred to above. My first out of school job was as a care attendant at a residential facility for mentally handicapped children and adults—in the type of large institutional setting that no longer exists in British Columbia. This was my first lesson in purposeful non-care. While the message was that our job was to provide "care" for the less fortunate the reality was that this was rough care at best. On my first and only day of orientation (no actual training was required or provided), we were told that it was important to not to get too close to the residents as many of them were unpredictable and could become violent. In addition we were told that staff, who get too close to the residents, don't usually "work out" as good employees, as they tended to get too emotional and couldn't keep the required distance. I got the message, I needed this job and it paid well. I had a dream and this was my way to get it. For months I became compliantly indifferent—perhaps even a model employee.

While not all of my fellow employees were non-caring, the institutional ethos could, at best, be described as apathy. There appeared little evidence of

care. On the first ward I was assigned to there were 24 severely handicapped men living lives more regimented and mundane than one could imagine. Their daily schedule never changed. It was dictated by shift schedules and employee television viewing habits. Quick, bland meals were followed by countless hours of sitting in moulded plastic chairs that ran the entire perimeter of a large day room. Showers came via a large fire hose that was sprayed on the residents as they stood shivering against a ceramic wall. During this time, the movie "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" was released. I watched it as a documentary and not as a drama. I recognized the cold aloofness of Nurse Ratched. I had seen her often.

Gradually I awoke to the uncaring reality of this situation. I began to ask if we could vary things a little, maybe take groups of residents for a walk down by the lake, or over to the recreation hall to play catch. While I was met largely with indifference, I was not met with resistance. Slowly we made changes to the daily routine, soon others suggested more changes and over time the atmosphere seemed to improve. I like to think it made a difference but I don't really know as soon I had saved enough money and was off to university. I have thought often about that experience. While it wasn't pleasant I recognize that I learned a lot. I learned that if you are rejected, devalued and feared life is very sad indeed. I learned that I was capable of indifference, even active non-care. I also learned that care is an active choice. If we are to care on any level we must actively choose to do so and we must find ways to demonstrate that care. In institutional life it seems there are more obstacles than there are opportunities to care.

My journey jumps ahead to my professional life. While I trained as a secondary teacher I was drawn to policing. As a small town boy in the big city I longed for some excitement. Soon after graduating from university, I joined a large urban police department. While I was unaware of it at the time, it provided me with a great context to understand the philosophical debates between the sometimes mutually exclusive ideas of justice and care that I became familiar with in my graduate work (and which are outlined in Chapter 2 of this

dissertation). Policing is largely built on an individualistic ethic of justice—an eye for an eye is the prevailing ethic. Finding guilty offenders is paramount to helping harmed victims. Detachment from emotion is encouraged, even demanded. In policing I found great amounts of what I would call compromised care. An ethic of care for one's colleagues is available and provides a powerful connection between police members; yet this form of care is denied if one fails to live up to the masculinist ideals of the group. Care for victims of crime is clearly evident; yet empathy for the plight of offenders is largely ignored and even ridiculed. Still I found opportunities to care about my work and to work in caring capacities for others. I worked as a school liaison officer for three years finding it easy to take a proactive care-for approach to policing. I used criminal charges as a last resort and found recognizing the inherent worth of individuals solved most problems. I enjoyed the work and it changed my life. I became passionate about the role of schools as an important socializing place for vulnerable youth. I didn't recognize until much later that my passion largely came from my desire to see others experience school as I had, a place where adults and peers play important care-for roles in the development of those youth who face significant challenges. After 10 years in policing I learned much about myself, about people and about organizations. I was ready to continue my exploration of care in other venues. I jumped at an opportunity to re-enter the arena of public education as a district administrator responsible for safe school and conflict resolution programs.

Within education the concept of care was fraught with many contradictions. I found an espoused commitment to social responsibility and care. Yet most every day I heard from a student or parent who would tell me, referring to teachers and principals, "they don't care." I saw teachers making great sacrifices for students, working countless hours to make a difference for individuals and the larger community. I also saw a system that would actively exclude students unable or unwilling to comply with often unrealistic behavioural expectations. During my career I also saw a new accountability agenda come

into play and with it immense pressure to improve academic test scores. This seemed to reinforce the subject focus of secondary school teachers. Students who couldn't keep up became behaviour problems, subsequently suspended and sent to me to "deal with them". Teachers often did not want to allow these children to return to their classroom, no matter how minor their transgression. Vulnerable students were clearly attuned to this dynamic. To them it meant the teachers didn't really care. Keeping these students in school was a great challenge. If they stayed, they all-too-often languished in alternative programs that were poorly funded, poorly staffed and from which it was impossible to take the types of elective courses that held their interest and, given the structure, it was impossible to graduate. During these years I learned that our public education system has the capacity to provide great amounts of care; however, I also observed that many of those youth who needed it most were the ones least likely to receive it. I realized that not everyone experienced what I had experienced all those years ago. I found myself wondering why. This wondering, as will soon be clear, forms the basis for my research question.

Before going on I should say more about my own family. Tammy and I have been married for 23 years. We have raised two awesome children, making career changes when necessary to allow us to maximize our family time. I have mentioned the role she played in bringing me back to my family. She has done much more. She cares for me, no matter what happens. She stood by me as I worked to build a career while maintaining a strong commitment to family. When at the age of 40 I decided to pursue graduate studies, she has stood by, all-too-often playing second fiddle to books and papers. My children are now grown. Ashley is 22 and married to Dominic, the love of her life. They are mature beyond their years, beginning promising careers and devoted to each other in a way that is a joy to watch. Jaryd is 19, just finishing his first year at the University College where I now teach. He is a younger me, a mirror to my past. An iconoclastic young man, his road will be unveiled over time. Like his father I think he will have

many intriguing stops along the way. Through my family I have experienced a care journey. We are close and supportive.

## Care as a Construct

In the introduction of this chapter I have made much of the term care. In this section of the paper I explore the multiplicity of ways in which the term is described and defined.

Care is a nebulous sort of word. It is a common word, "deeply embedded in our every day language" (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). Chaskin and Rauner (1995) say that to the academic ear it can seem "soft, lacking in precision and without boundaries, and therefore not a very useful guide for investigation, let alone for policy making or for directing practice" (p. 2). Yet, it is accessible beyond academia, conjuring up feelings that go to the core of human experience. It is one of those rare and simple words widely used in some corridors of the academy and more frequently and broadly in everyday life. Care as an idea frames the ways in which people see themselves, their relationships, their institutions and their society.

The Oxford Dictionary defines care as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it can be seen in three ways—as the "provision of what is necessary for the welfare and protection of someone or something; as serious attention or consideration applied to avoid damage, risk or error; or, as a feeling of or occasion for anxiety. As a verb it is defined as to "feel concern or interest; to feel affection or liking; to like to have or be willing to do; and to look after and provide for the needs of" (Oxford Online Dictionary).

However, it is vital to go beyond the dictionary definition in an attempt to contextualize and understand the innumerable ways we use the term (Tronto, 1993). Care requires some sort of engagement, a reaching out to another while fully knowing that action will be required of the carer. Thus, inherent in caring is

the willingness to go beyond a mere passing interest to a willingness to carrying the burdens of others. Tronto sees care as both a disposition and a practice:

> on the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world', so that we can live in it as well as possible. The world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (p. 103)

Clearly, Tronto (1993) provides a vast definition that moves well beyond human interaction and, if realized, would consume much of one's life activity. In this definition, care is an ongoing, life long commitment to all we do to better all that is around us. Tronto believes that care is actualized through a four-part interdependent set of steps. The first step in the process is caring about, which Tronto sees as involving the recognition that care is necessary. This active caring requires assessment of the attendant needs of the cared for. When we care about another we may seek a social or political response. For example we may mobilize others to act when we learn that AIDS patients' needs for food, medicine or mobility are hampered. The next step for Tronto is taking care of. Here the carer takes personal responsibility to act, to personally meet the unmet needs of another. Care-giving involves physical work to ensure these needs are met. This might mean delivering the food to AIDS patients, for example. Care-receiving completes the cycle as the cared for responds to care received. Without this final step we don't know if they needs of the cared for were met. As Tronto says, "unless we realize that the object cared for responds to the care received, we may...lose the ability to assess how adequately care is provided "(p. 108).

Other theorists use terminology similar to Tronto's but they don't define the terms in the same way, nor do they suggest they work together to form a process of care (Blustein, 1991; Mayeroff, 1995; Shogan, 1988). Blustein suggests that firstly there is to "care for" in which the carer likes and is drawn or attracted to another (p. 27). Shogan (1988) sees this type of care as a dutiful

type of care in which the carer is willing to attend to the needs of the other. The second usage offered by Blustein is where the carer has "care of" another. In this usage the carer has been given responsibility for supervising, attending to or providing for another (p. 27). Thirdly, there is "care about." Shogan and Blustein use this to connote a situation in which the carer is invested in and acknowledges an interest in another. They are clear, however, to state that this does not require caring for the individual. A teacher's caring about a student whom they don't particularly like falls into this category. The fourth usage is to "care that" a plan, idea or possibility comes to fruition. This form is non-personal and objective, seeking an end even while the carers recognize they may not actually be able to bring about that which is sought. Mayeroff (1971) concedes there are different kinds of activities of care, all of which are dependent on situation and need. Still, Mayeroff states that:

> in any actual instance of caring it is always someone or something specific that is cared for [about]: the writer cares for [about] this idea, the parent cares for [about] this child, the citizen cares for [about] this community. (as cited in Blustein, p. 36)

Finally, Blustein (1991) offers an inspired "care as calling," an almost divinely influenced conviction that gives meaning and worth to the lives of the carer and the cared for. Care as calling is an inherently risky, trust-filled relationship with another who may even take advantage of the strongly held helping conviction of the carer. Caring in this way requires much of, and teaches much to, the carer. It can teach humility, patience and persistence as it requires that the carer recognize what others bring to the world. When one has care as calling they care about caring; they are "emotionally invested in being a caring person, that is, a person who takes an interest in and devotes him or herself to things, activities, and people in his or her own world" (p. 62).

Gordon, Benner, and Noddings (1996, p. xiii) define care, within a teaching-learning context, as a "set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and realization, growth, development, protection, empowerment, and

human community, culture, and possibility" (p. xiii). Rauner (2000) defines it as "an endlessly cycling process comprised of three interrelated components: attentiveness, responsiveness and competence" (p. 20).

Care is both animate—"I care about my students" and inanimate—"the school doesn't care about me." Rauner (2000) says that it is a word of "great power with a long, rich and sometimes tired past...often trivialized, and thus marginalized in the important business of considering interpersonal relationships and larger systems of social interactions" (p. 4). As a result caring may often come up in conversation, but it does not hold a place at the centre of either policy or practice. Care may be acknowledged as an important concept yet, to-date, it has been studied more as a theory, as an "ethic of care" with considerably less discourse relative to its place in policy or practice (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Noddings, 1995, 2003).

The phenomenon of care is well researched under the rubric of an "ethic of care" (Gilligan, 1984; Noddings, 2005; Tronto, 1993). I explore the ethic of care extensively in Chapter 2, so I will make only brief mention of it here. To date much of the research in this arena is philosophical and is not well researched as teacher practice, especially as it relates to at-risk youth. Cassidy and Bates (2005) recently contributed to this research when they showed that at-risk youth clearly experience care in a publicly funded, private alternative school that deliberately actualizes an ethic of care. They found that when an ethic of care is an explicit goal it infuses practice and is experienced by all members of the school community. Phelan, Davidson, and Cio (1991) found that students report that they "value teachers who care and want teachers to recognize who they are" (as cited in Owens & Ennis, 2005). Eaker-Rich et al. (1996) explored an ethic of care from the perspective of a host of marginalized populations. Rauner (2000) details the place of an ethic of care across several youth serving settings.

## Risk and Protective Factors as Co-existing Constructs

There is no accepted definition of the term at-risk in the literature (Schonert-Reichl, 2000). Still, researchers from a variety of disciplines have studied the issue at length, contributing significantly to the literature across the social and medical sciences. As any academic field in which research precedes theory or term definition is likely itself to be ill defined and at-risk of obscurity, Tidwell and Corona Garrett (1994), suggest that scholars discard the term or focus efforts more clearly on determining its full meaning. It is not the purpose at this point to attempt to construct a suggested definition but to offer an understanding of the many ways in which the term at-risk is seen within the literature. Chapter 2 offers a full description of research findings in the field.

The term at-risk is generally used to describe youth on a path marked by numerous challenges, all of which threaten their capacity to fully contribute to, and thus reap the rewards of, engagement in civil society. The term at-risk is not a new one. Cuban (1994) says it has been used since the beginning of public education in North America. In early usage, the term was used interchangeably with poverty to describe youth, often from non-dominant cultures, who were a drain on the financial health of the community. The source of risk was seen as resting with the individual, possibly extending to the family but rarely to the larger structures of society. This myopic approach persists through today and limits the "utlility of the label and, thus narrows the effectiveness of prevention and intervention efforts" (Schonert-Reichl, 2000, p. 4).

Some definitions of the term are expansive, suggesting it be applied to any individual or group who may not mature fully into responsible adults. This is reflected in a 1995 report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in which they state "children and youth 'at-risk' are viewed as those failing in school and unsuccessful in making to transition to work and adult life" (p. 21). The OECD report goes on to acknowledge that the line

between special educational needs deriving from physical and mental limitations and needs arriving from risk status is blurred in many countries.

Mancini and Huebner (2004) define the term risk as "any behaviour that impedes successful adolescent development or the acquisition of socially approved roles" (p. 648). The authors suggest that multiple systems interact to produce a variety of developmental outcomes that can impede healthy development, such as:

> changing relationships with parents that result in alienation of youth and their families, participation of youth in deviant behaviour so much so that their transition into productive adulthood is prevented, a lack of connections between youth and both successful adults and supportive institutions, inadequate educational opportunities, lack of civic engagement experiences so that youth do not develop skills to be community participants, and alienation that comes from cultural intolerance, so that youth withdraw from mainstream society. (p. 649)

Mancini and Huebner (2004) state this description allows for a layered approach to examining youth risk, allowing the researcher or practitioner to organize and address a wide range of risk factors. As imprecise as it is, such a definition shows that when humans and the multiple systems in their environment interact, the outcome for some will be alienation, disconnection and a lack of opportunity for success.

In the psychological literature, risk has been defined as "those factors that, if present, increase the likelihood of a child developing an emotional or behavioural disorder" (Rae-Grant, Thomas, Offord, & Boyle, 1989, p. 262). Lehr and Harris (1989) say that in the educational realm a number of terms have been used synonymously with at-risk, including disadvantaged, culturally deprived, low ability, dropout prone, alienated, disenfranchised and low performing. Schonert-Reichl sums up the challenge that comes from this:

> educators sometimes use the term to describe students who are at risk of dropping out of secondary school, sometimes to refer to students who are not acquiring the skills necessary for successful

transition into the work force, and sometimes to denote students
with learning problems that limit their future career choices. (p. 5)

Not surprisingly, the use of term at-risk has generated considerable
criticism and debate (Levin, 2004; McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, &
McWhirter, 1998; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Designating someone as at-
risk is fraught with peril as prediction is never perfect, and even children at high-
risk may end up as productive citizens (Dryfoos, 1998; Levin, 2004; Masten,
2001; Werner & Smith, 1992). Placing at-risk status on a continuum, rather than
seeing it as broad diagnostic category, can alleviate some of the concerns. For
example, McWhirter et al. (1998) suggest a continuum where risk is defined as
minimal, remote, high-risk, imminent risk or an active risk. They apply the term
at-risk to the entire continuum, recommending that in assessing and responding
to specific circumstances the most accurate descriptor is used.

The vast majority of youth who face risks which may compromise their
success also have a variety of protective factors present in their lives. This is
reflected in recent modifications of the approach researchers and practitioners
have taken. These modifications reflect the idea that many adolescents exposed
to significant risk are also exposed to a number of protective factors which may
provide them with the resilience to withstand the pressures of being at-risk (Blum,
1998). Recognizing how risk and protective factors often intersect, Hawkins,
Catalano, and Miller (1992) created a risk and protective factor model. They see
risk factors as those which increase vulnerability, while protective factors may
simultaneously decrease the impact of potential risks.

In the Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller (1992) model, protective factors
include individual attributes, mechanisms that enhance social bonds in the home,
peer group, school and community. From the perspective of the individual these
may include self-esteem, problem-solving and coping skills among others. In
terms of social bonding, parental support and familial coping strategies play an

important role. Peers who support pro-social norms are also seen as protective. School commitment and attachment assist in reducing delinquent behaviours.

It seems best to see the term at-risk as a complex organizing concept that defies clear definition. The ambiguities inherent in the term make its operationalization in research or in practice difficult. In the context of this research the term is used to give context to the experiences of the participants. While they come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and each has faced a variety of risk and protective, there is a certain reality to their situations that becomes clear as their stories unfold. The reality is that regardless of the presence of protective factors, in the narrow confines of what constitutes success in our schools, the presence of relatively few risk factors can easily trump any number of protective factors and thus place very capable students at-risk of failure.

## Research Problem and Question

Academically, Canadian students compare favourably with international counterparts on standardized achievement tests.  In 2000, the Program for International Student Assessment demonstrated that the skills and abilities of Canadian students are among the best in the world (Willms, 2003). Canada has relatively high rates of post secondary participation and our governments make substantial investments in public education (Levin, 2004).  Further, the gap between the best and worst performing students is smaller than in most other countries. Additionally, most students participate in academic and non-academic activities at school, and develop a sense of belonging—"their friends are there, they have good relations with teachers and other students, and they identify with and value school outcomes" (Willms, 2003, p. 3).

Concurrent with these successes, Levin (2004) states there is clear evidence that a sense of complacency would be misplaced. There are still

significant numbers of at-risk young people in our schools, youth on the socio-economic margins who are  performing below expectations and who do not experience school as places where they feel successful, connected or even safe (Levin, 2004). These youth are less likely than peers facing minimal risk to successfully complete school and transition into adulthood (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Many youth face significant barriers to success in school and later in the work world. Youth who face poverty, ethnic minority status, family breakdown, abuse and neglect in the home are at much greater risk than their peers to not be engaged in the social or academic life of the school, and do not see school as a welcoming or caring place (Willms, 2003). Goodenow (1993) reports students from low-income families are more likely than their socio-economically advantaged peers to experience school as uncaring places. Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin (1995) state that dropouts view schools as unwelcoming places where they found acceptance only with other potential dropouts.

Gradually students facing significant risk begin a process of withdrawing from school or come to be seen as disruptive and are eventually suspended and/or placed in alternative school settings. Corbett and Wilson (1995) found that these students are largely invisible and lack a voice in the construction of the school environment, leading to further alienation and isolation. Further, they state, without a sense of visibility at school, students who are not attached to conventional academic goals, or who were not motivated by the desire to attain post-secondary education, too often tune out and eventually drop out of school.

McWhirter et al. (1998) state that the most often cited reasons for at-risk students leaving school are that it is boring and irrelevant and that they didn't feel like they belonged and that nobody cared. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) state that at-risk children who leave school believe that teachers show they don't care in three fundamental ways—by not providing extra help, by enforcing norms that label those seeking help as "incompetent," and by not paying attention to

personal problems students may be facing. Together, these factors trigger a long process of disengagement from school that leads to students dropping out. Dropping out is preceded by indicators that the student is retreating from school involvement and is followed by academic and behavioural problems (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Dryfoos, 1990). Bushnik, Barr-Telford, and Bussiere (2004) found that youth who drop out of school were much less engaged when in school, socially or academically, and were much less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities. Once the disengagement process has begun, dropping out becomes "easy"; administrators and teachers may encourage it and students observe that no one seems to care that they are going to drop out (Dyanarski & Gleason, 2002; Fine, 1991).

Disengagement involves social, cognitive and psychological processes (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Socially, the disengaged student is less likely to want to attend school, feel they have friends at the school or feel that their teachers care for them (p. 37). From a cognitive and psychological perspective, disengagement leads to a diminished ability to process academic information, self-manage their learning or want to be otherwise engaged with the school. Raywid (2001) states that in recent years we have re-discovered the importance of engagement, especially for the unsuccessful student who:

> may need more help than most in bringing into play those higher-level processes so widely sought today. And sadly, these are the youngsters who have characteristically been handed workbooks to fill out and a dumbed-down curriculum that...pretty well precludes engagement. (p. 2)

Conceptually, engagement requires a commitment on the part of the teacher to emphasize student competencies, not deficits. To be successful, this must be done over time and across the settings of the school (Firestone & Rosenblum, 1998). Commitment to students at-risk of dropping out leads to "strong emotional bonds with students, often a personal caring for them. When many teachers share this commitment, the results can be a positive climate

where students feel comfortable and wanted. Cassidy and Bates (2005), state that students whose social background and academic history put them at-risk for school failure most need a caring learning environment.

Youth lack a voice in public education (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Cook-Sather, 2002; Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Kozol, 1991; Thorson, 1996). Kozol (1991) says that the "voices of children...have been missing from the discussion" of how we construct schooling as an experience (p. 2). Cook-Sather (2002) says that those most affected by educational policy and practice are students and that they are systemically silenced. She says "it is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education" (p. 3). Acknowledging student voices is more than good manners—when practiced it pays many dividends (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). It can improve the accessibility of the content of classroom lessons and lead to enhanced student empowerment and motivation (Cook-Sather, 2002).

Firestone and Rosenblum (1988) concluded that dropouts perceive their teachers do not care about them. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) use the concept of "persistence-plus" to indicate that a commitment beyond teaching subject matter is required by the teacher committed to keeping students in school and showing that "caring adults want them to learn" (p. 38). Suh and Satcher (2005) reported that Korean-American students who had dropped out had been looking for a personal sense of care from teachers, "they wanted teachers to demonstrate sensitivity to their needs and feelings" (p. 8). Lacking this led to a sense of alienation and eventually to dropping out.

The intersection between school as non-caring, non-welcoming places for at-risk youth and their concomitant lack of voice in the construction of schooling is not well documented in the literature, even though each topic alone benefits by significant scholarship. There are exceptions. Cassidy and Bates (2005) researched an alternative school for at-risk youth and determined that when an ethic of care is an explicit goal it infuses teacher practice and is experienced by

all members of the school community. Eaker-Rich et al. (1996) explored an ethic of care from the perspective of a host of marginalized populations. Rauner (2000) details the place of an ethic of care across several youth serving settings. All of these attempt to extend the discourse from theory to practice.

As stated, at-risk students largely experience school as unwelcome and uncaring. However, few researchers have studied this reality, at least from the perspective of students. Wishing to make a contribution to this work, my research question is: "What do at-risk youth report as the salient qualities and behaviours of educational professionals who they perceive demonstrated care to them?"

## Rationale and Method

To truly understand the phenomenon of care as experienced in school by at-risk youth requires that the research method be carefully chosen. In qualitative research there is rarely one existing method the researcher can go to which is philosophically and methodologically in keeping with what is needed. Therefore early in the process researchers must determine from which methodological tradition(s) they will draw; however they must recognize that alterations are inevitable.

## The Setting

For this dissertation I was interested in building on the work to date related to at-risk youth and their experiences of care at school. In conducting a previous research project which had explored school experiences for at-risk youth I found myself intrigued by one specific alternate program I had visited. In the time I spent there I sensed something different, something very positive and I was curious. There was an integration among staff that I had rarely seen in any school setting. In the previous study I was able to participate in a few staff meetings. I was impressed by the nature of the discussions that took place in the

meetings. All staff seemed to know every one of the 80 students in the program. Comprehensive support plans seemed to be in place, and they were monitored. The tone was respectful and welcoming. Staff seemed to be focused on student success. At the time I found myself intrigued with the staff dynamic. In interviews with students I also found the students in the program to be focused on the future, they spoke deliberately and confidently about what they would do after graduation. It is important to note that these interviews were largely designed to determine what ideas students had for restructuring schools to allow at-risk youth to be more successful. The interviews did not allow me to go too far into discussions about issues of teacher care, though I very much wanted to. During the course of the project I was able to visit all of the alternative programs in the district, this one was different. As well, I have worked with or visited dozens of alternative programs over the years—I had never experienced the dynamic that seemed to be at work here. I wondered if the ethic of care was in play.

The study took place in a school district located in the Fraser Valley region of British Columbia, Canada. The setting is an alternative program within a comprehensive secondary school. The program draws students from across the district. However, most students come from the school catchment area which is a community of mixed use businesses and a socio-economically and ethnically diverse residential area. All of the students enrolled in the program have a history of school difficulties which include learning challenges, a problematic school disciplinary history and/or school avoidance. Students are referred by one of the secondary schools in the district or by senior personnel at the district who have responsibility for responding to students with problematic behaviour. The goal of the program is to graduate students with a secondary school diploma. Compared to other alternative settings in the district, the school graduates a relatively high percentage of students enrolled in the program. In other words, while many of the students in the program are confronted by significant risk factors, many of the participants are on the verge of "making it."

## Order of Presentation

Chapter 2 provides a review of the related literature. In this chapter I more explore fully the ethic of care literature and several factors most related to at-risk youth and their school experiences. This helps establish the case for the study and provides a theoretical frame of reference for the reader.

In Chapter 3 I address the general ontological and epistemological orientation of qualitative research in general and phenomenology more specifically. The chapter explains the procedures used to select participants, conduct the interviews and analyze the data. Ethical considerations and consent procedures are also outlined.

Chapter 4 introduces the research participants. This allows the reader to begin to know those whose voices are heard in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis of the data obtained during participant interviews. Each of two broad themes—care as collaborative actions and care as personal attributes—are introduced and the voices of the participants prominently illustrate each theme.

Chapter 6 provides a comparative analysis of the themes outlined in Chapter 5 against the relevant literature. Some of the literature introduced here is drawn from the literature review; other references were sought following the data analysis and theme development process. This is intended to place the findings in a broader context and illuminate the way to future research.

Chapter 7 fulfils the obligation of the researcher to act on the findings. This chapter provides some concluding observations and suggestions for future research. This chapter closes with selected recommendations from the research participants.

# Chapter 2.

# Review of the Literature

In phenomenology the researcher undertakes a literature review to assess prior studies in order to indicate what new thematic knowledge might be obtained (Moustakas, 1994). In addition to presenting the knowledge directly related to the field of study, the researcher also reviews the relevant methodological literature as a means for accurately aligning method with the goal of the research project. This study is anchored in Noddings' (1984, 2005) Ethic of Care as teacher practice. In situating Noddings' work I first review the foundational work of Carol Gilligan (1982). I will also draw on the work of others who have researched the ethic of care from a student perspective (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996; Owens & Ennis, 2005; Rauner, 2000). Additionally, I will explore the research related to at-risk youth. Finally I will examine the dynamics of school suspension and disengagement as factors that impact the perceptions of care at school for at-risk youth.

## Ethic of Care

As stated in the introduction, care is a nebulous sort of word. Chaskin and Rauner (1995) say that to the academic ear it can seem "soft, lacking in precision and without boundaries, and therefore not a very useful guide for investigation, let alone for policy making or for directing practice" (p.2). We all spend a great deal of time giving and receiving care, and while it is not a new concept, few have considered its full meaning (Hankivsky, 2000; Tronto, 1993). Care is accessible beyond academia, conjuring up notions and feelings that go to the core of human experience. It is one of those rare and simple words that is widely

used in everyday life. It frames the ways in which people see themselves, their relationships, their institutions and their society. While often discounted as an entity worth pursuing, none can deny either its existence nor, when it is present, its desirability.

In academia, care is largely studied under an ethic of care label. While the term has become part of the vocabulary of the social sciences and humanities, precisely what is meant by the term remains unclear. Tronto (1993) says "in many instances, writers who describe an ethic of care do little more than invoke the old forms of 'women's morality'" (p. 125). She argues that this classification opens up broad cultural and social questions that few wish to discuss and thus has doomed the concept to a marginalized position in the study of ethics and morality. Therefore to explain the concept most clearly we must outline its development.

The development of an ethic of care as a discrete area of study in contemporary society owes much to Gilligan (1982) who theorized that an ethic of care as a moral orientation differs from Kohlberg's theory of justice. In his research, Kohlberg (1976) posed moral dilemmas to boys at a private school in Chicago to see how they used moral reasoning to solve problems. From this he developed a six stage hierarchical framework that sees individuals move from the first stage of moral reasoning where they seek to simply avoid punishment to the sixth stage which is marked by a commitment to a comprehensive understanding of the moral dilemma from the perspective of all parties. Kohlberg's theory, viewed as the definitive account of moral development for many years, is centred on the development of notions of justice, equality and fairness as the core components of moral judgment. His principal intention was the development of a set of universal rules applicable to all situations. He concluded that a sense of justice is actualized on the basis of universal principles and rules made in an impartial and verifiable manner. This leads to fair and equitable treatment among

fellow citizens (Botes, 2000). The defining attributes thus become autonomy, objectivity and impartiality.

Criticism of Kohlberg's theory comes from many fronts. Critics of positivistic or modernistic rationality see the ethic of justice as classic reductionism, built on the "dominant model in western cultural history for decades" (Botes, 2000, p. 1073). As such its greatest weakness is that it annexes issues of emotion in order to maintain rationality. Tronto (1993) labels the theory as elitist apology for liberal society, reflecting an inherent bias in social psychology that seeks to explain the world in relation to how it is seen by elites and thereby to minimize the lives and experiences of peoples marginalized by gender, race or socioeconomic status. Tronto (1993) says that the wide acceptance Kohlberg's ideas have received across the social sciences has little to do with validity and more to do with what it says about power structures in our society:

> Kohlberg's theory yields the result that some of the most educated are the most moral. From the standpoint of those within the academy, it is not an untoward assumption to place exalted cognitive abilities at the centre of morality...Kohlberg's theory of moral development risks nothing in the current configurations of power in positing his stages of moral development. (p. 76)

Noddings (1992) makes clear that a society built on exalted ideal of justice with care seen as subservient, perhaps even irrelevant, is problematic. Noddings acknowledges that the issues of justice and rights make an important contribution to human welfare. However, a justice orientation that excludes the active involvement of an ethic of care often prescribes fixed responses and concludes the problem at hand is solved, though the inequalities that may have led to the problem at hand remain unresolved. For Noddings (1992), the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case is an example where justice did the right thing in ruling segregated schooling unconstitutional while the racial inequities that underlie

remain largely unaddressed. Summarizing her perspective, Noddings (1992) says:

> social policy guided by caring would try to establish conditions in which society can flourish. Under such a policy, all the agencies of society would be brought to bear on the problem of inequality in education. Government would not try to "care" directly by imposing an arbitrary solution. Instead, it would provide the necessary resources for various groups to try reasonable alternatives. (p. 16)

Gilligan (1993) suggests that issues of justice might not be the only relevant considerations for individuals when thinking about moral questions. She seeks not to dismiss justice but to add to it. In the introduction to the second edition of *In a different voice* she acknowledges this is not easy:

> the values of separation, independence, and autonomy are so historically grounded...so deeply rooted in the natural rights tradition that they are taken for granted as facts: that people are by nature separate, independent from one another, and self governing. To call these "facts" into question is seemingly to question the value of freedom. (p. xv)

Gilligan (1993) challenged the universality of Kohlberg's theory when she suggested that his work was fundamentally flawed in that his sample contained only males from a private school. She undertook to determine if perhaps the experiences for women were different. Gilligan concluded that when women were asked to talk about their own personal moral dilemmas, they often discussed issues of care and relationships that she felt were not well described by Kohlberg. For the most part, she concluded women and men in contemporary western society aspire to different moral paradigms. In discovering this "different voice" from women's experience Gilligan (1993) posited three things which she said point to the presence of an ethic of care. First, she said, care revolves around responsibility and relationships. Secondly, that morality is concrete and real, not abstract as is justice. Finally, she said, care is guided not by principles but by action—to care is to act with the interests of the "other" in mind.

In suggesting there is an ethic of care, Gilligan (1993) places the role of relationships at the heart of a social, political and philosophical theory. An ethic of care begins with the connection we all experience as part of human life. To exalt autonomy over connection signifies a "disconnection from emotion and blindness to relationships which set the stage for psychological and political trouble" (p. 122). Seeing first our relationships allows us to reframe our ideas of psychology, philosophy and political and legal theory (p. 122). An ethic of care is built on "involvement, harmonious relation and the needs of others" (Botes, 2000). The defining attributes in this construct are involvement, empathy, holism and individual context. The primary aim of the agent here is to seek to fulfill the needs of others, and as a result, maintain harmony, thus making rule application null.

The heated debate between the notions of justice and care have led these two ethics to be kept separate from one another, with each ethic focused on one dimension of human relationships to the exclusion of the other. This has led to exclusivist belief that justice is uncaring and care is unjust. Clement (1996) laments this for, she says, these "ethics are not merely reflections of gender, but of fundamental dimensions of human relationships, and thus their relationships to one another is of great importance for morality in general, as well as for questions of gender" (p. 2).

Like Kohlberg, Gilligan has numerous critics. The gender bias argument that she made against Kohlberg has been levelled against her as all of her research has focused on females. Clement (1996) claims that Gilligan, like Kohlberg, is guilty of false universalism: "while Kohlberg posited the moral experiences of men as *human* moral experience, those defending the ethic of care as a feminine ethic seem to posit the experiences of a specific, non representative group of women as *women's* moral experience" (p. 3). In the face of intense criticism, Kohlberg, Habermas and other influential (mostly male) academics struck back saying that Gilligan's argument is moot as she is operating at a different, private and personal level (such as obligations to family

and friends) while Kohlberg was describing life on the public level (Tronto, 1993, p. 87). Puka (1991) dismissed Gilligan's perspective saying that she offers care not as connected to moral development but rather as a "coping strategy" for dealing with oppression women have faced. In addition, he concluded that Kohlberg's ideas of the development of moral reasoning and Gilligan's care might be best nurtured together.

Hankivsky (2004) states that the criticism of the ethic of care theory can be seen in four ways—that care as a feminist construct is misguided as there is nothing inherently female about caring; that providing only women's point of view further marginalizes women; that theorists have not properly identified differences among women; and that theorists do not see justice and care as mutually exclusive concepts. Hankivsky sees these as "strategic traps that have doomed the approach" (p. 13) and that require disentangling. Most of these traps were unintentionally set by what she calls first generation theorists; specifically Gilligan and Noddings and their followers. By this she means those feminists who claimed that care emanates almost exclusively from the experiences of "mothering, caring and nurturing" (p. 12). While many of these theorists claimed their work was not exclusively feminine, they continue to work from the assumption that women are by nature *carers*, and are more likely to be in caring roles. The greatest criticism of these theorists came from other feminists who said they failed to differentiate women's experiences along racial, ethic and class lines.

The ultimate challenge, Hankivsky (2004) says, is to merge the notions of justice and care in a way that does not lead to care being seen as conceptually inferior and thus assimilated into justice ethics. Second generation theorists, led by Tronto and Clement, do this (Hankivsky, 2000). They have, she says, "established the centrality of care to all human life and activities" (p. 27). An ethic of care is now generally believed to include all the activities we do to equitably live in our world. In this view an ethic of care and an ethic of justice are not

understood as overtly gendered, but as an individual's moral orientation (Vogt, 2002). Situationally, men and women may reflect ethics in terms of care or justice or both. For example, when emotionally involved in a situation, individuals tend to use an ethic of care orientation, regardless of their gender (Vogt, 2002).

## An Ethic of Care in Education

Not withstanding the above battles, the ethic of care has had substantial influence on researchers and practitioners in education (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996; Noddings, 1984, 2003, 2005; Owens & Ennis, 2005; Prillamen, Eaker, & Kendrick, 1994; Rauner, 2000). Furman (2002) believes that the popularity of the care perspective arises largely out of an increased desire for the school to repair our "crumbling" sense of community at the same time as researchers are beginning to discover that a communitarian climate has a positive impact on student achievement, motivation and attendance (p. 9). Dempsey and Noblit (1996) assert that, historically, some schools that "were seen as successful...were embedded in communities in such ways that schools were seen as moral agents of communities; schools cared about students and community and vice versa" (p. 113). To illustrate that contemporary schools can, and do, maintain this dynamic they point to one school they studied which was marked by an atmosphere of "closeness and relationships of support" (p. 12).

Noddings (2005, 2003, 1984) has been the most influential and prolific of the care theorists in education. Her work takes Gilligan's original ideas and expands upon them, mostly, but not exclusively, through a very specific teacher-student lens. Noddings (1984) sees care as the moral foundation of education. She distinguishes traditionally male dominated ideas of rules and regulations from feminine ideas of reciprocity in relationships. Owens and Ennis (2005) say that "human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for form the

foundation of the ethical response to care...caring is rooted in receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness in a traditionally feminine sense" (p. 399).

Rauner (2000) says the greatest challenge for instituting an ethic of care in education is our tendency to see schools, and other important social institutions, as "value-neutral product providers with no care-giving role or responsibility" (p. 3). She challenges us to awaken to the possibility of social structures built on connections, to organize social, civic and economic institutions built on an ethic of care. This is all possible she says, if we conceptualize care through a 4-tiered hierarchy in which we demonstrate care in spontaneous face to face interactions, through professional relationships with clients, in organizational practices established along caring principles and through a society committed to these same principles (p. 2). In *They Still Pick Me Up When I Fall*, Rauner (2000) demonstrates that while parts of her vision have been enacted; her call is for an ethic of care as a societal commitment.

Operating from an ethic of care is an active process, not just an idea or theory; it requires much of the teacher. Key to Noddings' (2003) concept is the commitment by the teacher to reciprocity; in other words to creating a reciprocal relationship between the teacher as the *one-caring* and the student as the one who is *cared for*. As Noddings (1992) explains, teachers who work from an ethic of care see it as their responsibility to empower their students. Such a commitment often requires the teacher to buck a system which encourages an instrumental approach which sees teaching the lesson as the teacher's responsibility, while leaving caring for the student up to others. Operating from a care paradigm necessitates three things from the caring teacher—engrossment, commitment and motivational displacement. Engrossment involves the teacher demonstrating acceptance by acknowledging and accepting the students' feelings and the relevance of the students' lived experience. The cycle continues when the teacher is receptive to these actions, thus reinforcing the caring actions

on the part of the teacher. The simple act of focusing on student needs leads the teacher to become engrossed in their students.

While engrossment requires actions, commitment is reflected in an attitude. The caring teacher believes that nothing takes precedence over his or her responsibility to care for the student. For most, this requires a motivational shift in focus from self to other. This perspective-taking exercise requires the ability of the teacher to see the world as the student sees it. Through this shift the teacher begins to determine the motivators for the student allowing the teacher to create the conditions for receptivity and responsiveness in their pedagogical relationships (Noddings, 1992). In turn it is anticipated that the cared-for student will respond positively to the efforts of the caring teacher. This condition is then continually nurtured; the caring cycle is complete and care can flourish. It is important to note that the cared for may reject the overtures of the caring teacher. Altenbaugh et al. (1995) say that one must take the risk of rejection if caring is to take place at all. A critical element in care is to see rejection, not as failure, but more likely a matter of timing, "each of us at times needs space or even solitude...that should be sensed and honoured by the one-caring" (p. 160).

As indicated earlier, a growing body of research has been exploring the possibilities for developing an ethic of care in schools. This has allowed for the development of a series of characteristic themes. Most of these build on Noddings' initial conceptualizations as outlined above. Tarlow (1996) describes eight characteristics that can be summarized as "being there, talking and taking time" for your students. Other research has validated Noddings' theory from the perspective of students. Phelan, Davidson, and Cio (1991) found that students report that they "value teachers who care and want teachers to recognize who they are" (as cited in Owens & Ennis, 2005).

Rice (2001) says that teachers can create care in the classroom and that this care leads to a sense of belonging and enhanced learning outcomes for students (p. 104). Teven and McCrosskey (1996) emphasize that caring occurs

when students perceive the teacher to be caring. When students perceive their teachers care, they are motivated to learn. Rice (2001) showed that students' sense of belonging in the classroom impacts academic effort more than an interest in the academic subject. Perceived caring is associated with increased learning in the classroom. The teacher may care deeply, but if that is not communicated to and received by the student, caring is incomplete and learning is lessened (p. 2). Wentzel and Watkins (2002) stress the importance of relatedness and secure connection with others, as a powerful academic motivator; simply put, students are more engaged in learning activities when schools help connect achievement and affiliation needs (p. 366).

To best understand an ethic of care within the school context it is important to examine the similarities with attachment theory. Bowlby (1969) suggests that attachment is a primary human need which serves to provide "internal working models" through experience with care-giving relationships. Attachment theory posits that these models act like cognitive-affective maps built from past experience and from which we guide our present circumstance (Moretti, Odgers, & Jackson, 2004). Children with access to caregivers that are available and responsive to their suffering develop secure attachments in subsequent relationships. Conversely, children denied this opportunity, or who experience it inconsistently develop insecure attachments in later relationships. By late adolescence, securely attached youths can respond appropriately to conflict and seek support when needed. Further they are more likely to be socially accepted by their peers (Allen et al., 1998). As a result those around them see them as capable and non-hostile. On the other hand, by this stage youths with insecure attachment are known to present with behaviour problems which may include withdrawing from their environment, responding aggressively to others or engaging in a variety of delinquent behaviours (Allen et al., 1998; Moretti et al., 2004). In short it is often these youth who are seen as at-risk in the school environment.

Given the importance of the development of secure attachments in early childhood, researchers and practitioners have consistently identified the need for effective early assessment and intervention for children from environments in which their attachment needs are not met (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). In the school setting, at-risk children and adolescents can benefit significantly from attachment to teachers. Kennedy and Kennedy state that for these students, "teachers may be their only positive, supportive adult model and thus have a unique opportunity to help students foster positive representations of themselves, others, and relationships" (p. 253). Colwell and Connor (2003) build on Bowlby's work in advocating "nurture groups" as a way to provide the opportunity for children to form attachments to caring supportive, adults in a secure environment outside the family. They describe the nurture group as a school environment which provides the opportunity to "re-experience early nurturing in a warm and accepting environment, which fosters positive regard and the development of secure relationships with [teachers]" (p. 119). Their use in the United Kingdom has demonstrated their efficacy in retaining at-risk students (Colwell & Connor).

Closely linked to attachment theory is the concept of mattering: the fundamental need that individuals have to feel or perceive that they are important and significant to the others (Rayle, 2006). Elliott, Kao, and Grant (2004) say that having a belief that we matter is central to our sense of who we are and where we fit in the world around us. We know we matter when those closest to us seek to convey that they "care about what happens to us" (p. 339). Conversely, they say, the effects of not mattering can be devastating:

> if people do not share themselves meaningfully with us, if no one listens to what we have to say, if we are interesting to no one, then we must cope with the realization that we do not matter. The world not only can but does get along without us, and we are truly irrelevant. Such a terrifying experience might lead us to do anything to matter to others. The youth who acts out in socially undesirable ways may be motivated, at least in part, by the desire to matter to the significant others in his life who virtually ignore him. (p. 339)

We determine we matter when we have relationships with people that convey we are important to them. This may be because they "listen to our complaints about our problems, inconvenience themselves to see that our needs are met, or take pride in our achievements" (Elliott et al., 2004, p. 341).

## At-Risk Youth

During the past 20 years the term at-risk has appeared widely, and is used in multiple contexts, in the literature on education, psychology, medicine, social work, and economics as well as in innumerable government reports (Masten, 2001; Skiba, 2000; McWhirter et al., 1998; Dryfoos, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992). Depending on the context, these authors discuss risk related to emotional vulnerability, family poverty and socioeconomic status, family breakdown; school failure, substance misuse or involvement in criminal activity. Each of these issues contributes to risk, yet each risk issue is generally studied separately, thus "carving up our adolescents into many disconnected pieces, often losing sight of the real people we are claiming to care about" (Dryfoos, 1998, p. 25).

As imprecise as it is, such a definition shows that when humans and the multiple systems in their environment interact the outcome for some will be alienation, disconnect and a lack of opportunity for success. Mancini and Huebner (2004) describe it as a layered approach to examining youth risk, allowing the researcher to organize and address a wide range of risk factors.

Zeesman (2001) estimates that, as a result of emotional, behavioural, social or academic problems, 28% of Canadian children under age of 11 are considered to be at-risk or "vulnerable" (p. 5). This rate is at the upper range of estimates in other western countries (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 324). The rates for aboriginal children in Canada considered to be at-risk are much more significant than those of the general population. For example, the high school completion rate is 30 percentage points below that of other Canadians

(Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 324). However, attempts to understand the issue simply through frequency rates is of limited use. Beyond the fact that it blinds us to the systemic issues discussed, we may fail to recognize the transitory nature of risk (Zeesman, 2001, p. 5).

Within education, the term at-risk is used to indicate students who are not developing the requisite academic skills and who may have difficulties within the social context of the school due to marginalization within the larger community due family status, poverty, inadequate housing, ethnic minority status or language skill (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 324). In the broadest sense, children and youth are seen to be at-risk if they are "failing in school and unsuccessful in making the transition to work and adult life and as a consequence are unlikely to be able to make a full contribution to active society" (Evans, 1995, as cited in Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 322).

Brownell (2004) established that children and youth marginalized due to social inequity arising from economic or familial conditions struggle to succeed in school. In his study test scores for students from high socio-economic neighbourhoods were two-and-a-half times higher than scores for students from low socio-economic neighbourhoods. Additionally, 36 percent of the students from those areas were behind one grade or more and almost 20 percent had withdrawn from school entirely (p. 31).

It is important to note that not all children from these neighbourhoods are doing poorly and not all children from other neighbourhoods are succeeding. In fact, as Brownell (2004) makes clear, even though the largest percentage of students doing poorly are from low socio-economic neighbourhoods,  most children who are doing poorly are not from low socioeconomic neighbourhoods. Therefore, academic risk exists at all socio economic levels, albeit in greater proportions in poor neighbourhoods.

It is therefore vital to be judicious in the use of the term at-risk. It is very easy to see those not succeeding according to established norms as having an inherent, unalterable condition. While many professionals working with at-risk youth are committed to improving the situation for those at-risk, many interventions are based on the medical-disease model which pathologizes individuals and families by focusing "negatively on students who are considered to constitute parts of a problem population" (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 322). It is suggested that this deficit model leads to North American social supports lagging behind other countries in preventing and addressing risk factors (Simeonsson, 1994; McWhirter et al., 1998). Without demonstration of a developmental lag, or severe abuse or neglect, children and families do not qualify for services (Simeonsson, 1994, p. 35). In the context of the school, this leads to elaborate criteria for excluding children from the mainstream and to labelling them, often inaccurately or prematurely, in order to meet requirements for specialized services (p. 35). Levin (2004) cautions that labelling may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Teachers may lower expectations and instructional practices for students who they believe are less capable (p. 7). Levin (2004) provides an appropriate caution:

> identifying an individual as being at-risk is only useful if the identification in fact leads to improvement. If we do not know what to do to improve a situation, the identification may make us feel better, and may give us a reason—or excuse—for poor outcomes, but it is of not value to the students. (p. 8)

The application of negative labels to at-risk populations is a frequent practice in Canadian schools (Sobhat, 2003). The label, once applied, denotes an individual who is perpetually "violent" or "troubled," even though those behaviours may be a relatively infrequent feature of the student's persona. (Cassidy & Jackson, 2005). Primary among the concerns with labelling practice are that both those behaviours considered beneficial or problematic, are socially

constructed by decision makers in the social setting (Sohbat, 2003; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987).

In relation to at-risk populations, McCarthy and Hoge (1987) demonstrated that school administrators use criteria other than seriousness in determining disciplinary sanctions. The main influences on these decisions are the administrator's assessment of the student's disciplinary history, the teacher's perception of the student's overall behaviour and the student's past grades. As the authors say: "the simplest and most germane and accessible cues seem most important in decision-making" (p. 1117). When combined with the fact that most children labelled as at-risk are from visible minorities and from low socioeconomic situations, such labelling can be especially problematic, and a factor in leading to further marginalization (McWhirter et al., 1998, p. 9).

Recognizing the importance of systemic factors and the inherent dangers in labelling, it is important then to state that in this study the use of the term at-risk is used to recognize and understand the phenomenon of risk during adolescence generally, and not, as so often happens, to label those who may at any one time be living with risk. It is within this context that we move forward, cognizant that adolescence is a turbulent time of physical, cognitive and social group change during a life phase in which youth are simultaneously seeking autonomy and identity. The concomitance of these factors creates a state of enhanced risk for all youth (Ohannessian, Lerner, & Lerner, 1998).

## Suspension and Expulsion

A suspension is a punishment, rather than a consequence, of an inappropriate act (Rafaelle-Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002). Suspension is the most widely used disciplinary technique and is more common in urban than rural settings. Suspensions are most commonly used for minor infractions, such as disobedience, disrespect, and classroom disruption, and are thus linked to an

increased likelihood that a student will drop out of school (Anderson, 2004; Skiba, 2000). The goal is to reduce the likelihood that the same behaviour will reoccur. It is well established that suspensions rarely actually meet this goal, witnessed by the number of students who are suspended multiple times (Rafaelle-Mendez et al., 2002; Skiba, 2000). To the detriment of the at-risk students, suspensions generally occur in the absence of any prosocial or learning interventions (Rafaelle-Mendez et al., 2002).

The use of suspensions for serious offences is relatively rare (Anderson, 2004). Imich (2001) states there is a plethora of evidence to suggest that suspensions are used as an "easy and early response to in-school problems, whatever the source of these problems" (p. 79). He goes on to state that only 1 in 4 students suspended from school will be successful in completing school in the mainstream (p. 82). Epp and Epp (2001) state that school policies encourage suspension or expulsion for poor attendance, lack of academic success and behaviour challenges and that they act as both an "escape route" for students and an "exit lever" by which administrators can force students out of school (p. 231).

Zero tolerance policies have become very popular in North American schools in the last 15 years (Epp & Epp, 2001; Skiba, 2000). These policies have accelerated the use of suspensions. Originally intended for serious offences involving drugs and violence, they are now used widely for both serious and minor disciplinary infractions (Anderson, 2004, p. 1188). As all terms in this contentious arena, zero tolerance too is hard to define. Originally applied by the American government in the 1980s as a policy response in the war on drugs, it became popular for both American and Canadian schools following a series of high profile incidents in American schools in the early 1990s (Skiba, 2000). The general intent of zero tolerance policies is to send a message that certain behaviours will not be tolerated, by punishing all offences equally severely,

regardless of the details of the actual event or the life circumstances of the individual. However, as Cassidy and Jackson (2005) state:

> equal application of the rules to all students does not mean the policy is equitable. Children who comes from challenging home environments, who struggle with learning, or who experience chaos in their lives are less likely to be able to conform to rules which are inflexible and do not accommodate the life worlds in which these children live. (p. 20)

In a comprehensive analysis of the related issues, Cassidy and Jackson (2005) argue that these policies "deny the child the safe, ordered and inclusive learning environment to which they are entitled to under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms" (p. 9). Skiba (2000) makes a further rights-based argument, saying that such policies show a tension between the rights of individuals and the rights of schools to protect students from real or perceived harm.

Anderson (2004) outlines a further legal entanglement for suspended students. In recent years, there has been an increased involvement of police in school related incidents. As a result of this "net-widening," incidents that were once handled as school disciplinary matters may now place the student in a double jeopardy position where they can be disciplined by the school and charged criminally. She cautions that this is harmful and may lead otherwise compliant youth to dissociate from healthy "social networks and norms" (p. 1193).

Just as determining who is at-risk is largely socially constructed, so too is the question of determining who is to be suspended. By their nature, policies (suspension policies included) are meant to limit individual interpretation; rather they are intended to create consistent responses across a system, and be "relatively indifferent to the persona of the teacher" (Curtis, 1995, as cited in Epp & Epp, p. 232). However, Rafaelle-Mendez et al. (2002) determined that a school's suspension rate will be socially constructed, determined by the principal's attitude. In two schools with high rates of suspension, principals

espoused a zero tolerance attitude. In the same district, two schools with similar socioeconomic makeup, following the same district code of conduct, had much lower suspension rates. In the schools with lower suspension rates, principals were opposed to suspensions and instead focused on proactive classroom-based responses (p. 262). This is supported by Imich (1994) who found that administrators and teachers in schools with low suspension rates shared a "child-centred ideology" (p. 9). Imich also showed a high degree of variability of suspension rates, and found that "a minority of schools are excluding a majority of the students" (p. 9). Rafaelle-Mendez et al. (2002) summarized this dichotomy by saying that while some schools "reach out", others "push out" troubled youth (p. 274).

There is limited literature regarding the impact on, or the attitudes of youth towards, discipline and school suspension. What research does exist seems to indicate that students' perception regarding the effectiveness of suspension and other forms of discipline differs greatly from the perception of teachers and administrators (Romi & Freund; 1999; Skiba, 2000, p. 14). While teachers seem to agree among themselves that all rule breaking is serious, students tend to have varying views on what is serious or less serious. Romi and Freund (1999) state that teacher's inclination to see everything as serious may lead to an antagonistic reaction among students as:

> students tend to feel an inability to meet teachers' criteria and therefore give up in advance. They opt out of the 'discipline game' in which they have no say in any case. Neither teachers at school nor parents at home seem to have taken them into account when making the rules. (p. 61)

Students, especially at-risk students, see disciplinary practices as unjust, unfair (Gordon, 2001; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005) or as a challenge to escalate their behaviour. Indeed, some saw the school's attempt to control them as a sport, and detention was simply the penalty (Thorson, 1996, p. 8).

## Dropouts and Pushouts

At-risk youth are more likely to either drop out, or be directly or indirectly pushed out of school (McWhirter et al., 1998). Whatever the impetus, the negative effects on Canadian youth who leave school prior to graduation are well documented (Bowlby, 2002; Bushnik et al., 2004; deBroucker, 2005). Successful completion of secondary school has become a prerequisite to attaining the benefits of the knowledge economy and a first step towards further personal and professional success (deBroucker, 2005, p. 1). In short, obtaining a basic education eases access to jobs and the lack of it increases the risk of social exclusion. Additionally, competition for jobs grew more intense in the 1990s as increasing numbers of Canadian youth successfully completed school, leaving those without a high school diploma at a significant disadvantage.

Bushnik et al. (2004) define dropouts as any 17-year-old not in high school who has not already met graduation requirements. In short drop-outs are generally seen as youth who do not complete school with their same age cohort. While a portion of them may return to school later in life, the sheer act of leaving school early creates heightened risk and limits personal and professional success. Bushnik et al. (2004) determined that most youth who drop out will leave before the tenth grade. Therefore if students can be maintained in school until Grade 10 their chances of completing school are greatly increased.

Bowlby (2005) defines drop-outs as "the share of 20-24 year olds who are not attending school and who have not graduated from high school" (p.1). Using this definition the drop-out rate has been dropping in Canada. In 1990, 17% of 20- to 24-year-olds had not attained a high school diploma. By 2004 that number fell to 10%. Drop out rates in the United States remained largely unchanged throughout the 1990s (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Creating a clear picture of who drops out of school is a challenge. Available research indicates that socially disadvantaged youth are much more

likely than their peers to drop out of school. Dropouts are disproportionately from lower socioeconomic status neighbourhoods, ethnic minority groups, from families where parents' education levels are low and their involvement in their children's education is minimal. Prior to leaving school they were low achievers and frequently absent (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Simeonsson, 1999).

Educators have long worked from the assumption that at-risk students and dropouts are the same population. While this may be true, using risk factors to predict who will drop out is an inexact science at best. In a comprehensive review of this connection, Gleason and Dynarski (2002) found that no single risk factor predicted who would drop out. In fact, the factor with the highest predictability, absenteeism, was not highly predictive as only 15% of the students in their study with high absenteeism rates dropped out of school. Linking risk factors provides no further assistance, as they found that even students with multiple risk factors only dropped out of school 18% of the time. In short, they say that using the concept of risk factors, as many schools do, will not lower the dropout rate in any significant way. Compounding the issue, using risk factors to identify students who may drop out brings with it a type of blindness as school authorities fail to identify a great many students who do drop out.

Not everyone believes that universal graduation is a worthy goal of education. In fact, there is a great deal of tension about whether or not the role of the schools is to merely prepare students for adult work roles or if school should play a prominent role in the social and emotional development of youth (Fox & Harding, 2005). While most school jurisdictions in North America state they are responsible for both roles, considerable ambivalence on this issue has created a "fractured normative environment" in schools (p. 76).

Even those studies that lean to an analysis of the economic impact of dropping out of school acknowledge the importance of addressing social-emotional issues that limit students' ability to remain in school (Bowlby, 2005;

Bushnik et al., 2004; deBroucker, 2005). Dynarski and Gleason (2002) make a strong case for a societal commitment to preventing school dropout:

> as a society, we do not want students to drop out. We know that students who do drop out are probably not prepared for what happens to them afterwards. Most dropouts will not work as much as students who finish school and will not earn as much when they do work. Economic trends are likely to make this worse rather than better. Dropouts are more likely to depend on public assistance, use drugs, be arrested, and spend time in jails and prisons. We want students to succeed in school and in adult life. Dropping out is a signal that a young person has not succeeded in school and may not succeed in adult life. (p. 43)

The literature on school drop outs acknowledges that students leave school because an external situation "pulled" them from school or internal factors "pushed" them out of school (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). An examination of reasons for school leaving appear to indicate that push factors are a far greater concern than are pull factors, both for males and females (Bushnik et al., 2004). Push factors include negative interactions with school that lead students to choose to leave school voluntarily or to be forced out through school policies (suspension, expulsion, engagement). Epp and Epp (2001) state being pushed out of school can be an active process. They outline three factors that accelerate the push out process—suspension, placement in alternative programs offering inferior education and services and "baiting" students to act out until removed.

Pull factors include pressures external to the school (employment, family need) that also lead to students leaving the school. McNeal (1997) reported that for the most part employment is not a significant pull factor. He concluded that while some jobs increase the chance of school leaving, other jobs are likely to keep students in school and many have no relationship to dropping out of school. For females, the most-oft cited pull factor is pregnancy and family needs (McWhirter et al., 1998).

It is in the drop out literature that the issue of care as an important factor for at-risk youth starts to emerge most clearly. McWhirter et al. (1998) summarized the literature over a 30-year period and determined that the most often cited reasons for leaving school are that it is boring and irrelevant and that they didn't feel like they belonged and that nobody cared. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) state that at-risk children who leave school believe that teachers show they don't care in three fundamental ways—teachers are unwilling to provide extra help, that teachers enforce norms that ensure that to seek help requires "outing" oneself as "incompetent," and by not paying attention to personal problems they may be facing. Together these factors appear to trigger a long process of disengagement from school that leads to students dropping out. Dropping out is preceded by indicators that the student is retreating from school involvement and is followed by academic and behavioural problems (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Christenson & Thurlow, 2001; Dryfoos, 1990; Lehr & Harris, 2003). During the two years spent monitoring youth, Bushnik et al. (2004) found that youth who drop out of school were much less engaged in school, socially or academically, and were much less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities. Disengagement involves social, cognitive and psychological processes (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Socially the disengaged student is less likely to want to attend school, feel they have friends at the school or feel that their teachers care for them. From a cognitive and psychological perspective, disengagement leads to a diminished ability to process academic information, self-manage their learning or want to be otherwise engaged with the school. Raywid (2001) states that in recent years we have re-discovered the importance of engagement, especially for the unsuccessful student:

> who may need more help than most in bringing into play those higher-level processes so widely sought today. And sadly, these are the youngsters who have characteristically been handed workbooks to fill out and a dumbed-down curriculum that...pretty well precludes engagement. (p. 2)

Conceptually, engagement requires a commitment on the part of the teacher to emphasize student competencies, not deficits. To be successful, this must be done over time and across the settings of the school (Christenson et al., 2001; Firestone & Rosenblum, 1998). Commitment to students at-risk of dropping out leads to "strong emotional bonds with students, often a personal caring for them. When many teachers share this commitment, the results can be a positive climate where students feel comfortable and wanted. This is so important for this population, as Wehlage and Rutter (1986, as cited in Firestone & Rosenblum) concluded from interviews with students in 10 urban secondary schools that dropouts perceive their teachers do not care about them. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) use the concept of "persistence-plus" to indicate that a commitment beyond teaching subject matter is required by the teacher committed to keeping students in school and showing that "caring adults want them to learn" (p. 38).

Dynarski and Gleason (2002) found that at-risk youth are much more successful in schools where they experience academic success while being connected to adults and peers within their school setting who show they cared by helping students overcome personal, family and social barriers. Dynarski and Gleason state that in order to work in this way, schools must be committed to fundamentally restructuring both the prevailing mind set of educators and the structures of the school to be more focused towards "personalization" (2002, p. 67). In fact, attempts at restructuring in this way, will meet covert, if not overt, resistance. While districts and school often express support and appear to be strong advocates for change, those who seek to make fundamental change do it "at their own peril" (p. 51). The vast majority of programs continue to operate from a targeted perspective, determining risk factors and attempting to change the student through adding services (counselling, health clinics, child-care centres). However, simply adding services had little effect on student outcomes or the likelihood students will stay in school.

To address the issue of school structure, LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) say we must not only look at the issue of alienated, at-risk youth we must look at the issue of teacher burn out. While both of these are studied extensively, they are rarely looked at as evidence of the same phenomenon. Tuned out students and teachers are equally alienated and pose a considerable challenge to anyone attempting to 'solve' the problem. They state that for many students and teachers structural factors in school "no longer make possible the attainment of societally valued and individually desired personal goals, so individuals come to lose faith in the...school...and the institution begins to unravel" (p. 3). LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) state that the genesis of this loss of faith comes in the school's inability to adapt to a "new socioeconomic order" (p. 4). Teachers know they are not teaching what students need to know and students know it.

The structures of school can have dangerous consequences (Fox & Harding, 2005). In their examination of school shootings in American schools, Fox and Harding (2005) found that school officials were unaware that the youth who shot their teachers and class mates were under severe emotional and social stress and that they had developed "rage against the institution" (p. 69). In fact, they say, in every situation studied individuals were aware of concerns but the "loosely coupled" segregated organization of schools into a series of classrooms "plays an important role in the loss of information about troubled students" (p. 70) because teachers have few "incentives to communicate" (p. 73).

After a great deal of study, Dynarski and Gleason (2002) advocate a very simple approach that will likely address teacher and student alienation. They say educators should talk to at-risk students and ask what they need, what should be different, why they might be unhappy with schooling, how the staff can help with problems they may be facing and how they can work together to alleviate those problems. In short, educators need to feel comfortable about entering into a dialogue that demonstrates care. Such an approach would assist schools in moving toward a caring, personal approach to education that at-risk students

seek and that is so often indicated in the research. Cassidy and Bates (2005) showed such an approach can work when staff share a mindset that holds at-risk students in high esteem, "viewing them as survivors with whom they were privileged to spend time" (p. 96).

## Conclusion: An Ethic of Care for At-Risk Youth

Few studies focus specifically on the quality of students' experience in relation to schools as caring or welcoming environments. As stated, school dropouts or pushouts do not experience schools as supportive or caring communities. Altenbaugh et al. (1995) state rejection—by peers and teachers—is a significant problem. In their study of dropouts who return to school, they say that dropouts perceive schools as unwelcoming and that they only find acceptance with other potential dropouts. Their shared frustration leads to a rejection of school norms and values and further alienation, coupled with feelings of inferiority and rejection from more successful students. Even though the students in their study knew that a hostile reception awaited them outside the school fence, they believed it could not be any worse than remaining in school. The authors state that "why school leavers left and why they returned can be stated in deceptively simple ways: they left because school was boring and antagonistic, they returned very largely for economic reasons" (Altenbaugh et al., 1995, p. 132). Still, we pay little attention to students' individual or collective socioemotional needs (Noddings, 1992).

For at-risk students who drop out or are pushed out the issue of care, or lack thereof, is a reoccurring theme. Some researchers have studied what occurs when it is not there (Altenbaugh et al., 1995), others have explored what it looks when it is there (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). Altenbaugh et al. state that for at-risk youth, a lack of care permeates their lives. They state that "nobody gave a damn" about these young people outside or inside of school (p. 164). They take a very practical approach to what schools must do to address these issues. Firstly, they

say for at-risk students, schools must have a connection to the real world. They outline four missing qualities of schooling that, if present, would demonstrate care to at-risk students—that there is value in learning beyond instruction, dialogue that provides clear feedback, collaboration with students in determining learning activities and flexible use of time.

Cassidy and Bates (2005) investigate the outcomes in an "intentionally caring" school for at-risk youth, "collaboratively constructed" according to an ethic of care (p. 25). They found that the result was an intentionally caring mindset and actions on the part of the teachers and administrators that had a discernible benefit for students. Within a varied student population they noted "remarkable consistency in the kinds of things" said about the school and staff (p. 26). The characteristics included that they felt welcome, comfortable and safe, acknowledged and understood as unique individuals, respected and encouraged and they received help when they needed it.

In closing, I have attempted to demonstrate that schools are particularly precarious environments for at-risk youth. I have also attempted to show that care may be the missing ingredient in attempting to construct successful experiences for them. We know at-risk youth don't generally experience the school as caring and welcoming. What we don't know is if they experience care at all, and if they do, how do they define care? Do they see it in the ways it is suggested in the literature? What are their experiences with care at school in their lives? It is these questions that I hope to shed some light on.

# Chapter 3.

# Methodological Considerations and Decisions

This phenomenological study analyzed the perspectives of at-risk students regarding their experiences with care in school settings. The setting was an alternative program which draws on students from across the district. I was interested in better understanding the degree to which at-risk youth have experienced school as a caring and welcoming place. To do this I believed it important to provide an opportunity for them to tell the stories of when and how they felt most cared for or not cared for in school settings. The theoretical framework for this study comes from a merging of Noddings' (1984, 2005) Ethic of Care as teacher practice with a variety of others who have researched the presence of care from a student perspective (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Owen & Ennis, 2005; Rauner, 2000; Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996). Data collection employed the Seidman (2006) 3-phase phenomenological interview model. The central research question is: What do at-risk youth report as the salient qualities and behaviours of educators who they perceive have demonstrated care towards them?

Research questions must be answered through careful consideration of methodology, thus the purpose of this chapter is to work towards clearly situating my research within the qualitative methodology of phenomenology. This will be done by first outlining the ontological and epistemological considerations in choosing to follow a qualitative research path, detailing why the phenomenological method was an appropriate method for this study and outlining how this method was employed within all phases of this study.

## Research Paradigms:
## Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives

Palys (1997) says social researchers all share a common "belief in the desirability of trying to understand human action through systematic study and analysis" (p. 1). However, beyond this basic agreement there are many battles over how this endeavour is best carried out. The most foundational of these regards the paradigm through which the researcher sees human behaviour. From the enlightenment until early in the 20th century the dominant view was that human action is consistent, fixed and can therefore be known (Palys, 1997). This perspective, often called positivism, because the researcher is "positive" that truth exists and that it is verifiable and quantifiable. Research conducted from this paradigm is theory-driven, it begins by testing hypotheses and aims for generalization (Noddings, 1995). The researcher uses set procedures to ensure unbiased anonymity and objectivity while gathering data through intermediary devices that maintain separation from the research subject (Lancey, 2002). For many years all social research was conducted this way, it was unchallenged and even lauded as the "crowning achievement of Western civilization" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). As a result few researchers challenged the paradigm.

Starting in the 1920s the qualitative research perspective started to emerge. During this era, social researchers took a bold step in proclaiming that it was appropriate for the researcher to study the qualities of human experience by going to a "foreign setting to study the customs and habits of another society and culture" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 1). Sociologists from the famed Chicago School at the University of Chicago were soon followed by anthropologists and by the 1970s qualitative research had a tentative foothold in the fields of education, history, political science, nursing and others.

An ensuing clash between the quantitative and qualitative perspectives was inevitable. The conflict was furthered by the great strides qualitative

researchers made in producing accurate evidence and in translating theoretical concepts into research allowing for the rigorous testing of theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Because qualitative research could not produce scientific fact it was seen as useful only for preliminary exploration, not for science. The persistence of qualitative researchers, who claimed that their data was the "best and richest for theorizing about social structures and social systems" maintained and sustained the movement to the present day (Glaser & Stauss, p. 15). Today, qualitative researchers have their own traditions, methods and even internal battles.

Coming to a precise definition of qualitative research is thus no easy task. Denzin and Lincoln (1995) say that qualitative research is a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive practices that make the world visible...[through] field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self" ( p. 3). Lofland (1971, as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) provide a definition through questions:

> What kinds of things are going on here? What are the forms of this phenomenon? What variations do we find in this phenomenon? That is, qualitative analysis is addressed to the task of delineating forms, kinds and types of social phenomena; of documenting in loving detail the things that exist. (p. 13)

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) emphasize that qualitative researchers are craft workers, bricoleurs who assemble useful and variable forms from available, fragmentary resources as the situation requires. They liken the researcher to a quilt maker or jazz musician who finds pleasure in creating a creative montage from what they find in the moment. Even Cresswell (1998) who advocates the need for qualitative researchers to be clear and rigorous in their methods sees an "intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material" held together by a loom like framework (p. 13).

Improvements in qualitative methods have silenced the loudest critics but the debate has not disappeared. While qualitative research has carved out a

distinct and recognized place in the social sciences it has not replaced quantitative research at the top of the academic hierarchy (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Following a long and often pitted battle, an optimistic view sees the two paradigms once thought to be irreconcilable as "informing one another's arguments" (p. 164). However, it is also important to note that some researchers still see qualitative research as merely a collection of unrestrained, unrelated techniques (Lancey, 2001, p. 7). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) say that qualitative research is inherently political and qualitative researchers must become comfortable within themselves and the tradition and be prepared to hear criticisms that their methods are "soft, unscientific, disguised Marxism, secular humanism" (p. 7).

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in the terms of underlying epistemologies on how one derives truth, the purpose of inquiry, the role of the scientist and what constitutes evidence (Lancey, 2002).

The qualitative paradigm requires that the researcher break free from the constraints and criticism of the quantitative paradigm and be comfortable and confident knowing the human actor can be best understood through capturing social life as people live it, through their experiences and their interpretation of it (Cresswell, 1998). Making a decision to work qualitatively means that the researcher places himself within the research. This closeness is value-laden as it is not possible to separate the values and bias of the researcher from the research site. It thus requires the researcher to develop a self awareness or what Cresswell (1998) calls reflexivity.

The province of qualitative research is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of a socially constructed reality over the measurement of "quantity, amount, intensity or frequency" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). Researchers within this paradigm seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and

given meaning. The inherent messiness in exploring social life in the field "vexes" and repels those with a low tolerance for ambiguity because the endeavour merges theory with non specific methods (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18).

Subject-researcher interaction is a hallmark of qualitative research. This may include living with, observing or collaborating with those whose lived experience brings value to the study (Cresswell, 1998). The researcher seeks to minimize the "distance" or "objective separateness" as they move from outsider to insider in relation to the people or phenomenon which they seek to learn more about (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 76).

Motivation for placement in the lived experience of another may be driven by a "heartfelt need to promote social action, to lift the 'voices' of marginalized or oppressed people" (Cresswell, 1998, p. 78). Within this study it is important to acknowledge that this motivation is central to my study. I have worked with at-risk youth populations for many years, first with mentally handicapped youth in institutional settings, then as a police officer and finally as a program administrator for a large urban school district. These experiences have shaped my political-philosophical stance related to those youth who for reasons of class, race or family structure are largely marginalized within the structures of contemporary Western society, most particularly public education. While I don't deny that individual factors play a role in determining capacity for academic and social success, I situate myself as a practitioner and researcher within a social justice framework. Thus my political starting point in this research is clear. Rather than following the well travelled path of exploring personal deficits as the source of risk, I look to the impact of societal or structural inequities (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

# Phenomenology

There are many qualitative methods that I could have chosen to answer my research question. I chose phenomenology for its emphasis on the development of a full understanding of how others experience specific phenomenon. However, Tesch (1990) states, phenomenology is a philosophical paradigm rather than a research strategy. Speigelberg (1982) states that phenomenology is easier to describe than to define. Keen (1975) sees it as "more an approach, an attitude, an investigative posture with a certain set of goals" (p.41). Still, the qualitative researcher must be prepared for such ambiguity. As Lincoln and Guba (2000) caution, "the design of a naturalistic study...cannot be given in advance; it must emerge, develop, unfold" (p. 225). Recognizing a certain flexibility is important in doing phenomenology, I waded in.

The roots of phenomenology are found in the work of philosopher Edmund Husserl who believed that researchers, through systematic processes, could search for the essential, invariant structure (what he called *essences*) and thus the underlying meaning of human phenomenon. He believed that these phenomenon could be best understood through a science that "emphasizes the intentionality of consciousness, in which experiences contain both an outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning" (Miller & Salkind, 2002, p. 151).

Phenomenology seeks to describe the "meaning of lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomena....[and] the structures of consciousness in human experience" (Cresswell, 1998, p. 51). The province of phenomenological research is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Its aim is to support the unfolding of one's cognitive reality, which generally comes to life through our subjective human experiences (Schutz, 1970). Thus phenomenological researchers, as in all qualitative forms, minimize their

"distance" or "objective separateness" as they move from outsider to insider in relation to the people or phenomenon that they seek to learn more about (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 76).

Phenomenology assumes that there is an essence, a core meaning mutually understood through a phenomena commonly experienced (Merriam, 1998). Phenomenological approaches make understanding human perception their major focus, for perceptions are real in their consequences (Palys, 1997). Phenomenology does not aim to elucidate meanings specific to particular cultures as does ethnography, to understand certain social groups as in sociology, to explore mental types as in psychology or to know an individual's personal history as in biography (van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenology is the study of the world as humans experience it everyday, before any attempt at classification (van Manen, 1990). It aims to provide a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experience. van Manen says it allows for an understanding about the complex needs of individuals by accessing and documenting life experiences. He says phenomenological research "borrows other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience" (1990, p. 62). Phenomenology is most interested in how our lived experience creates knowledge that guides conduct in everyday life.

In this study I have sought to explore the essence of care in the schooling experience of at-risk youth. I am interested in how this is experienced in "everyday life...as knowledge that guides conduct in everyday life and only tangentially interested in how this reality may appear in various theoretical perspectives to intellectuals" (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 19). To aide in this endeavour I highlight an important aspect of phenomenology, namely the importance of epoche or bracketing to allow the researcher to distil the essence of lived experience (Natanson, 1962). Phenomenology requires adopting an

attitude where the researcher puts aside prior beliefs so they do not interfere with the researcher consciously seeing the structures of a phenomenon. (Merriam, 1998). This is what Husserl called the "phenomenological reduction", or epoche; it involves an attempt to put all of one's assumptions about the matter being studied into abeyance, to "bracket" them (van Manen, p. 47). Through phenomenology, Berger and Luckman (1966) state that the:

> phenomenological analysis of everyday life, or rather the subjective experience of everyday life, refrains from any causal or genetic hypothesis, as well as from assertions about the ontological status of the phenomena analyzed. It is important to remember this…if we are to describe the reality of commonsense we must refer to these interpretations, just as we must take account of its taken for granted character—but we must do so within phenomenological brackets. (p. 20)

Husserl was convinced that a suspension of belief in the outer world is essential. In doing this the researcher neither confirms nor denies reality. Schutz (1970) says that once the researcher engages in bracketing "what is left after the elimination of all ontological assumptions are the given processes of human consciousness and their 'intended objects'" (p. 6). In bracketing, Ferguson (2006) says the researcher is "stripping reality" from the ways in which social knowledge comes to us; allowing for a return to the "origins of our knowledge, of which our superficial everyday thinking has lost sight" (p. 49).

Therefore, in order to grasp the meaning behind the phenomenon, I must adopt an attitude that allows me, as much as possible, to bracket prior beliefs to prevent interference with my ability to consciously see the structures inherent in the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). This allows the phenomenon to speak for itself (Tesch, 1990). Through bracketing I seek to "view whatever stands out, in this other person's frame of reference, as the most valid entrance into this other person's world" (Moustakas, 1995, p. 48). This is important, as the challenge in doing phenomenological research is not knowing too little, it is that:

our "common sense" pre-understandings, our suppositions, assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we have come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question. (p. 47)

Finlay (2003) says that all qualitative researchers must do some form of this "reflexivity". Similar techniques are called for in other research methods. Grounded theory was inspired by and takes an explicitly phenomenological stance. Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocate the suspension of all prior theoretical notions as a precursor to data collection.

Bracketing is largely an artificial adjustment of the natural attitude we adopt in everyday life to a phenomenological attitude where we consciously reflect, philosophize if you will, on what we have heard and seen from the world of our subjects (Natanson, 1962). The process of bracketing is difficult as a pure objectivity is not possible and one simply cannot completely suspend previously understood theoretical perspectives (Finlay, 2003). Yet such reflective approaches are important as a means to allow researchers to immerse themselves in the "here-and-now, to consciously avoid being distracted by externalities" (Finlay, p. 110). Bracketing requires that we strive to consciously suspend, not doubt or discount, our prior experiences and thoughts related to the phenomenon. In phenomenology we contemplate them as the reflective philosopher might (Sokolowski, 2000). Through bracketing one seeks to "view whatever stands out, in this other person's frame of reference, as the most valid entrance into this other person's world" (Moustakas, 1995, p. 48).

It is social phenomena that I am most interested in. Social phenomenologists are interested in how ordinary members of society constitute the world of everyday life, especially how individuals consciously develop meaning out of social interactions. Social phenomena are constructed through meaning-making activities of groups and individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The meaning-making activities are central to the endeavour because it is the

"meaning-making/sense-making/attributional activities that shape action (or inaction)" on the part of at-risk youth and others in their social sphere (p. 167). This study is situated within an interpretivist tradition that gives priority to understanding the meaning that individuals make of their experiences (Garrick, 1990).

Social phenomenology was developed by Alfred Schutz (1970) who articulated how phenomenology could be used for studying social acts. Schutz believed a reliance on mechanistic science would fall short of a comprehensive understanding of human action. He was an advocate of careful attention being paid by the researcher to the development of research method, what he called the *scheme of reference*, believing that one must make the chosen scheme compatible with the research question by first considering the limits and possibilities before settling on appropriate method (Schutz, 1970).

Schutz was interested in how ordinary members of society as thinking, motivated actors constitute the world of everyday life, especially how individuals consciously develop meaning out of social interactions (Palys, 1997). Schutz sees the lifeworld as encompassing all day to day human activity in which we follow that which interests us, deal with others and make plans. The lifeworld is taken for granted, just like we mostly absorb the natural surroundings of our life. As such our lifeworld is given to us, provided in a social-cultural context within which we reside. He saw the lifeworld as being actualized through three interwoven concepts. First, he saw that we consider our lifeworld through a pragmatic, utilitarian lens which realistically acknowledges fact and impositions to our actions. Secondly, he suggested, we are biographically unique, standing alone on our own life path, with a unique set of activities, thoughts and ideas which preceded the moment and which are ours alone. Finally, we are informed by what he called stock knowledge. Through that which we know we create awareness that is sometimes precise, sometimes vague. Regardless, we

constantly draw on this knowledge to determine our next step. Tesch (1990) states that the phenomenological researcher:

> studies the ordinary 'lifeworld': they are interested in the way people experience their world, what it is like for them, how to best understand them. In order to gain access to others' experience phenomenologists explore their own, but also collect intensive and exhaustive descriptions from their respondents. (p. 68)

## Site

The site for this study was a Grade 9-12 alternative school program situated within a large secondary school. The alternative program is operated as a district program and receives referrals from all schools in the district, though most come from the immediate area serviced by the school. All of the students enrolled in the program have a history of school difficulties which include learning challenges, problematic school disciplinary history and/or school avoidance. While they have had chronic challenges in school, all potential candidates for the program must be deemed academically capable. The aim of the program is to provide a smaller, structured program that allows for enhanced individual attention and a more flexible environment than offered in the highly regimented secondary school structure. Program staff intentionally and actively promote their program to their colleagues as a viable and legitimate alternative model to the regular school structure. Students enrolled in the program follow the standard curriculum and graduate with the same diploma as all other students in the school. Unlike many alternative programs, the program is set up to allow students to integrate into the larger school to allow them to take the elective courses required for graduation. The school is set up on a single teacher, single grade model. Each class has one teacher and one teacher's aide and a student enrolment of 15.

I chose this program as the students all meet the criteria of being at-risk according to the criteria I had set out for this project. Additionally, the program

successfully maintains and graduates many students who have had severe learning challenges and discipline problems at other schools making it a potentially interesting site for a study of this type. These students have had a rocky history and are now on the verge of making it through the system. Their insights concerning their experiences of feeling cared for by professionals within the education system may have implications for supporting other students in similar circumstances.

## Ethics

As this study involves human participants all required ethical procedures required by the university and host school district were complied with. Ethical research is conducted so as to provide confidentiality, remove or minimize the likelihood that harm or threats of harm comes to the participants, and that these harms are balanced against anticipated benefits. This research project was considered minimal risk; however, in research regarding sensitive personal issues, the possibility of harm always exists (Fisher & Wallace, 2000). In order to minimize the likelihood of any harm, I ensured my participants full confidentiality and participant anonymity. Participants are not identified on transcripts (other than through a pseudonym they created) and are not identified in any way in this thesis. Additionally, I ensured that school counsellors were aware and available to offer support if any participant required it. Fortunately, none did.

Researchers must ensure that participants, or in the case of minor children under 19, their parents or guardians, have given fully informed consent in writing. The parents of all participants received a Study Information Document and Parental Consent Letter (see Appendices A and B). In addition, each participant read and signed a Participant Consent Letter in my presence (see Appendix C).

## Limitations

It is important to note that the sample size and procedures for participant selection, while appropriate for phenomenological study, will not support generalization to larger populations of at-risk youth. However, the goal of this study is not to generalize across larger populations; rather the goal is to understand the experiences and perceptions of this group of individuals. As this study has been limited to an exploration of the phenomenon of care as these participants experienced it, we have not heard from the teachers so often referred to, or from the parents, both of whom are valuable partners in the care endeavour. As phenomenology the study must be bounded by a group who have shared phenomena. The adults involved in the lives of these participants have different roles and experiences which make the phenomenon for them different and thus would have be the focus of valuable, yet separate phenomenological studies. Some might criticize this approach; however such criticism would be short-sighted. To date much of the available literature has focused almost exclusively on the actions of the carer, generally ignoring the perceptions, experiences of the cared for, especially when those cared for are youth.

## Participant Selection

The most important task in participant selection is to determine that participants have something informational and substantial to address the needs of the study. According to van Manen (1990), the participants must provide something instructive to the study. In this study, purposeful sampling was employed in determining participants best able to contribute to the phenomenon. Purposeful sampling is not meant to be representative of a larger population. Rather, its intent is to maximize the range of information covered, and thus the data available for analysis.

I determined that a maximum of eight Grade 11 or 12 students could provide the rich description I sought. These grades were purposefully chosen as students in these grades likely have a broader set of experiences and thus a perspective and capacity to reflect on past experiences related to the phenomenon. Participants were sought who represented as diverse a range of personal circumstances as possible. Thus, selection criteria included gender and the presence of dominant risk and protective factors. Given that all participants came from an alternative program it was likely that a cross section of risk factors would be present in their lives. Rather than seeking participants who had experienced specific risks I sought students who more generally had been at-risk for school failure. As such, the presence of any one risk or protective factor was not important. More importantly, I sought participants who acknowledged the presence of risk in their lives but who also believed they had insight into their circumstances and a willingness to speak openly about it.

I began participant selection by visiting the program, introducing myself and spending informal time with the students and staff in the program during both enrolling and non-enrolling time. This opportunity for relationship and rapport building is important. Patton (1990) says that rapport is often mistaken for neutrality—rapport is related to the person, neutrality to interview content. He says "rapport means that I respect the people being interviewed, so that what they say is important because of who is saying it...I will not judge them for the content of what they say to me" (Patton, p. 317).

Following this I met with all students in Grade 11 and then all students in Grade 12. I outlined the purpose of the study and the selection criteria. I then provided interested students with an information package which included a Study Information Document and the Parental Consent Letter. Program staff volunteered to also speak about the study in their class when I was not present, in order to provide students with a chance to discuss the matter openly as a way to assist them to fully understand the study and their potential role as

participants. It is important to again mention that I was not a stranger to this program. I had conducted an earlier study in this community in which I had visited the program and interviewed students regarding their views on the alternative program structure in the district. I knew all of the program staff as acquaintances and recognized some of the students from interviews conducted in January 2006, though none of those students participated in this study.

As the next step in the process I set up opportunities to meet one on one with interested participants to allow them to meet me, get a better sense of the study and make a final determination of their interest. I met individually with each of the seven students who volunteered to participate. I reviewed the research questions with each of them. I shared the open-ended interview questions I had constructed, indicating that these could serve as a starting point but they could provide any related information that they wanted to. Each potential participant was asked their views on having the interviews recorded and transcribed. They were informed that they would be asked to choose a pseudonym and that their real name would never be included or divulged at any time or in any way. They were informed that any quotes within the final paper would be attributed to their pseudonym. I asked if they would be intimidated by the presence of the digital voice recorder. All indicated they had no problems with the interviews being recorded. I said that I would provide access to their interview transcripts for review if they wished. I also informed them that I would provide a thematic summary from the interviews after the first two interviews and that a review of that summary could serve the basis for the third and final interview. Many of the possible participants stated they very much liked the idea of reviewing the thematic summary as that would give them a chance to see if their views were shared by others. All seven potential participants expressed strong interest in the project, clearly stating that they had great interest in talking about their experiences. At this point all seven participants had received parental approval and were eager to proceed. All seven became participants. They included five

females and two males. Four were in Grade 11 and three were in Grade 12. Due to the small size and intense nature of the program, all participants in the study knew each other prior to the study; however, none were close friends. The participants came from a variety of racial-ethnic backgrounds. Four were Caucasian, one was Vietnamese, one Black and one was South Asian. Detailed participant descriptions are included in Chapter 4.

## Personal Preparation for Data Collection and Analysis

As stated, phenomenology gives primacy to the lived experience and the perceptions that arise from those experiences. Thus, interviews are generally the sole method of data collection as they most fully allow for participants to consider, reflect, make sense and converse about these experiences. Other forms of data collection, while valid for other studies, simply cloud this type of study. They are likely to hamper the phenomenological reduction as they introduce information that strays from the essential goal of the exercise. Thus no interviews with teachers, participant observation, file reviews or other forms of data collection were undertaken.

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are not discrete functions. The moment you start to collect data you begin analysis, working to ensure you hear and understand what your participants are telling you. In phenomenology researchers must consider who they are in relation to the research. For me this meant paying special attention to motivation and to my need to bracket past experience and perception. I agree with Cresswell (1998) who says that motivation by the researcher to be present in the lived experience of another is often driven by a "heartfelt need to promote social action, to lift the 'voices' of marginalized or oppressed people" (p. 78). As I entered the data collection phase of this study, I acknowledged that this motivation is central to my study.

In preparation for this study I spent considerable time in reflection as I sought to determine how I could best bracket past experience. As I have worked for years with youth similar to those who participated in this study with me, this was very important. It was my job to place at-risk youth entering the district or who had been expelled from previous schools in new school environments. Often I saw them more than once. I have heard the often painful stories of those labelled as "thugs" and "crooks" as they struggled to make their way in school, convinced that schools and the adults that operate them are cold and uncaring at best, overtly hostile and rejecting at worse. I have witnessed their tears as they asked why nobody cared, why they couldn't get a break, what they could do to get help to prove their worth. I have heard adults tell me these youth "don't care." These are powerful experiences. At the same time I can tell the opposite stories—of youth, often with a caring adult at their side, who asked these questions and found answers. I have worked with professionals whose ability to care is profoundly impactful in the lives of youth. I have seen care actualized in people and in settings. These too are powerful experiences. During data collection and analysis I committed to a reflexive stance so that I could make sense of the experiences of "others," as free as possible from my own "natural attitude."

As a prelude to gathering data, I undertook a full description of my own experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Reflection and writing about my own experiences which is included in Chapter 1, allowed me to determine that I have a complex relationship with the phenomenon of care. This reflection and writing took place over several months and was, at first, very difficult as I realized that full involvement in the process required an honesty with myself and my reader that I had never anticipated. More than one tear was shed as I acknowledged the multiple dimensions across which I have experienced and conceptualized the issue of care in my own life. Once complete, however, I felt it was among the more important steps in the entire research process. As I was

much more aware of my own experiences, I was more able to consciously bracket these experiences. The end result was a deeper understanding of what the phenomenon means to me.

## Interviews

Typically in phenomenological research, long and/or multiple interviews are used to elicit detailed data from participants (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2006). Ideally these interviews are informal, interactive and designed to elicit open-ended responses through "social conversations." I employed the Seidman (2006) 3-phase interview model. This method utilizes a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide approach designed to provide enough time to gain detailed information from participants while offering structure and time for reflection and consideration of experience. A general interview guide is useful when the participant has not fully "tapped into the experience qualitatively and with sufficient meaning and depth" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116). This interview method is appropriate as each interview is focused on one topic or time frame. Participants are informed of the focus of subsequent interviews thus providing them with an opportunity to reflect on that topic. An interview guide is included as Appendix D. All interviews took place in a small office adjacent to the program area. These were scheduled during the school day at times which would not interfere with classroom activities.

When interviewing the youth, it was important that I be fully aware of the power imbalance that existed between me and the participants as this may lead to resistance (Fine, 1991). Active attempts to balance unequal power may be viewed negatively by the interviewee and may add to resistance. Resistance can occur when potential interviewees decide to limit access to their thoughts and experiences to those they consider insiders (Douglas, 1985). This resistance may occur because the individual simply chooses secrecy, because they are uncomfortable with the topic to be discussed or because they do not trust the

research or the researcher (Adler & Adler, 2003). I sought to minimize the chances of such resistance by subtly ceding some control to the interviewee. I did this by being flexible and open to change of circumstance or mood, offering privacy, diligently reassuring and appreciating the interviewee and by using humour and self-deprecation (Adler & Adler). Perhaps it was my awareness of the potential negative impact of a power imbalance or perhaps it was that all participants were confident, self assured young people who had volunteered to participate in the study; whatever the reason I was happy to note that my presence didn't seem to intimidate or faze them at all. They wanted to talk, they knew the questions—all I needed to do was turn on the recorder and they were ready to go.

Throughout the interviews I attempted to bracket my own perspective. Surprisingly I found this to be relatively easy. Thoroughly reviewing the questions in preparatory meetings with the participants seemed to have provided the participants with a chance to consider their thoughts before each interview. At the end of the preparatory meeting I told each participant what we would cover in the next interview. At the beginning of each interview I reviewed the goal of that interview prior to asking any questions. This, coupled with the eagerness of participants to talk, allowed the interviews to unfold quite naturally. I would ask for clarification or ask the participant to tell me more when it seemed they might have more to offer, but mostly I could just listen. With few exceptions participants required little prodding. From my perspective the interviews became conversational and comfortable.

In the first interview, I focused on the participants' school life history. The second interview focused on the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon in question. As such, early in this interview I suggested the participant take some time to focus on the term "care" as it relates to school experience, thinking in particular of times and places when they believe they have experienced it. I then encouraged them to give a rich description of the phenomenon. In the final

interview, I shared a draft of thematic summary of Interviews 1 and 2 that I had being preparing along the way using the constant comparison method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Each interview ranged from 15-60 minutes in length. Interview 2 tended to be the longest interview and interview three the shortest, taking about 15 minutes. Seidman (2006) suggests that interviews be scheduled approximately 7-10 days apart. Given school and participant schedules this was rarely possible and there was generally 2-4 weeks between interviews. I found that for these participants Seidman's recommendation would be too overwhelming. I negotiated appropriate interview times with teachers to ensure participants were not missing important class time for the interviews. Within those boundaries, I worked with participants to set up interview times. Participants made it clear that they had classroom commitments and they required time between interviews to reflect on their experience.

## Data Analysis

Given the emphasis in phenomenology on constructing research methods to fit the problem it is important to note that the existing literature provides guidelines only as the researcher is responsible for conducting a search for methods appropriate to the question, constantly considering limits and possibilities. Thus the analytic approach taken is ad-hoc and likely to be different each time. This makes a clear description of exactly how the researcher analyzed their data nearly impossible (Palys, 1997). Within this study, I have merged aspects of Husserl's phenomenological reduction with Cresswell's phenomenological analysis. Glaser and Strauss' (1967) method of constant comparison was embedded within this analysis in order to provide a method for entering the data early and to examine the data from all participants simultaneously. As much as possible I have attempted to outline my process here, hoping to avoid the qualitative mystique; that is the tendency of researchers

to lean towards telling their story rather than consciously discussing decision points they faced, and how they made the decisions they did.

Following data collection, I had in excess of 200 pages of typed transcripts. My process for data analysis involved three phases—reflection, thematizing, and writing.

In the first phase, I begin by listening to the interviews to compare the transcripts with the spoken word. Richards (2006) says that the quality of analysis is dependent on the quality of data records and I wanted to ensure that I was working from verbatim transcripts that captured the full nuance of language and context. This is vital if the researcher seeks to "work up" from the data to coherent ideas and explanations (p. 67). This is indeed a daunting task and an awesome responsibility since I was involved in an inductive, or emergent, process in which I alone was responsible for determining themes within the data (Cresswell, 1998). Throughout this I tried to remember that qualitative data analysis is largely intuitive and as a researcher I had to recognize that I would not always be able to explain exactly where an insight came from or exactly how relationships between data came to light (Merriam, 1998). As Glaser and Strauss (1967) say "the root sources of all significant theorizing are the sensitive insights of the observer himself" (p. 251).

I then moved more deliberately into the reflection phase; my goal here was to listen to each interview without regard to classification or a need for in-depth analysis. I sought a deep understanding and a refined appreciation for what I had heard (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This process, called epoche, involves attending to the data without preconceived notions or bias. To do this I listened to each interview fully, concentrating on really hearing what was said. I made an effort to remove any thoughts about the speaker from my mind so as to avoid the possibility that my experiences with that individual would creep into my thinking about who was speaking.

In the second phase, thematizing, I read through the transcripts several times, sometimes skimming, sometimes reading a sentence and contemplating its meaning. I purposely did not make any notes during these readings. When I felt that I had knowledge of the content, I went into each transcript searching for the themes which captured the essence of what the participant was saying. I made notes of possible themes in the margins. During this phase I aimed to consider the relevance of each statement. I went back to my notes made during constant comparison and reflected on how these notes fit with the notes made during this phase. This provided new insight and clarity on the emerging themes. I found that often my earlier notes captured a theme more accurately than had my more extensive analysis. Additionally, I compared transcripts, looking for similarities and differences among participants. Statements that seemed relevant to the phenomenon were highlighted, irrelevant content was crossed out. By continuing to sift through the data I was able to arrive at two tentative themes— "the actions of the caring teacher" and the "attributes of the caring teacher" (see Appendix E). Under the theme of actions of the caring teacher I outlined five subthemes: outreach; motivate and guide; set and enforce standards; connections with students; open environment; talk openly. Under the theme of attitudes of the caring teacher I outlined seven subthemes: interested/involved; understanding and connected, thoughtful, trusting andtrustworthy, encouraging, respectful and fun and laughter. I shared this summary with the participants in interview three. The purpose of this was to provide participants with an opportunity to give feedback on the themes expressed during the interviews. All of the participants agreed that these themes accurately reflected their perceptions and experiences with care. I then prepared and reviewed the transcripts of this third interview repeating the process described above.

The next phase in thematizing involves confirming the themes. To do this, I imported all transcripts into NVivo software to assist with the final coding of data. NVivo7 provides a variety of tools to do the tasks that were, not all that long

ago, done with paper, scissors and file folders. While the software is designed for a variety of analytic tasks, I limited use of the software to the "cut and paste" organizational tasks as I preferred to own the coding process. In qualitative research, coding is the process of reviewing your data "until you understand the patterns and explanations" inhered within (Richards, 2006, p. 86). It is an organizational technique that allows the researcher to bring data together under theme or topic, essentially aggregating what all participants have said about a theme. I began coding to the tentative themes I had shared with the participants. Once I had done that I would print out the coded results and review them, editing on paper and updating the electronic file as needed. I found this use of NVivo to be enormously helpful. I was still able to do all of the coding but was able to maintain highly organized files for ongoing analysis. While I maintained the integrity of the two tentative themes shared with the participants I renamed them to more accurately reflect my complete analysis. These themes are outlined in detail in Chapter 5.

The third and final phase involves writing up the findings by theme. Writing is often considered a post analysis task. However, I found it to very much be a part of data analysis. In the writing phase I was very much involved with the data as I aimed to transform it into prose which told an accurate story of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. The most clear analytic task at this point is in constructing the narratives that link themes with the quotes selected to illustrate the theme. These narratives provide the glue that hold the divergent pieces together and the bridge that links themes into a unifying whole.

## Conclusion

The quality of any project is directly related to the thoroughness of the method used to obtain and analyze data. In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate that the process was comprehensive. My goal in the following chapters is to present the data and to offer a detailed analsyis of that data.

Before I do that I will, in the next chapter, introduce the participants, mostly allowing them to tell their story.

# Chapter 4.

## Introduction to Research Participants

### Participant 1: Kierie

Kiere is a 16-year-old young woman. She is in Grade 11. Kiere lives in a large blended family. Her parents divorced when she was one year old. She and her mother moved to this city soon after the divorce. In the interviews, Kiere is bright and articulate. She talks openly and with a great amount of insight. Kierie has found school to be a challenge—academically and socially. Her greatest academic challenge is math which she has struggled with since her early elementary years. She says she always wanted to get help from teachers but never really knew how, when she did reach out she was rebuffed. Socially Kiere, as will be discussed, was the victim of significant bullying by her peer group. This led to a long history of school avoidance in elementary years and skipping out in middle and high school years which in turn led to a lot of fights between her and her parents. Still she has managed to keep up with her peers and is set to graduate on schedule.

Kiere says her primary years in elementary school were fun. She remembers the school principal with fondness—he would play football and tetherball and hang out with the kids. In Grade 2 a new girl named Megan came and joined her group. She fondly remembers sitting on the school steps singing Spice Girls songs. While she says she mostly has fond memories of those early years, the other students started picking on her in Grade 2:

> *cause I still had my baby fat, so I was chubby, and I went through*
> *that stage where it was... I'd wear big baggy clothes and everything*
> *so that I would try to hide it and everything...I didn't like it. It was ...*

> *I don't know. It made me feel out of place. I still had some pretty*
> *good friends that stuck by me.*

The school counsellor became an important resource. He was fun to talk to and he would help her make plans to deal with the bullying. Kiere's mom would say:

> *"just let it go, or laugh about it. Laugh with them or something, and*
> *they just… sooner or later they'll say, Oh, it doesn't get to her. Then*
> *they won't bug you" But it just wasn't that easy for me.*

When Kierie was 10-years-old her mother remarried. This was the beginning of a difficult time for her; she says she "threw a lot of tantrums". She felt like her father was being replaced and she did not like that. She had a close relationship with her father and felt she had to protect her father's place in her life. She became a bit of a loner and spent a lot of time in her room, playing with dolls. Visits with her father were highlights; he was very helpful as they could talk easily. She said:

> *we would sit down and talk and everything and he'd be, like, 'how is*
> *it going?' and things that I could try to change for myself to try to*
> *make it a little bit better, and then we'd go shopping for all my*
> *favorite foods and have a fun time.*

Things took a turn for the worse in Grade 4. The bullying continued but now she wasn't prepared to take it anymore and she started fighting back. Kiere ended up on the receiving end of a lot of discipline and finally the principal told her she could no longer stay at school for lunch so her mother had to come and pick her up and take her home for lunch. At the same time school work started to become more difficult, Kierie was not good at math and was now struggling with reading and writing as well. School was no longer fun. Kiere remembers wanting to leave school in Grade 5. She says:

> *people [were always] picking on me saying, oh, I don't belong here,*
> *and then going home and it feels the same way in a way because*
> *it's like when I was 10, my brother was born, so [my mother and*
> *stepfather] kind of paid more attention to him, so it was making me*

*also feel more like I was pushed out of place and everything, like I didn't... I went home from school, where I felt like I don't belong. I go home, and I still feel like I don't belong there.*

In Grade 6 Kiere started cutting herself and says she "just didn't want to live anymore". Even on the hottest days she would wear long sleeved shirts so people couldn't tell she was cutting herself.

*I just took a razor blade and just ... tried pushing as hard as I could, but I never... I had this feeling, like, "I can't kill myself all the way." It's just, this is what helps me get rid of my anger kind of thing.*

On a positive note, Kiere made a really good friend during those years. When they were together it was as if they "were in their own little world" where they were the most important people in the world. This friend still plays a prominent role in her life. During this time her family began to care for foster children. One of the foster girls was 17; the two of them developed a strong bond as they both felt like they had been "pushed out" of their world. This girl had a strong influence on Kierie. She introduced her to speed when Kiere was in Grade 6. She says she only used it once but marijuana smoking became a regular occurrence and before long she was using ecstasy. She liked it because:

*it made us really happy, and we'd just forget about things, but as soon as it starts wearing off, you get really depressed, and you get... so then that made us just take another cap and be, like, "oh yeah... let's"... I wouldn't be home on the weekends, and if I was, I'd lock myself in my room, basically.*

Kiere started to withdraw from her family which led to fights with her mom. School continued to go downhill. She started skipping, getting into fights with her teachers and subsequently spent a lot of time in the principal's office.

*I got suspended for beating up one kid, pushing him into an overhead. He got really... I don't know, he started picking on me, and I guess it kind of brought back the thoughts of what, you know, kindergarten and all that, and I just got really mad, and I pushed him and started hitting him and everything.*

By Grade 9 she was skipping school more often than she was attending. Kiere was entrenched in a group of students just like her. When she was at school she says she was:

*a total bitch. I got into fights all the time. I never went to classes. If I showed up at English, my teacher would be like, "Oh. You've finally shown up. You've decided to come." And then, I'd be there for half an hour, and I'd pull an attitude, and I'd get kicked out.*

At the end of the school year the principal told Kiere she would not be allowed to return the following year. However, something started to change, Kiere is not sure exactly why, but she got an energy spurt and did a great deal of work to get caught up in all of her courses. For reasons that remain a mystery to her, the teachers she had a lot of conflict with provided a great deal of support. At this time one of the teachers in the program she is now enrolled in met with her to negotiate a plan to finish the year and have her transfer into the program the following year. In the September of her Grade 10 year she joined the alternative program that is currently enrolled in.

## Participant 2: Ken

Ken is 16 years old and in Grade 11. Ken lives with his mother and siblings. Ken grew up in a large city not far from his current home. He has lived in this community for about two years. Ken is a quiet and proud young man. Life has not been easy for him but he is clearly proud that after some tough times in school and life, things are coming together for him. In the interviews Ken is guarded, he chooses his words carefully and is succinct in his responses. On occasion, however, a specific topic would strike a cord and he would open up and be quite animated and passionate.

Ken's family moved regularly in his elementary years. He never spent more than two years in one school. At first Ken says he has good memories about elementary years, it was, he says, fun. However, as we continue to talk he

tells stories of significant bullying. He sought protection in his older siblings. However after they were no longer there the bullying intensified, often over little things such as how he wore his hair:

> *people have made fun of me and stuff, because my hair back then was really weird because of the way I cut it...I had my front long down here, and people would just make fun of me, call me a girl, and stuff like that.*

Ken put up with the bullying, until one day:

> *in Grade 6 I remember these kids would be making fun of me, calling me Monk and stuff like that. Just disrespecting my race and stuff—my religion—they did it for weeks. I told nobody, but then when they did it that one time, I really got mad so I chased them down and just started hitting them and stuff. And then, after that the principal was like, 'he's in the hospital, and he has to get something removed', and he kept on telling me, 'it's not your fault' and stuff. But, then I felt bad.*

For the most part Ken was able to keep up with the school work, except Math, which he has always found to be the hardest. His sister introduced him to skipping when he was in about Grade 4 or 5. He got caught by his mother, and she became very upset when she found out because she thought Ken was going down the same road his older brother and sister had. They had always struggled in school and Ken remembers them getting into a lot of trouble. Both dropped out of school during high school. Ken says he has learned a lot from his older brother, who is now 22, who has a lot of regrets about how things have turned out for him:

> *my brother, he told me he smartened up cause he just says as he grows up he thinks he could have still been in school and graduated if he didn't make stupid choices, and he moved out here, and that's what he was thinking about—all the stupid choices he made—[if he finished school] he probably would have got a job and a car already.*

When Ken was in Grade 7 his younger brother started to get bullied, just like Ken had. Ken became his protector and would often stick up for him. Yet this caused more problems for Ken:

> *people make fun of my hair and my weight, and called me 'loner' and stuff. And, cause one time I was walking around with my little brother, it looks like, you know, I'm hanging around with little kids, and so they made fun of me for that reason. All I'm doing is looking after my little brother.*

Increasingly Ken found the bullying was harder to ignore:

> *there was one time I was walking home and again it was because of my hair I was getting made fun of again. They were calling me stupid and stuff. They said I had no friends just cause I was walking home alone and I said, "What is that? Don't say that, or I will have to do something." And then, it just kept on going on and on. So, it got me really angry, and I just went back there to go beat 'em up and stuff.*

As Ken moved on to high school things took a turn for the worse. High school, he says, was "the baddest."

> *I just met new people...and then some of them that I went around with, was like influencing me, and to not doing bad stuff, just stuff like skipping classes, a lot. I wouldn't be going to classes, there were a hundred and something absences, classes I was failing, everything was just so bad.*

He continues:

> *my whole life was just slipping away, and I knew it was. My brothers and sisters were like, "Oh, don't skip, don't skip. You're going to ruin your life". My brother mostly, he'd say, "You see how I turned out. I dropped out, and now I can't even go back to school, cause I'm too old." He'd say, "Let's talk about it, don't skip or you'll get kicked out." I didn't listen, I just kept on skipping, I would pretend to listen. Nothing would go through my head. It'd just be coming out the other ear. I didn't take their advice at all.*

Ken was now getting into trouble a lot, mostly for skipping. He would get suspended, made to sign attendance contracts and see the counsellor. Ken

recalls one of the meetings with a counsellor who told Ken if he managed to go through one week without skipping, the counsellor would buy him something to eat. Ken says, "It didn't work out so well." Outside of school, he and his friends started to get into a lot of trouble, they were fighting, stealing, drinking, using drugs. School friends were convinced he was a gang member, but he said they weren't a gang, they just hung out together. When Ken did attend classes, the experience made him want to skip even more.

> *I'd come into the class, and [the teachers would] be like, "Oh, who are you?" and stuff like that. And when they'd be giving me the work to do, I wouldn't even know what's going on. I asked them what to do, and they say, "It's your fault for not being here. You gotta find out yourself," and stuff. This other teacher, when I just got there my first day and I'm typing, and he's like, "That's not how you type it. You type like that again, I'm gonna kick you out of my classroom." And, I did it again, got kicked out, and he's like, "Don't ever come back until you learn how to type right." My English teacher, he'd be like, if you'd say something—like you're just talking to your friend—"Have you done your work?" and he'd say, "You shut up," and stuff, right? "Sit down. Be quiet." He just gave me the hardest time.*

Soon after this Ken's mother had enough of the city. She decided to move to a smaller city, about one hour away where she hoped things would work out for her and her children. However, for the first year nothing changed except the address. Ken gravitated to a group much like the one at his old school. Visits to the office were a frequent occurrence. What was different was that at the new school the Vice-principal believed Ken could do better. He started to encourage him, telling him he could make it. Ken says he was sceptical of the optimistic approach at first, but it seems the vice-principal was persistent and Ken started to believe him. The vice-principal introduced Ken to one of the teachers from the program. She introduced the program to Ken:

> *I thought it was a good program, and all I was thinking was like, if you can't skip classes, then I guess I could do that. I'd try and it worked.*

## Participant 3: Carly

Carly is 17 years old and in Grade 12. Carly lives with her mother, father and sister. Carly has lived her entire life in this community. She has a very strong relationship with both of her parents. Carly is an articulate and self assured young woman. She is focused on the future, which includes being the first one in her family who plans to attend university, and she is confident she can succeed. Carly says her greatest struggle in school was her relationship with teachers. She believes that teachers tend to focus on the smart kids and ignore kids like her, who need extra help. Carly has strong opinions on these topics and she is willing to share them.

Carly has good memories of the primary years, where school was "fun" and the teachers were very helpful. However, things quickly turned sour—"It was pretty easy up until Grade 3 and then when we got into the latter grades, Grade 4 and 5 and 6 and 7, it was really hard." Math and science have always been her most difficult subjects and it just seemed like teachers were never very helpful. Grade 5 was different; that year she had a great teacher:

> *Math was still a struggle, but my teacher helped me a lot. He was really good for helping me, and we did lots of projects, and I did really good on those. I'd get help from my dad and stuff. And my teacher, if I went in the summertime, he would let us take our work outside. We'd sit outside and do our work. So, it was nice.*

Mostly Carly got through; she always managed to pass her courses. She faced some peer-pressure but was able to weather that quite well. Her strong relationship with her parents helped, she could tell her mom anything and her dad was a strong advocate at the school when necessary. That made a big difference. In middle school things started to go sideways, especially in Grade 8. She didn't like having to go to all of the different classes with so many teachers, it was all quite overwhelming. As a result:

*I just didn't care. I didn't want to be there, so I didn't do my work. I did some of the work, cause it depends what classes. But in Math I didn't do anything. In French I got really frustrated because I couldn't be in the class with everybody else. There was me and another girl who had to go into a different class with a different teacher, so that she could teach us one-on-one.*

This led to a pivotal moment of frustration and anger for Carly. At the end of the year:

*we were in the final exam, I'm turning these pages, and I said, "I never learned this." So, I put up my hand, and my French teacher that was supposed to be my teacher came over, and I said, "I didn't learn this or this or this or this." And I basically, I could do one page in the exam, cause I didn't learn anything else. So, she just put, "Oh, okay, well then, just say you didn't learn it, 'cause you were in a different class." So, I had to write that note on every single page. It was horrible.*

In middle school the students were not allowed to leave the campus, but in high school it all changed, no one was paying attention so she started skipping, it was easy. Her grades dropped and she got suspended several times. Classes were not going well, she did her best to scrape by but she was not enjoying school. One day she got in trouble for going home sick from school and even though her mother vouched for her she got a detention. As a result:

*I hated school, even more than I did before. I hated that vice principal. There was two of them. One had his favorites, but he was nice to everybody. But, you knew he had his favorites. And the other one had his favorites, and was mean to everybody. So, I got the one that was mean to everybody, and he gave me the detention.*

That was the last straw for Carly, she wanted out. Her boyfriend was attending an alternative program at another school. He really liked it; she checked it out.

*it's kind of like you're in a different... a completely different school. Cause they have their own principal, [one of the teachers] is basically the principal of it all. And, then, you each have your own teacher for the courses and the subjects.*

This intrigued Carly; maybe this would work. The school was all the way across town. She convinced her parents that she really wanted to be part of this program. They figured out a way for her to get there. She is attending and flourishing—proud that she really can chase her dream of going to university.

## Participant 4: Alex

Alex is 17 years old and in Grade 12. She lives with her mother, brother and sister. Alex has lived her entire life in this community. She says her family has had a lot of stress to deal with, but she is able to keep it separate from her school work. Her greatest struggle in school has been attendance and commitment to school. Starting in kindergarten, Alex started avoiding school. Ironically, though, when Alex did attend school she enjoyed it. The biggest problem was getting over the fear of being there. Moving on to high school and having to deal with all the different teachers was overwhelming for Alex.

Like most participants, Alex has fond memories of her early years— kindergarten and Grade 1 were fun. However it didn't take long before school started to become difficult, by Grade 3 she was "butting heads" with teachers. In Grade 3 teachers started assigning letter grades on report cards and from then on she struggled academically and the marks were never what she wanted. Her struggles with teachers started very early and she remembers one teacher very specifically. With indignation, Alex shows me her thumb and first finger clasped together in the shape of a zero and says, "she just made me feel like I was this big." She recalls this time very clearly:

> *the teacher thought that I was dyslexic and had ADHD because I*
> *write with my left hand, and when I first started writing, I was writing*
> *all my letters backwards. And, it was just because I was left-*
> *handed, and I had to go to this special school in the morning, and*
> *they had to assess me and so for a couple months I was really*
> *troubled, cause I was like, "There's something wrong with me. Like,*
> *my teacher thinks I have attention deficit." I didn't really know what*
> *dyslexia and ADD were, but I knew they weren't good, and I knew*

*that I was going to some special school in the morning that none of my friends were going on, and it was pretty hard on me...It wasn't good. I was, I felt really embarrassed. And then [all the tests] came back normal.*

During this time attendance became a big problem, Alex would pretend she was sick. Her mother would play along. Her father was still living with the family at the time. He wouldn't let Alex get away with these tricks so her mother started "fibbing" for her. Alex says she "took advantage of that." Socially, Alex says she had no problems at school. She had lots of friends and got along "with all sorts of people." Academics were a different story:

*academically, I've never been strong. I've always been like, it's almost embarrassing, but if I could pass my classes, my parents were like, "Okay, good." I knew I was capable of more and so did they, but it was just like whatever. Just show up and do whatever and just pass your classes. And that's always sort of been my expectation—"just pass your classes", and it's as far back as I can remember.*

All of these factors led to a lack of commitment and motivation all through her elementary years. She thought school was "pointless." Around this time Alex's parents divorced, her father moved to a nearby community and started a new family. It was stressful but Alex is pleased that she has maintained a strong relationship with her father.

As the elementary years came to a close, Alex and her parents agreed she needed a change. They agreed she would transfer to a private Christian school for Grade 8.

*It didn't work for me. It didn't work at all. It was terrible...it was just awful. The teachers were fantastic. The administration was terrible, and the students were terrible. I don't know. I just, I hate doing this, but it felt like I was in some Aryan whitewash, like Wonder bread. It was just... I felt like I was totally not where I belonged. The administration didn't like me. The students didn't like me. It was the first time in my life I didn't have any friends—any friends at all. Nobody liked me. It was terrible, it was just a waste of eight months. And I ended up getting kicked out because I dyed my hair*

*pink... I felt that they were very hypocritical in a lot of ways, cause it was like... Jesus hung out with bums and the homeless and the tax collectors, and the hated and the diseased...*

Alex has a sense of why all of this might have happened:

*I was from a family with one parent. My parents were divorced. I was just different than them. I just felt very different, and they picked up on it immediately, and they judged me based on it, and then they didn't like me and then it was just sort of a 'well, up yours' attitude. If you think I'm the outcast and the black sheep, then that's exactly what I'm gonna do.*

After being expelled from the Christian school, Alex attended a middle school for the remainder of Grade 8. She had missed her friends while at the private school. She was back with many of her friends from elementary school and she was determined to make up for lost time; it was "party time." Alex rarely attended school, did very little work yet her teachers passed her on everything. Alex remembers the final oral exam in French. The teacher went from student to student, quizzing them each. When it came to Alex he walked right by, she was thankful but uncertain of what was going to happen to her mark—she passed French that year. This seemed very strange, but she wasn't going to complain.

Grades 8 to 10 were a blur of non-attendance and non-learning. Alex only came to school to socialize. She developed a mild addiction to marijuana. When she did go to class she says she was often stoned. Alex had two social groups at this time—when she was at school she was friends with all of the "popular kids"; outside of school her friends were heavily into drugs. The kids at the school were very accepting, it was ok, she says to be in two different groups, besides she says some of the other popular girls were into "way worse" things than she was. As far as school was concerned Alex said:

*I never got a sense that [the teachers] cared. Never. I remember one class—I never, ever, ever went to class. I honestly, I'm not even exaggerating, at least half of the time I was supposed to be in class, I wasn't there. And it said that I didn't miss any classes when*

> *I got my report card. My teacher just marked me there. Every*
> *single day. It was crazy.*

On the home front, Alex's mother was fairly liberal—as long as she didn't get into really big trouble, she was free to make her own choices. Then, late in Grade 10 Alex ended a "really bad relationship" and met a new boyfriend whom she describes as her "saviour"; he really believed in her. He told her she was smart and deserved to be happy. At the same time fate seemed to intervene, it seems every one of those teachers who kept passing her when she wasn't there was advocating for her with the alternative program teachers. Apparently they told the alternative program teachers she had so much potential, she was an ideal candidate, they said. At the same time Alex was ready for a change. She says:

> *I felt like I was ready to grow up. I didn't really want anything to do*
> *with smoking pot every single day. I was gaining weight. I was*
> *depressed. I was mood swinging and I felt like a failure, like I had*
> *accomplished nothing, really. And, I met somebody who was a*
> *fantastic guy, a Christian, [he] got good grades in school, had his*
> *head on straight, and with a lot of support from him, and my family,*
> *I decided to come into [the program] and it has honestly changed*
> *everything so much for me. I had to make the decision, but [the*
> *program] put me in the right direction and has really helped me a*
> *lot.*

## Participant 5: Rick

Rick is 17 years old and in Grade 12. He lives with his mother and father. He has a brother who is six years older who now lives on his own. He was born and raised in this community. His parents are hard working people who were at work a lot in his younger years. They speak very little English. They would come home late and ask if he had done his homework. Other than that they were not very involved in his education. Often his brother would care for him. In school his biggest struggle was getting his homework done. Rick appears to be quite a nonchalant young man; it is only after he opens up that he admits he is not such

a care free guy. He has always found it easy to make friends but he admits he tends to get wrapped up in their problems and that "stresses him out" and affects his ability to concentrate on and complete his school work. Rick says he also gets stressed about family issues and that also makes it difficult to concentrate. He says he never really "had any big problems with teachers," his biggest complaint was that he was unable to get the individual learning support he needed to be able to understand and complete the work.

Rick has fond memories of elementary school. He had several good friends and they went through all of those years together. The teachers were fine; they did lots of fun things. He changed school a few times and this too was stress free. Attendance was never a problem. He acknowledges that he "struggled through school work," mostly getting C's. Like so many of the other participants, Math and French were the most difficult subjects. He knew he needed help and he wasn't shy about putting his hand up in class or going in at lunch for extra help. Still it was frustrating to be struggling so much.

Moving on to middle school meant both nervousness and excitement. The school was new and big. He made new friends. Grade 8 was a difficult year though. His grades started slipping and he wasn't enjoying school:

> *Well, I remember that's when I started, I sort of started going through a depression. And so, that year wasn't too big for me. In the beginning it was fine, but half way through the year, I started going through a depression and stuff.*

One of Rick's teachers started noticing he "was acting different and stuff". Rick admitted to the teacher that he was depressed. The teacher was very helpful but Rick started avoiding school. He just did not want to be there, he just wanted to stay home and watch television. Eventually the school played a more deliberate role, arranging for medical help and assisting Rick in telling his parents about his struggles. Rick took anti-depressants for a while and they seemed to help him. He no longer takes the medication and says while he still says he is

quite stressed the depression has lessened. If Grade 8 was largely remembered as the year the depression hit, Grade 9 was the year he started skipping:

> *I fooled around a lot. It was like that was when I just started not to really care too much about school. And that's when I started hanging out with people and they would just skip all the time.*

Rick says he and his friends weren't into drugs or drinking, they were just "buddies" who didn't like school. He says he was suspended quite often; his parents would get called to the school:

> *we were getting lectures and all that and talks from the principal, or whatever, saying, "Yeah. You keep this up. You're not going to be able to get through." And then, I don't know, just didn't really have too much impact on me. I don't know, I just didn't really care at that time.*

As Grade 9 came to a close things were not good. He was failing most of his courses. One of the program teachers came to talk with him:

> *Oh, well, she would just talking to me about how she's talked to a couple of my teachers, and seen some of my progress and stuff. And she was like, "Yeah. You're not doing that well," and she was just letting me know the program would be helpful for me. It would be able to get me through the year and stuff.*

Rick was perplexed, he didn't want to go into an alternative program but he also didn't want to repeat Grade 9. Faced with this quandary he decided to give the program a try. Of all the participants in this study, Rick seems to have faced the toughest time in the program. He was reluctant to be there and when he broke the rule regarding substance use at school activities, he was suspended from the program for several months. He was allowed to return the following September:

> *I sorta started to realize what I was actually doing...I came into Grade 11 at the beginning of the year, and started to really realize how the program's helped me, how it helped me get to Grade 11.*

Rick now found the motivation he had lacked before. He isn't sure exactly where it came from, but Rick found a new interest in being at school and in doing the work. He started concentrating on the work and began to except help from the teachers. His attitude turned around and he began to appreciate the efforts of the teachers. Rick says he is amazed that he is back on track and will graduate with all of his friends this spring.

## Participant 6: Andrea

Andrea is 16 years old and in Grade 11. She lives with her mother and father. Andrea has lived in or near this community her entire life. Her biggest challenge at school was dealing with the peer-pressure and bullying. She says she was a tomboy, the other girls teased her about that a lot. When asked about her elementary years, Andrea is honest and says she wants to talk about it but mostly it is "just bad memories. I don't really want to go back to it...I'd rather forget about it." Andrea is much more willing to talk about the present and the future. After several years without direction, Andrea comes across as focused on achieving her potential.

Andrea, like so many others, says the first couple of years were fine, but by Grade 3 things were getting tougher. Andrea found it difficult to concentrate on school work; she preferred to avoid the work, often she would just sit and doodle. This led to a lot of arguments with teachers. Andrea's most persistent memory of her elementary years was dealing with almost constant teasing and bullying.

> *I remember always being by myself. I never really had friends when I was little, or if I did, I always hung around with the boys...I don't know. I never really fit in.*

The bullying continued all through elementary school right into the middle school years.

*I remember this one time, it was my first year in the middle school, and this girl threw rocks at me, and I got really mad, and I got all my guy friends, and we're all yelling at them, and then I got suspended. But, then I realized, well, maybe I should hang out with the girls more than the guys, cause ... then, I grew my hair out.*

Alex worked hard to make friends; she was willing to make changes if she needed to. She remembers thinking that "maybe they'll like me if I do this, or maybe if I don't give them attitude, they'll hang out with me and be my friend."

School work was always a challenge for Alex. In elementary years she fooled around in class a lot, she rarely finished her homework and she always had homework. However, her parents really stayed on top of it, they would check her homework all of the time. When middle school came around she started realizing she could tell her parents her homework was done even though it wasn't. She says that is when she really started having troubles. She started arguing with teachers and getting into trouble. At the same time Alex started to succumb to peer-pressure:

*That's when everybody started smoking and going to parties. Not necessarily Grade 7, but more Grade 8. Everybody was talking about smoking weed for the first time and I was like, "Wow. You guys are so young!" But, I tried... that's when I first tried all of that stuff.*

Alex knew she was too young to be doing all of this stuff, but she had friends and that was all that mattered. School was not going well but that was not all that important to her.

*I started skipping school, and not caring at all anymore...and, then, my report card would come, and it would be like, F, F, F, F. And I was grounded for a very long time.*

Eventually Andrea's story is similar to the other participants. One of the alternative program teachers approached her. She was tired and ready to make a change. After some initial attitude and reluctance, Andrea accepted the invitation to join the program. She says it was the right decision.

## Participant 7: Dakota

Dakota is 16 years old and in Grade 11. She lives with her older sister and her sister's children. Dakota was born in a large city far from where she now lives. She lived with her mother for the first several years. Dakota says she has never had a relationship with her father. However, her mother had significant struggles and Dakota was raised in a foster home for much of her childhood. Dakota was close to her foster mother, she says she was like her "mom." Dakota found out her birth mother died when she was in Grade 9. Dakota is talkative, forthcoming and often quite animated. She seems to like being the centre of attention but at the same time admits to being quite shy. Her biggest challenge in school has been dealing with teachers. She feels teachers "nag" her a lot and that has led to a great deal of conflict over the years.

Dakota recalls the first few years of school with fondness. There was lots of play time and after some initial struggles she settled in to her foster home quite nicely. Dakota had several friends she could "really, really, really trust" and she told them everything. This was important because she never liked telling adults too much. Trust issues have always made friendships important, but balancing them is tough sometimes:

> *Yeah. I'm really picky with my friends, and I don't like to share my friends, because of the fact that one person doesn't like the other person, and then I'm friends with them, and then they always fight or they talk about one another, and then I have to deal with it, so, I kind of keep my friends distant, like... from each other.*

For the most part Dakota found school work easy in elementary school.

> *It was easy. I'm really smart. I just don't like to do my work which made it kind of hard for me, cause I was a straight A student Grade 2, 4, and for 7 and 8, but I didn't put my mind towards my work, so I was getting Bs and Cs. I almost failed Grade 8, cause I wasn't doing my work, so it was easy. It's just the fact that I didn't try.*

Early on however Dakota started to clash with some teachers, she would talk back and get suspended. She managed to get through the elementary years though and says the trouble she got into in elementary school was "no big deal," especially compared to high school. Once she hit high school things started to change, the school was bigger and everyone was in separate classes. New friends were made and old friends lost. The school work was easy and she managed to pass all of her classes, at least until Grade 9. That was the year she learned her mother had died. This was made more difficult because Dakota does not like to talk about her feelings because:

*I've noticed when I talk about anything that I'm going through, it gets used against me or thrown back in my face...it causes a lot of anger and in Grade 8, I started cutting, because I had nobody to talk to, and I got put into therapy because they thought I was doing it for attention, and I had so many problems.*

Dakota was skipping school and things "started to go downhill." She wasn't coming home on time. After a while her foster mother couldn't deal with it anymore. Dakota was moved out of the long term foster home and into a group home. At first the group home was fine, it was summer and there were a lot of fun things to do. She was good friends with one of the other girls in the group home. They went to school together; they would pretend they were sisters so no one would know they lived in a group home. Unfortunately before long, problems started to creep in; she had a new boyfriend who was not good for her; she started using drugs, staying away from the group home. Eventually she ran away. Soon she connected up with a family member who arranged for her to move to where she is currently living. This occurred about 18 months prior to our meeting. After being out of school for several months Dakota entered the local high school. After living in a larger city, she said the school was "culture shock, big time." The students were a lot different from her friends in the city, not as accepting of people who want to be a bit different from the crowd. At first, she had a great deal of conflict with the teachers. She says:

*I gave my teachers a lot of problems, like my socials teacher. I just wasn't trying. I wasn't putting out any effort. I wasn't handing anything in....*

In the spring of 2006, Dakota was approached about joining the alternative program. She was reluctant, and says she still has mixed feelings about being in the program; she says she might like to go back into the regular program. When I ask why she is non-committal. Dakota says she was basically "just put into the program." While she was reluctant to be in the program and she still has some conflict with the teachers, overall she says she likes it, especially because it helped her make and keep good friends.

*you are with the same kids everyday all day, you get used to it and you make friends easier, going class to class, oh my God, I have to make new friends in this class...last year I was new, bouncing around from friend to friend not knowing who to hang out with....this year I can keep my friends and who I hang out with instead of bouncing around from person to person.*

# Chapter 5.

# The Collaborative Actions and Personal Attributes of the Caring Teachers

## Introduction

Very early in the process of analyzing the interview transcripts I began to see that participants describe care as a complex, interwoven process of collaborative actions and personal attributes. When describing the collaborative actions of caring teachers, participants spoke not only of what "she" does (in this program all of the staff are women); often the participants spoke of what "they" do. This perception by the participants of a shared commitment among the program staff seems to be an important aspect in modelling and communicating care and thus in the participants receiving care. It is important to note that participants did not readily describe one-off positive relationships with teachers outside of the current program as "caring." Such teachers were described as "nice," "really good teachers" or "fun"; however, only on a few occasions were they described as caring. The term care was generally used by participants to describe their current environment, as in this environment they felt teachers were collaborating to intentionally and purposefully demonstrate care.

In the first part of this chapter I outline five themes which demonstrate the collaborative aspects of care as experienced by the participants: building personal connections with students; creating a family-like environment; encouraging rich dialogue; reaching out to at-risk students; and motivating students. In addition to these collaborative aspects, participants described how care is confirmed through the personal attributes of the caring teacher. Whereas the collaborative actions help create the environment in which care can flourish,

these personal attributes seem to confirm care between individuals. In the second part of this chapter I outline four personal attributes of the caring teacher—trust, encouragement, patience and respect. In Chapter 6 I analyze each identified theme and attribute in relation to the current literature.

## Care as Collaborative Action

### *Theme 1:*

### *Caring Teachers Build a Personal Connection with Students*

The first theme identified is a shared commitment among the teachers in the program to connect with students. Participants described how the carers get to know the cared for as individuals. As participants spoke of their experiences with care, it became clear that they see care as a process, a journey that begins when the carer takes an interest in the cared for. This interest takes two forms, which in tandem lead to strong connections between the carers and the cared for. First, the carer is interested in the person, someone who the carer recognizes as a unique individual with a previously unrecognized need to be seen, heard and supported. Second, there is a clearly displayed interest in the learning needs of the cared for. Many participants described how knowing that the carer has an interest in the cared for is comforting as it allows the cared for to feel like working with them is "not a hassle." This is different from "other teachers where you don't feel like they care, so you don't care." This personal connection begins when the carers reach out to the cared for, letting them know they are there. As Dakota talks about this she laughs and says these personal connections are like having a loyal friend "kind of, that's older, sounds weird... like say you were in really bad situation you could go to them." Kierie says that it is not just her teacher who seems to do this; it is part of the collaborative nature of care in the program:

> *you need a teacher who can go up to you and at least say are you*
> *ok with everything ...[the teachers in the program] they do that,*

> *even if you don't ask for help they all go around and ask are you ok with everything...there are kids out there who are afraid to say I need help.*

Alex also identifies the collaborative nature of teacher help:

> *They help you with your homework, if you need help. I'm sure the other teachers would have been willing. I never went to them. But, that's a big thing with the [teachers here]. They'll tell you they'll stay after school with you, at lunch—whatever you need, come here early...*

As part of the shared commitment to making personal connections, participants described how each teacher would reach out to strengthen the personal connection. In discussing this, Alex spoke of the teachers as friends, acknowledging that this may not be an easy role for some teachers to assume:

> *she makes a really big effort in connecting with the students. She became your friend, almost, which, I don't know, maybe some teachers aren't into that, because it may not be seen as really professional. But, she did, she seemed like your friend. If you had a problem that didn't relate to school, she'd... you'd feel totally comfortable talking to her about it...you could tell she really enjoyed your company.*

In a follow up interview, Alex continues to ponder the teacher as friend relationship:

> *I said this in another interview, that I don't think it's absolutely necessary for the teacher to be like your best friend, but I do think that it helps a lot for them to be your friend, for them to get to know you as a person, as opposed to just knowing you as a student; for you to get to know them as a person as opposed to just being your teacher—to form a relationship so that you want to make them proud. You want to do well for them. You don't want to let them down or disappoint them, and you feel comfortable with them.*

Andrea talks about the eased into ways in which these connections are built. They can happen with something as simple as:

> *on Monday morning, the starting of every morning, [the teachers] always ask us how our night went, and what we did and what T.V.*

*shows we watched and, you know, every morning everybody tells what we did overnight...*

Kierie agrees that knowing something about the personal life of the teacher helps. It doesn't need to be a lot, little pieces of information can help create the connections.

*caring teachers...you get to know about them, not just getting to know us...we also know them, I know [my teacher] goes to Mexico at Spring Break with her husband and everything.*

Alex takes it a step further. She says the personal connections must go both ways:

*I think if you expect your students to come to you with emotional issues and personal problems and expect them to try to fix that with them, then you have to do that, in my opinion. You have to extend that to them the way they're extending it to you.*

Kierie says that these personal connections can be very helpful:

*I had this really bad day and I was bawling my eyes out and before I went to any of my friends I went to my teacher...she is the type she told me this one time...I don't remember exactly who the character was but it was from someone from Gone with the Wind...and there was this character and she said I am going to lend you this book because there is the girl who always like puts things behind her, she's like have a good day I will deal with it tomorrow kind of things....she wants me to have a good day and she always has something right for me...makes me come out of her office with a total smile on my face, not bawling my eyes out..*

To Carly, these connections with students are a must for teachers:

*You have to have a connection otherwise the students won't listen to you, or they don't care what you're saying, or they won't care about anything. So, I think it's really important to have a connection with a student.*

Carly says that when this connection is present, you have someone to go to. For example, she says:

*if you're having a personal problem or an academic problem, you feel like you need someone to talk to, someone to help you along. I think you go to a teacher and they have to have a connection with you to be able to talk about that openly. Otherwise... I think you just keep it all bottled up inside. Your teacher has to kind of open you up and get you to know everybody in the class and have a personal connection with you to understand. So, I think it's very important to have a connection.*

Ken is very succinct on this point. He likes feeling connected to his teacher:

*well you get to know your teacher more, and the teacher gets to know you more. How their life is like, and what they do on a regular day, and I don't know. It's just getting to know your teacher a lot more.*

Kierie says when these student-teacher connections occur, the teacher develops an enhanced sense of intuition about the needs of the students:

*my teacher knows when I have a bad day, sometimes when people get to me I just need to go for a walk...she always knows exactly what I am doing, she will know just before I get really mad...*

Rick says he was at first reluctant to build personal connections with teachers. Over time he learned those connections can be helpful inside and outside of school. He says teachers who value connections will work together because they are concerned with the welfare of the cared for. The program teachers, he says:

*interact with each other and see if you have any things going wrong, there might be problems outside of school like at home or with other friends...the teachers they actually they try to talk to you one on one and try to help you as best as the can....for each of the teachers I will notice if there is a problem they will talk to me one on one and be able to help me as much as possible...at first I wasn't really sure I wanted to talk and then I started to open up and I guess it does help and...they are like able to keep me going instead of me getting focused on my problems outside of school and not bothering to do my work and stuff like that.*

Humour was often described as a vehicle carers used to connect with the cared for. Ken says that "this one time...we had to put pictures together and my

friend put this picture of a rapper on his paper and [the teacher] was like "He's hot...it was so funny." Kierie says the program teachers will try anything to make the students happy. With simple understatement she says:

> *I like teachers who are happy. I am not going to be happy if teacher is grumpy, always have smile on their face...because, you come to school, you don't want to just have it all this school work and everything. You want to be able to have some sort of fun.*

### Theme 2:

### Caring Teachers Create a Family-like Environment

Early in the interviews I noticed that the word family was mentioned frequently. All of the participants stated that the program is like a family. They said they appreciate and are proud of this aspect of the program. Yet many seemed surprised that they were experiencing such an environment; it seems they had not really thought it was something they would ever experience in high school. Initially I had intended to subsume this theme under theme 1; however it was mentioned so often and so specifically that it seemed it required to be set off as an important and distinct aspect of the care process. As I think about this dynamic, it is clear that the commitment of teachers to connect with students is the action; the family-like environment is an outcome. Alex says:

> *I think [the program] in and of itself is like a big family—being with the same people for a long period. It has that comfort there. You feel safe with them. You want to make them happy, not just the teachers, the students, the other teachers that aren't yours, the administration, and [the program]. You all get really comfortable together, and that's neat.*

For Andrea the family-like environment extends to how the curriculum is delivered: "in Family Management last semester we always talked about our problems to the class, like our class we opened up completely, it made us like a family". Later, she revisits this:

> *we are completely like a family, if you ask anyone in [the program] and asked would you consider this one big family, when we have*

> *our assemblies....it is like we are a family...we are pretty much all really close, people have their fights but we get together.*

Carly agrees, saying that the program:

> *is just like one big family. We're all nice to each other. We don't cause fights. It's like... I don't know why [the other students in the school] think we're bad; cause I'm probably getting better grades than most of the people out there.*

For Dakota, the program is "like a really big family...you can go to anyone of the teachers and they know what's going on...and it is easier to handle." And to Kierie:

> *once you are in the same class with people for long enough then it feels like a family and you can say anything that you really want...if you are coming in the class and you are bawling your eyes out you don't really care because everybody is there for you they wont go like what a wuss kind of thing*

She goes on to say:

> *I like having caring teachers. I like coming from one home to another...where it is friendly and safe...you feel comforted, if you need a hug and anyone in your class is like come and give me a hug kind of thing*

I began to wonder if the family-like talk would lead to parental labels being applied. It does, a few times. Kierie brings it up first, saying "the teachers and everybody in [the program] are like mothers to us, they are always catching up to you." Rick agrees, saying the teachers in the program are pretty much like mothers, "like how if you go home and you are doing your homework and your mom is like is your homework done?"

At this point I began to notice a gender divide. As noted, all of the teachers are women. Men were rarely mentioned during the interviews. Only one participant spoke positively of males in the school; Ken spoke of a vice principal who gave him several chances. Interestingly all of the other participants had dealt with this individual, yet the others did not mention him. Occasionally

participants speak of a male teacher they liked, but they do not often refer to males when they are describing care. Further, in describing the family-like environment it is worth noting that participants mention mothers but not fathers. Outside of the school, most participants spoke of fathers who were largely uninvolved in their lives, either because they were not present or because they did not play much of a role. Listening to participants speak mostly of women as the carers in their life it is hard not to conclude that, even with all of the social change in our society, women largely seem to carry the weight when it comes to care. The question of whether or not this is a role of choice or one of relegation is outside the mandate of this research: important, yet best left for another day.

*Theme 3:*

*Caring Teachers Encourage Rich Dialogue*

Rich dialogue was identified as an important part of the caring relationship. The carer is someone the cared for can trust enough to talk to about important personal issues, "like a friend that's older." The dialogue is rich, participants say, because the carer is listening eagerly, sincerely trying to understand what the cared for says. As stated, in this environment, teachers work to create personal connections with students, as a result a family-like environment is created. From there rich conversations flow. These conversations take place in structured ways in class time, in informal one-on-one conversations, in "pep talks" and in informal, everyday interactions. These conversations seem mostly focused on preventing or resolving problems. Interestingly, the participants rarely discuss rich dialogue in regards to the curriculum. Perhaps this speaks to the participants' need to develop mechanisms for resolving inter-personal conflicts differently than they had in the past. Most of the participants told me of how conflict with peers, teachers and family members had been an almost constant factor in their lives prior to enrolling in the program. They seemed to have few methods for dealing with that conflict, or to learn how to avoid conflictual situations. However, in this class there were other students in

the same boat and teachers who were very open about dealing proactively with the conflict. The combination of these factors seemed to create a strong desire to address conflict more openly. Class meetings were often used to unearth and resolve potential problems. Sometimes the teachers sensed something was happening for the individual and would reach out to the student to talk through the problem one-on-one. Other than Rick, all seemed to ease into this environment of open dialogue without difficulty. At first Rick is surprised that teachers would actually want to talk to him about anything:

> *the teachers here they actually try to talk to you one on one and try to help you as best as the can. For each of the teachers I will notice if there is a problem they will talk to me one on one and be able to help me as much as possible. At first I wasn't really sure I wanted to talk and then I started to open up and I guess it does help and when I am in the program they are like able to keep me going instead of me getting focused on my problems outside of school and not bothering to do my work and stuff like that...*

The dialogue seems to have a soothing effect on the environment within the program. For some it also seems to have a healing, almost therapeutic quality. Andrea, for example, says most everyone is comfortable bringing up personal issues:

> *if someone was having a problem we would talk about it, only if they were comfortable, we would talk about it and then someone would bring up another problem, we would have a whole ball of problems and then we would unscramble them... I love doing that....*

I find myself curious about what types of issues are brought to these meetings. Andrea tells me that the most frequent issue brought up has nothing to do with school, rather:

> *everybody has been fighting with their parents, someone would say we aren't getting along ...then we would have this big ball of problems, more people would give other people an idea, I would say maybe if you talked to your parents and blah, blah, blah then maybe that would sum things up they would try that. People freak out with their parents and think they can get away with it. I would*

> *say calm down, don't argue with them, let them talk....they would*
> *come back the next day and say that helped so much...*

A little surprised that family problems are openly discussed in the classroom, I ask if all of the students take part. Kierie tells me:

> *not at the beginning, we are all like what if I say something stupid,*
> *but when we got to know each other it was like brother and sister*
> *and I had no problem saying anything and people said what was on*
> *their mind*

Several students talked about how this classroom dialogue is a favoured part of the day. Kierie says her teacher last year held similar class meetings that were part discussion, part counselling session. Often the teacher would open the meetings by saying:

> *what is going on? We would each go around the class, how are you*
> *feeling, what is bugging you this week? She would even say if there*
> *is something I have done something that has offended you, just say*
> *it out....we would all get into this conference, I didn't like how this*
> *person did this...then we would all deal with it, it was like a big*
> *counselling session, I liked it...*

Others picked up on this willingness on the part of teachers to insert themselves personally in the dialogue. It seems that this willingness to open up encourages the students to do the same and to see that they are not alone. For example, Carly says her teacher:

> *puts herself, not in the same situation as you are, but if she's had*
> *similar situations, she'll tell you about it, and tell you how she dealt*
> *with it, and how it made her feel, and how I'm probably going*
> *through the same thing and having those feelings.*

How does this happen, I wonder:

> *One-on-one. If you want to talk to her, you'll say, "Oh, can I talk to*
> *you?" and she'll say, "Yeah." So, she'll pull you out in the hallway,*
> *and have a big, long discussion. And she'll just relate to what's*
> *happening with you, and give her opinion and her advice and ask*
> *you how you're feeling about it, and she's just really good.*

Now Carly and I are in a rich dialogue. I say "it sounds like she listens well. What does she do to let you know she's listening?"

> *eye contact. And she kind of goes like, "Um hmm", "Yeah," and she'll just put little comments in there that you know [it's] actually not going in one ear and out the other.*

Carly says teachers must be able to talk openly. Carly says: "you have to be able to open up and talk about things and not just be a closed book." Dakota uses these conversations as a way to cool off when she is agitated. She is pleased when she can express her own emotions:

> *I talk to my teacher all the time, I don't have really good days like yesterday I randomly tweaked out on her, I would go back and tell her what happened, she understands, she doesn't go to the office, you're going to get suspended, she understands me....*

Ken is not comfortable with engaging in intense problem solving dialogue. He prefers the light banter that opens the day:

> *every day in the morning she talks about how her day went...and what did you guys do and stuff....she would tell us what she did, what she watched on TV....it gets everyone in communication, we start communicating with one another and that is fun because everyone starts talking about what they did and it is funny*

While Kierie had talked about engaging in problem-solving dialogue, she agreed with Ken that the banter was a good way to start the day:

> *what did you do for the weekend...they don't just say get down to work, they start off in the morning with like what did you do over the weekend....we talk this outside of school talk....not just science this is what we have to do...they will get to know us personally.*

Kierie says that given the complexities of home life, this ability to talk openly with a teacher is very important to her. She says sometimes she can talk to teachers a lot easier than family members because:

> *my mom is a yeller; the only way she gets through to you is by yelling at you...and my step-dad I have never been really close to him. I was always afraid to talk to him because he is my new dad.*

> *My real dad is like split away from my mom, he is in Vancouver and*
> *I can't see him that much, also my half brother was born from my*
> *step dad and I am the outsider. You have your blood son. I felt a lot*
> *of the attention was put towards him.*

### Theme 4:

### Caring Teachers Reach Out to At-Risk Students

Many of the participants described how they fell through the cracks of the school system. While some participants described acting out and aggressive behaviours in their school experience, many of the participants described being mostly compliant and withdrawn; many had been victims of significant bullying and all had struggled academically yet didn't seem to get much support. As a result many quietly withdrew from school and were largely left alone to cope with their situations as best they could. Some retreated with peers, who like themselves, found solace by skipping school and becoming habitual marijuana users. While some of the participants described how their "turn around" was self directed and followed a personal decision to make a change, others described the role of the teachers in reaching out to them. Participants spoke of how the program teachers seemed to know that they were their target clientele. The teachers actively reached out to these students, working with colleagues to identify students who met the program criteria. Once these students are identified the teachers approach them to invite, entice, and even coerce them to join their program. Such strategies were likely in response to the reluctance of students to join the program; many described being leery to step outside of the "normal" track and most did not want to face the stigma that comes with placement in an alternative program. Alex talked about how the teachers reached out to her. One of the program teachers came to her and said that every single one of her teachers had referred her to the program. They had all said she was the prime candidate for the program. Alex wasn't persuaded. She said no three times before agreeing to join the program. I asked her why she was so reluctant to join the program when they approached her:

> *I didn't want to be away from my friends. I didn't feel ready to give up that. I also kind of knew that I'd have to buckle down and fix it. I'd have to start coming to school. I'd have to start trying. So, I didn't know if I was ready for that either.*

"What about the second time?" I asked:

> *I was starting to think about it. I was kind of embarrassed. And, I still am, when I look back. I've wasted so much of my education in high school and elementary school. I could have had straight As if I just tried, and I didn't bother. And, the fact that I passed with 50%. I had a C minus average for years and years and years. Knowing I can do better—that's embarrassing. And, I think I was ready to change that.*

And then she said: "the third time, I just decided to. I thought, Okay. yeah, I'll do it. I'll go for one term." I ask Alex if she has any regrets. Her reply: "I should have gone into it earlier."

Andrea says that it is important to reach out to students who might benefit from the program as many are "too shy to ask for help." This need is enhanced because the program, like most alternative programs, suffers from a negative reputation as the place where the "stupid people" go.

Ken had moved to this community from a large urban centre. When he wasn't belittled by teachers he was largely ignored and occasionally suspended for non-attendance. Ken says when says that when he first moved nothing changed but he soon leaned that there was a program at the new school that was tailor-made for him.

> *I was still doing the same things—skipping, hanging around with the wrong crowd. And then when they're talking to me, they're ... they kept on giving me chances, even though they told me to sign a contract when I first came here. The [vice-principal] just kept on giving me chances. He helped me out a lot. He told me to talk to the counsellor and stuff, and I told him what kind of class I'd like to be in, just like in one simple class, one teacher, just hand me the work, tell me what to do, and stuff like that. I didn't like moving around the school to go to all the classes. [One of the program teachers] told me about this program, she told me I can do it and*

*then when I started getting better she would say well done, keep up the good habits, don't fail, don't get into the bad stuff.*

Kierie too was approached by one of the teachers. The experience was marked by both invitation and coercion:

> *[the teacher] talked to me, and she was like, "I want you to put on some thought into this," and she told me, she bargained with me. She was like, "Okay. You come into [the program], we'll make it magical. She said we have this one program kind of like elementary school how you stay in class together ....but you learn exactly like the mainstream it just helps you stay in class which I had a big problem with in Grade 9, at first I thought that sounds stupid, it sounds like the elementary school. I was a total attitude queen. [The teacher] said send this home to your parents and they talked to me about it and I ended up getting into it.*

Still there was a coercive quality to the circumstances; there really was not a choice for Kierie:

> *the principal had said since I had been doing so bad in Grade 9, [he] said if you get kicked out of the program, you are not going back into the mainstream...and then [the other schools in town] wouldn't take me either.*

Given this it is not surprising that when she did get into the program, she:

> *hated it, stuck in one class with everybody. The same people everyday and it is Grade 10 so it so dramatic and I had so many problems with it. I got told just kind of stick it out, but my teacher was nice, she was always there for me.*

She continues:

> *I would sometimes blow fits but then the teacher would see ok she needs to go for a walk but then after a while my mom started to see the total upping of my grades, like I failed Grade 9 PE you can pass just having your gym strip...I was told you have to do Grade 9 over if you don't go [to the program]...that was another thing that just made my final decision...then my mom saw As and Bs on my report cards, I was on the honour roll for the first time ever.*

Kierie is the only participant to openly talk about the coercive nature of the program entry process. As I listened to her speak it was clear that the actions of

the principal were coercive and not in keeping with the type of care described by the participants. However, neither Kierie, nor the other participants, identified it in a negative light—for them it seems it is just what happened. This is not really a surprise to me since the participants are very pragmatic and focused on high school graduation. Given this, and their experience with a generally punishment-based school system, such actions don't seem to strike them as out of the ordinary. Still I cannot help but wonder if the coercive elements attached to the outreach actions of the teachers should negate inclusion of this theme from a description of teacher care. In the end I have chosen to keep it and report it. From my vantage-point my moral judgment may say remove it, but in phenomenology we strive to explain phenomenon as experienced by the participants. It seems the participants believe the ends justify the means; for them the outcome is positive, therefore the actions are justified. Further, these actions may well be in keeping with their experiences to date and so they have no point of comparison. Perhaps most importantly this issue of coercion illustrates the complexity of care as an actualized entity in school settings.

### Theme 5:
### Caring Teachers Motivate Students

Participants are clear that they are brought together for a purpose; that being to graduate from school. They describe the carers as committed to creating an environment in which they are motivated to reach this goal. In order to do this the carer must "push [the cared for] to do our best...making sure work is done on time," the carer is seen as "somebody who guides you and cares about you wanting to graduate." This means the carer is there for the cared for, before class, after class, whenever "you are really stuck on something they are always there, they don't leave your table until they know you have gotten it." As part of this, all participants saw the program as having high standards for behaviour, academic work and attendance. They liked this as it motivated them to do better, and it communicated to them that they were not in an inferior "alternative"

program. The standards, they said, were higher than in the regular stream where they could easily avoid work. Andrea stated that the teachers have:

> *high standards, they expect all the kids to do work....not that she pushes us to do it, she wants to make sure it gets done so that we can pass the exams, she stays on top of it. It is completely part of what makes her a caring teacher, she makes sure that we, all of her kids all graduate on time, she wants us to all graduate together...she is going to make sure I graduate, she will be there too.*

She continues: "because that's what they push on the most. That's what they push us mostly, is to… for academic work, and the rules. You gotta follow them." When I ask her if she thinks it is good to have high standards, she says:

> *If we didn't have rules, [the program] would be something completely different. It would be people who didn't come to school, and didn't have rules and can do whatever we want, right? But, since we have higher standards, this is what is making [the program] better.*

But is not just that the standards are high, Andrea says the support is high as well:

> *she is there to guide me right if I need help she is there for me, if I don't need help, she is still there. Not just me, everybody, if we are not struggling she will still make sure we get the point, still makes sure we are on the topic...and if we are struggling she will be there.*

Alex admits that living up to the standards is a struggle. She says:

> *attendance is huge; knowing that I used to be horrible with attendance and now that I'm better at attendance… I still struggle with it. That's still one thing that [my teacher] gives me heck about a lot, which I deserve. I still struggle with it. But, I'm here 90% of the time.*

Besides attendance the standards for the class work is also high. Alex says her teacher:

> *expects our best, and I don't think that there's anything wrong with that. She did expect us to get our work done, and she would not let you get away with doing stuff that she knew that you could do*

> *better at. [The other teachers] are like that too. If you hand*
> *something in, and it's not to the best of your ability, she'll give it*
> *back to you and tell you to do it again. She won't cut you any slack*
> *when it comes to doing certain work. You have to do your very*
> *best.*

Alex continues:

> *When they start showing you that you're capable of succeeding,*
> *then you want to succeed, and the only way for them to do that is to*
> *be really on you and to push you and to really enforce that,*
> *so...they just... they go the extra mile. They let you know that*
> *they're there after school, at lunchtime, whenever, if you need*
> *them. They praise you when you do well. They let you know when*
> *you're not doing well. They're honest about it.*

Carly is on the same page, she likes the high standards: "because if you don't do that, they won't show up for school. They won't do their work. They don't set any guidelines, really. They'll just walk all over you." However, Carly admits to being frustrated with what she sees as inconsistent application of the standards:

> *there's people in my class that I don't understand why they're not*
> *kicked out. [Right.] Because, if you miss more than two days, you*
> *get a strike. Three strikes and you're out. But, there's people in my*
> *class that don't show up all week, and then they'll show up on*
> *Monday and they have a note saying they were sick, but yet, for*
> *some people like me, I'll get in trouble for missing two days cause I*
> *had the flu. I just... I don't understand. I had to do the dishes*
> *because I missed two days of school last month because I was*
> *sick. [The teacher] said my punishment is to do the dishes, but then*
> *there was other people that had been sick for an entire week, and*
> *they didn't have to do anything. I was very ticked off. I don't get*
> *any flexibility, and then there's some people that do, so I'm thinking*
> *maybe she likes them better than she likes me and I just... that*
> *makes me not like her very much.*

While most of what the participants describe paints a picture of an environment of abundant care, there are moments like these that creep in. Carly describes extreme frustration here, yet even with the open, dialogue-filled environment she is unable to voice this frustration. Still, throughout the interviews Carly was effusive about the existence of care in the program; and the existence

of non-care as a dominant ethos in other school settings. Perhaps, what is going on here is that care has a "tipping point". In other words once we reach the point in which we conclude care is in existence we are prepared to accept acts which are not caring. As with the issue of coercion, the issue provides further evidence of the complexity of care. Further, it illustrates that the development of care is a journey; not a static state that is either fully present or fully absent. Additionally, care experiences are differentiated among individuals—what one experiences as care may not be care to another. Still it seems an air of clear intentionality and consistency is a preferred goal for caring environments.

## The Personal Attributes of the Caring Teacher

In addition to care being the collaborative acts of groups of caring teachers, care also involves the personal attributes of each carer. Participants identified four key attributes which are presented in detail in this section—trust, encouragement, patience, and respect. Respect and trust provide the structural base for caring, allowing for the development of a relationship in which the carer will "never put you down" and will always "respect you." When encouragement and patience are also present, participants say they were able to achieve academic success in a way they had never experienced before.

*Attribute 1:*

*The Caring Teacher Is Trusting andtrustworthy*

Trust was seen by all participants as an important attribute of the caring teacher. Participants acknowledged that they had not experienced it much prior to enrolling in the program, so trust took time to build. Participants said they know trust was in place when students were able to be open with the teacher, yet be confident that they would not be betrayed. Trust has to be present in the relationship between the carer and the cared for in order for the caring relationship to be complete. When trust is in place, the relationship is stronger.

Advice given in a trusting relationship is more valued and likely to be followed. Because Andrea trusts her teachers, she says the advice she receives is more valuable: "I trust her, she gives me the information I need, it makes me think, wow...it makes me think I will guide myself with it." When trust is present between the students and the teachers, it makes it easier for trust to be established between students. When Alex spoke of her teacher from her first year in the program, she said: "I would open up to her about anything because I trusted her, and I knew that she genuinely cared about me and my well-being." When I asked how that trust is developed, Alex said:

> *I saw the way she interacted with the other students. She'd do caring things for me. She would share with me. She would share with the class, hard things that she had gone through in her life. [The other teachers] have done that, too. So, they open up to you as people.*

Rick has a very straightforward definition of trust. He knows he can trust the teachers in the program because "I trust them to not tell personal stuff, trust them to not go running to someone and say there is something with this kid and then not get into this big situation about it." When I asked Andrea how trust was developed with her current teacher, she said:

> *the first time I went to her, she gave me advice, doesn't tell anybody anything unless I ask her to, she has proved to me that I can trust her, like when I talk to her she understands, and she closes the door, it's just me and her one-on-one.*

But trust doesn't just happen. Andrea says:

> *t took a little bit of time, cause I didn't really get along with teachers my whole life so. This was new for me, completely. [Before] the only one I ever talked to was my counsellor and now I haven't gone to counsellor since I met [the teacher].*

Andrea says this trust is strong across the program, "we all trust each other, it is like a circle of trust," even during the tough times. She provides an anecdote that illustrates why it is so important:

*Trust is really, really, really, really important- especially in a class like that because one person will be talking about another person in the class, and we need to be able to trust each other. We should just come out and say it right in front of their faces, so that it doesn't go around the school before it gets to the person and hurts them, right? So, we usually all of us know what's going on, right? Actually, there's a beef going, there's sort of something going on right now in class. Somebody called one of my friends a name on Friday when she wasn't there, in front of the whole class, and everybody started laughing. I was like; "You guys, that's not appropriate, right?" and then I've told her. Now, she's like, "Well, now that people are saying stuff, I can't trust anybody in this class, and blah, blah, blah," but why would I keep it from my friend? It was, it had to have gotten to her eventually, because she said it in front of the whole class, and I was the first one to tell her, so now she's like, 'No, I don't trust nobody, because I said something on Friday that slipped out, and now one of my good friends hates me. And, I'm like, "Well, that's what you get for saying stuff, right?" So, trust is really, really important, really important in the classroom, especially when you stay in it all year, because you have to stick with those people for the rest of the year, unless you drop out.*

When I ask if trust will be rebuilt in that situation Andrea replies: "yeah. It always works out...in the moment it's tough, but it works out."

Carly sees the trusting teacher as someone who is:

*very trusting andtrustworthy. You don't want to think that you're telling a teacher something and then thinking they're going to go into the lunchroom and spread it around to all of the other teachers, and then everyone will look at you differently. I think you have to be able to trust the teacher in order to express yourself to the teacher.*

I asked Dakota how she knew she could trust someone:

*I don't know, it takes a while...if you tell them something they won't broadcast it to the entire school, like if you are being bullied or something you don't want to go to a different teacher...they will get in trouble and then come after you....you can go to your teacher and say I am having problems with this person can you help...they will give you ways to solve the problem*

Ken says:

> *So, if you talk to a teacher then you could trust them a lot, and you*
> *could trust them with certain stuff that you can tell them and you*
> *can't tell them, and just to be sure if they would not tell and stuff like*
> *that. I think trust is the most important, because you trust a person*
> *before you learn anything else about them.*

I ask Ken how he knows he can trust someone. He says:

> *they tell you stuff, like how their life is about and stuff—how their life*
> *was. Cause they've been through a lot more than we have and stuff*
> *and they could just tell you how school was like or how the future is*
> *like or how a real job is like and stuff.*

Trust is clearly the key to cementing the caring relationship for all
participants; it seems it is almost a litmus test for care. The participants seem to
know this; they often spoke of extending little bits of themselves to see what
happens. If they felt the teacher could be trusted they would share more of
themselves.

## *Attribute 2:*

## *The Caring Teacher Is Encouraging*

Caring teachers encourage their students. Encouragement is
demonstrated through word and deed. The participants see the most valuable
acts of encouragement as those which are specific and goal oriented. In the
context of the program the goal is graduation, and they want to be encouraged
towards this end. After struggling in school for many years, graduation is no
longer ellusive; participants saw the finish line ahead. They wanted to cross that
line, and they knew the encouragement they were receiving was playing a role.
Alex provides her description of the encouraging teacher:

> *they really believe that you can do it, and they tell you that, and that*
> *makes you believe that you can do it, and that's very important for*
> *them to have that kind of faith in you, because you don't want to let*
> *them down. You can really tell that they're putting that effort into*
> *you succeeding; it encourages you to do your best.*

Andrea says the encouraging teacher is always pushing towards graduation, saying: "you can do it. I want you to graduate." Ken sees the helping actions of the carer as courage giving. These teachers, he says, are "always there to help you." Ken is the only participant who mentioned being encouraged by staff outside the program. Ken says:

> he kept telling me you are not a bad kid, you can do it, I know you can. I just tried it and he has given me so many chances and I took this last chance and now I am here. He is always just there, never telling me [I am] not going to make it or nothing like that.

I asked Ken if he believed the vice-principal when he offered the words of encouragement.

> At first no, it was, just like whatever, and then a couple of more times he told me and I started believing. I started going to school. I have never been on the honour roll before and [now I am].

I asked how he felt when he received encouragement.

> if they're encouraging you, it makes you feel good and it makes them want to try even harder to do whatever, like graduate. It just brings more courage into me thinking about that, I can make it and graduate and be the first one to graduate in my family and just go running around saying I graduated and stuff. I can just picture what they are telling me, and then just walk across the stage

Kiere says encouragement is communicated through the carer's use of language, offering includes the right words offered at the right time.

> I think that you want to come to school, and if you hear little compliments like, "You know, you can make it, you're gonna make it." Especially if you're having a bad day. If they encourage the slightest bit, you know that.

Like Ken she says when she receives the encouragement of others it is helpful:

> I get through school easier when [I] have people motivating me and encouraging me and saying, "you can do it" when I have bad days. It's like, "everything's gonna be alright" and everything. "Tomorrow will be a better day."

Encouragement, it seems, is closely linked to motivation. After years of feeling discouraged and unmotivated, encouraging words are reassuring and provide the energy that keeps participants motivated and moving forward. In other words encouragement is about the personal relationship, motivation is about supporting goal attainment. As can be seen it allows them to develop a belief in their own ability to do that which is necessary to be successful and reach their goals.

*Attribute 3:*

*The Caring Teacher Is Patient*

The program brings together a vulnerable population; many of whom had experienced a variety of difficulties and traumas. Participants spoke of never feeling there was anyone they could go to in the school, and often, out of school. This has led to defiance, substance use, school withdrawal, even self harming behaviours. Perhaps as a result of this, participants express appreciation when teachers demonstrate patience by taking time to listen to personal issues without over-reacting, to carefully explain class assignments, and to take time to individually work with them. Alex says her teacher is very patient:

> *She will go over something with you, over and over and over and*
> *over again and not make... if... like, she won't get frustrated*
> *because if you're working with a teacher and they get frustrated,*
> *then that's really hard on you. Like I've said numerous times, she*
> *will give you her time. She will stay with you and work with you.*
> *She will go over things twice.*

Andrea says patience means recognizing when she needs to be taken aside for some one to one time:

> *if someone hasn't got their work done she will say 'take your time, it*
> *isn't a rush to get it done', if I am struggling a lot then she will pull*
> *me aside to talk with her or assistant teacher for one on one*
> *help...they explain it properly, they don't zip through it...and when*
> *you ask for help they actually break it down for you instead of just*
> *confusing you*

Ken also talks about the importance of one to one time:

> *say you don't understand this one thing, they sit with you for that time and tell you how to do it, they just take their time to help you...some even take their lunch times to help you with math and stuff ...she helped out with work so much, she would sit with you and help, she is just very nice...*

Kiere sees patience in a slightly different way. For her, patience was not so much demonstrated by teachers' willingness to help with school work; it was in counselling her to be patient, to give the program time to click. While this acclimatization was occurring, the teacher is patient, waiting for her to come around:

> *at the beginning of Grade 10 I hated it, stuck in one class with everybody...same people everyday and it is Grade 10 so it is so dramatic and I had so many problems with it. I got told just kind of stick it out...my teacher was nice, she was already there for me, she stuck it out with me...*

Like encouragement, patience provides an acknowledgment of personal worth to the participants that they have not often received in the past. They have experience with the discouragement that comes from years of hearing what they cannot do. Patience seems to reduce anxiety of the participants and acts as a catalyst for the development of a more methodical approach to their work.

### Attribute 4:

### The Caring Teacher Is Respectful

Many participants identified respect as a key personal attribute of the caring teacher. Respectful relationships are equitable, the carer recognizes the cared for as worthy of relationships which removes, or at least tempers, the power dynamic between teacher and student in order to build the caring relationship. Respect in these relationships is unconditional. Respect thus becomes reciprocal, but not at first; the cared for wants to experience it from the carer before they are willing to complete the cycle. Andrea says:

*This might just be a personal thing for me, because I'm really... I always give people respect, and I expect it back from them. I think that's really important. They speak to you as adults. They're not ... I don't know the word. I'm trying to think of it. I don't know how to say it. It's ... they just ... I just think it's very important for them to be respectful of you. They respect your space. They respect your privacy. They can respect if you're in a bad mood that day. They can work around your needs. So, I think that that's really important.*

Rick says:

*I do respect my teachers....there has been times when I first got into the program that I didn't really show too much respect, but then I slowly learned and stuff....now I respect them a lot for what they have done for me as a student...*

Ken sees respect being demonstrated through action:

*you know they respect you when they do things just for you, feed you if you are hungry, making sure you are never hungry, she gives you candy and stuff, and when my house got robbed she said if you need anything else we have old equipment that we can give you...*

Alex agrees:

*I remember when school had just started. I came to class, and I was soaking wet, cause I had to walk there, and she gave me her sweater and made me tea, [Right.] which was really sweet of her to be so kind and, to like, show respect to me.*

Like trust, respect is something that the participants had not often experienced. In this environment, these participants speak of it as an unconditional commodity, given freely, even when participants are not necessarily being respectful themselves. Respect seems to convey a sense of self-worth through actions as simple as tea when wet and cold, and food when you are hungry.

## The Unique Impact of Care

As demonstrated, all participants commented that they had experienced care in their current school environment. For them care appears to be an essential ingredient for school success. Participants described the development of a personal caring relationship with their teachers as a necessary precondition for a learning relationship. Additionally, without exception, participants said that their care needs were not met in any discernible way prior to entering the program. To close this chapter, I offer a quote from each participant which illustrates that, while care was received by all, the impact was unique for each of them.

Alex says that because she received care in the program, she and her peers want the teachers to know that students do "really care."

> *Every once in a while, it'll come out, like we all appreciate them…*
> *but… the Minister of Education came to our school the other day. It*
> *was great. She didn't stay for very long, but everybody was talking*
> *about how, 'Oh, [the program] saved me. Without [the teachers],*
> *we don't know what we could have done', and it was just those are*
> *the times when they really see that we really do care. I mean, [one*
> *of the teachers] was crying. In times like that, it's made really*
> *aware that yeah, we do really care about what you're doing for us.*
> *We appreciate it a lot.*

Dakota delights in the dramatic difference in her life since joining the program. She tells me that recently people have told her she has really turned things around:

> *There is a complete difference this year with my teachers, and like*
> *no one has gotten on my nerves this year as opposed to last year*
> *when I was constantly fighting with my teachers and…I have been*
> *told a lot of times, [Alex] you have made a big turn around, you are*
> *not so mouthy anymore, you are paying attention in class. I like to*
> *hear that cause last year I was mouthy I really didn't care what*
> *anybody had to say to me.*

Carly says she is on the verge of realizing a family dream; she is able to go to university:

*Then it kind of really hit me, and I'm like, "Wow. I'm going to be going to university next year, and I'm gonna be out on my own, and if I don't have good grades, then I won't get in, and if I don't get in, I won't make a lot of money when I'm older, and then I'll be nowhere. I'll be working where my mom works." I just... my parents want better for me than what they had. My mom's parents didn't say, "Go to university. Go to college." They didn't say anything to her. They weren't together. And then, my dad, his parents said he had to pay for it himself. And he couldn't afford to, so he couldn't go either. So, it's a big deal, I'm going...*

Rick says he never used to think about the prospect of being successful in school. Now he wants to succeed, not just for himself but also to repay those who cared for him:

*Recently I started show my teachers more respect, my gratitude....just like to show them how I understand like I don't know how to word this I want to show them I am capable of what their expectations are for me because they have pushed me and stuff. They told me, 'we know you are capable and you're smart'. I want to show my respect to them, to show them how thankful I am for everything they have done for me to get me here. Even when I didn't care about them they cared about me. I guess they have grown on me.*

When thinking about the impact of the care received in the program, Ken thinks of his mother:

*When we had parent conferences my mom came in and [the teacher] started telling my mom that I was doing so well and my mom can't speak good English so I have to translate it to her and like she kept on going on about how great I am, the grades I am getting and that made me care a lot that she cares for me. My mom was like crying after, she said I can't believe you changing and stuff, lets go get you a present and then we went home. She told me because I have perfect attendance and it is all over my wall...my mom had this friend whose kids were perfect, perfect attendance and stuff like that and their whole wall is covered from elementary to high school and that makes my mom jealous because why are my walls not like that....now when she walks into*

*my room and sees that she cries because she sees I'm doing good.
It makes me feel like I did something right for the first time in my
life. That was the first time my mom cried because I did something
right and that made me feel good.*

Andrea is poetic in her description of the impact of the care she has

received:

*[The program] is like the stems on my rose. I love it, I do. I don't
know how to explain it cause I hate school, I used to. Now like I
want to be in school, when we are not in school I am like I want to
be in school, I want to see my friends, [the program] has helped me
make friends too, last year [before I was in the program], I was
fighting with everybody in that class...now my attitude has changed
the most. I have to cooperate, I can't have attitude, I have to keep
friends and do my school work at the same time.*

Kiere laughs when I ask her about how the care she has received in the

program. She remembers the uniquely calming nature of one of her teachers and

the most memorable thing the teacher ever told her:

*[Mostly I think of] the things [my teacher] says, like, 'would you like
to die on this mountain.' That is one thing she says, and like would
you like to do this, if you go up this mountain this is what you are
going to have to do, you are going to have to deal with it right. If
you get into a fight you are going to have to deal with it, do you
really want to die on this mountain, and then I am like no, I don't
want to die on that mountain. Before she talks to me I am ready to
freak and she will be like lets go talk...do you want to die on this
mountain...what is going on.*

## Non-Care: A Composite Description

All participants were eager to discuss what they saw as the qualities of a

caring teacher. They did so with passion and depth. To provide a full context for

participants' description of care, after I asked them to describe care I asked them

to describe the qualities of a non-caring teacher. Participants responded quickly

and eagerly. In fact many were able to more readily describe the qualities of non-

care than of care. One participant said it was easy because she had "a lot of

those teachers all through high school." In fact, she said prior to being in the program she never had a single teacher she would say was a caring teacher.

The terms care and non-care are antonyms. In analyzing participants' responses to this question I realized that the qualities of a non-caring teacher were the opposite of the caring teacher. Whereas caring teachers have a passion for their job, the non-caring teacher is "apathetic...shows little interest...they just show up." Non-care is not the act of deliberately not caring for an individual; it is more that the non-caring teacher does not want to be bothered by students who may need additional support. This lack of interest is contagious and acts as a de-motivating factor to the participants. After all, if the teacher is not really going to show up, then why should they? While the caring teacher makes the academic work interesting and engaging, offering a variety of ways to approach the curriculum, the non-caring teacher is "boring." Rather than interesting and diversified activities, they hand out worksheets and booklets. Additionally, the caring teacher is interested in a personal connection with students, the non-caring teacher actively discourages connections, they are "very unapproachable," in fact, they may "push you off." Sometimes non-care becomes personal. While the caring teacher is respectful, the non-caring teacher may "belittle", be "rude" or "pick on" people. Whereas the caring teacher sets high standards for behaviour, attendance and school work, the non-caring teacher has no standards. They don't care if students attend class, they don't care if they get up and walk out in class or if their cell phone goes off during class.

## Conclusion

Sadly, all participants said that non-caring experiences were more common than caring experiences during their school history. Until participation in this program in which care was present, most had concluded that schools are non-caring places. Once immersed in care, however, they could see that care is possible and, as seen above, they could describe it in great detail. For them a

caring environment made a significant difference in their lives. They still do not know where the future will take them, but it seems their future is a little brighter, thanks, at least to some degree, to the care they received. As I close this chapter it seems fair to wonder what is required to make care the norm, and not the exception, for other at-risk youth. In the next chapter I analyze the themes identified here against the available literature.

# Chapter 6.

# Comparing the Findings to the Literature

## Introduction

Most research exploring an ethic of care in school environments builds on the prolific body of work originally presented by Noddings (1984). Noddings' ethic of care is framed in moral and philosophical terms, largely exploring what is meant by an ethic of care and advocating that care be more prominent in our schools and in society. Noddings' arguments are primarily philosophical; that is, they attempt to convince others that what they say is true because it is what they see (Williams, 1995). In 1994, Prillaman and Eaker lamented that much of the literature was theory driven and "thus may not be fully useful to the professionals who work in the field of education" (p. 3). Fortunately, recent research has begun to address this. However, there remains a shortage of literature on the perspectives of students as cared for. Therefore, attempts to offer a comparative analysis of the findings of this study against the existing literature are hampered by this lack of empirical literature. This study seeks to build on this work. In this chapter, I will restate the analytic typology offered in Chapter 5 and discuss the findings of this study against the relevant literature.

## Analysis of Themes

### Care

As outlined in the literature review, care is difficult concept to define. When realized, it is highly personal and specific to relationships and bounded by time (Rogers, 1994). Rauner (2000) says we need to know more about how youth

understand their care relationships, how they "integrate these experiences into their developing identities, and how these experiences relate to the overall context of their lives" (Rauner, 2000, p. 61). We know that when high school students perceive their school environment as supportive and caring they achieve at higher levels academically and report fewer social and behavioural challenges (Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, & Miller, 2006). When adolescents perceive their teachers care about them they report enhanced belonging, satisfaction with school and self-efficacy (Rauner, 2000). Creating schools in which all students receive care is a great challenge given current structures and assumptions about the goals of education. However, the current study and others show that school environments can be places where care is received and can have a positive impact on those youth who receive care. Lipsitz (1995) says that creating caring cultures does not require radical change; rather it requires subtle shifts in attitudes. Further, she says, "educators must begin to consider their students within the social context of their families and communities" (p. 665).

Few studies have asked youth to describe care from their perspective. Bosworth (1995) asked 100 middle school students from two socio-economically and racially diverse schools in the American Midwest to describe care and to detail the personal qualities of the caring teacher. This mirrors what I did and therefore allows for comparison of responses.

Bosworth (1995) found that 96% of the youth could readily offer up a description of care. How they described care contributed greatly to the literature. In analyzing the student responses Bosworth identified five inter-related themes—to help; having feelings; having relationships; displaying values; and, involvement in activities. Regardless of age, gender, grade or race, youth said that to care for someone means to help someone, or as one participant said "to give their needs" (p. 3). The second theme is that the carer shows feelings, most specifically reciprocal empathy, for the cared for. Interestingly, this aspect of care was largely seen as a one-sided relationship in which empathy is unconditional.

The youth also said that to care for another was to have a relationship with him or her. Synonymous with the word relationship was friendship; to care for someone is to engage in friendship. The fourth theme involved the core values of kindness, respect and faithfulness as foundational to the caring relationship. The youth in the Bosworth study also said that to care for someone meant shared involvement in activities. These could be very informal and might involve just "hanging out". Bosworth sums up the youths' description of care:

> when the students described what they meant by caring, they indicated that something more than a particular, isolated event or activity bonds two persons...the relationship between caregiver and the receiver is richer than just a relationship based on helping someone with an isolated homework problem. For the adolescents we surveyed, caring arose from relationships that involved a commitment on the part of both parties. (p. 6)

When asked to define how they described the qualities of the caring teacher, the youth in Bosworth's study referred to a variety of teaching practices and personal attributes. These included helping with schoolwork and personal problems, valuing individuality, showing respect, being tolerant and encouraging. Helping with schoolwork was described by so many of the youth that Bosworth says that helping with schoolwork is seen as a strong marker of teacher care. Helping with schoolwork involved ensuring that the student understands the work. In addition, caring teachers are willing to help with personal problems; generally this involved a willingness to listen. Valuing individuality meant that teachers sought to know the student as unique and worthy. This quality is linked to the first theme, as caring teachers get to know the individual so they are more able to help them when needed. Respect is displayed by the caring teacher when the youth makes a mistake, in such cases they "won't yell at you or anything like that." Tolerance and encouragement were closely linked in that caring teachers were seen as those who allowed - even encouraged - second chances to make up work or improve behaviour.

There is remarkable fidelity between the descriptions of the caring teacher in Bosworth's study and those offered by the participants in the current study. When analyzed against how the participants in this study saw care there are some striking similarities and a few distinct differences. Neither group had any difficulty constructing a description. Both saw care as relational, yet pragmatic; largely determined by the willingness and interest of the carer to help the cared for with school work and personal problems. The word friendship was used by both groups to identify the importance of this relationship. Given the power of friendship networks in adolescence, this quality bestows significance on these relationships. Respect as a personal attribute also appears to be foundational. In both studies the term "friends" is used by both groups to signify how the carer treats the cared for. Personal attributes of tolerance and patience are also identified, as is encouragement.

In addition to these commonalities there are also some interesting differences in the participants' descriptions. For example, while the participants in this study identified the setting of high standards for school work and rule compliance, Bosworth's participants did not highlight this. Also, her participants did not identify the collaborative nature of care described here. Both of these may well be due to the fact that the participants in this study are from one small program where the students see the staff working together and therefore have an enhanced awareness of how they work together. Also, their history has made these participants especially aware of standards and expectations. Prior to entry in this program, they were largely aware of the standards because they were not living up to them, and were constantly told that, in ways that were both subtle and overt. Now, however, they find the standards reasonable as they see that to be successful they must live up to this set of standards. Importantly they also mostly see that the standards are applied in a reasonable fashion. In larger populations of students this awareness would not likely be as heightened.

Before going forward it is worth revisiting one of the points made in the literature review. In 1982, Carol Gilligan ignited an academic debate that continues to this day. In suggesting that there is a previously ignored feminine dynamic at play in moral reasoning she challenged the prevailing wisdom of the day. One of the ensuing critiques was offered by Hankivsky (2004), who stated that theorists who view care through a gendered lens reflect early thinking; more recently, she says, second generation theorists have seen care as a general quality of humans that is present when we care for others and our world. However, in relation to this research, there is little support for the notion that care is non-gendered. In fact one of the important findings of this research has to be the absence of males from the care dynamic for these participants. One participant identified a male vice-principal who he saw as caring; otherwise both the males and female participants all identified care as something provided by the female staff in the program. While we can only speculate as to the reasons for this it seems, at least on the surface, to say a great deal about those in our society who are expected and able to care for our children.

## Care as a Collaborative Action

As an overarching theme I have identified that the type of care received by these participants is the product of a collaborative commitment of the adults in their current learning environment. When referred to in the literature this sense of collaboration is referred to by a variety of terms that will be reviewed here. For example, Cassidy and Bates (2005) study a school "designed according to a collaboratively constructed ethic of care" (p. 95). Their participants made reference to the collective actions of the teachers who actively work to understand and respond to students' needs. Cassidy and Bates explain how the collaborative nature of care was so clearly communicated that students felt they could go to any staff member for help with personal problems. For example they quote one student who, like the participants in this study, repeatedly used "they"

language—"the principal here, he understands...the teachers here, they're just funny, and they understand you...they actually talk to you about what is going on. These references to the teachers as a collective are included in many quotes offered by Cassidy and Bates.

Rauner (2000) says that "caring for youth is rarely an individual experience" (p. 94). In the context of the school caring requires some form of organizational commitment beyond that which any individual can commit to. Creating a caring environment involves both personal style and practices that communicate that these values "under gird the purpose and mission of the classroom and of the school itself" (p.79). Rauner describes an alternative program in New York City in which small case size allows for frequent student-teacher contact combined with a commitment by teachers to a shared set of values. These actions conveyed to the students that the teachers genuinely care. In referring to all of the teachers in the program, one of the students in the program said: "they're on your case all the time...they care about your academics, but they also care about how you are...about other things happening in your life" (p. 70).

While Noddings (2003) is focused on the role of the caring teacher in supporting the cared for, she envisions schools as places where teachers collaborate to create *centers of care*. These centers, or domains, would replace the current curricular-subject structure. The domains of care could be organized in a variety of ways, around Gardner's multiple intelligences, for example. Such schools would be more open to parents than schools, especially secondary schools, are today. In *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*, Noddings suggests that in these re-organized schools teachers would have to build in time to "discuss their own growth...offer moral support, intellectual/academic help, and solid friendship" (p. 177). These changes are necessary, Noddings (2005) says, because:

the traditional organization of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society. We live in an age troubled by social problems that force us to reconsider what we do in schools...We need to give up the notion of an ideal of the educated person and replace it with a multiplicity of models designed to accommodate the multiple capacities and interests of students. ( p. 172)

The multiple models on which schools can be built will, according to Noddings (2005), share several key collaborative features in that they will take care of the affiliative needs of youth by keeping groups of students and teachers together for several years (p. 174). Additionally, students and teachers will work together to design learning opportunities that meet individual need.

While direct mention of the collaborative nature of care is rare in the literature to date, several references to important, complimentary ideas can be found. The literature is replete with references to the importance of caring relationships. Such relationships may be unidirectional, bi-directional or multidirectional. Rauner (2000) sees care as bidirectional. She says it involves mutual engagement; "if one party disengages from the relationship, care cannot continue" (p. 37). Mayeroff (1995) sees caring as a relationship pattern in which the carer seeks to help the cared for actualize himself. This type of relationship is the antithesis of exploitive relationships where fulfilling personal need is a motivator for the relationship. For Mayeroff, relationships of care are trust relationships. These relationships are largely unidirectional and marked by blind devotion. The carer is devoted to the cared for despite the fact that the future cannot be known or seen. Bi-directionality in these relationships is not certain as Mayeroff says care in these relationships may not be reciprocated. Reciprocity is more likely to occur in the teacher-student relationship than in the parent-child relationships where the child is dependent on the parent to meet their basic needs. As being cared for is a necessity in these relationships, the possibility for reciprocity is limited. However, in the teacher-adolescent student relationship this

is more likely to occur as the carer's attitude and behaviours are contagious and lead to reciprocity being activated in the cared for.

Beck (1992) points to the importance of interdependent relationships within communities. Beck sees caring as existing within relationships that exist between individuals or within small groups. This she calls caring within communities. Bellah et al. (1985) state that a sense of community is essential for the development of genuine care. Western social structures have stressed individualism over communitarianism and thus negated the importance of membership in a community as a way to move us from independence to interdependence in our public relationships. Bellah et al. issue a call for caring as a way to restore our essential social ecology, which in turn will allow us to care for the marginalized and disadvantaged.

Rauner (2000) talks of organized care demonstrated through a shared recognition of a common endeavour. She outlines the commitment to care in several youth serving community organizations and schools. By organizations she means communities within communities, places where care compliments that which ideally occurs within the family as part of the "spontaneous, voluntary associations that comprise community" (p. 9). Rauner seeks to build a global care, where caring is the social norm, not the purview of an isolated few.

While the previous descriptions all share similarities with the descriptions of care offered by the participants, it is Noddings' call for schools to become centers of care that most fully represents the collaborative actions described by the participants in this study. It seems the teachers have spent the type of time together deliberately creating the type of environment they have created. Participants described how their affiliative needs are met in the program. Collaborative care in the program was described as intentional and purposeful. Participants state that the adults in their program care together. They sense that they do it not just because it is the right thing to do but because they have made a specific joint commitment to do it. They told of shared action, of having a

confidence that the actions of one carer would be the actions of any of the carers. Here there was predictability to the caring behaviours. Care was not experienced simply because they were drawn together for a common purpose; they already had that in other school settings. Rather they report that care in this place is an outcome of the adults acting together to convey the singularity of their purpose, to create care collaboratively.

*Theme 1:*

*Caring Teachers Build Connections with Students*

The establishment of interpersonal connections among the participants and their teachers was essential to the participants' perception that care was actualized. These connections between teacher and student are reminiscent of what Carl Rogers called person-centered counselling. Rogers (1957), suggested that when therapists demonstrate the "core conditions" of unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and congruence and when the client perceives these at least to a minimal degree then positive change is inevitable (as cited in Kirschenbaum & Jourdan, 2005). Additionally, Rogers argued that these conditions were not related to any particular therapeutic technique which he saw as less important than the practitioners approach. This is similar to what the participants described – the way in which they taught was seen as much more important than what was taught. A sense of unconditionality and congruence as demonstrated by the teacher made the curriculum more accessible; because the relationships were less intimidating so too was the subject matter.

Attachment theory is also instructive here. In telling their personal stories, participants spoke of having both secure and insecure attachments. None, however, reported secure attachments across both school and family. Their description of their present environment however conveyed that they had developed a secure attachment to the teachers. This attachment, or connection, seemed to serve as a catalyst towards an affectional student-teacher bond.

When this bond is in place students will establish stronger peer relations, demonstrate fewer problematic behaviours and value academic performance (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). While this research did not seek to quantify such outcomes, the descriptions provided by the participants demonstrate a renewed commitment to each of these factors.

To further understand this dimension we must explore the literature on connectedness. A significant amount of scholarship has occurred under this banner (also referred to as bonding, attachment, belongingness). Additionally, a growing theoretical and empirical knowledge base is being created by scholars from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, education and criminology. Connectedness is defined by Whitlock (2006) as:

> a state of belonging in which individual youth perceive that they and other youth are cared for, trusted and respected by collections of adults they believe hold the power to make institutional and policy decisions. Moreover, connectedness is conceptualized as something not merely received but reciprocated as well. (p. 15)

Whitlock (2006) states that in order to create connectedness adult-youth relationships must be marked by willingness to provide time and help, emotional availability and an enhanced visibility for students in order to make school more meaningful.

Connectedness powerfully enhances positive developmental outcomes and protects against negative development outcomes. Youth who report a strong sense of school connectedness demonstrate strong commitment to healthier behaviours and health outcomes (Bonny et al., 2000). Resnick et al. (1993) found that secondary students with high levels of school connectedness had significantly lower rates of emotional distress, suicidal behaviour, violence and substance use than their peers who reported lower school connectedness. Indeed, Resnick determined that connectedness has shown to be more protective than any other factor, including family connectedness, against absenteeism, delinquency, poly-drug use and pregnancy. Hymel et al. (2006) say

that connectedness is "reflected in the degree to which students feel that they are cared for and respected and the degree to which they feel connected to or bonded with others in the school" (p. 164). Connectedness has shown to be highly malleable to interventions, most notably when efforts to connect the student to their school environment are undertaken in the elementary years (Bonny et al., 1993). There is little in the literature about the effect of interventions undertaken during the secondary years.

Dwight Rogers (1994), an education researcher, says caring teachers connect with students in ways that communicate empathy and sympathy. Personal connections are enhanced when teachers are fun and fair (Rogers, 1994). Students do not have a high standard for fun; they simply want class activities to be interesting, meaningful and not mundane activities from textbooks. The test for fairness is also not onerous; here students simply want to be offered second chances to learn from curricular or social mistakes. Rogers (1994) sums up his year spent studying care in a Grade 4 classroom:

> The image that emerges from these children's perceptions of a
> caring teacher is that of a highly responsive individual whose words
> and actions seem to invite children to communicate: a person who
> is sensitive to their children's needs and able to understand things
> from their perspective; a just human being who seeks connection
> with his or her students; a person who is confident enough to let his
> or her students make mistakes and give them another chance. (p
> 36)

It is interesting to note that Whitlock (2006) directly refers to care as a component of connectedness. In fact care anchors her definition, grouped as it is with trust and respect as a vital commodity in creating connectedness. She goes on to say that adults must do more than this; they must also be an influential, even powerful, group committed to shared action which is almost magnetic in its ability to hold kids to the school as a place and to the teachers as people. Reciprocity closes the loop as connected students act to confirm the relationship.

Whitlock's definition of connectedness captures much of what the participants in this study are referring to when they describe care as being about personal connections. Most cogent in Whitlock's definition are the aspects of connectedness that are rarely mentioned in the care literature, particularly the collaborative nature and the ability of staff to influence policy. In this study participants saw that teachers had a power to take action in ways that their other teachers couldn't or wouldn't. The program teachers had the power to unilaterally change the program, pace of work, structure of day, to let them go home early and start late and to determine discipline without having to refer to the principal. Lowering the decision making to this level seemed to enhance trust and respect; participants knew that they would not receive one message from one teacher and a different one from other teachers or the principal. This level of power seemed to enhance the participants' relationship with their teachers, but also the connectedness to the program and to the school. Whitlock's reference to the "collections of adults" providing care, trust and respect seems to come closest to what the participants were describing when they offered their descriptions of care.

It is clear that the concepts of care and connectedness are closely related. In fact, I think that perhaps a case could be made that future studies in this field might be better placed under the banner of connectedness. Shifting the focus from care to connectedness may also free the researcher from some of the ideological chains that hamper the concept of care in the academy. Connectedness does not have the philosophical lineage as the term care does. As such it is not encumbered by politicized, gendered debates that continue to surround the ethic of care. I am not suggesting that care be replaced by connectedness simply that Whitlock and others may well be on to something when they indirectly suggest that care is actually part of a larger concept. It seems a worthwhile endeavour to explore this link between care and connectedness in future research.

*Theme 2:*

*Caring Teachers Create a Family-like Environment*

Martin (1992) suggests that we acknowledge that schools are the moral equivalents of the home. As part of a larger restructuring of the social and political order towards an ethic of care, she suggests we fundamentally alter the separation our society places between the private life we live in our homes and the life we live in public arenas; in schools for example. For Martin, the bedrock values of the ideal family, which she does not define, can play a part in aligning the values of home, school and the larger world. Martin acknowledges the inherent challenges in such an approach given that "domestic tranquillity" is not a hallmark of all families. Martin is not suggesting we replicate the non tranquil nature of these homes; rather she is saying that the type of domestic life used as an exemplar in the American constitution holds great hope to allow for the creation of a citizenry who value "care, concern and connection" over the harsh, divided polity we witness today.

Barr and Parrett (2001) state that effective programs for at-risk students create a "surrogate family atmosphere where students feel supported, cared for, and challenged" (p. 73). In such environments, they say, at-risk youth become actively engaged. For students lacking supportive family environments school can act as a proxy family. In turn, an environment of positive pressure is created, which may result in enhanced attendance and academic achievement.

Noddings (2005) suggests that teachers see themselves as "parents who are engaged in the task of raising a huge heterogeneous family" (p. 177). Noddings' inspiration for this thought comes from a quote first made by John Dewey over 100 years ago: "what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child that must be what the community wants for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (as cited in Noddings, 2005, p. 180). The family like atmosphere Noddings envisions would provide a healthy place for teachers to talk openly and

professionally about students. Diligence would have to be exercised to avoid the "pernicious gossip that corrupts too many discussions in teachers' rooms" (p. 177).

Mulcahy and Casella (2005) suggest a cautious approach towards the creation of schools that are intentionally family-like. They wonder "what connection we make to the student who is abused at home when we tell her in order to help her that we are 'like a family'" (p. 248). Indeed they say that care is a cultural construct shaped by one's experience of home and family; these experiences are not always recalled with fondness by youth. Given that care—like other virtues—can be misguided, even in the home, this caution seems well placed. To the outside observer a parent may seem caring; behind closed doors care may disguise an overly controlling parent. What looks like care can be damaging to the child. Youth from these environments may see attempts to be just like a family as coercive and therefore reject even the best of intentions (Mulcahy & Casella, 2005).

While this caution is well placed it contradicts the perspective of the participants in this study. Those youth who came from intact homes and who reported strong relationships with their parents seemed to appreciate the parallel family created at school. Those who came from broken homes, including some who did not have parents or who had not seen their parents for years, or those from homes in which conflict was a constant reality, sought, even appreciated, the refuge of the school family. They seemed not to care, or even consider, that their home reality clashed with the idealized family created at school. Perhaps, the limits inherent within their own family enhanced their longing for a sense of family somewhere. Rather than alienating, it seems the family-like environment drew them closer.

*Theme 3:*

*Caring Teachers Encourage Rich Dialogue*

Rogers (1994) says caring teachers take time to connect with students by listening to their personal problems regarding difficulties at school, home or with their peers. He calls this "caring talk" (p. 35). He goes on to say that opportunities for these one-to-one discussions are important because teachers do not usually make frank statements to children that they care for them. Rather, care is communicated indirectly through what they say. In addition, to problem-based communication, care can be communicated through subtle words of encouragement.

Danin (1994) sees dialogue as the first step in the development of a caring relationship. It requires openness to discuss whatever people need to discuss. It is a partnership in which sharing and negotiating precede action. In her study of an elementary school for at-risk youth, she found that the staff attempted to engage in this type of dialogue but rarely found the time. Danin talks about dialogue between teachers being compromised by time pressures but makes no mention of the use of Noddings' classroom-based dialogue. Rogers (1994) also sees dialogue as the first step in the establishment of a caring relationship. Dialogue is supported by an interest by the teacher to discuss whatever students believe is important. Such a commitment requires a willingness to "listen, share and respond" (p. 64).

Noddings (2005) says dialogue connects us to each others and is foundational in creating and maintaining caring relations. She sees dialogue as "talking and listening, sharing and responding in an open-ended quest for something new" (p. 186). In dialogue the outcome is unknown when the dialogue begins. When well practiced it becomes a habit of mind, a habit in which those involved seek full information in order to make adequate decisions on issues at hand.

For Noddings (2003) dialogue serves two purposes. From a curricular stand point dialogue involves discussing that which is of intellectual interest to the students, even when that issue is contentious or one from which others shy away, Additionally, it is a forum for open talk of the values, beliefs and opinions of the group. Noddings (2003) says it is "absurd to think we are educating when we ignore those matters that lie at the very heart of human existence" (p. 184). Current school structures do not serve to allow for the type of dialogue Noddings envisions. She advocates changes that would allow elementary school classes to stay together longer and secondary classes that would see high school teachers assuming responsibility for groups of students over the entire span of high school years. When this happens teachers become not "imparters of knowledge, but counselors and advisors" (p. 187).

Noddings (2005) also sees dialogue as essential if we are to learn how to "create and maintain caring relations with intimate others" (p. 53). Ideally dialogue should be the foundation for the delivery of lessons. If this is not possible each child must be provided sometime in each day for "sustained conversation" (p. 53). Unfortunately Noddings see little of this type of dialogue in classrooms. This is unfortunate because:

> part of what is learned in dialogue is interpersonal reasoning—the capacity to communicate, share decision making, arrive at compromises, and support each other in solving everyday problems. The school presently puts tremendous emphasis on logical-mathematical reasoning, but almost none on interpersonal reasoning. (p. 53)

The dialogue that took place in that setting and all of the other references to formal and informal dialogue that occurred at different parts of the day seemed designed to meet Noddings' (2005) second objective of dialogue, the exploration of values, beliefs, opinions and interpersonal relations. Participants talked of nothing being out of bounds, that they were encouraged to bring personal issues to the forefront. Dialogue seems to be at the heart of the collaborative in that it

strengthened connections and allowed the family like environment to be built. Noddings also speaks of the use of dialogue in relation to the content of lessons. However, Noddings' concept of dialogue as a key aspect of lessons was rarely discussed by participants. The use of dialogue to explore the curriculum was mentioned by two participants as something commonly used in Family Studies, but it seemed that was more a place where dialogue of a personal nature could fit into the day. The real purpose of dialogue here was for the development of the type of interpersonal reasoning Noddings (2005) highlights. This seems appropriate as true dialogue must be driven by real, student identified, teacher confirmed need.

## Theme 4:
### Caring Teachers Reach Out to At-Risk Students

Rauner (2000) says that reaching out to care for others is difficult because the caring process is reliant on "trust between both parties to a care relationship" (p. 129). This is compounded by the fact that class and race differences may act as a divide between carer and cared for. It is harder to care when differences between the parties lead to suspicion or indifference. When this happens we are more likely to retreat and seek to care for those who are most like us. To overcome this, Rauner prescribes "wilful commitment...to attentiveness, responsiveness and competence in caring for those whose perspectives might be very different from one's own" (p. 129).

Barr and Parrett (2001) say that effective alternative programs invite students into their "intensive care units where students who have been battered by home, community, and school are provided with immediate responsive care" (p. 170). During significant transitions, at-risk youth are especially vulnerable; effective educators know this and they seek to "protect and insulate" youth within a cocoon of family-like care. To do this programs must see the students as individuals and be willing to advocate for youth outside the program with

administrators, parents and community service agencies. Finally, they say the teachers must communicate that they believe each student has value and potential.

Goplerud (1990) states that outreach is a necessary, yet rarely considered, component of any program designed to address youth risk issues. Those most at-risk are not easily enticed to new programs; as a result staff must be determined in their efforts to bring them into the program. Marketing of programs to those who would make referrals is also an important factor. Schools which successfully respond to the needs of at-risk youth "create a positive atmosphere based on a sense of community and shared values" (p. 9). Such programs are built up from a child-centred ideology in which school staff consider the circumstances of the students and respond to the learning, social and other needs of the student. Further, discipline systems are flexible and administrators shy away from over-reliance on suspension and expulsion.

It seems the above prescriptive advice has, likely unwittingly, taken hold in the program. The class and race divide, which Rauner outlines, between the teacher and the participants are real and significant. Yet this does not seem to stand in the way of the teachers who, with a steely determination, are determined to bring into the program students who they think will benefit from the approach. Resistance was described by many participants yet this did not lead to retreat by the staff who would return to them time and again to say they are still waiting for them. Once in the program participants generally describe a proactive environment in which support for individual development is present.

*Theme 5:*
*Caring Teachers Motivate Students*

Rauner (2000) says that care mostly focuses on internal motivations and largely ignores the role of external expectations in the development of care. This, she believes, is unfortunate as standards set important benchmarks for the

development of caring relationships. Holding young people to "high expectations of how they are to treat themselves and others offers opportunity for growth, both by establishing standards for future relationships and by offering young people real choices in their actions" (p. 39). In a case study of El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, Rauner says that high standards led many of the students to excel academically and socially.

Noddings (2003) says that setting standards is inherently difficult because when we speak of standards in education we are generally referring to the standards required to achieve a certain grade in a course. Often these standards are externally set, the teacher's job largely being to mark predetermined work and assign a letter grade. A sole focus on high standards of this type does not constitute caring. High expectations alone simply are a form of product control, a soul-less actuarial task designed to please the system not the person. Rather than concentrating on limited time courses, all of which have letter grades attached, Noddings suggests a system whereby the focal point shifts to the learning attained and not to, as we generally do now, when it is attained. This type of student-teacher interaction leads to confirmation, one of Noddings foundational aspects of care. In confirmation the teacher assigns the best possible motive to the student and works with the student to confirm his potential to be more than he believes he is now. In this type of relationship, students retake tests, redo papers or revise projects until the student and teacher achieve consensus on an appropriate grade. Thus, she says, students learn something about themselves, their motives in learning and they experience procedural fairness aimed at a type of learning driven by curiosity, not a timetable. The end result she says is that the teacher is truly able to set meaningful standards and determine excellence. Rather than failing students who have not completed required work according to a strict timetable, a relationship of honesty and cooperation is built. In this relationship the teacher doesn't fail the student; she simply says "you are not yet ready to move along. Stay with me a while and we

shall work on these problems" (p. 195). In this scenario relationships are built; typically, Noddings says, relationships, if they were built at all, are "utterly destroyed" (p. 195).

Participants in the current study stated that they are proud of the high standards in the program. The type of standards they refer to follow Noddings second corollary—namely, that the learning process is more important than when the learning occurs. As with all aspects of this study, the participants saw the setting of standards in highly utilitarian terms. The participants spoke often of the teachers expecting much of the students, but the teachers also seemed to have high standards for their own conduct. The participants spoke of teachers "pushing them," but this type of pressure was seen as appropriate because they were focused on the shared goal of graduation. While the pressure was there, so was the teachers' willingness to "go the extra mile." Ongoing support, guidance and motivation were conveyed to the students along the way, this let them know they weren't on their own. The participants agreed that living up to these standards was a struggle; as discussed in Chapter 5, one even admitted she sometimes resents it. I will return to this issue in Chapter 7.

## The Personal Attributes of the Caring Teacher

In the previous section of this chapter, I outlined the collaborative nature of care described by the participants. When the participants spoke of the personal attributes of the caring teacher, it was interesting to note that these attributes were not described in the same depth or with the same richness as were the collaborative actions. The participants saw these attributes as the personal foundational qualities of the teacher. All of the teachers were described as having these personal qualities and it was their collaboration with others that strengthened the sense of care within the program. Essentially what the participants described to me was that care required more than trust and respect, it required the type of collaborative actions previously outlined. Of course, none

of the above is intended to disparage the importance of the personal attributes of the caring teacher. Like the collaborative qualities, they too must be present. Demonstrating these attributes is not easy; it requires a deep commitment on the part of the caring teacher. As Noddings (1992) says:

> caring cannot be achieved by formula. It requires address and response; it requires different behaviours from situation to situation and person to person. It sometimes calls for toughness, sometimes tenderness...some situations require only a few minutes of attentive care; others require continuous effort over long periods of time. (p. i)

van Dempsey (1994) states educational literature has a "long history or romanticism surrounding our ideals of good teaching" (p. 89). Van Dempsey believes idealized notions of the good teacher are equated with the caring teacher. Yet the discourse about the qualities of good teachers tend to address issues of technical and pedagogical competencies and the human qualities of the caring teacher are seen as clichéd and often dismissed from the discourse surrounding educational improvement (Prillaman & Eaker, 1994). It seems the participants in this study would agree with van Dempsey when he states that good teaching is defined by the "context, relationships, and shared experiences that students and teachers construct in their classroom" (1994, p. 89). The participants indicated that moving to the point in which this type of rapport can be built requires that students sense the kind of human qualities described below.

### Attribute 1:
### The Caring Teacher Is Trusting and Trustworthy

Care is rooted in trust in a "chicken-egg sort of way: caring fosters trust, which leads to caring, which fosters trust in the next generation" (Rauner, 2000, p. 124). Without trust, the caring relationship cannot be cultivated nor confirmed. All of us differ in our capacity to trust and thus to receive care, this is especially true for at-risk youth in the early phase of relationship building. Experience with positive relationships of trust allows the trust-building process to take hold.

Conversely youth who lack such relationships will find it difficult to demonstrate the affinity for the carer that is necessary for a caring relationship. Those who seek to care must be willing to take the time up front required to allow this to develop. In this way trust is linked to patience. Trust is the bedrock of the practice of the caring teacher (Vogt, 2002).

Empathy is closely linked to trust because when we demonstrate empathy to another's situation the other begins to trust that we understand their needs (van Dempsey, 1994). Mayeroff (1995) says when we work from a care perspective, we realize the independent existence of the other, recognizing that independence means we must be willing to let go, to trust him to make and learn from his mistakes. At its core, care involves trusting the other to grow in his unique way. Trust and courage are closely linked, for trust involves a leap of faith. Trust is animate, that is it requires the caring teacher to promote and safeguard the conditions under which individuals flourish. Thus the trusting teacher is constantly assisting, encouraging and exposing students to invigorating experiences.

This description of trust captures many, but not all, of the aspects of trust as outlined by the participants. As stated in the literature, it took time to build trust as previous school experiences were largely marked by mistrust. Trust was built up over time if students felt they could share personal stories and know that confidentiality would be maintained. In this way, the carer also had to patiently wait for trust to be established. In some ways, trust, as described by the participants went beyond that stated in the literature. Trust to these participants included not only confidentiality but competence as well. That is the participants wanted to know they could trust not only the individual but also their advice. Interestingly, trust also had a collaborative aspect to it. Trust was not just something built into the teacher-student relationship, trust had to permeate the entire program, and everyone had to betrustworthy if the program was going to really be a caring place. This, as was admitted, was not easy. Clearly, the

trusting teacher had to achieve a fairly high standard; they had responsibility not only for their own behaviour, but for the classroom environment as well.

*Attribute 2:*

*The Caring Teacher Is Encouraging*

Mayeroff (1995) is one of the few scholars who speak of the importance of encouragement in caring relationships. He sees trust and encouragement as closely linked. To care requires that we trust and to trust requires a willingness to enter the unknown which requires both courage and encouragement. The carer must themselves be courageous and must encourage the cared for to come along. In caring, he believes, we inspire and encourage the other to be himself. The goal being that he eventually trusts himself and knows he is worthy of trust. Courage of this type is never blind. The carer must trust their reservoir of past experience to guide the experience. Mayeroff sums up his position on encouragement:

> Perhaps few things are more encouraging to another than to realize that his growth evokes admiration, a spontaneous delight or joy, in the one who cares for him. He experiences my admiration, a spontaneous delight or joy, in the one who cares for him. He experiences my admiration as assuring him that he is not alone and that I am really for him. His awareness of my delights in his efforts to grow has a way of recalling him to himself: I help him realize and appreciate what he has done. It is as if I said to him: 'look at yourself now, see what you did, and see what you can do.' (p. 65)

Encouragement was a very important facet of the caring relationship for these participants and Mayeroff's quote seems to closely describe the impact of encouragement on these participants. This type of encouragement, built on faith and belief in human capacity, seems especially important given the participants' histories; following significant experience with discouragement, they came to the program without faith in their abilities. They need to hear and feel it. Encouragement meant recognition and confirmation that they could do the work; they needed to hear that before they could know that they could be successful.

Encouragement evoked an affective response, it made you feel good, and it was, as Mayeroff says, "a spontaneous delight or joy" (p. 62).

*Attribute 3:*

*The Caring Teacher Is Patient*

Mayeroff (1995) sees patience as key to growth, and thus to care. Patience is enabling, it allows the other to grow in his time. Impatience, on the other hand stifles growth, it diminishes the quality of time spent together. The impatient person takes time from, and thus denies, growth. Patience is not passive; it requires active participation in the tasks that encourage growth of the other and then a willingness to wait for the growth. In their study of an alternative school designed to be caring, Cassidy and Bates (2005) provide an exemplar of this type of patience. They described how one student they interviewed appreciated his teacher's commitment to "just sit down, talk to me, just see what I do and all that" (p. 88).

To the participants in this study patience was described as a straightforward quality, described in two ways. Firstly, the patient teacher does not get frustrated when there is a need to go slowly through schoolwork, perhaps to repeat instructions, or to sit with the student until they understood the concept at hand. Patience is a gift of time, often presented as a reminder to the student to take the time needed to fully complete the task at hand. Secondly, patience was demonstrated through a willingness to allow the student to change their negative attitudes on their own schedule. The patient teacher knows the resistant student must be given time to come around. The patient teacher doesn't push or make demands for the student to be instantly kind and compliant.

*Attribute 4:*

*The Caring Teacher Is Respectful*

Given the ubiquitous nature of the term, it is interesting to note that respect is rarely identified in the literature as a personal attribute of the caring teacher. Cassidy and Bates' (2005) study of care in an alternative setting is an exception. The students in their study identified respect as vital to their success. However in this environment respect had been redefined for them. In their former schools, the students were expected to respect the teachers, even when it was not earned, deserved or reciprocated. In this setting, respect was bestowed upon each individual almost like an inalienable right. True respect is reciprocal. One participant said that because it was something they gave to teachers, they expected that teachers should reciprocate. Another participant saw the teacher as the starting point for respect. Once the respect was earned, respect would be returned.

## Conclusion

The teacher who cares makes a difference (Rogers, 1994). Students who say their teacher cares about them report liking school better, are happier, try harder and make better grades than their peers. One of the subjects in Rogers study outlines the impact of a teacher who is not caring: "if a teacher doesn't care about you, it affects your mind. You feel like you're nobody, and it makes you want to drop out of school" (p. 43). However, when adolescents perceive their teachers care about them they report enhanced belonging, satisfaction with school and self efficacy (Rauner, 2000). The findings of this study confirm this as the presence of care as provided for by the teachers in the program acted as a powerful motivator for students largely de-motivated by years of languishing. In the final chapter I will draw all of this together and outline some implications for future research.

# Chapter 7.

# Reflections and Recommendations

## Introduction

During completion of my course work in my doctoral program I had an opportunity to hear Nel Noddings speak at Simon Fraser University. I was aware of Noddings' significant contribution to the ethic of care literature; but was not well versed in the intricacies of her work. As Noddings spoke, she said a few things that stuck with me. One of her points, roughly paraphrased, was that our schools are not well set up to allow teachers to care for students or to teach students how to care for others. She also said that care is not developed by telling students how to care; it is developed through the creation of caring relationships, what she called modelling. Some time later I was pondering a research question for my dissertation. I knew I was interested in school experiences for at-risk youth but was struggling to narrow the focus. At this point Noddings' comments came back to me. If what she said about schools not being set up to allow teachers to care is true, and if care is learned through modelling, then what does this mean for at-risk youth who in my experience most need to be cared for and are often placed in educational environments that are bound more by rules than care? This brought forward many questions - what does care mean to at-risk youth? Do they experience care in school? If so, from whom and how do they experience it? I moved from there to conjure up an early version of the research question I eventually developed for this study. I became excited about the possibilities for this research and began sharing my tentative idea with fellow students and colleagues. While some were curious and seemed as intrigued as I was, one looked at me with a bewildered look on his face and told me at-risk

youth lack insight; another told me they lack the ability to describe care in meaningful ways. One colleague told me that asking open-ended questions to at-risk youth will simply elicit blank stares. Not wanting to dismiss this feedback, I considered each point, seeking to minimize the likelihood that any of these things might actually occur. For the most part, however, I was undaunted so I pressed on.

Now, I find myself at the end of this project. In this final chapter I aspire to present a cogent narrative which extends the findings discussed in earlier chapters by asking new questions of the data, offering some wonderings and reflections, offering recommendations as suggested by the participants and suggesting possibilities for future study.

## Personal Reflections

I opened the first chapter of this dissertation with a personal exploration of care; thus it seems fitting to open the last chapter in the same fashion. Recently I learned that a cousin, (I will call her Jane) who lives in the southern United States, and is close to my age, had been diagnosed with cancer. As I write this Jane has only weeks to live. The cancer is very aggressive and she is too ill to travel home, though her last wish is to return to Canada to die. This wish, it seems, will not be granted.

In the mid 1970s Jane travelled to the Southern US seeking to "find herself" in a way many did in the lingering shadow of the "hippy" era. Truth be told I always believed she was running away. She had always struggled to fit in, had difficulty in school and once told me, with a certain amount of bravado, that she had an enormous chip on her shoulder. The bravado I always knew hid a pain and a loneliness. Home life for her was at times chaotic; her family circumstances were not unlike my own. To sum it up, Jane was an at-risk kid. In the years that have gone by she has only returned for rare, brief visits. On one

such trip, Jane visited my parents' home. When we were young she and I were able to speak easily, but during this visit we really didn't know what to say to each other, our lives were just so different that we found we had little in common. Later, Jane married and had a daughter and built a life in the south. I would hear through family that things were not easy. Her husband was abusive, drugs became an issue and she lived a meagre existence on the literal margins of a very affluent community. In recent years with the "illegal alien" fury in the United States Jane lived in fear as she had never applied for citizenship. Her daughter is now 19 and she too is struggling with many of the same problems her mother has been burdened with.

## Care and Peer Relationships

My cousin's medical condition has had me thinking a great deal—about the parallels in our formative years and about the divergent paths in our lives since then. As I reflect on this I realize that one of the real differences may well have been the availability of care in each of our lives. While I have described being surrounded by abundant care outside of my family, Jane, as I recall, received little. She was a bright young woman, yet she dropped out of school and left her home in her mid teens and lived a largely nomadic life after that. I really have no idea if it is more than destiny that places some of us in times and locales that afford opportunities to receive care, while others receive relatively little.

As I was pondering this I recalled that many of the participants spoke of a related issue in the interviews. They spoke of feeling fortunate that they had the opportunity to be in the program and have a chance at success while so many of their peers did not get the opportunity and therefore have not received the full impact of the type of care the participants told me they experienced. Several spoke of friends who were struggling trying to make it. They spoke of moving on from many friendships because the differences in their lives were so dramatic. Alex told me that "once you go into [the program] you become very anti-social. I

don't hang out with anybody I used to hang out with...my priorities are completely different." Like Jane and I, she found she had little in common with those from her past. The other students in the program were more like the new person they were, they could relate to each other in this new family. Kierie spoke of looking back at old friends from her new vantage point and seeing what was missing for them; the quiet ones who never get any help because no one has ever gone up to them and "at least said are you ok with everything...in [the program] they do that...but there are kids out there who are afraid to say I need help." Ken told a story of running into a friend from his old school who used be a straight "A" student:

> *and now he's like failing grades and I was like 'what happened to you' and he's just like 'I don't know'...and he said 'what about you, you still failing? And I'm like, 'no I'm passing everything'. And it felt good to say that.*

Ken knew why there was a difference between him and his old friend. His friend, Ken told me, didn't know what he was missing because he had never experienced it.

I asked several participants why they thought so many of their old friends were struggling when they were so much like them? Alex said that before she and her peers could receive care they needed a certain level of "maturity" to know there are people around who will "put a lot of effort into you, people who really want to see you succeed." Dakota picked up on this point and says that too few people understand that "some kids need more attention than others" and there simply isn't enough to go around, so not everyone that needs it can receive the care and attention they need. Kierie goes back to her own experience to answer the question. She believes that the problem is that many teachers spend too much time with the students who don't need extra help. Sometimes she said she would see the best students getting help and wonder "why are they getting so much help and I am not...I felt like I was pushed away and I was in the corner desk in the classroom."

This study makes it clear that, for these participants, care was not readily available to them across their school experiences. It was only once it became clear to themselves and the education system that they didn't "fit" in the regular stream that they found themselves in a place where care was present. They realized once immersed in the culture of the alternative program that they were being cared for in ways that had not occurred before. However, remedial pullout programs such as this one have consistently shown to be an ineffective intervention and students enrolled in them face being stigmatized as bad and incompetent by their peers and even educational professionals (Barr & Parrett, 2001). While the participants reported a positive experience in the program, stigmatization was clearly identified as an issue. For several the stigma attached to being enrolled in an alternative program had originally acted as a barrier to entrance into the program. For Alex it constituted a "really big part" of why she was reluctant to enter the program; she didn't "want to be seen that way." Carly too was reluctant to enter the program. When she told her friends she was considering it they said: "You're going in the bad kid program?" Now that she has experienced the program she is not concerned about the stigma: "it's not really a bad kid program... when they say that I just think yeah, I'm probably getting better grades than you are." Kierie explained what being in the program meant to the larger student population and how she resented it first, but she too came to grips with it:

> we are known in the mainstream as the stupid kids. I used to get
> mad, want to punch people out but now it is kind of like you don't
> know us...maybe one of these days we can totally show you that. I
> know who I am that's all I need and if you don't want to know who I
> am and judge me then go right ahead but I know who I am and I
> know where I am going....

Andrea echoes this sentiment.

> I remember being in gym last semester and we walked by these
> kids who said [the program] is for losers. I was ready to beat them
> up, people say it is for stupid people, but it is not at all, it is for

*people wanting to graduate and to help prevent skipping and to stay on task.*

While the stigmatizing effect of alternative programs is well documented, research has shown that when schools create diverse alternative program options that offer a clear focus on academics and have caring and demanding teachers consistently monitoring student progress at-risk youth can succeed (Barr & Parrett, 1995). Interestingly the participants identified these factors in their description of caring teachers and they are described in detail in the preceding chapters. Additionally, consideration must be given to the fact that the current study and others (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Rauner, 2000) have shown that alternative placements are sometimes the only places at-risk youth experience care. Public education operates largely on the assumption that all students should participate in the traditional subject focused classrooms upon which liberal education is built. However, these participants were unequivocal in their belief that the traditional approach did not meet their needs in either elementary or secondary school for it simply ignored their relational or learning needs. Noddings does not specifically address at-risk youth in her writing but she rejects this approach as the blueprint for the provision of all educational services. Her advocacy is for options centred, care infused structures. So while remedial or alternative type programs have met with mixed results, rejection of these types of options would be counterproductive. The more hopeful strategy would be to recognize the benefits and address the shortfall. We are of course still left with the reality that none of the above will remove the stigma that acts to bar entry participation in such programs for many youth. While there is significant literature on at-risk youth and on alternative programs, little of it deals with the issue of stigma and how it can be addressed. I will address the need for more research in this area at the end of this chapter.

The stigmatization that participants faced was largely directed at them by their peers. As I thought about this and looked back over the participants'

descriptions of their school experiences it became clear that peer difficulties predated enrolment in the program. In Chapter Four I outlined how bullying and peer harassment was an almost constant feature of the school experience for most of the participants. Some of the participants reported ongoing bullying and peer rejection since early elementary years. Andrea, Ken and Kierie, for example, reported that they were bullied for things as simple as wearing baggy clothes, being new to the school or having a different haircut. Andrea said that as a result of the bullying she was almost always alone: "in kindergarten, grade one I remember always being by myself. I never really had friends when I was little... never really fit in...it just wasn't my good years." For others the bullying didn't start until the transition into the high school years. This transition meant the loss of friends from earlier years and significant peer rejection. Dakota for example said when you move to high school "your friendships just get really screwed over." For Alex it was the move to a private Christian school were she was different from the others:

> the students were terrible...I felt like I was totally not where I
> belonged. The administration didn't like me. The students didn't like
> me. It was the first time in my life I didn't have any friends—any
> friends at all. Nobody liked me. It was terrible.

At some point for all of the participants who reported bullying, frustration took over. They changed from being the victim to now being both a victim and an aggressor. Andrea recounted an experience in middle school when she finally responded to some girls who had been harassing her for some time: "I got really mad, and I got all my guy friends, and we're all yelling at them, and then I got suspended." Ken said he took the bullying for years but when people started "disrespecting his race and stuff" he had enough:

> I told nobody, but then when they did it that one time, I really got
> mad so I chased them down and just started hitting them and stuff.
> And then, after that the principal was like, 'he's in the hospital, and
> he has to get something removed', and he kept on telling me, 'it's
> not your fault' and stuff. But, then I felt bad.

Kierie started fighting back in grade four:

> *It'd be like, well when people picked on me, I'd kind of bring my*
> *tantrums and all that to school more. I'd kind of freak out and deal*
> *with it the way I'd dealt it with that at home. And, I got sent home*
> *for lunch. Sometimes I'd kick dirt and gravel at them on the*
> *playground, and I got really mad, cause I just had enough of it.*

Ironically the aggression these participants displayed allowed them to experience peer acceptance as it led students to invite them to parties and to skip and hang out with them. Andrea thought things were getting out of control but finally she had friends and she thought "I just liked having friends. That's why I think I did it, I have friends and I've gotta stick with them, now." Ken was approached by some of the cool kids, they told him if "you skip, I'll treat you—buy you stuff." Ken had the same reaction as Andrea: "I really didn't want to look like—really like—a nerd or anything like that, so I just went along—I just went with the crowd and stuff like that."

Clearly peer rejection before and during the program was an issue. As indicated in the literature review, Altenbaugh et al. (1995) state that rejection—by peers and teachers—is a significant problem for at-risk youth. While the circumstances in such cases are complex, the presence of rejection, bullying and stigmatization highlights the importance of care experiences being provided for at-risk youth within the school environment. These care needs are likely not universal as peers without these challenges may not have the apparent care deficit that comes for at-risk youth. However, for at-risk youth care within the school environment appears as a protective factor which can counter the negative impacts of their experiences both inside and outside the school. While this puts a heavy burden on the education system, a burden largely borne by the classroom teacher, it seems apparent that school may be the last bastion of care for at-risk youth and leaves us with a rhetorical question—if at-risk youth don't receive the transforming power of care relationships in school settings where will they receive it? More research which explores these dynamics is required.

## Care as Teacher Commitment

Given the significant peer issues each of the participants faced prior to entering the program it is certainly not surprising that they welcomed the commitment to care that they experienced in the program. It is clear to me that when care is received it is because the one-caring is committed to this role. Noddings (2007) says that if we simply see caring as an attitude or as an expression of concern for another, we miss the essence of caring. Rather than simply being a way of thinking of another, it is a way of being with others, a relationship in which the caring teacher undertakes to do a great deal with and for those for whom they care. As such, care is a demanding undertaking that holds great promise but provides no guarantee of a tangible reward for the caring teacher. The students for whom they care may receive and openly appreciate their efforts; yet their efforts may also go unnoticed or may even be rejected. At the same time, care requires only receptivity from the student.

When care was available to the participants in this study all of whom have faced the type of tribulations that would make their rejection of care efforts understandable, even likely, many recounted to me how they willingly accepted it, akin to what Cassidy & Bates (2005) and Noddings (2002) noted. Carly, for example, told me that all she needed to know was that the teachers "cared about their job, it's just really important that they like what they do…and they want to help you, and that they want to help you learn." For Dakota, the collaborative quality of care was important to her comfort in building a relationship with the teacher: "you can go to anyone of the teachers and they know what's going on…they are concerned about you." While some participants readily accepted care, others had to work towards it, testing the boundaries of the relationship to see if teacher efforts were genuine. Andrea tells me that she tested the teacher early by telling her something to see if she would tell anyone. The teacher "proved to me that I can trust her…when I talk to her she understands, and she closes the door, it's just me and her." In their study, Cassidy and Bates (2005)

said they were "struck by the fact that students were able to enter into caring relationships so quickly despite their troubled histories" (p. 97). Even students who were relatively new to the school reported changes in decision-making and their outlook.

When received, we have seen here how care created, perhaps renewed, a belief system that confirmed in participants' minds their own worth and capacity. Perhaps more importantly, experiencing care in this public setting increases the likelihood that the students can go forward and move from being the cared for to being the carer. Mayeroff (1995) says to care for another person "is to help him grow" (p. 335). He sums up this as follows:

> This, then, is the basic pattern of caring, understood as helping the other to grow; I experience the other as an extension of myself and also as independent and with the need to grow; I experience the other's development as bound up with my own sense of well-being; and I feel needed by it for that growing. (p. 338)

Alex explains how she experienced this in her situation:

> *being cared for makes me want to care back, to show [the teachers] how thankful I am for everything they have done for me to get me here...even when I didn't care about them they cared about me...I guess they have grown on me.*

An enhanced capacity to care within the participants was witnessed during the interviews as I realized that the participants were well practiced in all of the caring attributes they used to describe caring teachers. It seems the teachers had modelled these traits well and now they had become integrated into the behaviours of the participants themselves. Such modelling is vital as the capacity to care depends on the experience of being cared for. Nodding (2005) says our "role as carer is more important than our role as model, but we fill both simultaneously" (p. 22). The impact of this modelling was on display during the interviews. The participants were respectful, trusting, encouraging and patient. These attributes allowed the interviews to become a series of rich and textured dialogues. Respect was shown to me in their willingness to almost insist that they

work around my schedule. I was impressed at how willing they were to restructure their day to make mine easier. Trust was an implicit part of the experience. Once we had established initial rapport the participants seemed to trust that the interviews and their outcome would be valuable. Encouragement came in the form of many of the participants' innate curiosity about the research. Before and after the interviews, several would ask about my own interest in this subject matter, they asked about my career, they would share their thoughts on a topic and then ask my own. Patience was shown in their willingness to stick with the three-phase interview process, even though by the end they had each contributed considerable time and energy to this research.

## Care in Schools for At-Risk Youth

At the core of Noddings' (1984) message is that schools must be ordered so as to allow all educational practices to be examined through a lens of care. She believes "the primary aim of every educational institution and every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring" (p. 172). However the realization of this goal is hampered on many fronts. In our society, caring has been "eclipsed by the depersonalizing procedures" of technology and the power of the market economy (Phillips & Benner, 1994, p. 2). The impact of the resulting bureaucratization of both the private and public spheres has been felt across the helping professions as the development of the moral citizen takes a back seat to the demands of production and consumption (Phillips & Benner, 1994). The option for care to originate and be centralized in families is hampered as economic demands dictate that parental work demands result in many children receiving less care than would be ideal in their home.

As large public institutions schools are not immune from bureaucratization. Danin (1994) details how these bureaucratic structures separate people into discrete positions with little or no influence or interest in the work of others. This in turn can make it difficult, even for committed schools to work from an ethic of

care. Danin outlines how a school built on an ethic of care attempted to develop a program designed to improve student test scores. While the principal was committed to building such a program she largely worked alone; as a result teachers became isolated into groups of "resisters, idealists and realists" (p. 57) as teachers realized successful implementation of the program required more compromise and trust than the staff were willing to give. The program was discontinued without having achieving any of its goals.

Additionally, the impact of the bureaucratic structure of schools can be harmful to at-risk youth. Bureaucratic responses to student compliance almost wholly tend to be punishment focused, relying on suspension and expulsion to maintain order. These responses are most harmful to at-risk youth who get caught up in zero tolerance disciplinary practices that attempt to replicate criminal justice responses without the safeguards provided by the courts. At the same time systems based on order and rule maintenance tend to ignore students who are not overtly disruptive. These students, like many of the participants, tend to fall through the cracks because they are not a "problem" to the orderly operation of the school.

Thus bureaucratization affects both students and teachers. The result for both groups is a rejection of shared norms and values and further alienation. For at-risk students the issue of care, or lack thereof, is a reoccurring theme. Altenbaugh et al. (1995) take a very practical approach to what schools must do to address these issues. They outline four missing qualities of schooling that, if present, would demonstrate care to at-risk students—that there is value in learning beyond instruction, dialogue that provides clear feedback, collaboration with students in determining learning activities and flexible use of time.

## Participant Recommendations

In closing I asked each participant what he or she would say if a teacher came up to him or her and said, "I really want to be a caring teacher. What's the most important thing I can do to become a caring teacher?" Their recommendations can be summed up under two headings, both of which reinforce key findings of this study. Teachers who want to demonstrate care, they told me, must first be able to reach out and guide students who most need help and secondly, they must communicate and connect with students. Andrea highlights the importance of both of these commitments:

> *Help guide your students, and help get your students through it as hard as you can, and if they quit, then try to push them and talk them into staying because graduating is the most important thing. And get to know them. You know, really talk to them and don't become on their bad side.*

Alex agrees:

> *put forth an effort... come to me and asking me and really put an interest into what you're doing. They really want to be a good teacher...talk to us...communicate with us.*

Carly highlights the importance of reaching out and persevering with the students who need it:

> *if they're getting straight A's, then they obviously know what they're doing, if there's other students in the class that don't get it, and they're just sitting there with their eyes wide open going, 'I don't know what to do?" Those are the students that they have to focus on, not the ones that are getting A's ... you have to guide everybody and not just the specific ones.*

Dakota highlights the need to communicate and connect with students: "just be there, and if I need help, listen. Just listen to what I have to say. I just want you to be there to listen, so I can talk." Ken, succinct as always, reinforces the need to create a connection with students: "get connected with them. Get to know them more, very well. I think that's the most important." Kierie agrees: "it's good

to know what a teenager likes, what they're going through kind of thing." Rick unknowingly seemed to sum up the perspective of the group:

> *you have to be a teacher who wants kids to learn, tries to do every*
> *thing they can to get you to understand what the lesson is and stuff*
> *like that and do everything in their power to help you pass your*
> *courses and just make a connection to you.*

These recommendations for teacher practice parallel key aspects of the thematic descriptions of the caring teacher outlined in chapter four and five of this dissertation. In both instances the issue of positive student-teacher relationships are highlighted. Noddings (2005) would not likely be surprised by these findings. She is harshly critical of current teacher preparation in universities which continue to push the development of teachers as subject matter experts. As a result, many teachers define their worth as teachers by the display of advanced knowledge in their subject, even though Noddings says that the development of this knowledge is counterproductive as they will not likely use it in K-12 classrooms and if they do they are forcing it on students who are "neither interested nor ready for it" (p. 21).

## Implications for Future Research

I have attempted to construct each section in this chapter so as to highlight key issues worthy of additional scholarly activity. In doing so I have highlighted three issues - care in schools for at-risk youth; care as teacher commitment, and; care within peer relationships. While this list is not exhaustive, and much more could be done, I believe it represents several appropriate directions as indicated by this research.

Additional research designed to address how schools can better be places of care for at-risk youth could follow several paths. A worthy starting point would be an in-depth qualitative study across broader populations of at-risk youth. Ideally such a study would involve student and teacher participants enrolled in a

variety of regular and alternative school settings, as well as youth not enrolled in school. Such a study could explore the presence of the actions and attributes identified in the studies to date across diverse settings. An interesting aspect to this research could be an exploration of the presence of care for students who may be at-risk but are maintained in the regular stream. It would be short-sighted to conclude from the research to date that care for at-risk youth is only available in alternative settings. However I am not aware of any research which examines care relationships in regular settings.

Further exploration of the links between attachment theory and an ethic of care would be worthwhile. As discussed in the literature review, the attachment research conducted to date can tell us that students who have secure attachment will have greater success than those who don't . However, Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) acknowledge that "school-based attachment-oriented interventions have rarely been addressed in the literature" (p. 253). Treatment oriented approaches have received the bulk of the attention from researchers as addressing attachment deficits is largely seen as the work of clinicians. Yet it seems that when teachers operate from an ethic of care, they may well enhance attachment for at-risk youth. It seems worthy of further study.

Moving forward, it seems worthwhile to address what types of research would not be advised. Noddings (2007) issues a caution against the use of instruments designed to measure caring which have started to be developed. I agree with her belief that the use of this methodology would likely be a mistake unless the "researcher is meticulous in probing deeply into the manifestations of each indicator on the instrument" (p. 13). The problem with such checklists is that they do not allow for the probing into "how" caring occurs; rather we are limited to knowing "what" caring looks like against predetermined criteria. Noddings says such approaches do not get to the phenomenological nature of care which we need to understand through experience and perception of those caring and cared for.

The second area of potential research relates to care as teacher commitment. There is a need for additional research that explores care as teacher practice with at-risk youth. By suggesting this tack I am not saying that teacher competence is the issue. I am not concerned here with teachers achieving some sort of care benchmark; this is why I specifically refer to commitment. Many teachers want the best for their students. They may struggle with how to best provide care when they have responsibility for so many students. As a result many students may not receive or interpret their efforts as caring. Yet we would not want to label these teachers as non-caring. Alex addressed the issue of the importance of teacher effort in her recommendation to a teacher committed to care: "the fact that they're putting themselves out there that way and coming to me and asking me and really putting an interest into what they're doing. They really want to be a good teacher." The challenge then is not to pass the care test, it is to see care as a worthy endeavour. Thus related research needs to continue exploring the subtle nuances at play when teachers strive to care.

An additional dimension of teacher practice relates to the teachers' need for preparation. Noddings (2007) says:

> recognizing that students come to them with very different motives and interests, caring teachers must be prepared not only with a variety of instructional methods but also with a repertoire of stories and materials that connect their subject to ordinary purposes, to other school subjects, to the great existential questions, and to new purposes such as aesthetic appreciation and critical thinking. (p. 20)

The burden on the caring teacher is great. Teacher-directed action research could be designed which allows groups of teachers, possibly from the same setting, to come together to determine "what works" in allowing them to develop the full repertoire Noddings refers to above.

Much of the literature related to an ethic of care in schools looks implicitly or explicitly to the role classroom teacher, while little or no attention is paid to the role of other educational professionals in the caring endeavour. Given the tremendous burden placed on the classroom teacher it would be informative to look more closely at how administrators and school counsellors can assist the establishment of care in teacher-student relationships. Too often the administrator is expected to play the role of the enforcer, there to discipline when the student crosses the line. It would be helpful to learn what effect administrator practice has on students' care experiences. In this study Ken clearly saw the vice principal as a valuable ally in helping him get back on track. Yet we know little about this link. It would be valuable to learn what conditions lead to students identifying care in administrator practice. We have seen here, and in other research, how teacher care can act as a catalyst for student success. I am not aware of any research which demonstrates if administrators can have this same impact. In a similar vein, research which explored the care dynamic within the student-counsellor relationship would be helpful.

Considering care and peer relationships leads us to another viable road for future research. It would be timely to ask youth about their experiences with being, to use Noddings' phrasing, the one-caring. Given the experiences of the participants with peer rejection and an apparent lack of care among youth populations such research would be an important part of understanding the complexities of care. Much of the literature to date, the present study included, asks students how they receive care. If we are to enhance the presence of care within school environments we need to know more about the role youth can play in caring for their peers and in assisting in creating a culture of care within their school.

## Conclusion

I began this research intrigued by the role of care in the educational experiences of at-risk youth. I close intrigued and optimistic that this line of research will grow, that the burgeoning call for care will spread and that our schools will increasingly become aware of the power of student-teacher relationships to be, as Mayeroff (1995) told us, relationships of care so that they can be relationships of growth. The challenges are great but the mission is simple. It is to learn how best to care for those who most need it. This is at the core of an ethic of care and core to the mission of any school seeking to assist the vulnerable.

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**APPENDICES**

# Appendix A.

# Study Information Document

**Title: *Exploring Care as Lived Experience in School for At-Risk Youth***

**Investigator Name:** Terry Waterhouse
**Investigator Department:** Education

Place the study will be completed

Abbotsford, BC, Canada

Who are the participants (subjects) in this study?

The participants will be eight students in a public secondary level (Grades 9-12) alternative education program in the Abbotsford School District. Ideally the participants will be in Grade 11 or 12.

What will the participants be required to do?

Participate in three interviews with researcher. The broad subjects covered in the interviews will be school life history and participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the existence of what is referred to in the literature an "ethic of care" within those relationships.

How are the participants recruited?

The participants will be recruited at the program. The researcher will speak to all students and outline the research, answer questions and determine which students are interested in participating. Those students who are interested in participating will be provided with a Participant Information Document (this document) and a Letter of Consent which must be signed by their parent/guardian. They will be informed that their participation is completely voluntary and that refusal to participate will not effect their grades or standing in the school in any way. The students must also sign a consent form.

Overall Goals of Study

The goals of the study are: 1. To determine how at-risk students conceptualize the concept of "care" in relation to their school experiences. 2. To determine the attributes, as perceived by at-risk youth, of teachers who demonstrate "care" in their professional practice. 3. To determine the effects of teacher "care" on at-risk youths learning experiences.

Risks to the participant, third parties or society:

The risks to participants are minimal, however, the experiences that some participants discuss may be personally sensitive and as such may be emotionally upsetting for some. If this occurs, arrangements will be made for participants to receive support from counsellors at the school.

Benefits of study to the development of new knowledge:

It is anticipated that your son/daughter's participation in this survey will help teachers and researchers have a better understanding regarding the experiences of students who have had a difficult time being successful in school.

How confidentiality and anonymity will be assured if applicable

Participating students will adopt a pseudonym (fake name) of their choosing. The taped interviews will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home and all transcriptions of the tapes will be stored in a separate location in my home. At no time will any of the students' real names to released to the participating school or school district, or in any published documents.

Approvals that may be required from agencies, communities or employers

Approval has been granted by the Abbotsford School District and the SFU Ethics Director.

Persons and contact information that participants can contact to discuss concerns.

Terry Waterhouse
Phone: 778-808-2939
terry.waterhouse@ucfv.ca

# Appendix B.

# Informed Consent for Minors

**Title:** *Exploring Care as Lived Experience in School for At-Risk Youth*

**Investigator Name:** Terry Waterhouse

*The University and those conducting this study subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This form and the information it contains are given to you for your own protection and to ensure your full understanding of the procedures, risks, and benefits described below.*

I am currently undertaking a research project as part of the requirements for completing a doctoral degree in Education at Simon Fraser University.

Your child has expressed an interest in participating in this research. If you consent to their participation by signing below your child will participate in three interviews that will take place at school over a one month period.

Participation in this research is voluntary and completely confidential. The identity or comments made by participants will not be divulged to anyone. In order to ensure confidentiality, all participating students will adopt a pseudonym (a false name). The interviews will be taped and the tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home and all transcriptions of the tapes will be stored in a separate location in my home. At no time will any of the students' real names be released to the participating school or school district, or in any published documents.

The broad subjects covered in the interviews will be school life history and participants' experiences and perceptions with relationships of care in school settings. It is anticipated that your child's participation in this survey will help teachers and researchers have a better understanding regarding the experiences of students who have had a difficult time being successful in school.

This research has been approved by the Abbotsford School District and the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University. The risks to participants are considered to be minimal; however, the experiences that some participants discuss may be personally sensitive and as such may be emotionally upsetting . If this occurs, arrangements can be made for participants to receive support from counsellors at the school.

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a Study Information document (attached) which describes the procedures, possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the document, and that you voluntarily agree to allow the minor named below to participate in the study.

The participant knows that myself, or he or she, has the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that any complaints about the study may be brought to the chief researcher named above or to:

Dr. Tom O'Shea
Faculty of Education
8888 University Way
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia V5A 1S6
Canada

Name of Minor (PRINT): _____

Please indicate your *relationship* to the minor: _____

I certify that I understand the procedures to be used and have fully explained them to the minor.

I understand I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion by contacting the researcher named above. I certify that I understand the procedures to be used and that I understand the Study Information Document, and that I have been able to receive clarification of any aspects of this study about which I have had questions.

# Appendix B.

# Informed Consent by Participants in a Research Study

**Title of Research Project:** *Exploring Care as Lived Experience in School for At-Risk Youth*

**Researcher:** Terry Waterhouse

*This research is being conducted under permission of the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological well-being of research participants.*

Having been asked to participate in the research study named above, I certify that I have read the procedures specified in the **Study Information Document** describing the study. I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to me in taking part in the study as described below.

The risks to participants are minimal; however, the experiences that some participants discuss may be personally sensitive and as such may be emotionally upsetting for some. If this occurs arrangements will be made for you to receive support from counsellors at the school, if you wish.

I agree to participate in three interviews with the researcher. The broad subjects covered in the interviews will be school life history and participants' experiences and perceptions with relationships of care in school settings. It is anticipated that your participation in this survey will help teachers and researchers have a better understanding regarding the experiences of students who have had a difficult time being successful in school.

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by the law. Knowledge of your identity is not required. You will not be required to write your name or any other identifying information on research materials. Materials will be maintained in a secure location.

Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, or about the responsibilities of researchers, or if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in this study, please contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics by email at hweinber@sfu.ca or phone at 604-268-6593.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that I may register any complaint with the Director of the Office of Research Ethics.

Director, Office of Research Ethics
8888 University Drive
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia
Canada V5A 1S6
+1 604 291 3447
email: dore@sfu.ca

I understand I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion by contacting:

Terry Waterhouse
36120 Walter Road
Abbotsford BC
V3G 1K9
Phone: 604-504-5897
Email: terry.waterhouse@ucfv.ca

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, whether there are possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the documents describing the study, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

I have been informed that the research will be confidential.

_____

Participant Contact Information (address, phone number):

_____

_____

_____

_____

# Appendix D.

# Interview Guide

Participant Pseudonym: _____

## Interview 1: Personal Educational History

I am interested in hearing about your past experiences in school, particularly what you remember about the adults in schools you have gone to, including this school (by adults I mean the teachers, principals, counsellors, teacher helpers). Start back as far as you remember.

Going back to elementary school, can you remember what school or schools you went to in your primary years (Grade 1-3)?

Middle years (4-7) ?

High school years (8-12)?

*(probe to determine memorable experiences, grades they received, attendance patterns, changes in their perceptions or feelings about school or educators, their perceptions of "good' or "bad" teachers and of "caring" and "non-caring" teachers)*

## Interview 2: Perceptions of "Care"

Review key points from Interview 1 *(probe if any additional thoughts...)*.

Last time you told me about your school experiences. That was very helpful. As I mentioned last week, today I wanted to talk about the idea of "care" or "caring" What does this word mean to you?

(define or describe the term, ask if it is important in school, are caring relationships in school are different from other forms of caring outside of school.)

Can you think of adults in school that you believe really cared for you? Past schools, this school?

What effect does feeling your teacher cared about you have on you how you felt , or feel, about yourself, on your school work, on other relationships at school or at home?

Do you think some schools are more caring places than others, why or why not?

What about your own experiences with caring in school? Can you think of adults you really cared for? What happened in these situations, how did you feel or act? Did you have any teachers who you cared for who you felt didn't care for you? Can you think about teachers who you believe were trying to care for you and you rejected them? Why do you think that happened?

What about teachers you felt didn't care about you, can you think of any? If so, how are they different from the teachers you have already described?

Does anything else come to mind that you would like to share?

## Interview 3: Reflections on the Phenomenon

Now that you have told me about your school experiences and your thoughts about the word "care", I was wondering if you found yourself thinking about things since our last interview. Would you like to talk about that?

What advice would you give to a teacher who really wants to make sure that other students like you really feel "cared for"?

Do you have any thoughts about the definition of care you provided last time? Is there anything you would change (add or delete)?

Have any other teachers or experiences come to mind since we talked last time?

If they have not already done so, I will follow up to ask them to describe to me the qualities and attributes of a "caring" teacher.

# Appendix E.

# Actions and Attributes of Caring Teachers

## ACTIONS OF CARING TEACHERS

- OUTREACH
  - o *to attract students into program*
- MOTIVATE and GUIDE
  - o *to support academic and personal success*
- SET and ENFORCE STANDARDS
  - o *for academic work and program rules*
- CONNECTIONS WITH STUDENTS
  - o *To get to know students personally and help students connect with each other – "like a family"*
- OPEN ENVIRONMENT
  - o *family meetings*
- TALK OPENLY
  - o *about personal issues*

## ATTRIBUTES OF CARING TEACHERS

- INTERESTED/INVOLVED
  - o *In order to get to know student personally*
- UNDERSTANDING and CONNECTED
  - o *Know the individual, don't overreact to problems*
- THOUGHTFUL
  - o *about personal issues – check in to see how things are going*
- TRUSTING andtrustworthy
  - o *demonstrates they can be trusted with personal information*
- ENCOURAGING
  - o *you can do it...I want you to graduate...*
- RESPECTFUL
  - o *of the individual*
- FUN and LAUGHTER