

PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH AT RISK OF SCHOOL FAILURE:  
THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH IN SPECIAL PROGRAMS OR  
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

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By

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## ABSTRACT

An abundance of research exists on youth at risk of school failure; however, in-depth qualitative studies that examine the perspectives of youth in Canadian schools are limited (Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007). In the spring of 2014, 12 youth from alternative schools and special programs, in one Saskatchewan urban setting, were interviewed. Rich qualitative data was gleaned from interviews to understand: *What factors are most relevant to the success or failure in school for youth at risk?* The term, *at risk* was defined for the purpose of this study based on attendance in an alternative school or special program verses a mainstream school. Alternative schools and special programs are designed to support youth struggling with a variety of issues that can stand in the way of school completion. These schools and programs support youth with a variety of concerns, including, but not limited to: truancy, behaviour, mental health, addictions, and other risk enhancing factors that exist in student's personal lives (Cuddapah, Masci, Smallwood, & Holland, 2008; McCann & Austin, 1988). The participants in this study reflected on their needs, shared their school experiences, and made suggestions. Through an analysis of the interviews eight factors emerged as being relevant to success or failure in school: teachers, the work, relationships to staff in schools, supports in the school, school and classroom environment, peers, mental health and addictions, and transitions. Based on the eight factors, suggestions are made for schools to support the needs of those most at risk of school failure.

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## **DEDICATIONS**

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## PROLOGUE

Currently in Saskatchewan teachers could have upwards of 30 students in their classrooms, with next to no support. Within that one classroom there can be much diversity in language, literacy, culture, ability, sexual orientation, interests, behaviour, and personality, not to mention family history, exposure to trauma, or other unknown lifestyle stressors and struggles. There are far too many differences for one teacher to be mindful of, especially without training in strategies conducive to understanding the root of student behaviour and motivation.

From my experience teaching in a community school over the course a decade, I felt that *teacher* only defined a small part of my role. I was more often than not a parent, a nurse, a social worker, a mediator, a friend, and on good days I taught. This is not to say my students did not learn, but the formula for learning had to start with the heart and meeting the imminent needs of the students prior to subject specific teaching. This endeavour involved building relationships, making connections with the students first, establishing trust, routine, and a system of support within the classroom. I had to be willing to stop a lesson at any moment and pick it up when everyone felt ready to move forward. It was with this philosophy alone, that I was able to even begin to meet the diverse needs of my students.

If my classroom was not a place where everyone felt safe, comfortable, and supported, we could not move on. I know for a fact, that on days I struggled with outside pressures, for example, having to implement external testing procedures, collect data for deadlines, or teach something because of some outside source, my students suffered. It was always a delicate balance between the expectations of the province, school division, school, and the needs of the students. I am not afraid to say, I put students first, and I am confident that in doing so, I helped them to become strong, independent, caring, and contributing members of their communities who were also as prepared for the world academically, as they would be socially, and emotionally. I know they did not suffer as a result of increased focus on whole self and well-being because the more we enjoyed the time we spent together in the classroom, the more everyone was open to learning.

If a school itself does not add to the risk factors in students' lives and instead enhances resilience by protecting young people and supporting them in facing challenges, then the students' chances of successful completion of high school are increased. Positive, supportive, accepting, and welcoming schools are places the young people in this study stated they could call

home, and they were places these young people wanted to be. All of the youth interviewed expressed the desire to graduate high school, despite risk factors and negative school experiences or barriers. Each participant also had either post secondary education or career goals. Some youth had a clear path from which they planned to reach their goals and knew exactly what they needed from schools to get there and some struggled with a very vague notion of how to get where they wanted to be. Among the group of young participants in this study there were future health care professionals, a conservation officer, a police officer, counsellors, teachers, a welder, a truck driver, and a marine biologist. There were only two youth unsure of their future career paths. All dreamed of their lives after completing high school and reflected on the support they received or did not receive in school that would or would not help them get there.

Young people remain at the mercy of the adults in their lives through the different stages and events that happen during their time at school. Schools can support students to be strong, capable, and productive members of their communities or they can alienate them and put them at risk for failure. Administrators, teachers, and school-based support staff are the link between dreams and reality for many young people. Through this study, no one factor emerged as the defining factor for success or failure in school. What did emerge was a reflection on positive and negative school experiences that were strongly linked to teachers, their personalities, other relationships or connections with the supports or support staff in the school, and the work. A diverse personal and school history existed for each participant. Their struggles while attending mainstream schools contributed to a disengagement from school and their experiences in a special program or alternative school helped to bring things back on track and reconnect them to the importance of being successful in school.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Educational experiences help to shape lives and those experiences contribute to a person's confidence and success. In our culture the expectation is that we will go to school and ultimately become successful and contributing members in society. Failure to complete grade 12 can contribute to, "fewer work opportunities, less income, and ultimately poorer health" (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2014, p. 164) and that itself puts tremendous pressure on educators to strive for high levels of school completion. As a young person, I did not always connect to the importance of finishing high school and the reasons for my own disengagement in school are explored later in this paper. Despite this lack of engagement through my high school years I remember a time when there was excitement and conviction about my hopes and dreams for the future and at one point in my life those hopes and dreams were realistic and attainable. When I think back, a common question often asked to young children comes to mind, a question that frames many possibilities and hopes for the future: What do you want to be when you grow up? It is a simple question and can appear in conversation and play from a very young age.

For some, this idea of limitless educational potential and confidence fails to actualize, as more pressing basic needs come first, and somewhere between preschool and adulthood as many as 20% of Saskatchewan youth fail to complete high school on time (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2014). The barriers that appear between young people and their dreams of a successful future can bring ones educational journey to a grinding halt. If those roadblocks happen at a time when there are minimal supports to continue with schooling and decreased motivation or resilience, then high school completion can become a seemingly unattainable goal.

I was a young person at one point in my own educational journey with circumstances that led to a disruption in school and I left school early at the age of 16. My motivation to stay in school decreased, at a pivotal time, as it can for many, early on in high school. I knew there were dynamics in my life that influenced my ability to be successful in school and when I moved on to become an educator, I continued to see how the events and stages of people's lives could disrupt learning. The purpose of this study was to find out if there were factors common among other youth who have also struggled in school. The hope was to find ways to support these young people to stay in school, achieve their goals, and be successful with their educational experiences.

## **Biographical Sketch**

The factors affecting my ability to stay in school were diverse, yet not uncommon: a split family, unstable relationships with immediate family, a questionable peer group, poor self-esteem, exposure to drugs and alcohol, academic failures, absenteeism from school, and eventually a teenage pregnancy. These factors contributed to poor decision-making. It was not until I reached graduate school that I started to question what it was that fostered the resilience I had to eventually complete high school and persevere in my educational goals despite the many risk factors. I eventually realized it was the people in my life who guided and provided me with the tools I needed, and that resulted in eventual success in school. If it were not for the role models who entered my life at just the right time to save me from predictable school failure, I would not be where I am today.

My own educational journey started and stopped several times in my teens and I was not ready, resilient enough, or prepared to learn until finally completing high school at the age of 21. I took a long road and I struggled with many aspects of mainstream schooling, yet was eventually resilient enough to overcome my barriers. It was once I realized I was about to become a mother myself, that I was capable of defining what success would look like for me. I was ready to plan for my future, and capable of following through in order to reach my goals. When I returned to school with this renewed hope for the future and I was welcomed into an environment willing to support me, I could finally see my potential for completing high school and even furthering my education in order to support my young family.

An alternative high school in my community, one that had a different perspective on educating youth, was the critical factor in my successful completion of grade 12. The school's focus was on fostering relationships, building partnerships within the community, and offering relevant learning opportunities for youth. The strength behind my successful completion of high school was the ability to envision the possibility that at some point I could become an instrument of change for others in similar situations. That realization was fostered through many positive relationships with staff; relationships I had not been privileged to have in my mainstream school experiences. The alternative school I attended had a flexible view of the curriculum and a keen understanding of students' diverse needs. It was then that I started to see a future where I dreamed of being like the teachers I had encountered. Teachers who tailored the curriculum to meet my needs, the needs of a young mother who had spent the better part of her early high

school years avoiding school, responsibility, and the realities of her future without a high school education. This collection of amazing educators essentially prevented me from disappearing from school forever and they changed the course of my life.

The understanding of my situation and the desire to change my path happened late in my school career, well after leaving mainstream schooling. It was not until I found a school in the midst of changing its perspective and mandate to help struggling students through alternative programming and support services that met diverse needs and offered flexible classes, that I was able to gain back that perspective. The application of the curriculum, personalities and strengths of the teachers, and a generally comforting and supportive atmosphere gave me the tools to actualize the dream of pursuing higher learning. The alternative setting fostered my ability to define success for myself once again and set achievable goals. This renewed hope was accomplished in an environment free from judgment, with teachers who were driven to build relationships with the students and hold them accountable in ways that did not discriminate or alienate. These experiences became the foundation for which I later developed my own teaching philosophies, based on building strong relationships through student-centered approaches.

The journey to high school completion led me straight into pursuing a university degree in the College of Education, at the University of Saskatchewan. During that time, I sought out opportunities to work with struggling youth who, in one way or another, reminded me of myself. In my first year of university, I volunteered for a literacy organization called Frontier College. Through this work, I organized reading circles in a local detention center, various group homes, community centers, and in schools. These opportunities allowed me to work with some of our communities most disengaged youth. My volunteer experience with Frontier College was a personally rewarding and successful endeavor through which I was later hired as a Provincial Coordinator. For two years, I planned, organized, and facilitated provincial literacy initiatives and solicited volunteers to train in basic literacy instruction. These volunteers were placed in schools, community centers, and detention centers, throughout the province to work with adults, children, and youth.

Frontier College programs were designed to hook youth into learning how to read and improve their literacy skills through relevant activities and experiences. Youth who participated in the Frontier College reading programs were integral to the design of its lessons and activities, as were community members such as school personnel, parents, and volunteers. The experience

of working with struggling youth in a variety of environments afforded me the opportunity to observe what I felt were critical factors relevant to academic success for youth who were disengaged from school. These factors included: relationships, resilience, environment, motivation, and engagement. A commitment to student-centered practices and continued communication, evaluation, and flexibility helped influence relevant and successful academic programs that serviced the youths need for a connection in the learning environment.

Upon completion of my Bachelor of Education degree in 2002, I left my position as Provincial Coordinator for Frontier College and found teaching opportunities in challenging environments. Through these experiences, I was able to further my understanding of working with youth and tailoring the curriculum to meet their unique needs. The four years I spent with Frontier College, during my university career, gave me a perspective on education and curriculum through early learning, community development, the judicial system, and schools. When I became a classroom teacher, I took with me the stories and experiences shared by the youth from these diverse learning environments and transferred what worked from our lessons and activities into my classroom practice. Merging students' lives and experiences both in and out of school fostered an environment where students felt welcomed, connected, and successful. I believed the curriculum had to come from the students as much as it came from provincially mandated material and these beliefs were the foundation for teaching philosophies, which I implemented in my classroom.

At times, I was successful in my endeavor as a classroom teacher, juggling the curriculum with what the students needed in a challenging environment. At other times, I could not compensate for the barriers standing in the way of my students' success. I had questions I could only find answers to by furthering my own research and education formally and it was at that point that I realized, in order to be an instrument of change I needed to look beyond my own experiences and practice in the classroom and look further into curriculum research and the study of youth-at-risk of school failure by furthering my own education. The first step in my desire to help foster successful school experiences for young people needed to come from further understanding of: individual, school, and community dynamics; education, psychology, and learning theories; and a broader understanding of the history of curriculum. These foundational underpinnings would add to my experience as a classroom teacher and provide me with the

necessary tools to embark on further understanding of the barriers of success in school for those at risk. It was from that curiosity the research question for this study emerged:

*What factors are most relevant to the success or failure in school for youth at risk?*

### **Position of Researcher**

I came to this work with a sincere wonder about my question and a desire to learn more about youth who have struggled in school. Supporting youth through quality educational experiences has been a passion that comes from the heart and I know that my personal connection to this topic helped me build relationships with my students and the young people who participated in this study, even if for a short time. When I was young, I knew what I wanted, I just did not know how to get there and at times it seemed the role models in my family were just as confused as I was. As an educator, I have reflected on my personal struggles and have used my experiences as motivation to search for tools that could help young people to develop healthy relationships with the adults in their lives, set desirable and attainable goals, and reach their potential. I also have used my story to encourage those I have taught, to never give up and to seek out adults in their lives who could support them.

My experiences as a disengaged youth helped me to understand how easy it can be to lose a young person in the classroom. I became invisible to the teachers, especially when I did not connect with them or the work. The focus on academic achievement competed with my need for a personal connection and support, and that further alienated me from school. These experiences have framed who I am today as an educator and a researcher and undoubtedly made it difficult to bracket myself from this work. That being said, having had personal experiences that led to leaving school early supported me as an educator and a researcher to focus particularly on students who were less engaged, as I could relate. I was able to connect with this population of youth and I am certain my own story influenced so many of them to volunteer to participate. The volunteers were keen to share their stories because we had many things in common and I do not think someone without similar experiences in this area of research could have connected to the youth or this work in quite the same way.

### **Framing the Research**

The research presented in this work was designed to provide answers from the perspectives of youth through a descriptive qualitative research study centered on the beliefs of youth attending special education programs or alternative schools. The youth interviewed met one or

more of several characteristics of risk that led to their need for special programming or alternative school placement. It was believed that youth directly involved in these programs were in the best position to provide insight into their experiences and that they could highlight barriers or relevant contributing factors that led to success or failure in school. School divisions can focus on developing and maintaining adequate programs that are specifically designed to support success in school for youth at risk of school failure, but without talking to youth themselves in these programs the overall picture that includes the perspectives from those who need the support the most can not be gained.

### **Defining Risk**

To find answers to the research question it became necessary to first define the term *at risk*, as it can be a vague and misleading term. Cuddapah, Masci, Smallwood, and Holland (2008) described at risk youth as youth who, “exhibit negative behaviour patterns and steadily remove themselves mentally and physically, from school” (p. 261), suggesting that these students are most at risk for truancy and dropping out of school. For the purpose of this study youth at risk are specifically defined as *youth at risk of school failure*; however, there are a variety of factors that constitute the risk of failing in school. McCann and Austin’s (1988) definition of at risk youth in schools included the following three characteristics:

First, the problem of ‘students at risk’ refers to students who, for whatever reason, are at risk of not achieving the goals of education--of not meeting local and state standards of high school graduation, of not acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become productive members of the American society. Second, the problem refers to students who exhibit behaviors that educators see as interfering with the educational process, behaviors that may actually prevent students from meeting the requirements for high school graduation [including: truancy, lack of engagement, lack of academic success, use of drugs or alcohol, committing delinquent acts, pregnancy, and mental health related concerns]. Third, the problem refers to students whose family or community background may place them at risk [such as poverty and language barriers]. (p. 1 – 2)

To use the term *youth at risk* loosely without defining what it means specifically, can be unfair. Therefore, for the purpose of this study the definition of youth at risk was formed from the above criteria, my own experience as a youth at risk in school, and from working with youth in high-risk situations. Term in the context of this paper can be described as a working definition

that arose from a culmination of multiple sources and experiences. The youth who served as participants in this study were youth who were at risk of school failure due to their life experiences and fact that they attended a special program or alternative high school. The choice to attend or the fact that they were referred to a special program or alternative high school meant that the youth would have struggled with some aspect of mainstream schooling. All of the youth in this study outlined a reason for becoming disengaged in school that led to either dropping out of school altogether for a time, being asked to leave a particular school, or a referral to the program or school they were in at the time of this study. All of the youth also spoke about characteristics referenced in McCann & Austin's (1988) definition of behaviours and actions that slowly alienated them from school consequently placing them at risk of schools failure (Cuddapah, Masci, Smallwood, & Holland, 2008).

Youth who are at risk present many challenges for educators. The challenges include but are not limited to ensuring that students' academic, social, and emotional needs are being met in and out of school (Bullock, 2006). Special education programs or alternative schools designed to help struggling students exist in many forms and serve diverse populations of youth. Most of the students in these programs have experienced years of struggles in school and these struggles, in addition to the myriad of other issues they may be dealing with (i.e., poverty, abuse, mental health, etc.) influence their risk of school failure (Estes, 2006). Youth at risk are a delicate population, whose contribution in society could be immeasurable yet, may go unnoticed if they disengage or disappear from school.

### **Context**

Within the urban setting where this study took place there were three school divisions, one health region, and several other smaller organizations operating special programs or alternative schools and classrooms for youth ages 13 to 21. Including the schools whose population of students match McCann and Austin's (1988) definition of at risk, approximately 15 special programs or alternative high schools fall under the umbrella of providing services to youth at risk of school failure. These schools service hundreds of youth each year in Saskatoon.

Schools designed to meet special or alternative educational needs operate under diverse formal and informal mandates, some examples are: services for mental health, absenteeism, or youth with behavioral concerns; services for youth with low achievement, cognitive deficits, or learning disabilities; support for youth needing functional life skills; programs for street youth or

youth with concerns related to gang involvement, prostitution, or addictions; classrooms in government run facilities like jails and group homes; semi-private schools based on cultural or language needs; and home schools. A variety of governing bodies are responsible for these schools and programs locally.

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education defines provincial guidelines and policies for all alternative education programs, locally developed courses, locally modified courses, and functional integrated programs, which includes programs conducted in languages other than English, programs in First Nations schools, custody and care schools, and all post-secondary sites that have been approved by Saskatchewan Learning to offer secondary level courses (Saskatchewan Learning, 2006). All schools or programs are expected to follow provincially mandated curriculum, with adaptations and modifications as needed; however, no recent evaluations can address the effectiveness of these programs. We only know that an increasing number of youth are accessing services and special programs, begging the need for analysis of the current situation in schools on a local level. This analysis can start with research like this, based on the perspectives of students who access those schools and programs.

Some local programs for youth at risk have specific mandates and offer supports to a select group of students with specific diagnoses. However, other programs have loose guidelines or no mandate at all to define programming and thus are housing students significantly at risk of school failure, with no particular goal setting practices, tracking procedures, or transition processes. Student voices can help to shed light on educational practices in special programs and alternative schools, providing details that may not otherwise be gained. The youth in our schools are in the best position to tell us what they need to be successful in school and if we listen we can support their chances of success.

### **The Current State of Alternative School Settings**

Alternative settings, from resource rooms to completely alternate school environments sometimes have a form of intensive focus or intervention geared toward education and learning, while others do not. The teachers can be highly specialized or trained in working with youth with a variety of learning disabilities, behavioural disorders, or emotional, and cognitive needs; however, specialized teachers or approaches are not mandated. The consistency lies in the fact that many of the youth referred to these programs are not attending or seriously struggling in a mainstream school. They can be young offenders, young parents, and sometimes young people

struggling with moderate to severe mental health concerns or addictions. Vital to this population of youth are, “Multifaceted intervention programs that keep students in school, remediate academic and social problems, engage students in prevocational and vocational programs with transition specialists, and teach self-determination skills” (Zabel and Nigro, 2007, p. 337).

There are many factors in alternative settings that are crucial to students’ success. The research around effective practices in general has been a critical piece in planning programs for students who are at risk of school failure for decades; however, current Canadian data shows much work is yet to be done in the area of mandating and following practices that influence success for students who are at risk of school failure (Dworet & Maich, 2007; Gold, Whitehead, Muhajarine, Waygood, & Soiseth, 2004). Gagnon and Bottge (2006) stated that it was estimated that as high as 50% of the students in alternative educational settings are classified as emotionally disturbed, a number requiring at a minimum effective curriculum models and teacher practice in schools.

In 2014, one of the local alternative schools selected for this study was in the process of phasing out highly specialized alternative programming for youth at risk. In addition, when special education coordinators from one local school division were asked how local alternative programs define success and how they know if their current programs were successful for youth, the answer was that it remained unclear, and the success of services to students were not tracked or assessed (personal correspondence May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013). This information points to the necessity of further research on a local level to ensure that high quality programs are planned, monitored, and executed, and that programming that meets the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of youth are offered and not phased out.

### **The Role of Curriculum**

The field of curriculum studies covers a vast area of exploration including decades of research in education, psychology, philosophy, and the social sciences. Though difficult to define, the meaning of curriculum dates back to Latin roots and the word *currere*, being derived from the act of running a race or following of a course (Marsh & Willis, 2003). Today, curriculum impacts the standards from which students are measured. In light of McCann and Austin’s (1988) definition of risk, the first defining aspect of risk relates to the inability to achieve goals and meet standards, which is a curriculum related risk factor. The understanding of curriculum related to students and relationships and not just academic subjects becomes

important because it opens up room for understanding learning from a variety of perspectives; specifically, the students' perspectives regarding contributing factors to their risk of success or failure in school (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2009).

From a theoretical perspective discussions about curriculum reflect pedagogy, principles, and practice, and are continually debated and sometimes even “divorced” from practical applications in the classroom (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2009, p. 21). Marsh and Willis (2003) claim that curricula are not static; they are ever changing and must include a combination of the following three principles: what curriculum should be, what curriculum can be, and how curriculum is experienced in the learning environment. Another argument that has historically been presented and can not be ignored in any discussion around youth at risk of school failure is the fact that no matter the curriculum it must start with the needs of the students (Oliva, 2005; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2009; Wiles & Bondi 2011).

To look at curriculum as merely a document, a textbook, or a syllabus for the sake of learning specific subjects denies that it can play a much bigger role in the education of our youth (Wiles and Bondi, 2011). Dewey (1940) and others who concluded that curriculum should be viewed as much more than academics; that curriculum is life, just as life is a “race to be run, [and] a series of obstacles or hurdles to be passed”, understand that curriculum is the totality of all learning experiences and can not merely defined by one mechanism (Marsh & Willis, 2003, p. 7). Curricula constitute programs, and developers should pay close attention to crafting the learning experiences in ways that promote the greatest opportunities for students' success; this is best achieved when teachers serve as those developers because they should know their students best.

### **Curriculum and Youth at Risk**

Parents, students, and educators today often think of curriculum as subject matters; however, it can be much more than that as students' experiences and teachers' expertise combine in a context that will be unique to each classroom and school. This means that curriculum is not a manual, it cannot be held, or seen as though it exists tangibly, and though it occurs in every school and classroom it does not exist as a document that can or should necessarily be followed (Oliva, 2005). For this reason students must be at the heart of the planning process.

According to Oliva (2005):

Students can help greatly by indicating to the professional curriculum planners how they perceive a new proposal or program. They can provide input from the standpoint of the recipients of the program, the persons for whom the program was designed. (p. 91)

Oliva (2005) also noted that students can excel in describing how they perceive a curriculum or program development and how they feel about it, making it clear that if we do not include youth, especially youth at risk of school failure, in the development of curricula and programs we have failed this particular group of students.

Knowledge of the experiences of even just a few young people in our local schools and programs can be generally applied to the perspectives of many of our youth struggling in school; “Students manifest not only their own particular needs but also the needs of young people generally in society” (Oliva, 2005, p.189), and this reiterates the importance of studying the perspectives of local youth to understand their experiences to help with decisions that could provide all youth with educational opportunities conducive to their success. We can hypothesize about curriculum and other relevant factors that contribute to the risk of school failure; however, we cannot validate our beliefs justly without hearing from the youth themselves. By asking young people for their perspectives on schooling we can learn about factors relevant to them and gain the insight necessary to plan programs with the students’ needs and interests. Practices that start with the students encourage positive student-teacher relationships and that in turn encourages success (Martin & Dowson, 2009).

As educators, we must be aware that we are teaching youth from a variety of backgrounds with various life skills, values, and experiences. Some are more engaged than others and at different developmental stages in their young lives (Perry, 2013). We can capitalize on learning opportunities that influence success in school or we can be directly responsible for alienation from school through how and what we teach (Johnson 2009; McMillan, Reed & Bishop, 1992; Schulz & Rubel, 2011; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). In order to influence students’ success, we must be mindful of young peoples’ life experiences and make appropriate and timely decisions within the confines of the curriculum, a task not always easy to complete, especially if we do not consider the needs of the students first and foremost.

Regardless of how or what we define as curriculum, once again, education can be simply described in the words of John Dewey (1940): education has always been “a preparation for life, to learn to live, to give the child what he needs, or will need to know, to develop good citizens;

to develop well-rounded, happy, efficient individuals” (p. 269). What Dewey described at the heart of successful school experiences are students who leave feeling prepared to take on the world, and are happy about their journey in life. This state can be effectively cultivated by starting with purposeful and thoughtful relationships that consider students first.

### **Special Education and Teacher Training**

Paying attention to at risk students in mainstream classrooms particularly and tailoring learning experiences in specific ways to foster their success and remove or reduce the impact that barriers to success have on students is fundamentally important. In a break-down of teacher pre-service education programs in Canada, Van Nuland (2011) highlighted only one program nationwide with a focus on special education for all teacher candidates; where a practicum required all third year students to complete a placement focusing only on learning disabilities. If all teachers were educated in the area of special education, mental health, and ways to support the most pressing needs of students who could potentially become disengaged from school for emotional, intellectual, behavioral, or academic reasons, inevitably they would be equipped to meet the needs of any student.

The use of flexible teaching strategies that make use of the adaptive dimension and what Falkenberg (2011) refers to as the “innovative dimension,” allows for lessons to be tailored that present challenges for highly engaged and academic students, yet they provide opportunities for students on the fringe of success as well (p. 569). Students who are most in need of this flexibility, creativity, and opportunity are often those most at risk in school. Developing classroom routines that assist struggling students in mainstream education seems like a natural way to meet needs and keep youth from feeling alienated in school (Gagnon, & Bottge, 2006; Falkenberg, 2011; Corrigan, Higgins-D’Alessandro, & Brown, 2013).

In my experience academic planning, though very important comes second to student needs that can often be unrelated to learning outcomes, yet at the same time are as essential to educational success. For ten years I designed classroom experiences tailored to the highest needs in my classroom. I believe I was successful in keeping students engaged in my own classrooms by finding creative ways to tailor curriculum outcomes to engage and inspire students most at risk of leaving school early. I regularly used strategies such as peer teaching, direct instruction related to specific skill development (from Bloom’s idea of *mastery learning*; 1968), strength based learning, and other research based best practices in a highly structured and predicatable

classroom environment (Gagnon & Bottge, 2006; Guskey 2005; Martin and Dowson, 2009; Volante, 2006). These in addition to other strategies that helped to regulate students (Perry, 2013) set the tone for learning and enabled success.

Though our current system tries to focus on the highly individual needs of those at risk (Saskatchewan Learning, 2006), we continue to operate in ways that are counter-productive to supporting students with the highest needs in our general and special education classrooms, particularly at the high school level. In a review of two national longitudinal studies, Wagner, Friend, Bursuck, Kutash, Duchnowski, Sumi, and Epstein (2006) found that teachers in general were underprepared, not utilizing well-known academic interventions in classrooms, and overall were failing to meet the needs of students with a variety of mental health needs, emotional/behavioral disabilities, or disturbances (EBD). Students with EBD account for a wide range of students at risk and the academic interventions that could have supported students, but were often not used by teachers included: a structured teaching environment, including highly interactive direct instruction; opportunities for peer-mediated learning; and having a strong repertoire of behavior management techniques (Wagner et al, 2006).

In addition despite the willingness of teachers to plan with students needs first they are under educated in the area of mental health and the special needs of potential students. Teachers are also be overloaded with academic expectations that inevitably create environments where those at risk of leaving school early can be further alienated or disengaged from school (Corrigan, Higgins-D'Alessandro, & Brown, 2013; Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; Sahlberg 2014; Volante, 2006). Changes could be made in teacher education programs to involve increased opportunities to plan for and work with special learning needs, support mental health, and develop student first philosophies that support all youth. At least then all teachers would be prepared to support the youth that present themselves in their classrooms every year.

### **Summary**

Students at risk of school failure are most in need of attention in research and education today, as the numbers are growing despite the shrinking support for programs. Alternative school closures and decreased funding for support in mainstream classrooms significantly impacts the needs of youth in all schools and the participants of this study, youth in alternative schools and special programs, have provided relevant insight into their needs and experiences that support

this. This knowledge can support educators to understand what influences success or failure in school and both educators and students can benefit from these insights.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The works of several humanistic, constructivist, and developmental psychologists who have covered social, psychological, and educational topics over the span of several decades were reviewed to complete a comprehensive literature review on the topic of education and youth at risk of school failure. Relevant research around curriculum, planning, and approaches to education and special education were also reviewed in order to frame this study in the context of schools and programs designed to support youth who struggle in school. First, perspectives in the literature related to youth at risk are outlined, followed by an analysis of historical, national, and local perspectives related to special programming or alternative education. Risk enhancing factors are then reviewed followed by risk reducing factors such as engagement, motivation, and resilience. Philosophies and approaches in education are discussed in light of curriculum, relationships, and various school settings, providing an overview of perspectives that frame the purpose and intent of this study.

The literature review was conducted using peer-reviewed articles from, Pro-Quest, JSTOR, and ERIC databases. In addition, Google Scholar and Google were used as search tools for articles, books, and other published works on education and youth at risk of school failure. Government websites and documents were also analyzed for the purpose of this review, and on a local level the, *Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching* resources were extensively reviewed. The result of this review was an exhaustive analysis of the topic of youth at risk of school failure noting that in the research there are two major deficits: qualitative research studies from national and provincial perspectives and the perspectives of youth through in-depth qualitative study.

#### **Perspectives in the Literature: An Overview**

There exists an abundance of research on the topic of youth at risk of schools failure or alternative and special education practices from various locations around the world. Much of the research from a North American perspective comes out of the United States, a population not unlike Canada; however, a population that has distinct historical, cultural, ethnical, and socio-economical differences. Several sources cite the lack of Canadian research and urge the continued study of special or alternative education, including suggestions to gather more

qualitative data from youth who can share their experiences and stories (Becker, 2010; Dressman, Wilder, & Connor, 2005; Gold, et al., 2004).

In 2007, Thiessen and Cook-Sather edited an, *International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary School*, looking at international research that spanned almost six decades; their intent was to “take stock of the research in the field, to identify and respond to whatever problems or limitations exist” (2007, p. 1). In an extensive review of the literature, they examined and or edited for the purpose of the handbook, approximately 30 reports focused on youth perspectives, experiences, and voices in education and compared that to hundreds of sources cited in almost 1000 pages of published work. From their work, Thiessen and Cook-Sather (2007) concluded that even though the topic of youth experiences in school was very obviously a widely studied area in the literature, research that puts student’s experiences as the focus for the work remains limited, inconsistent, and unclear.

Many private and publically funded organizations within Saskatchewan review or sponsor research about the state of education: The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, Saskatchewan Teachers Federation, Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation, as well as our province’s major universities and colleges. In a recent government report, *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth: Vision 2020 and Beyond* (2012), local government leaders made a small but valuable contribution reflecting their plans for education and support for special services and alternative programs for youth at risk. They stated their goal would be “to provide more integrated and coordinated supports for children and youth at-risk to connect them to school and education opportunities” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012, p. 61). From reports like this initiatives like the Student First Approach (2014) were developed to get conversations started around education in general from the perspectives of people who utilize educational services. Qualitative studies such as this could add to existing research in an area of need; youth at risk in Saskatchewan schools.

Internationally, it was found that research involving the education of youth at risk was extensive (Ennis, 1987; Feldman, Waxman, & Smith, 2013; Klingner & Vaughn, 1999; Whitlock, 2004; Bonica & Sappa, 2010). On a national level, many studies involving youth at risk also exist; however, few studies included talking to youth about their perspectives regarding success or failure in school, “While numerous studies have examined the dropout issue, youth voice has largely been absent from prior investigations” (Feldman, Waxman, & Smith, 2013,

p.1). Specifically, no qualitative studies were found related to understanding factors conducive to success or failure in special or alternative education from the perspectives of youth (Brownell, Roos, MacWilliam, Leclair, Ekuma, & Fransoo, 2010; Kearns, 2011; Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; Saldanha, 2010). Overall the personal experiences of youth, including how youth define success, what they need in order to succeed in school, and the specific needs of youth in Canadian and Saskatchewan schools were not reflected through qualitative research in much of the literature.

### **Historical Review**

A review of the literature and resources cited in the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education's curriculums as well as the guides used for special education in local school divisions revealed that for the most part local programs and mainstream school beliefs were modeled after much research and practice in the United States. In the last two decades, the U.S. has implemented two key mandates affecting education: 1) No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001); and 2) changes to the Integrated Disability Education and Awareness Act that has been in effect since the late 1980's (IDEA, 2004). From these mandates came an increased focus on how to support youth who did not fit within mainstream school wide practices or programs, yet, a continued push to educate all youth in the least restrictive environment (LRE) prevailed (IDEA, 2004). Schools in the U.S. continued in the years following both educational mandates to attempt to meet the needs of struggling students, forcing states and school divisions to branch out and offer a variety of different special education opportunities for youth falling through the cracks (Tissington, 2006). However, limitations to programming for students in need of special education (Reaume, 2012) and a push for practices that were controlled by standardized testing have very negatively impacted education for students at risk of school failure despite the best efforts of policy to prevent it (Volante, 2006).

Alternative schools, Freedom schools, Open schools, and Charter schools became necessary throughout the United States to serve the needs of the students who were not thriving in the mainstream, yet these schools were without specific standards (Tissington, 2006). Though a review of the literature on programs for youth at risk of school failure revealed policies and guidelines for special programs or alternative schools (Tissington) no documentation over time was done to help monitor and ensure that on a national level the programs or schools were effective (Dworet & Maich 2007). Tissington (2006) categorized the needs of students in various

programs in American schools as either; “Type I (educational), Type II (behavioral), or Type III (therapeutic)” (p. 23). However, despite her research on awareness and assessment prior to placement, and the obvious need for extensive planning for youth in need of these supports, resources remain unavailable in many school divisions and very little data has been collected and reviewed in regards to these three needs in schools.

### **National Perspectives**

In Canada, research has been quite limited in terms of the success of students in special programs or alternative schools. There are no national, and in some cases no provincial standards as to how special programs are run, how to collect data, or how and when to start the process of transitioning into and out of programs (Dworet & Maich, 2007). Through a national survey, Dworet and Maich concluded that the only consistent practice throughout Canada was that all provinces and territories had a teacher and a paraprofessional in special educational settings, a limited national practice to say the least. Canada has a unique and diverse education system, therefore, the decision-making has been left up to provincial ministries of education, and though this can be a good thing, it can leave gaps specifically concerning whether or not programs are successful (McBride, 2008).

Without clear policies for programming, youth may be in programs that are not aware of their particular needs (mental, emotional, social, cultural, physical, or academic) or in programs not tailored to meet their needs effectively. Dworet and Maich (2007) investigated the state of Canadian policies for youth in special programs and discovered that “it is uncertain, whether these services [special programs or alternative programming and supports] are focused on the appropriate groups [of students] and similarly, if they are providing improved educational experiences” (p. 39). It is crucial for services to be monitored and updated based on the changing needs of students and successful planning involves meeting with students, parents, caregivers, practitioners, and the like, to not only gain an understanding of the students’ individual needs but to monitor and record success (Saskatchewan Learning 2006).

Youth at risk, along with their families use many community resources, especially when they are not successful in school. Young people who are unsuccessful at school are not only at risk of failing, but they run the risk of getting into trouble with the law, needing increased supports if they are struggling as young parents, often do not access primary health care, and have difficulty sustaining employment if they do not complete high school (Hughes & Adera,

2006). It is beneficial to whole communities to invest in the youngest members in need of special supports with quality educational experiences filled with choices and opportunities to ensure success. The fact that the needs of youth are so diverse means that all programs need policies that start with student and the success or failure of meeting those needs must be monitored and changed when necessary. Only then will schools know if they are providing quality education to the youth in their community.

### **Local Schools and Programs**

Locally, school divisions have recognized the need for program reform and have started the process of tracking special education and program services. Local public schools began this critical reform by researching and training educators under the umbrella of Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies that included Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) at the elementary school level (Sugai & Horner, 2002). PBIS models start with altering the classroom to support the needs of diverse learners in an inclusive manner, with the goal of meeting as many needs as possible without having to remove students from the classroom.

The first and most daunting task in this model was getting classroom teachers on board. An attitude of acceptance and a willingness to adapt the learning environment and provide flexible opportunities to learn are necessary in order to reach as many students as possible early on. Research around RTI models guided this approach and was discussed conceptually in local schools for at least the last six years, “The basic concept of RTI is that when provided with effective intervention, a student can be determined to have responded or not responded adequately to that intervention and such information can be used to guide service delivery decisions” (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007, p. 226).

On a local level the push for inclusive practices has caused a ripple effect that may or may not prove helpful for those at risk in schools. This ripple effect included recent alternative school closures and the loss of smaller classrooms designed for youth who need the support most to be successful in school. The result of these changes in programming options has caused some mainstream and alternative schools to become over-crowded with students who are under-serviced and I see this everyday in my work at a mental health facility where part of my role involves finding places to refer students after their time is up in our program.

A balance must be found between servicing youth in alternate environments and providing services in mainstream schools to somehow provide supports that offer a variety of environments

with services unique to student needs. It would be effective practice to evaluate programs first by hearing from the experiences of youth in the community who utilize the services of those schools in order to make relevant decisions. Using information from youth to plan for the success of all students in schools affirms the importance of student voice and benefits all students, not just those at risk of school failure.

### **Educating Youth at Risk**

The education of youth at risk requires a comprehensive understanding of the unique needs of this population of youth, and not all schools or educators are prepared to provide the level of care necessary for struggling youth to succeed in school (McGregor & Mills, 2012). A holistic view of the curriculum and the student are essential aspects to providing successful educational experiences for all youth; however, for the most part these types of philosophies are more common in alternative settings than in mainstream school environments (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Philosophies and approaches in alternative education provide common themes that support serving youth at risk of school failure and these themes are explored here in order to characterize the intent of this study and justify the need for further research of local school programs.

#### **Risk Enhancing Factors**

Exceptional family experiences and various life circumstances can contribute to youth becoming at risk of school failure. Involvement with the criminal justice system, a history of developmental disruptions, trauma, abuse, or neglect can affect many of the kids in schools (Perry, 2013). Through my experiences working in an inner city school, a special program and alternative school, it was evident that some of these youth stop going to school altogether, abuse substances, or have more non-traditional addictions (relationships, video-games, etc.). These disruptions can have a dramatic effect on a young person's ability to focus in a learning environment (Perry, 2013).

As a result of compromised mental or emotional health many become disengaged in school altogether or fully engaged in other activities that further isolate them, perpetuating symptoms of depression, loneliness, or anxiety. The responsibility of educators then becomes to find creative ways to meet curricular outcomes by engaging students on any level in order to facilitate academic connections and learning. For educators that means knowing their students interests and abilities and taking a step back from the learning goals (or curricular outcomes)

altogether to focus on the needs of the student emotionally and developmentally, especially if the students life experiences are particularly damaging.

Essentially, the most important pieces in providing safe and effective programming for young people is that they are viewed holistically in mainstream and alternative classrooms, and that their diverse needs are considered with planning that centers on the students and their goals. In Gold's (et al., 2004) research, recommendations about classroom climate are noted among several factors that decrease the risk of students leaving school early. If the atmosphere is not safe, comfortable, and engaging, these youth become the population most at risk of school failure, due simply, to the school failing them. Gold (et al., 2004) noted that on paper local schools embrace a student-centered and community-oriented approach that could meet the needs of students in smaller classrooms with increased connections and supports, but in reality these things are not happening.

If a young person is struggling in a classroom and the relationship with the teacher or peers has been compromised, and this has not been recognized, documented, and followed up on, then their chances of leaving school early increase:

Behavior problems are exacerbated by exposure to inconsistent and largely punitive classroom management strategies. Left untreated, student problems multiply, diversify, and intensify which in turn increases the probability that school personnel will seek to remove the student from the regular classroom. (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006, p. 6)

Students who experience repeated failure and frustration become "escape motivated" (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006, p. 6). PBIS and RTI models have a three-tiered approach to needs management that reinforce the fact that as many needs as possible must be met at the classroom level even if it means significant changes within the school, in order to prevent school failure. In theory, this model can be practical and useful; however, it must be applied with conviction and dedication otherwise it fails to decrease risk.

### **Supports for Youth at Risk**

Consideration of the personal, vocational, and occupational needs of youth in special programs and accounting for students social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs can build resilience and open doors for the future (Platt, Casey, & Faessel, 2006). Based on an RTI philosophy, intervention can start in the classroom in the form of prevention; however, inevitably some students simply cannot make it in a mainstream school environment. Youth struggling

despite countless interventions would be involved in the third tier of intervention in a PBIS/RTI approach. The most recent research on RTI shows that this group of students accounts for about 5% of all kids in school (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). References to this 5% are noted throughout the research on youth in American and Canadian schools and though this has traditionally been a small population it has historically been one in need of the highest quality programming. It seems inevitable that in even the best educational systems, 5% of students will inescapably require a number of supports to be successful.

Locally, there are several programs currently designed for this small population of youth with emotional, behavioral, or academic needs in tier three of the PBIS system. Within this realm of special programming unique programs exist for youth with mental health concerns, cognitive deficits, and those needing moderate to severe behavioral interventions; in addition, special schools exist for youth in need of modified and adapted programming. These schools provide smaller classrooms, more staff, and adapted curricula, and are essential elements of a diverse educational system. However, current trends that intend to support inclusive educational practices have meant the restructuring of these smaller programs and services. In my opinion, this restructuring has left a gap in services for students at risk of school failure.

Behavior problems in school are a significant predictor of future academic success (Dworet and Maich, 2007). Therefore, special education programs designed to provide support for youth who do not manage, even given the added supports in the classroom, offer all the more reason to ensure these are positive, thoughtful, and goal oriented programs. Siperstein, Wiley, and Forness (2011) stated that overall, special programs and services continue to be “significantly under resourced” and even programs specifically designed to meet special needs are not meeting the diverse needs of students (p. 174). Gable, Bullock, and Evans’ (2006) research pointed out that “for some youngsters, misbehavior is the first step on the slippery slope that leads to more restrictive placement (e.g., detention centers, correctional facilities, treatment programs)” pointing out the importance of servicing these youth in schools instead of jails (p. 5).

It goes without saying that youth most in need of special services for emotional, behavioral, or learning disabilities/deficits should be a top priority in schools and communities. Less emphasis needs to be placed on punitive measures to change behavior with more emphasis on providing supports in schools to help prevent problems in the first place. Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette (2011), asserted that, though many environments that provide high levels of support

exist, the quality of research in the area of alternative programming, especially for youth in need of behavioral interventions, was quite low. Collection of data at the classroom level has been underway for some time; however, special programs designed to educate students most at risk of school failure locally, lack studies dedicated to their unique environments and serving their unique populations of students.

### **Engagement and Motivation**

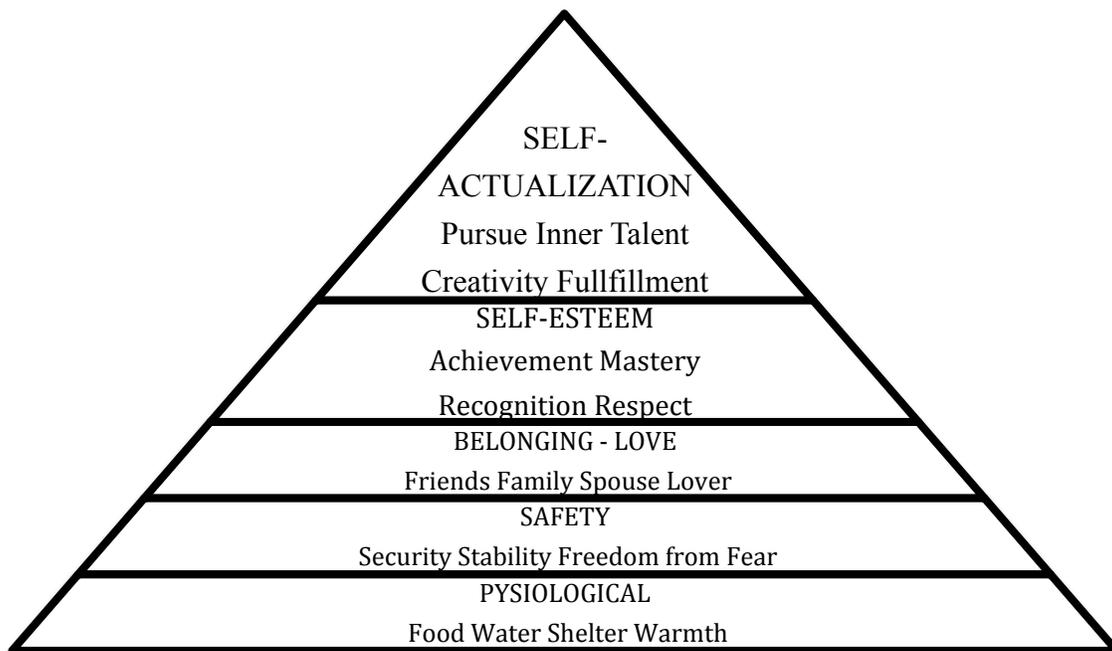
Teachers influence engagement and motivation, and naturally, engaged students are more likely to be academically successful in school (Walker & Greene, 2009) . The ability of the teacher to engage youth in the learning in meaningful ways proves to be crucial to student success in school, as “youth who are cognitively engaged...who are willing to invest time and efforts...achieve better outcomes” (Archambault, Chouinard, and Janosz, 2012, p. 319). Meaningful classroom activities in conjunction with teachers’ attitudes and beliefs (not only beliefs about students, but belief in their students) directly impacts students’ success by promoting a positive self concept; in turn, when students perceive that their teachers believe in them, and they feel good about what they are doing in school, it can influence both engagement and motivation (Andrews & Lupart, 2014).

How students perceive their learning environments and how they feel their teachers support them is a critical area of study in order to understand school from the perspective of those at risk of not being successful in school. Student perception was the foundation on which the interview questions for this research were developed (See Appendix A). The school often exists as the “primary institution outside the family within which the development of adolescents can be directed and shaped” (Johnson, 1998, p. 101); therefore, understanding what engages or motivates students in school can provide the awareness necessary to positively support learning and thus support students to be successful in school.

Human beings innately want to succeed and the survival instinct drives an array of human behaviours which motivate us to act (Maslow, 1943). Maslow’s early research on human needs, motivation, and behaviour proposed that motivations drive needs (like instincts) and that those needs are, “almost always biologically, culturally, and situationally determined” (Maslow, 1943, p. 371). Starting with basic human needs related to physical health and safety, factors related to one’s success, Maslow believed people move through the phases in his hierarchy to a point where success; could be achieved. Maslow referred to this ascent through the phases as being

creatively fulfilled, or as “self-actualization” (1943, p.383). Though the definition of success can be subjective, the pyramid developed by Maslow shows that safety and a feeling of well-being exists at the core of human motivation and it influences a persons ability to be successful later in life (See Figure 1). In order to attain higher education, employment, resources, and property (self-esteem and self-actualization) one must achieve a level of success that starts with meeting their basic human needs. They can then move on to building healthy relationships and pursuing opportunities that by that point, they are prepared for.

FIGURE 1: *Maslow Hierarchy of Needs*



Maslow, A. *Motivation and Personality* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Harper & Row, 1970

Human needs motivate learners, and though there are other determining factors , these needs can be the focus from which classroom learning takes place. In 2004, Gold’s (et al.) research for the partnership organization, *Community-University Institute for Social Research (CUISR)*, reported that in Saskatoon, stakeholders interviewed on the topic of youth not in school determined five main reasons children were not in school. The first was that “children who leave school often have unmet survival needs” (p.18). Three of the other four reasons were related to relationships, support from teachers, and support from parents. The last reason was related to learning difficulties. In another study, Hamblin (2000) conducted interviews and surveys with 50 youth, not in school, in Saskatchewan. Hamblin’s research found that most of the youth who

were not in school were represented by Maslow's first level of the pyramid with safety and security issues. This research, further supports the belief that basic human needs and connections with others are at the root of motivation towards self actualization (i.e., success).

If students feel their needs (basic or otherwise) are being met in school and they feel good about their school experiences, then a lack of interest in achievement, school failures, or drop out, can be overcome. Maslow (1943) summarized some his beliefs about the preconditions for basic needs satisfaction and how that can be supported in schools:

Such conditions as freedom to speak, freedom to do what one wishes so long as no harm is done to others, freedom to express one's self, freedom to investigate and seek for information, freedom to defend one's self, justice, fairness, honesty, orderliness in the group are examples of such pre-conditions for basic need satisfaction. (p. 383)

By creating the conditions for "need satisfaction" in their classrooms teachers can effectively create a space where students are motivated to learn and engaged in the learning, thus influencing their chances of success.

## **Resilience**

In order for youth to resist the barriers in life that can contribute to risk, they must have some support to build resilience in the developmental stages of their life (Perry, 2013). Resilience cannot be underestimated as a powerful contributing factor to being able to attend to the learning environment and it plays a major role influencing success or failure in school. The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines resilience as the "ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change" (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.). In schools things are changing all the time, as they are in life, and understanding factors that perpetuate resiliency helps to support what can be done at the curricular and classroom level to foster resilience for young people and impact successful school experiences (Marshall, 2012).

Teachers can educate youth to work with their strengths, and focus on being positive. Supporting youth to overcome trauma, abuse, neglect, on a small or large scale, can be essential in meeting the needs of even the most at risk youth. As one of the main sources for quality adult role models, schools inately contribute to resilience through the relationships they develop daily. Dangers and risk factors may not necessarily be removed from students' lives; however, it is important for teachers to understand that their role in aiding students to deal with life's

challenges, find supports, make informed choices, and learn coping mechanisms, cannot be underestimated (Marshall, 2012).

Educators can create environments that foster learning and success through supportive, caring teaching practices that build real life skills. If teachers and support staff in schools help young people to see the possibilities and opportunities for their future through successful school experiences, then they have contributed greatly to building resilience in all youth, not just youth at risk. In the fall of 2006 the entire journal, *Preventing School Failure*, dedicated itself to the concept of *Alternative Education for Children and Youth*. The journal featured nine articles directly related to research-based best practices when working with youth most at risk of school failure and all nine articles summarized various recommended strategies for supporting youth. Platt, Casey, and Faessel's (2006) article referenced best practices for classrooms serving youth in custody, a particularly high-risk population. They noted the following things to consider when designing programs and services to educate youth with some of the most pressing needs in schools and classrooms everywhere:

- holistic needs based approaches,
- students current level of achievement,
- vocational options,
- teaching employability skills,
- teaching social and emotional resiliency,
- students level of moral development (and developmental level in general),
- evaluation and assessment of skills regularly,
- providing occupational guidance and career support,
- counselling during planning, intervention, and transitioning, and
- teaching self advocacy. (p. 34-37)

If strong relationships are built, considerations are made at crucial phases of the planning process, and programs are planned based on student needs and goals, students will develop the skills necessary to be resilient to many of the factors that contribute to school failure. Research and interventions that work within populations of youth in custody are valuable when considering changes in education for youth at risk in a variety of other settings. In fact, one local school division consultant stated that many of the youth in our special programs at the high school level, are youth who have been involved with the criminal justice system (anonymous

personal communication, 2014); therefore, it is crucial educators in these programs plan with this knowledge in mind. Many of the factors noted in the literature on school failure are related, in one way or another to the concept of resilience and are important considerations when taking into account that roughly 40% of youth in custody are youth with special education needs who were once in mainstream schools (Wolford, 2000).

### **Philosophies and Approaches in Education**

According to many educational philosophies, all people are capable of learning, especially if the learning can be holistically based on the needs of the individuals, and conducted in a safe comfortable learning environment where relationships are a priority (Underhill, 1989). Even in the cognitive domain, Bloom (1968,1981) aimed to prove that 95% of all learners are capable of mastery learning given the right teaching and learning environment. Dewey (1897) also talked about the idea of child-centered learning, throughout his work stating, “education must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, and habits” (p. 77). Humanistic approaches grounded in developmental educational and psychological perspectives are for the most part based on the notion that if some basic elements and needs are met or considered, all people are capable of growth and success in the learning environment and in life. These ideas are particularly relevant for youth at risk.

Needs based perspectives are explored in the works of Rousseau (1762), Dewey (1940), Maslow (Theory of Human Motivation, 1943), and the more recent works of Rogers (Person Centered Approach, 1979), and William Glasser (Reality Therapy and Choice Theory, 1986, 1992, 1997). There is also emphasis on the student’s individual needs and abilities and how teachers can implement adaptive dimensions to provide adequate student centered learning opportunities that accommodate most, if not all, learners in many curriculum documents (Saskatchewan Learning, 2006). A continued focus on needs based approaches in curriculum and planning can support all youth to be successful, but especially for those disengaging in school because they do not see relevance in the learning or they struggle with the work.

### **Curriculum**

Since the emergence of formal education, many educators have debated or identified hundreds of variations on curriculum. Some define one overarching definition (Marsh & Willis, 2003) to lists of over 120 (Portelli, 1987) definitions of curriculum. During the 1920’s Bobbitt outlined an incredible 800 curricular learning objectives to be attended to in an effort to define

curriculum. Others have developed diverse procedures for defining curriculum and list various considerations that must be addressed when curriculum planning (Wiles & Bondi, 2011). Still these lists, definitions, objectives, and outcomes leave many debating and struggling to define just what does curriculum mean and from where should it be developed. The debates focus on the advantages and disadvantages of student-centered approaches that view curriculum holistically, the importance of relationships and understanding students individual needs in the planning of curriculum, and on whether or not academic goals or students needs should guide curriculum planning or even be at the heart of learning objectives at all.

### **Student Centered Approaches**

For centuries, curriculum theorists have presented ideas based on student centered approaches: Rousseau (1762), Dewey (1897), Montessori (1912/2009); and later the works of, Maslow (1943), Rogers (1979) and Noddings (1995) offered humanistic views of curriculum planning; including planning for affective outcomes related to students needs and interests (Bloom, 1981; Ornstein, 2011; Yount, 2010). From both an educational and developmental perspective the consideration of both academic outcomes (cognitive domain) and affective outcomes (personal, social, emotional) prevails when planning learning experiences in schools. When faced with student diversity whether it be academic, emotional, social, spiritual, mental, or physical, teachers need to be flexible in curriculum planning and content delivery in order to keep students feeling safe, successful, connected, and engaged (Hughes & Adera, 2006). When teachers are connected to their students, know where they are at, and what they need to move forward the essence of a student-centered, holistic approach is present.

### **Holistic Curriculum**

Successful educators capitalize on opportunities that can influence individual success in school. Knowing what students need and when they need it takes a keen awareness, which can be fostered through connections with students that go beyond their life at school. Awareness of students' needs both in and out of the classroom allows educators to take advantage of teachable moments; moments that come more often when students feel comfortable and regulated through their positive interactions with people at school (Perry, 2013). Education that is holistic in nature goes beyond supporting academics; it comes in the form of supporting families and the mental, social, physical, or emotional health and well-being of the students. If educators show an interest in students' lives and they are capable of supporting the diverse needs of students, they can foster

success by nurturing students who are “teachable”, ready and open to the learning opportunities presented before them because they feel connected to their teachers and the school (Neufeld, 2012).

Teaching holistically, in a manner that meets the personal, social, emotional, academic, and developmental needs of students requires educators to go beyond the curriculum. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) reviewed a large body of research on teachers’ social and emotional competence, concluding that the ability of the teacher to engage on an emotional level has a major impact on the climate of the classroom, including the teachers’ ability to do their job and the students’ ability to learn. They found as a common denominator throughout several studies that teachers must be effective problem solvers and masters at building relationships that allow them insight into the needs of their students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

### **Relationships at the Heart of Curriculum and Planning**

Hargreaves (2005) contended that teaching is an “emotional labour” and that “strategic planning, cognitive leadership, problem solving, teacher reflection, higher order thinking, and standards-based reforms” pale in comparison to the importance of positive teacher – student relationships (p. 279). This shift in focus to the emotional connections required to build meaningful relationships with youth requires a shift in how one views and defines curriculum. In essence there are at a minimum, two curriculums: one from which educators monitor success, provide feedback, support, and plan for learning and transition, and the other reflecting the level of positive or negative connections through inadvertent teachings that take place in a classroom on any given day. These nuances are sometimes referred to as the hidden curriculum (Snyder, 1971), the null curriculum (Eisner, 1991), the latent curriculum (Bloom, 1972), or the unwritten curriculum (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1994).

No matter the terminology, inevitably there are lessons that educators do not intend to teach, but are nonetheless learned by the students for better or worse. When teaching students at risk of school failure educators must have a keen awareness of what they teach beyond the scope of what they plan because relationships, connections, values, and beliefs can be critical factors as to whether or not students feel comfortable or alienated from school and they can have just as much effect on learning, if not more of an effect, than the formal curriculum (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1994).

Control Theory (Glasser, 1986) and Restitution (Gossen, 2012) based practices have worked in schools and classrooms over the last several decades with great success in building strong relationships conducive to mutual respect. The success comes from the idea that the teacher builds a relationship with the students based on the needs of the group. Teachers and students work together to develop the *ideal classroom* (i.e., a space where everyone feels accepted, respected, needed, and successful) (Gossen, 2012). In Saskatchewan the success of Restitution-based practices can be closely linked to cultural practices. Gossen (2012) makes these connections with her research and her teachings related to traditional First Nations philosophies. Her theories fit naturally within a multi-cultural framework, one based on traditional practices, integrating the knowledge and understandings of many Canadian First Nations cultures. As an example, First Nations circular philosophies and the idea of the four basic needs can be closely linked.

Philosophies like Restitution and Control Theory are helpful in fostering respectful student-teacher relationships because the onus is on the student to control their own behaviour using internal motivation and not on the teacher to implement punitive measures to control student behaviour (Glasser, 1997). If the teacher can be connected to the youth in some way beyond that of something superficial, and connects to students emotionally, personally, or culturally, it fosters a culture of care, which builds resiliency, and encourages success in school (Cavanagh, Macfarlane, Glynn, & Macfarlane, 2012). Rogers (1979) referred to this as a “person-centered approach” (p. 98), and his work along with that of Maslow and others formed the foundations of Glasser’s approaches to education.

It is difficult to know where priorities should lie within the classroom with regards to building quality relationships that acknowledge the needs of the students versus the expectations of school divisions and ministries of education, and sometimes the lines become blurred in efforts to provide worthy educational experiences. Walker and Greene (2009) argue that social and emotional support are closely tied to academic support and thus student success. Caring for and supporting others to meet their most pressing needs first connects directly back to Maslow’s need for love and belonging and the vital role relationships play in adolescent development and success in school.

### **Conclusions From the Literature**

The review of the literature highlighted current themes and trends in the education of youth at risk and important information around curriculum and program development. The literature also highlighted that practices commonly used in alternative education could be used in mainstream schools to increase the success of all students. It was evident throughout, that the perspectives and experiences of youth struggling in schools are just not reflected in enough of the research specific to this topic and that youth would have much to say about what could improve the state of education for those at risk of school failure. Hargreaves, Earl, and Ryan (1996) stated, “One of the most fundamental reforms needed in secondary and high school education is to make schools into better communities of caring and support for young people” (2009, p. 463). However, with few evaluations and no federal policies in special education it makes it difficult to analyze the effectiveness of programs and schools designed to support struggling youth.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Overview and Purpose

Clear evidence exists for the need to examine practices in special education, particularly in Canada where currently no federal mandates govern special programs or alternative schools designed for youth at risk (Canadian Council on Learning, 2010). A student perspective on education in general forms the basis for this qualitative study designed to understand how to provide quality educational experiences that can increase students' chances of success in school. By looking closely at factors most important to youth, educators may be able to increase the number of students meeting educational outcomes through programs that are designed to be student focused and needs based. Through qualitative data collection and an interpretive analysis of 12 participant transcripts a rich description of youth experiences that resulted in eight factors influencing success or failure in school emerged. The question that guided this research was:

*What factors are most relevant to the success or failure in school for youth at risk?*

#### Research Method

The meanings people have constructed about life events and experiences can be effectively explored through qualitative study (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, qualitative analysis was the most relevant choice for research on this topic. Qualitative research has been described as, "A systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context" (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p.195). The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of youth at risk of school failure, in order to find common factors, and describe those factors through the richly descriptive data that qualitative analysis allows (Merriam 2002). Data was collected through interviews that were guided by six questions (See Appendix A). As the interviews were semi-structured, subsequent related questions arose and were used to elicit responses about the different youth's specific experiences in school (Merriam, 2009). The text was analyzed, transcribed, and coded revealing themes, categorizing this research as a basic interpretive qualitative study (Merriam, 2002).

The research was completed with the intent to understand how participants made meaning of their situations or experiences; the situation in this case was schooling. The collection of qualitative data through interviews personalized the information gathered. Eisner (1991) stated that qualitative research "enables researchers to say what cannot be said through

numbers” (p.187). Analysis of interviews took the information beyond the scope of numbers on a page and gave context to the situations the youth faced. The result was rich data, through many detailed accounts that in this case gave a strong voice to the participants.

### **Research Sample and Recruitment**

Upon being granted permission to proceed with this research by the University of Saskatchewan, Behavioural Research Ethics Board, two local school divisions and the local health region were contacted for permission to conduct research and solicit volunteers for interviews from schools or programs in their jurisdiction. All three organizations were contacted as they operated programs or schools for youth struggling in mainstream schools. From within the three organizations there were several hundred youth who could have potentially seen a presentation and had an opportunity to volunteer. Casting a wide net from which to solicit volunteers helped to limit the possibility of the participants being identifiable. This process of selecting the sample of volunteers from special programs and alternative schools in order to achieve to the objectives of this study was an example of purposive sampling (Given 2008). The sample was selected by means of specifically identifying the recipients of special programs or alternative schools in order to learn more about the effectiveness of those services, a process called stakeholder sampling (Given, 2008).

Administrative personnel and teachers in special programs and alternative schools were contacted and asked if a short 15-minute presentation could be made to programs and classrooms within their buildings, with the intent to elicit volunteers for this study. A total of 15 special programs and/or alternative schools designed to meet the needs of students at risk were contacted by email or phone. Each school meeting began with a short PowerPoint presentation designed to introduce the researcher to the youth. Presentations began with the researcher’s own story and background, which included experiences as a youth at risk in an alternative school. Presentations ended with an overview of experiences as an educator and the rationale for investigating young people’s experiences in alternative schools and special programs.

A sample of 12 youth of various ages, genders, and cultures from a variety of school environments and backgrounds resulted from the school presentations and by the time the 12<sup>th</sup> interview had been conducted it was decided that the participants represented an adequate cross-section of youth from special programs and alternative schools. In qualitative data collection few agree on a set number of acceptable interviews that result in quality data (Given, 2008) and

different researchers suggest different numbers of interviews by which the saturation of data can occur (i.e., no other categories or themes can be constructed from the data set). According to research conducted by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) where data from sixty interviews was analyzed, saturation occurred within the first 12 interviews, and they suggested that 12 to 15 interviews would be adequate to glean relevant information from participants. Given (2008) suggested as many as 15 to 20 and Sutter (2012) argued this can happen in as little as three to six interviews. Though a minimum and maximum number of interviews were set for the purpose of this study the final set of 12 participants was decided upon completion of the first few presentations and the data had been collected and reviewed.

### **Role of the Researcher in Soliciting Participants**

Sharing my background and school history during the presentations was integral to the success of this research. I have shared my personal history with every class I have taught over the last decade resulting in positive connections and relationships with students. Therefore, I believed it would benefit my ability to communicate the intent for this research. Having common ground changes the hierarchical nature of the relationship between the researcher and participants, therefore contributing to a safe place from which to share ones story. This approach proved to be as essential to the research as it was to building relationships in my own classroom.

Approximately one half of the youth who saw a presentation chose to volunteer and the interviews were comfortable, personable, and yielded much quality data. Upon the completion of only four presentations the search for volunteers had to cease due to the sheer number of students wanting to partake. The amount of feedback from each presentation was exciting. Many youth not only stated they would volunteer, but several wrote comments beyond that of a simple *yes* or a *no* including, “I would love too”; “I loved your presentation”; and “YES PLEASE”.

During this initial contact with schools a total of 50 youth saw a presentation, of which 21 volunteered for an interview. From the 21 youth who volunteered, 12 followed through with the completion of consent and or assent forms (Appendix B & C) and showed up to the first round of scheduled interviews. It was known at that point, that other scheduled presentations would need to be cancelled because there was not the capacity within the scope of this study to conduct and analyze a large number of interviews. The sheer number of participants willing to share their story spoke to the importance of providing a platform for youth to be heard in

education; and I truly believe my personal connection to this research served as a conduit to the success of acquiring volunteers.

### **Participants and Setting**

No discretionary or exclusionary measures were used in this study and an attempt to accommodate all youth who volunteered for an individual interview or focus group, depending on preference, was made. Participation was voluntary and therefore random, beyond the fact that only alternative schools and special programs were selected as sites from which to solicit volunteers. The progression of this study and the participant selection process from beginning to end happened quite naturally and in the end no one needed to be removed from or denied participation in the study.

Youth aged 13 to 18 were identified as prospective participants for the scope of this research because that age group represented the majority of youth in special programs and alternative high schools. With 12 completed interviews (including a small focus group containing three youth) there also emerged a balance of participant demographics. There were nine females and three males represented in this research. Four participants self-identified as First Nations Canadians, there was one English as an additional language EAL participant and the remaining seven participants either identified as Caucasian or did not identify at all. All self-identification and additional information given beyond the scope of the interview questions such as culture, language, trauma history, mental health or addictions issues emerged as a result of the conversations that took place during the interviews. Table 1 displays the participant demographics in order to illustrate the diversity of each participant.

**TABLE 1: Profile of Research Participants**

	Age	Grade	Status	Transitions	Languages	Trauma	Addiction/ Mental Health	School	Gender	Race
1.	13	8	Lives at home	Same school K-7		Yes	Addictions	Special Program / Resource Support	Female	Caucasian
2.	18	12	Is a parent / living on own	6 schools K-12	French Immersion K-3	No	None disclosed	Alternative High School	Female	First Nations
3.	14	7	Lives at home	4 Elementary schools		Yes	Addictions	Special Program	Female	First Nations
4.	18	11	Lives at home	1 Elementary school / 4 High schools		No	Addictions	Alternative High School	Male	Caucasian
5.	14	9	Lives at home	3 schools K - 9 + home schooled	French Immersion K-5	Yes	Mental Health	Special Programs/ Advanced Program	Female	Caucasian
6.	16	10	Lives at home	2 Elementary Schools / 3 High schools		No	None disclosed	Alternative High School	Male	Caucasian
7.	17	10	Is a parent / living on own	4 Elementary schools / 5 High schools	Spanish Speaking	Yes	Addictions / Mental Health	Alternative High School	Female	South American
8.	16	10	Lives at home	1 Elementary school / 2 high schools	French Immersion K-8	Yes	Mental health	Alternative High School	Female	Caucasian
9.	16	10	Lives on own	3 Elementary schools / 2 high schools		Yes	Addictions	Alternative High School	Female	First Nations
10.	15	10	Lives at home	3 schools K-8 / 3 high schools		Yes	Addictions	Special Program	Female	Caucasian
11.	16	10	Lives at home	6 elementary schools / 2 high school programs		No	Addictions	Special Programs	Male	First Nations
12.	14	9	Lives at home	2 Elementary schools		Yes	Mental Health	Special Program	Female	Caucasian

### Data Analysis

The students’ experiences were analyzed for the purpose of finding patterns and themes in order to understand what the youth felt contributed to success or failure in school (Merriam, 2009). The themes (later factors) were categorized and used to describe the details of the students’ experiences, views, and perspectives; a process described as content analysis (Merriam, 2009). The themes that resulted from a coded analysis were later termed factors relevant to success or failure in school, as they related directly to the guiding research question. A thoughtful process utilizing inductive reasoning as an analysis strategy was used to extract the initial themes within the transcribed conversations (Merriam, 2002). Inductive reasoning grounds “the examination of topics and themes, as well as the inferences drawn from them, in the data” allowing the youth perspectives to speak for themselves regarding successes or failures in school (Zhang & Wildemuth 2009, p. 308). At this point in the data analysis it was crucial to consciously recognize and set aside my own experiences in order to bracket myself from the communicated experiences of the youth. I was able to do this by approaching the data with an open mind and by applying a rigorous analysis to the transcribed text through repeated examination of statements made by the youth.

## Interviews

Six open-ended questions were asked in ten one to one interviews and one focus group. From the initial six questions several more context based questions (usually used for clarification or to glean more details from the youth) emerged across interviews. These subsequent questions were tracked and they ranged from asking students to: be more specific; give examples; clarify events; order the importance of events; define specific terms like “good” or “bad”; qualify descriptions of schools, classrooms, the work, peers, staff, or teachers; predict why something did or did not happen; define how they were feeling in a given moment; and lastly a question was posed that asked the youth to describe their *dream school*. Any subsequent questions were asked for two reasons: (a) because the youth was vague in his or her response, or (b) many details were given and guiding questions helped to get to the root of the events or experiences. A conscious effort was made not to ask leading questions that could influence the participants to come to specific conclusions about any events or circumstances.

Each session was conducted in a quiet, private space within each participant’s school, as per their request, and was an opportunity for the youth to share comfortably and openly about their experiences in school. The semi-structured interview format was preferred as it was systematic in nature, thorough, flexible, and allowed for spontaneity in the youth’s responses (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The interviews were conducted in a relaxed fashion and flowed like casual and comfortable conversations going back and forth between the participants and the researcher. Interviews ranged from approximately 30 minutes to one hour, with the shortest interview lasting 23 minutes and the longest interview lasting 78 minutes. The average interview was 42 minutes in length.

The final number of completed interviews with a focus group was ideal. It was possible to dedicate the time necessary to attend to the details of each of the participants and their particular circumstances. Though it would have added to the breadth of the research to continue presentations and allow for more volunteers that was not possible within the scope of this study and would have proved unmanageable. It was felt that 12 participants were sufficient as each participant provided different, but relatable experiences, in addition to coming from vastly different backgrounds. There was enough data that it could be effectively compared, yet the number of participants was limited enough to devote adequate time to the analysis.

The process was structured so that quality time could be dedicated to each interview during the interview and again after in its analysis. There were no time constraints on the interviews and each meeting took its own course being as long or as short as it needed to be. The interviews provided essential face-to-face interactions through which, at times, very personal and emotional school histories were shared. The stories were authentic and honest, and they felt reliable because of the emotion and detail inherent in them.

### **Coding System**

A variety of coding systems exist for analyzing and organizing qualitative data, and over time different codes have been named and used in a variety of contexts within the field of qualitative data collection. A detailed coding system summarized by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) was reviewed prior to data collection and analysis and the following coding categories provided a starting point from which to begin to organize information: setting or context codes; situational (different perspectives) codes; activity codes; event codes; strategy codes; and relationship (social structure) codes. The coding system used involved collecting statements, narrowing them to one or two words, and charting them in tables; all related statements and words were sorted together (Merriam, 2009).

The data collected was analyzed line by line for the recurring themes and then reviewed five additional times narrowing the codes each time to provide the researcher with an effective means from which to draw conclusions about students' experiences in school (Eisner, 1991; Henricksson, 2008). All audiotaped interviews were subjected to this rigorous analysis and the transcribed text of each interview was listened to repeatedly throughout. This process allowed for the youths' perspectives to guide the final analysis; a process known as inductive reasoning.

The final analysis was compared to the first and the resulting themes remained consistent. The emergent themes (which later became factors), though specific to the youth who participated, were analyzed in light of the general population of youth at risk of school failure in special programs since "from individual subjective experience it is possible to find universal experiences" (Henricksson, 2008, p. 42). From the themes that emerged through each interview, information was interpreted with its relevance to success or failure in school and its relationship to student needs and goals in general.

The charted transcripts revealed a total of 2100 statements that were highlighted and coded. Each statement relayed students' perspectives on their experiences and how that affected

their ability to be successful or not in school. At times the descriptions were so detailed they included aspects of the students lives that were not related specifically to school and in this case the information was coded only if it could be related to something they needed from the school to support them to be successful. All unrelated statements were not coded.

The recurring themes emerged naturally from the repeated analysis and once coded it was deemed more appropriate to refer to them as factors. Protective factors buffer youth from the risks conducive to disengagement in school and help to build resilience (Benard, 1991). Therefore, based on the fact that this research set out to find factors related to success or failure in school and the fact that the eight themes were revealed to be more than just themes in the research it constituted re-naming them as factors. The eight factors revealed were: 1) the work or learning taking place in classrooms; 2) the teachers and their personalities; 3) relationships in general with the staff in schools; 4) the supports or lack thereof in schools; 5) peer specific dynamics; 6) the environment in the school and in classroom; 7) transitions; and 8) mental health or addictions. An extensive analysis of these factors occurs in Chapter 4.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When conducting research with all participants it is pertinent to make ethical decisions, respect boundaries, and protect identity; this is especially true for youth who are in at risk categories. Specifically, Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) suggested when conducting research using human participants adhere to the following: “show respect for research participants, protect them from avoidable harm, and honor their contributions to research knowledge” (p. 69). Much effort was made to honour anonymity and confidentiality in this research through practices that helped to keep the volunteers nameless. Though the schools and programs from which volunteers were solicited could be identified due to the specific nature of their programming, the youth who followed through with an interview cannot.

The programs and schools providing services to youth who struggle in mainstream schools work with hundreds of youth locally. Some programs from which volunteers were sought serviced as little as ten to twenty youth and some schools had populations over 1000. Because these schools and programs offered services for childcare, EAL, and mental health and addictions for youth who experienced multiple school transitions, trauma, or other life circumstances that constitute risk for failure in school the details each youth provided, though specific to their life, are not uncommon for youth in these schools. The stories told could be

reflective of any number of youth within this population; therefore the data gleaned from them is non-identifiable to any specific person. The participants who shared their stories were also not associated with any particular community, school, or classroom and these considerations allowed for their experiences to be honoured as those of students in special programs or alternative schools, but protected being specifically identifiable.

In order for volunteers to remain anonymous right from the start, slips of paper were passed out to every person in the room upon completion of a presentation. Each youth was instructed to either: (a) state their willingness to volunteer and provide their name and contact information, or to (b) write a thanks but no thanks or something to that effect. All youth complied with this at the end of the presentations and paper was collected from every youth in the room and placed in a sealed container. This way no one would know who volunteered and who did not. The interviews and focus group that were completed were done so in private locations within each of the schools.

Consent and assent forms were distributed to all of the youth and in some cases parents of youth who volunteered for this study (Appendix B & C). Five youth were under the age of 16 requiring parent consent as per the guidelines set out by Health Canada, *Requirements for Informed Consent Documents* (2014), and accepted by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. In four cases with participants under the age of 16 the parents were met in person to explain and sign consent and assent forms to ensure clarity and understanding. In one case the youth had told the teacher about her involvement in the study and asked for the teacher's support to gain consent from the parent. The teacher met with the parent to sign the consent form with specific instructions to adhere to ethical practices. For all youth 16 or older, as a precautionary measure, consent forms were sent to parents to be signed and returned by the youth. Any youth 18 or older or living on their own did not complete parental consent.

Assent forms were reviewed for clarity prior to the start of each interview. In each interview responsibilities and obligations, information on how to withdraw post-interview should the participant change their mind, and a review of the questions and intent of the study were covered. Interviews were recorded on a password-protected iPhone and transcribed by the researcher onto a password-protected computer and to maintain confidentiality and anonymity no names were recorded or associated with any recording or transcribed data. Students were also

informed that all data collected would be kept in confidence and stored in a secure location in the College of Education by the supervisor, Dr. Brenda Kalyn, for a period of five years after the completion of the study. Each student who participated in this study was referred to as a numbered participant to protect his or her privacy, identity, and ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

### **Focus Group**

The possibility of conducting one to two focus groups was proposed for the scope of this study. In all presentations the opportunity to be part of a focus group was offered; however, only three youth from one location opted for this option, explaining they felt most comfortable sharing in a group verses an individual interview. It was explained to this group that as study participants they would remain anonymous but that confidentiality could only go so far as the members of the group. The importance of respecting confidentiality within a group was explained in addition to the risks involved with confidentiality when focus groups are conducted. The focus group was conducted in a private location within the participants' school.

### **Conflict of Interest**

One of the special programs from which volunteers were sought was a program in which the researcher had taught, putting the researcher in a position of power or influence and this could be questioned as a possible conflict of interest. Careful consideration was given in terms of the method of data collection and the intent communicated to all the students whom the researcher knew or did not know personally and in no way were any students made to feel like participation or specific conclusions were expected from them. All youth were made fully aware that the data collection was purely for research purposes and that participation, or lack thereof had nothing to do with assessment in the classroom. The message that participation was neither encouraged nor discouraged was relayed to other teachers who were present during the presentations and to parents during follow up conversations so as to make it clear there were no expectations for participation.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in many ways, including the ways in which one establishes validity and reliability relating to the researcher, the data collection process, its interpretation, and final presentation. Validity and reliability are traditionally terms used to describe or analyze the trustworthiness of quantitative data; however, through this

research both quantitative and qualitative studies have been found that use the terms interchangeably. Guba (1981), in his work on establishing *Criteria for Assessing the Trustworthiness of Naturalistic Inquiries*, suggested four descriptors for communicating trustworthiness in qualitative research specifically using the following four terms: 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability, and 4) confirmability. Each will be explored in this section to provide a context for trustworthiness in qualitative research.

### **Credibility**

One of Guba's first methods for establishing credibility is to spend time observing and analyzing the environment from which you intend to solicit participants, which he calls "prolonged engagement" (1981, p. 85). In addition to fifteen years of personal experience in alternative schools and special programs, much preliminary work was completed in preparation for this study. An extensive review of the literature was conducted, several papers and presentations were completed, and many formal and informal discussions around the topic of youth at risk of school failure were had. Six conferences or conventions were also attended in 2013 tailored to the investigation of youth who are at risk in preparation for this study.

At no point was the researcher on site in any particular location for the purpose of observing students in classrooms or schools formally, nor was there time spent in the schools and programs when conducting interviews. Each participant was given only one interview from which relevant data was gathered. However, through working as an educator in the community with youth at risk, an understanding of the unique environments, their characteristics, and site-specific milieu as discussed by Guba through what he termed "persistent observation" (1981, p. 85) was inherently gained. The final analysis of the transcripts was a line-by-line analysis of the youths' words in conjunction with personal observations of their school environments and the people in them, resulting in credible data.

### **Transferability and Dependability**

The data collection process by means of recorded interviews was a thorough and well-planned endeavour. Notes and journals were kept throughout the entire process to assemble multiple interpretations of the data at different times and many documents were created to separate and analyze the transcripts in different ways. Data was read and then analyzed by question, participant, theme, and through interesting and meaningful quotations that were pulled from the text in five separate instances that provided an exhaustive review of the information

gathered. Several tables and graphs were created and from that synthesis many themes emerged. Once closer analysis of the themes took place, information was re-categorized and re-sorted, resulting in the final eight factors. The analysis and synthesis of the data was rigorous in nature and was accomplished through a number of detailed readings of raw transcripts, multiple reviews of audio recordings, and review of notes resulting in a myriad of themes based on personal interpretations (Thomas, 2006). In the end a collection of “thick descriptive data” was produced that included a trail of paperwork that could be used at a later date to replicate or further analyze the data gathered for this study (Guba, 1981, p. 86).

### **Confirmability and Limitations**

Though a rigorous process was used to analyze the interview data, transferability must be considered when assessing trustworthiness, and confirmability presents itself as a limitation in this regard. As mentioned, a journal of jot notes, ideas, and thoughts were kept throughout the research process that could be used at another time; however, it was not organized to be used or referred to by a third party. The journal was organized in a way that was easy for the researcher to decipher and build upon, but a third party would have difficulty with the organization, limiting their ability to follow the initial thought processes of the researcher. It was never considered that the raw data and personal notes would be reviewed by any third parties as it was inherent in the Behavioural Ethics application that only the interviewer/researcher would view any of the raw data; this was done to assure confidentiality and anonymity of the young participants, somewhat limiting confirmability.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the shared experiences of youth in local alternative schools and special programs and to answer the research question:

***What factors are most relevant to the success or failure in school for youth at risk?***

From the qualitative analysis of the transcripts of 12 interviews and one focus group a rich description of the lives of 12 young people emerged. The details surrounding each youth's experience in school or in life, but related to success or failure in school, are described in detail in this chapter. Each participant will be referred to as Participant 1, 2, 3, etc. and this was done purposefully to further de-identify the youth who volunteered to be a part of this study. It was felt that a pseudonym (which is typically used in qualitative research) could cause readers to *think* they could make a connection to the participants; therefore, it was safer to simply refer to them as participants. Direct quotes are used to personify points and add descriptive details from the youth, in their own words. Through the words of the youth stories unfolded about experiences in schools that were at times exciting and engaging and at other times traumatic and disheartening.

The quotes used in this chapter were accurately copied from the transcribed interviews. Changes were only made to any original text if information was repetitive or unnecessary words were used; for example: like, um, you know, uh, etc. This was done to allow participants opinions to be represented clearly and concisely and to eliminate any confusion for the reader. All other statements transcribed from the youth interviews have remained the same including jargon, words that are used in the wrong context, or mixed up words. The only exception to this was where the use of one word or term completely altered the intention of the participant as understood in the interview; in that case the word was eliminated for clarity.

#### **Participant Biographies**

##### **Participant 1**

The first volunteer was a 13-year-old, Caucasian female in a special program. She had been in the same elementary school from Kindergarten through to grade seven and was then referred to a special program in grade eight due to mental health and addictions concerns. She was kind, soft-spoken, honest, and very personable. She was eager to share her story and especially her opinion on how schools should operate to help young people to be successful.

What struck me first in the interview was how important it was for her that schools be like a second home. On numerous occasions she referenced school and home in the same sentence:

*I want my school to be like a place where you can call it home, I think that's where you should go; I think if you want to be comfortable somewhere you want to call that a home.*

In this part of the discussion she was talking about how schools not only need to be welcoming and teachers friendly, but that they need to be places where young people feel completely at ease and at home. It was very important to this participant that the staff in the schools smiled a lot, and that they were honest and real. If teachers shared pieces of themselves and their own lives with the students, she felt even more connected to them. She talked a lot about struggles in her life and a lack of support at home. When she was in crisis she wished she could have access to the school and that if she designed her dream school it would be open to all students in crisis at all times:

*If there's a kid that's going through lots of drugs and all kinds of stuff and she actually one day decided, I really need help, I need to get out of here, I can't go back to my house, or something like that, right, they can go to the school...and they can talk to the people there. It's like a place to go where you actually need help.*

This participant also stated, that her dream school would be like a community center, serving youth from Kindergarten through to University with programs and supports to assist young people with career development and mental health and addictions problems. During the interview this participant disclosed that her family had a history of addictions and that she struggled herself because of her family's drug use. She was desperate not to end up like a sibling who was involved with prostitution because of the instability and drug use in her own life.

## **Participant 2**

The second volunteer was an 18-year-old, First Nations female attending a local alternative high school. Already a young mother, she was a confident, hardworking student with many goals for her future. She had been in six different schools in two urban settings and spoke a lot about how the majority of her needs in school revolved around adequate childcare. Her biggest struggle in school related to teachers who did not understand her parenting responsibilities and schools that did not offer quality daycare. This young woman was already working a part time job, studying to complete her grade 12, and parenting a young child. For the most part she spoke positively about connecting with adults in school; however, she had several

instances where negative interactions with one teacher and other support staff regarding her busy life as a parent impacted her at school. In one case she recalled feeling alienated:

*I would miss class or something and she would tell me that “you need to get your priorities straight” ....it’s not my fault you have problems at home,( if my kid was sick) and I was like, kay well...my other friend has a kid too, and she would be like, “oh its okay, I understand you’re a parent all kids get sick”. But when it came to me, “you got to get your priorities straight”.*

Though she struggled with some educators not being welcoming and supportive she was resilient enough to overcome negative influences. The biggest barrier for success for this participant was adequate childcare:

*I really wanted to quit school and stay home with her cause I didn’t want her to be looked after improperly.*

She stressed that if schools provided more daycare options for children birth to school age, it would make things easier for young parents to complete school and have a good start in life. She reiterated that it could be very difficult to concentrate in school when you are worried about your child.

### **Participant 3**

The third interview was conducted with a 14-year-old, First Nations female who was attending a special program. She was in grade seven and spoke about being in at least four different schools in rural and urban settings. She talked a lot about her mom and two kokums and the impact they had on her. Her father was deceased and she had a step-dad. She recalled many chaotic events in her early school history: running away from school, chasing after boys, and fighting with teachers and administrators. She also spoke about drug and alcohol abuse, both for herself and within her family and she talked about being apprehended from her home for a short period of time. Though quiet, this young girl had a strong personality and made many powerful statements about how schools can either support or push away young people:

*I would always go to school high and then bring weed into the school with me and then I get suspended and then I wouldn’t listen to the principal and I’d always talk back at him ...I’d try to hit him but then he won’t let me and then he sent me here.*

Her message was strong about how forcing kids to comply with strict rules only made them angrier and that by being suspended and expelled she was getting what she wanted but not getting the help she needed.

Later she talked about how it was important to her mom for her to go school and “get her grades up”, and she talked about how an alternative school environment helped her:

*...If I needed help they'd come help...they'd have two EAs in the classroom cause there'd be so much Indian kids that needed help, so then they'll have two, or like three teachers in the same room...then there'd be a teacher helping a whole table like this but kind of bigger and then there'll be another teacher helping the whole table and then there'll be the main teacher helping the other table so that was kind of helpful.*

Her main suggestions for increased supports in schools were: more teachers in classrooms, breaks from the work, and the ability to listen to music to help her focus. She repeatedly stressed that classrooms needed at least two to three teachers or educational assistants to support struggling youth and that if the work was relevant to the student's skills and interests they would pay attention and do the work. She also noted the importance of good classroom management and the difference between strict teachers versus mean ones. She talked about how essential it was for teachers to have the ability to be strict but not mean and how fundamental that was to the success of the students.

#### **Participant 4**

The next interview was with an 18 year old, Caucasian male. He was attending an alternative school because a variety of issues led to disengagement from other large high schools, in two different urban settings. He spoke of a relatively stable home life and no major concerns in elementary school. He had attended one school Kindergarten to grade eight and started disengaging from school in high school:

*I don't know I just didn't really have like... I just had to do the classes and there was a lot of really bad peer groups and stuff and then the teachers weren't really that supportive, they just kind of went on because it's a bigger school and stuff.*

When I asked him to expand on what he was feeling or noticing he replied:

*[The teachers] would kind of be like; show you what to do but they wouldn't come and personally help you. They had to do some other stuff, and teach I guess...*

I thought this was a really sad statement because after that point he explained that he slowly stopped asking for help and eventually he just quit going to school.

Upon moving to another large urban setting where he did not know anyone he ran into another situation where he was let down by the school. The school would not enroll him mid-semester, so he just stopped going and for several months stayed at home not really doing

anything. He seemed like a kind, caring individual who did not really need much support beyond being noticed and helped in school. He did not connect to a lot of the learning and suggested that schools could offer more classes based on students interests. His interview was short but powerful. In about 20 minutes he painted a picture of himself as a fairly average student who went unnoticed in a large high school, until he encountered some experiences with substance abuse. At that point a referral to a special program was made resulting in his placement in an alternative high school.

When interviewed he was at a point in his life where he was focused on completing high school and moving on to become a conservation officer or work up north. I asked him who provided him with the most support in his life and who motivated him and supported him to be successful, his response was:

*I don't know it's like trying to just better myself and be a better person and stuff and get everything done that I need to get done. I kind of wavered from that but then I kind of just smartened up a little bit and grew up and started to get my life back together I guess.*

This young man never spoke about his parents or his family and was strong in his statement that he was his only advocate to complete high school.

### **Participant 5**

Another young female participant was the next volunteer. She was 14 years old, Caucasian, and at the time of the interview was in grade nine. She had a unique history in that she had previously been in an academically advanced program and home schooled for a period of time. At the time of the interview she was attending a special program due to complete disengagement from school. Though she spoke articulately and came across as quite intelligent she spoke of significant struggles in mainstream schooling. By mid elementary school she was presenting as an academically gifted student and recommendations were made for an advanced placement. She agreed with the assessments; however, noted that she was only average in math and struggled a bit in that subject. The move from her French immersion school to an academically enriched program in an English school exacerbated the difficulty she was having in mathematics. At this point she began disengaging from school completely because she felt awkward, unsupported, and did not feel like she was fitting in with her peers:

*In the [advanced] program a lot of the kids were there because they were very, very good at math, which I was not good at. If I remember my little test result sheet, I was doing*

*strongly in the other three or four areas but I was average in math, which meant I was below average with the [advanced] kids.*

She also had lost a parent at a young age, and recalled getting frustrated with the school and counsellors fixation on her loss as being the reason for her struggles:

*Every single time they'd get stuck on, my dad died as a little kid; "That must be where all your troubles are coming from. That is all that is wrong with the world, if we get past this horrible, horrible thing it'll be fine."*

Eventually she was struggling with relationships and the schoolwork to the point where another program placement recommendation was made, this time to a program that was far below her academic capabilities:

*I was bored out of my skull and felt like I was being treated like a fourth grader.*

This program also wanted too much out of her too soon as she explains here:

*[The staff were] pretty much expecting me to pour my heart and soul out to somebody I'd only known for a week and didn't know at all... And she wasn't really building a relationship it was more, "listen to me" right away.*

This participant's focus in that special program was not on dwelling on past trauma; she wished to remain in the present and focus on her current needs, but she felt she was in the presence of teachers that were, "nasty, horrible people", and peers who, "weren't really very nice either." She felt the support she was getting was focused too much on the wrong things and she was not fitting in at school, so she just stopped going. The longer she was away, the easier it was to stay away and the harder it became to go back. She did attempt to attend a regular high school when she reached an age appropriate for grade nine; however, it offered much the same as what elementary school offered, only with more cliques. She felt she did not belong and she again was with teachers who did not notice or understand her needs. By the time she came to the special program she was in at the time of this study she was completely disengaged from school, and had not attended school in several months; this program was to be yet another fresh start.

This participant was very thorough in her analysis of what schools need to be supportive, "just look at my file" she stated bluntly, "and plan a program based on my needs." I was impressed with her ability to be so reflective and direct. Her suggestions were simple, realistic, and obvious, and she reminded me that as school staff, no matter our position within a school, we must not assume a student's issues are related to any specific event, traumatic or not. In this case, she needed her teachers to notice she was struggling with the expectations of her as an

academically gifted young person with other challenges as well. She needed people to look past the one event in her life and notice she was struggling to connect with her peers, complete the work, and was quickly becoming disinterested in school.

### **Participant 6**

This participant was the second of three male volunteers. He was 16 years old at the time of the interview, Caucasian, and though he had been at the same school for his entire elementary school career, this was his third high school in two years. The interview was conducted at his alternative high school, a school he was attending in the hopes of reconnecting with teachers, peers, and the work, with the goal of getting back into one of the local mainstream high schools. He spoke a lot in this short interview about how his parents do enough parenting at home and at school he wanted his teachers to teach him and support him, but not parent him. He felt like the teachers in the mainstream high school spent too much time “pestering” him and parenting him. This pushed him away and he would skip school often. When the school threatened to kick him out, he just left. He felt like the school had expectations of him to be an “A-plus” student and he was ok with attending somewhat regularly and just passing. About school and the pressure that came along with it, he stated, “I didn’t like the concept of it.” And he had a simple message for educators:

*Schools need to be places that are welcoming, with friendly teachers who push you to do well, but do not expect perfection or treat you like a child when you let them down.*

He stated that he liked the alternative school because it provided a lot of time and support to complete the work and provided rationale for the work to be done. He felt like an equal there, not a child. He said if it were not for his friends back at the mainstream school he would just stay in an alternative environment to complete high school, but that he was working to get back on track and transfer out as soon as he was caught up; he missed his friends.

### **Participant 7**

This participant provided the longest and most detailed interview. She was a 17-year-old female who had an extensive life history for only being 17. She offered a lot of information about her experiences, schooling in general, and goals for the future. Coincidentally, on the day she was interviewed she was supposed to speak to superintendents of her school division on the topic of how to support young people in school. She had bowed out at the last minute fearing a lack of support or backlash from her former peers. She was appreciative of the opportunity to

speak anonymously through this study. As part of her story, she spoke of isolation and alienation as a young EAL student in Canada. She talked about struggling to fit in, in different communities and feeling bullied by peers and teachers.

This young student had struggled through an abusive relationship with a boyfriend and an addiction to a variety of drugs in her early teens. When she became pregnant at 16, she cleaned herself up and moved home to live with her parents and get back on track. She quite articulately reflected on teachers and schools that she felt were welcoming and supportive. In her words it was the variety of services and positive supportive environment in her alternative school that influenced her success. She made suggestions for alternative schools and programs, noting that all schools should offer supports so students do not disappear from school:

*I love this school cause you can't miss a day without my social worker texting me saying "where are you? Why aren't you here?" Or Ms. X: "why aren't you here", or the daycare calling me, "are you coming", Or Ms. Y., "like, get over here"...*

She noted that alternative school environments are ideal, but they should offer more academic programming for young people who need an alternate environment but still want to go to college or university:

*The bigger schools, it's the fact that they're bigger, they don't worry about an individual student. Here the teachers are...they meet my needs ...they're awesome, it's just the fact that I feel like its too modified, too basic but it would be nice if they could more like... something to expand my knowledge, like the counsellor thing, the chemistry, bio, and foundations; that would be perfect if we could get those different variety of classes instead of just the basics, like with science, I think that would be sweet if we had more to learn.*

This participant's dream school was a small school with a lot of supports, yet one that offered a variety of classes for young people to explore their talents and interests. During the interview she mentioned at least four different career possibilities for herself ranging from esthetician to a counsellor, first responder, or police officer. She was smart, articulate, and seemed like she had the potential to reach her goals, whatever they may be upon graduation.

### **Participant 8**

The eighth interview took place with a 16 year old, Caucasian female attending an alternative high school. She had gone to the same elementary school from Kindergarten to grade eight with a group of high achieving, French immersion students. She spoke a lot about teachers with high expectations, bullies at school, and not fitting in on the playground or the classroom.

She struggled with depression, school or social anxiety and truly felt many of her teachers and peers were not there for her on a personal level:

*Personally my whole family has struggled with depression and I know one time when one of my friends in grade eight had told the rest of grade seven (maybe it was grade six I don't even remember), had told the rest of the grade that my brother tried to commit suicide once and a lot of the people, you know being sympathetic were just leaving me alone, leaving me to my thing kind of; they thought that maybe me and my family was crazy.*

She felt alienated due to her family history and socio-economic status, compared to that of her peers, and she felt isolated in school:

*You know, you get in trouble you get made fun of, you do something wrong you get made fun of, you get bad grades you get made fun of.*

At times the bullying was intense and she felt much of it went unnoticed or unresolved by teachers or staff in the school. She was discouraged about approaching teachers after an incident in middle elementary school went unresolved and she spent much of her later elementary years feeling uncomfortable and un-wanted. Her anxiety became increasingly overwhelming in high school, larger classes, a bigger school, and even fewer connections with teachers or staff in the building:

*A lot of it was honestly just feelings of anxiety that were just unexplained, like I couldn't really do anything about it and it kind of was pretty tragic because I was doing amazing.*

*Then I just started feeling anxious and hopeless and then that spiraled into a couple of things here and there, and I got sick and then that made it even worse, so for two weeks I was out and I was freaking out because, well for the first week I was out and I was out sick and then the second week I didn't want to go back because I was too scared about how much work I had piled up, and the fact that I didn't have any friends and all that and that was when I went back...*

*...And that one teacher who we talked about [before] she sat down with my mom and I and she was just like: "you know I don't even think you're anxious, I think you just don't want to do the work." ...That's not it at all, I was seriously freaking out but I managed to get through that semester with feeling very, very depressed.*

This participant went on to be hospitalized for depression and anxiety before attending an alternative high school where she felt accepted, successful, supported, and noticed. She spoke endearingly about the alternative school she attended and how all schools should have supports in place, especially for students who feel anxious or depressed. She specifically suggested that

putting pressure on students to complete missed work and ignoring their mental health is detrimental to young people. She needed to be supported and not pushed further away from school.

### **Participant 9**

A 16 year old, First Nations female was one of the last to be interviewed. At the time of the interview she was attending an alternative high school and had lived on her own with a boyfriend for some time. She had recently moved home to be with family and felt that she was a role model for younger siblings and cousins. She wanted to finish high school so they could see her succeed. She had aspirations of going to university to teach or become a lawyer and help people in her community. She very obviously needed to be connected in her school and she compared a mainstream high school to the current alternative school environment in the following way:

*I like the teachers here. They understand and it's different from the other schools I've been to and stuff. Like [at my old school] I really didn't talk to anyone there. They didn't ask me stuff and help I guess.*

*At [the other high school] they really didn't ask if I needed help or if something was wrong or having a bad day. [Here] they are just really good people like everyone here, all the students, they're like, we all get along. We're all like one big family here. So its really good like if somebody needs help in the hallway or something, somebody else will go and help them, its not...they're not stereotypical here, they don't judge you on how you look or anything.*

For this particular student trust was an asset in order for teachers and students to have good relationships. She felt that when she had genuine teachers who understood her needs she was most successful. Sometimes her needs included being supported to get to school and extra time to complete homework. She spoke about a busy life outside of school with friends and many negative pulls in the wrong direction. She also talked about a chronically ill parent and siblings and cousins who counted on her. She knew she was a role model and wanted to be successful in school, it just was not always easy. She gave the following advice to teachers working with struggling youth:

*Support and help what they need, just like when they first get there, ask if there's anything that's going to hold them back from being there? Are there any academic needs that they need like tutoring or something like that, so definitely [offer] that, and make them feel welcome. They need to feel welcomed cause if they feel uncomfortable then they don't want to be there.*

*There's a lot of families that struggle with food too, so that too, like breakfast programs and lunch programs, stuff like that. And asking them what they like, their sports or something that helps them during the day, like get through another day, like art or something. Some people are really passionate about that stuff and just to see what keeps them going and help them with it. And counselling, a lot of people need counselling these days...just making sure they feel safe and welcomed, like they want to be there not that they have to be there, they want to be there and get the work done, get the school done you know, finish their grade 12.*

## **Focus Group**

The focus group was interesting and for the most part the three participants supported one another in answering the questions and sharing their stories. The three participants included: a 14 year old, Caucasian female; a 15-year-old Caucasian female; and a 16-year-old First Nations male; all from one special program. This group, more than other participants, shared fantasies about future goals and lives that involved education, over-seas travel, having life partners, and having children. None of the participants in this group were parents yet, but each spoke about one day being married and having a family. The theme in this group was acceptance “going to school where you are accepted for who you are.” Each of the participants spoke about being bullied. In two cases the bullying was spoken of as being particularly traumatic and the overall consensus of the group was that, “we need more staff members, not just schools” in order to have safe comfortable schools in which to be successful.

Each of the youth in this group felt they had something that made them somewhat of a target in school: one youth was openly struggling with her sexuality; one was a First Nations male attending an “east side” school, a school out of his home community, where he felt ostracized, alienated, and generally uncomfortable; and the other participant felt that she needed a lot of support and modifications in school and as a result had difficulty making friends, she was also severely bullied over a long period of time and harassed by a group of students in elementary school.

About midway through the interview one participant became visibly upset while recalling years of bullying:

*In first grade everybody's friends, second grade well sort of got a little strange, kids starting realizing that there's a sort of a status quo. In third grade kids started bullying me more and then fourth grade and fifth grade came around and then sixth grade, then seventh grade...then in eighth grade, I thought I was free of it, but then it took basically one person and it suddenly started up again.*

She discussed the number one factor, in her opinion, for success in school and it was to be able to attend school in a “judge-free zone”. She summarized that alternative schools and the one special program she attended were places where she felt safe and comfortable. She felt that teachers noticed when things were not right and supported her to be who she was without judgment. She also noted that the teachers in these schools were open and approachable and that made all the difference in her comfort level at school. She recalled several situations where she was bullied in her mainstream elementary school, including a few situations where she felt bullied by teachers:

*In third grade we had these things called PWIM books, well I had written on it...I had a crush on this one guy, and then my teacher she decided to read it all out loud, and then she read his name, and he kind of had this weird look on his face and like...*

She was completely embarrassed by this teacher reading her notes out loud in front of her peers. I admired her strength, to reflect on these events of her past. Despite being upset, she wanted her story to be heard and I commend her for that.

### **Summary of Participants**

From the story of each young participant, factors emerged regarding the practices in schools that are conducive to success and practices that contribute to barriers for young people in reaching their goals. Within the group of 12 participants was much resilience to the experiences that often placed them in a position where they felt, at times, up against the world. With a myriad of factors that could have easily driven them away from school, each prevailed with hopes and dreams of graduating high school and becoming successful, constructive members of society.

In meeting each of the 12 youth it was apparent that they needed positive adult role models, people in their lives who smiled at them every day and accepted them for who they were. They need teachers and staff in schools who noticed them, noticed how they were feeling when they were at school, and noticed when they disappeared all together. Each of the young people spoke about the sheer importance of the adults in their lives who provided them with tools they needed to be successful. Embedded in their accounts was the fact that their “good” teachers and role models exhibited honesty and trustworthiness; and that those were the kind of relationships they could count on and “bad” teachers or schools that pushed them away. It was evident at the end of each interview how important teachers were and how much they impact the lives of even the quietest as well as the most rebellious students.

## **Factors Affecting Success or Failure in School**

Fostering positive experiences for young people in schools in order to build resilience to outside factors is a worthy challenge that educators can face with some degree of success (Marshall, 2012). The classroom can be an environment where, if led by positive, supportive, and understanding teachers, students build skills, feel confident, set achievable goals, interact positively with peers, and understand expectations of them as learners. Five of the eight factors that emerged from the youth interviews were directly related to the school: the work, the teachers, relationships within the school, and the school environment. These five factors, all aspects of school success or failure, are factors of which the teachers and other staff in schools have control. The youth who participated in this study spoke clearly and concisely about how specifically the teachers, relationships with school staff, the work, and supports within the school helped them to be successful, or conversely, alienated them from school.

The remaining factors: peer relationships, mental health or addictions issues, and transitions are factors that are beyond the scope of the schools' control; yet it was apparent in this research that they are highly influenced by the schools' ability to support youth despite their barriers and challenges. The key challenge faced by young people, from the participant's perspective, was the need for the school or staff within the school to support them when times were tough and to build them up and notice when they were successful or faltering. Schools that were successful at fostering a welcoming learning environment with a myriad of supports helped to rebuild these young participants' confidence in their ability to complete high school. Schools designed to engage youth through creative programming along with the supports to be successful are places that students can be successful despite students' risk factors.

### **Eight Factors Defined**

Eight factors related to success or failure in school are reviewed in the next section of this chapter in the order of most common to least common based on the transcribed text of nine interviews and one focus group. The frequency was derived at from initially combing through transcripts to look for themes, counting those themes and renaming them as factors relevant to the success or failure in school for the 12 participants. The themes were counted through a process of open coding, from the total number of coded pieces of text (2100) and then the total number of times each code appeared was counted (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The numbers were divided to come up with an average for each. The themes became the following factors with

corresponding percentages that order their prevalence from the transcribed text: 1) the teachers, their personality, etc. 24%; 2) the work, 17%; 3) relationships to staff within the school, 16%; 4) the supports within the school, 15%; 5) the environment in the school or classroom, 9%; 6) peer based factors, 8%; 7) references to mental health or addictions, 6%; 8) and lastly, transitions, 5%. From this representation of the data one can see that the first four factors make up nearly 75% of the total responses. Suggesting that the teachers, the work, relationships to staff, and the supports within the school (all factors within the schools control) impacted the youth most, in terms of how successful they were or felt in school.

### **Factor 1: Teachers**

Teachers were in the top two most coded responses for all but one interview and in the top three of all analyzed transcripts. Furthermore, the number one most referred to factor from the interview transcripts were comments pertaining to teachers; roughly 500 of a total 2100 coded responses were specifically about teachers, with many others relating to teachers but resulting in coding in another category. In seven out of eleven transcripts analyzed, teachers emerged as the number one factor. It makes sense that teachers are at the root of successful school experiences or at times the reason for a young person's disengagement from school. Teachers set the tone for the classroom environment, the expectations, and interactions of the students. Teachers spend the most time with the students directly connected to the work, the curriculum, and directly influence their chances of succeeding in the classroom. All of the youth noted that having teachers who are flexible, knowledgeable, and understanding of their needs helps to support young people to be successful. The youth interviewed for this study also noticed when their teachers genuinely cared about their well-being and their needs and they knew when they did not.

Despite having some disappointing school experiences, participant 8 eloquently summed up the positive qualities of her amazing teachers to help illustrate the point that good teachers made all the difference for her:

*My grade seven teacher was a very great teacher as well. And I don't know if those are the teachers that I remember the best or were the best or anything cause they were the last teachers. But she was very positive and very open and always open to us talking to her. We had a lot in common as well so we talked often and she made her classes fun as well, she allowed us to laugh and to talk about things.*

*Another thing that I really loved about her as well as my grade eight teacher was, when I was behind in school they would sit down with me and help me make a plan to get back on track so that made it really easy.*

*I guess it's just all of the teachers that I've had that were really positive, were the open teachers, the ones who would ask us how we were doing, recognize that we were having struggles and not get angry at us for our struggles, you know, rather help us.*

*I've always liked joking around with teachers and the teachers here that make it really positive are open and they want to get to know us for who we are and not just for school work or our grades or anything. You know they want to have conversations with us, they want us to be, a part of the class and a part of their lives and that makes it a lot easier to come to school. And the other thing is if we are having a difficult day, every single (like whenever I have a down day here and I feel like down in the dumps) every single teacher notices that I am down in the dumps and then tells me: if you need somebody to talk to my door is open.*

The comments from this participant were echoed by other youth, as many agreed, teachers need to be personable, friendly, open, and have a sense of humour. The commonality amongst all participants concerning teachers was the importance of teachers being open and creating a comfortable classroom space where they felt welcomed:

*Participant 2: If you don't feel like you can talk to your teacher then you're less likely to stay there or ask for help or improve in the person's class.*

Many of the youth likened teachers to their parents and the qualities they liked or disliked in their parents. Next to parents, teachers can function as the closest role model and support person for young people. For most, there is no one else they spend that many hours a day with five days a week for months or years at a time, therefore, teachers have a huge impact on young people beyond the curriculums they are hired to teach. It was evident from the youth interviewed in this study that the teachers' ability to be supportive, meet their students' needs, and make the students feel special was key to the learning and engaging participants' in school:

*Participant 4: They kind of like, walk by you and be like, "how's your day going?" They actually kind of talk to you.*

*Participant 5: I think it's important not to treat kids like just another seat...knowing kids' names or knowing how they work, not just assuming they are student number.*

*Participant 7: I love that at this school they will bust your butt and they will stay here until five. Their job is to be here from nine till three thirty but my teachers would stay with me till 5 o'clock last semester so I could finish my assignments and they would help me, AND they go out of their way to do what they need to do for you, and that's*

*awesome. I don't think just because they have to they're willing to help you. They're just not teachers that [say], "ok I'm teaching you a class, you do the assignments or you're not gonna pass, well whatever I don't care, I'm getting paid for this"...I've come across a lot of teachers that are like that, they don't care.*

Participant 7 (Reflecting on another teacher): *That was the only class I remember, I would skip every other class... I'd always show up there. And sometimes he'd know I was on drugs but instead of kicking me out he'd be: "ok, be good, you know that I can't be doing this..." he's like, "you can't be doing this, this isn't allowed, I should be telling on you, you should be getting kicked out, but I know this is the only class that you're ever going to come to."*

Conversely, all participants also spoke of some very negative early school experiences; in some cases they even felt bullied by a teacher. Participant 7 described the specifics of an event in elementary school when she was caught with some food in her desk:

*I was just putting it in the back of my desk and I got into trouble for not putting it in my locker. But not just like, 'ok, well go put it in your locker', like, your suppose to do that at recess, it was more like, 'you're so dumb, you never listen and it's cause your parents are foreign, and do you even speak English...do you even understand what I'm saying?' Then all the classroom was laughing at me and then she was making fun of me ...*

There were several accounts similar to this for participant 7; where students felt bullied by teachers. Some youth recalled being called names or even described encounters with overtly racist teachers or staff in schools. When listening to the descriptions of some of the teachers and their behaviours, I found myself questioning the reality of the students' recollections. In three interviews, participants recalled racist teachers or teachers who called them "failures", "stupid" or "dumb". As a teacher myself, I had a hard time hearing these accounts and I wondered if these teachers from their past were actually capable of using such harsh language. I questioned if it was exaggerated perceptions of negative encounters with teachers or if they were actual memories. I even asked the participants if the words they were using were the actual words from teachers or if the words described more how teachers made them feel. However, in the end, real or imagined, these were the students' perceptions of the situations in which they felt bullied by a teacher. The perceived alienation was all that mattered.

## **Factor 2: The Work**

I was surprised to hear the word curriculum several times during the interviews, in addition to the number of times participants talked about quality education verses simply "textbook" learning. I knew the youth would talk about the work, the learning, and lessons or

activities, directly or indirectly, but to hear the word curriculum specifically was something I did not really expect:

Participant 5: *It was just difficult to feel engaged when she was just reading out of the curriculum.*

Participant 6: *The work has to be whatever the curriculum says.*

Participant 8: *...but here, you know if its kind of incorporated into the curriculum; mental illness affects one in five people...it would be nice if that was more incorporated into the curriculums specifically, like health and stuff [in all schools].*

The participants in this study understood there was prescribed learning that needed to take place in school but they also felt strongly that teachers needed to tailor that learning to suit the students in their classes. For the most part these participants succeeded in learning and achieving most, when their teachers went beyond the curriculum or the textbook and brought the lessons to life, by making it real, and connecting it to their lives and interests:

Participant 7: *He was so caring and nice and he taught really hands on, it was conversation it wasn't reading out of a textbook.*

Participant 1: *[Teachers need to make it] fun for the kids so that they know how, so they actually, learn it in a fun way, not just in like, 'open your textbooks, read this' and that's all...*

One of the youngest participants in this study had a particularly difficult time in school. She had lived in several different communities and was quite disengaged from school at one point, abusing drugs and alcohol at a very young age. She had lost a parent early in her life and been apprehended from her home at least once. During the interview she alluded to a possible history of abuse and connected her own experiences to that of her mother and grandmother, who had both been survivors of Canadian Residential schools. This young woman tormented her teachers by running away, attempting to physically assault them, and was verbally abusive at school.

When I interviewed her, she was 14 years old, very shy, quiet, and reflective. In fact, at the start of the interview she was so quiet I wondered why she had volunteered. Her teacher had informed me she was quite keen on being interviewed, so I was patient and did a lot of waiting and listening. Slowly, she began to open up about her life history and she wanted me to hear her story. She never talked specifically about being successful with the schoolwork, and noted she

had been held back in school due to being absent and being particularly behaviourally challenging in school.

One topic she did speak about quite poignantly was her desire to be a nurse. She talked about how there should be schools and programs from a young age (definitely by late elementary school) that are designed to meet the career goals of young people. She stated that if she was in a school where she was learning about helping others and learning to work in a hospital she would have clued in at a much younger age to the damage drugs and alcohol were doing to her body, both mentally and physically. She noted that if schools hired educators from various sectors of the community to teach specific skills to young people based on their interests it would increase their chances of success and their attendance and engagement in school:

*A school for people who want to make a difference and who like, work in a hospital and help people...teachers would be...there will be a carpenter, for people who want to learn how to do construction. There will be like a doctor, a nurse for people who want to learn health, and health stuff. There will be a scientist for people who want to learn science...like everything for people, and then there will be a gym teacher for like... who wants to be a gym teacher...*

*...they would be teaching them how to like work it, and how to keep it steady and stuff like that ...how, I don't know... like how its suppose to be done.*

Though at times, this participant had a difficult time communicating her thoughts, the overall message was clear. She needed more role models in school teaching not only a curriculum that was relevant to her, but also teaching her critical life skills to help her stay in school and stay focused on her goals. She noted, that if she had more of that, she would have been less likely to go down the path she did. Near the end of the interview, she summarized her thoughts in response to a question regarding more relevant learning opportunities in school:

*I think people would want to be going to school [if the learning was more relevant] and then there are young kids now that think that missing school is cool and that ...and they think that getting high and going out, partying every weekend is cool; when actually it's not. It's just like ruining your body on the inside, cause you don't know how the drugs and alcohol will affect your body. Like, if you're allergic to it or something. I think we just need to talk with the young people to be more mature and go to school and finish it.*

Among many suggestions to better our schools, she also noted that having a Cree teacher in every school she went to would be beneficial. She said that learning from her Cree teacher about First Nations history was critical to her family's healing. When she learned about the history of residential schools in school, she talked to her mom and kokum:

*Both my mom and my kokum were in a residential school and it was kind of tough on them and then they thought the only way they could escape that were doing drugs and getting um... getting drunk every single day and that; and then I finally talked, like I talked to them and then they finally stopped.*

This young participant was wise beyond her years, due to the nature of her life experiences. She strongly alluded to the fact that good schools had quality education programs that focused on relevant skills. She stressed that learning about culture and history could help young people stay focused on their future and their goals. From her perspective quality educators delivered quality programming and they created environments that were welcoming and felt like home. Schools that helped to meet her basic needs, for example feeding her, were the best schools. This was a young lady, who wanted to make a difference in her community, and in the midst of turmoil herself, she was able to share what quality education would look like for her.

All of the youth talked about homework and all agreed that their lives outside of school were busy, hectic, and in some cases traumatic and that schoolwork was not a focus outside of the hours they were in school. The focus of this study was not intended to add to the debates on the effectiveness or relevance of homework; however, it is interesting to note that all of the youth saw relevance in homework and they wanted to complete homework, yet needed time in school with access to support in order to do so. One student argued:

*Participant 8: My whole life I've come to school and every single day I'm at school worked super hard and part of that is why it's so hard for me to go home and work super hard as well.*

Not one youth argued that homework was irrelevant, just that it should be incorporated into the school day or it should be obvious that teachers would support students to complete the work if they wanted to come to school early or stay late to do so.

All participants interviewed knew that completing high school was integral to their success in life, yet at the same time, all had suggestions about the work or the curriculum and the need for it to be relevant and useful to them individually. Students need to understand how the curriculum is connected to their future goals and quite possibly that is something that could be further explored in schools. Young people want to learn, they want to be successful, but at times they cannot see the relevance in what they are doing. Good teachers find ways to impact students with what they teach, either through their own excitement about the learning, or their ability to connect the curriculum to the youth in their classrooms.

### **Factor 3: Relationships to Staff**

As each participant spoke about the experiences they had in various schools and programs, it became apparent that relationships with peers and staff in schools linked all the factors, and directly or indirectly, relationships were relevant in each of the factors. According to all of the participants, their success in school was closely tied to their relationships with teachers and staff. Conversely a lack of success was also linked to minimal connections with teachers and staff or a dislike for the staff in the school. Successful relationships hinged on the personalities of teachers and other staff and their ability to provide relevant learning opportunities and to support learning. In addition when people in the school were supportive of the students' needs outside of school that helped with building solid relationships.

Healthy positive relationships are conducive to meaningful experiences and perpetuate increased motivation and engagement in school. During the first interview a young 13-year-old female student articulated her thoughts about healthy positive connections in school very clearly:

*Participant 1: See I don't think a lot of people understand about connections... I think that people really don't understand: how can we help you more? ... You actually want to be connected to them...that's the big key. You want to be connected with them, you want to understand them. People love it, I mean LOVE it, when you understand them cause then you can be like: yeah I know that I did that once, it was fun right and your like yeah, I had the same reaction as that...you have something in common so that's a reaction and that's a connection that's a good vibe that's a good day!*

She made it clear throughout her interview that teachers could connect with students and vice versa by sharing stories and allowing time for personal stories to be shared in class. She felt that teachers and students could learn from one another through their personal connections and that it brought them closer and was conducive to success in school.

Positive connections with the adult role models in schools are key to the success of all youth, not just those at risk of school failure. Based on personal experience, research, and findings from this study, I would go so far as to say the number one criteria to be accepted into an educational training program (or to work in a school) should be ones' ability to build and maintain healthy, supportive relationships with young people. However, positive, supportive role models do not always exist in schools and classrooms. According to the majority of youth interviewed for this study, at least half if not more, of their interactions in schools were with teachers they felt did not care about the success of individual students:

Participant 1: [Talking about all staff in schools]...*When they don't have a smile on their face, when they look like they just want to be there for the money, not for what they actually care for. I think everyone should have a job that they actually care for and actually want to be there.*

Participant 7: *I have a lot going on so I find myself overwhelmed a lot of the time and it gets hard to come to school...knowing that I have Ms. A, the social worker/ counsellor, she really, really does help. Like if I didn't have the support from the social worker and even the daycare ladies... sometimes I have such bad days, I'll just end up going there to the daycare and cry.*

Participant 7, Sharing Another Experience: *Nobody noticed, it was like: "whatever, you don't have your work done, you're getting zeros, you're getting zeros..." nobody went out of their way to be like, oh ... I know you should be independent enough to do this on your own, but sometimes people do need a push.*

Most participants talked about staff in the alternative schools or programs with whom they easily built relationships and they explained how that supported them in coming to school and being more successful. Many noted the importance of staff in all schools who were friendly, welcoming, or understanding and how that affects young people:

Participant 9: *This school helped me a lot actually. It changed my view on school. I use to just think, I don't want to be there, don't want to do my work, don't want to see anyone there. But just being here, I like seeing all the happy faces and seeing people who want me to be here instead of like, "you NEED to be here."*

All individuals who work in schools have powerful influences on young people and students need support from the adults in their life as they work through a myriad of issues and experiences that affect them. Teachers and staff must be present, and not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. Young people in schools can tell from the adults around them when their mannerisms, facial expressions, tone, or words communicate judgment or a lack of understanding, or desire to support them. It was evident from this study that young people in schools want to be accepted by their teachers, almost more so than their peers. When they are not, when relationships and connections are not fostered and maintained, the participants in this study said they almost immediately disengaged from school.

#### **Factor 4: School Based Supports**

Schools need supports in order to help all youth be successful in school. Supports seemed most important to the participants at the elementary school level and in grade nine, a major year of transition and change. It was in these formative years that each participant spoke of

particularly troubling experiences and even trauma that affected their confidence or ability to learn in elementary school. Participants also noted that in many cases if troubles existed in school, they were exacerbated during the transition from elementary school to high school. All youth stated that schools need counsellors, social workers, or therapists of one form or another who support struggling students. It was stressed that access to these kinds of supports are crucial in schools and that many times in elementary and regular high schools, these supports were not visible or accessible.

Though the majority of special programs and alternative schools house counsellors dedicated to the school or program, the young people interviewed for this study noted that even that was not enough at times. The following suggestions were made for increased support staff in schools: counsellors, therapists, addictions supports, doctors, nurses, daycares, social services, and an increased number of educational assistants and teachers to support learning and be mindful of student issues like bullying. Many youth felt that much of their troubles in elementary school started when the things troubling them were not noticed. Accessing outside supports were difficult for them for one reason or another and for this reason many of them believed that schools should be like community centers and feel like home: “a home away from home”, was a statement echoed by four participants. Participants identified that it was the lack of supports available to deal with issues and concerns in elementary school that led to more serious issues in high school and the overall suggestion from many was: smaller schools, fewer students, and more teachers and supports; especially at the high school level.

Two youth from one alternative high school did not talk about serious issues or concerns in elementary school; however, they did communicate that what they needed most was more support upon transitioning to high school. Grade nine can be a particularly difficult year as youth go from a school usually close to home with smaller numbers, to a larger school with many new faces, classes, and experiences. High school can be exciting, yet at the same time very intimidating. Many comments reflected the concerns around the transition to high school:

*Participant 1: The thing is, I'm scared of is, I'm going to end up like my sister and become a prostitute and a drug addict really hard core...but I'm trying my best not to, its just harder, like, I'm getting older and its more like, I'm going to high school and then there's people... more who are going to offer it to me...*

Participant 4: *And then when I got to high school, I don't like... I don't know, I just didn't like the environment at the high school and I started skipping class and stuff and started moving schools.*

Participant 5: *I didn't know anybody because I'd missed a lot of school back in [elementary school] and there were only four kids who transferred from [there] to [my high school]. I wasn't close friends with any of them, I got lost very easily cause I missed the days where they tell you what you're doing and that was very stressful; and my locker was apart from everybody else's, I was sort of on my own in the hallway...*

The major theme in regards to supports Kindergarten to grade nine was that there must be enough adults in a school to notice kids and the isolation and fear they have entering a new and overwhelming environment for grade nine. All schools need enough support staff so that young people are noticed when they feel lost, alone, are struggling, desperate, and most importantly, when they stop coming and are missing altogether.

#### **Factor 5: Environment**

There were several aspects of environment that came up during the interviews. The participants discussed everything from the physical characteristics and design of the school or classroom to the general atmosphere in the school. As mentioned in the previous section being able to do the work was important for these young people; however, in terms of the environment the work often became a source of stress and animosity between students and teachers, creating environments that felt less welcoming and less supportive. Teachers and other staff members could also contribute to environments that were more or less than ideal. If staff were assuming, judgmental, or generally lacking understanding for the needs of the students it impacted these participants tremendously. Finally, peers, supports, or activities offered in the school also communicated to young people whether or not they were in a place that would welcome them or turn them away. One word to summarize the overall feeling from the youth in this study was “welcoming”, they all wanted schools to be welcoming. If a school gave an overall impression of acceptance and support (physical, social, emotional, or academic) the youth felt they would be successful.

The environment in the school needs to be one of acceptance and support, no matter the students' commitment or lack thereof to academics and learning outcomes. In fact many youth stated that guidance, reminders, and support to finish work were most often the best strategies to help them stay on track. Pressure, threats of expulsion, mounting piles of missing assignments,

zero's and the threat of failure without support to make up for missed work turned young people off of school and perpetuated a very negative perception of the schools environment. Many of the participants commented on how students should *want* to be at school as opposed to feeling like they *have* to be there and that teachers needed to support youth to be successful, not threaten them when they were not:

Participant 9: *Like if somebody misses a week or something, or two weeks then they don't get kicked out. They could get help or catch up with another teacher or something on the side, like on a side note. Like resource that's where you go to catch up in classes and stuff like that; get your work done or even get the help that you need with those classes. If you tell someone that they have to be here or they have to do it or they're gone and they can't come back you know that's not what they want to hear. They want the support for [things] that they need.*

The participants commented on the fact that people cannot be forced to come to school or do the work. The environment in the school needs to be one where the students feel welcomed and supported. Many youth stated that when the environment in the school was punitive or stressful they felt angry or ashamed and would stay away from school longer:

Participant 6: *Teachers are nice when they're supportive, but they're not pressuring you to do everything...I got sick one day and the rest of the days I skipped...they would question me why was I not at school, cause they knew I skipped and I just said I was sick and then he'd always threaten to call my mom if I was, it was just pissing me off like that.*

Participant 8: *Teachers would get mad at me, students would make fun of me for not having my homework done you know like I at lunch time trying to finish an assignment for the next class and people coming up and coming towards me and being like: oooh you're in trouble...I didn't want to go back because I was too scared about how much work I had piled up.*

The physical, emotional, and social environment in schools and classrooms were important to all the youth as well. Each participant felt that in some way his or her mainstream school environment contributed as a barrier to success in school. In elementary school a common theme was that peers were judgmental and teachers were either equally judgmental or dismissive of the reality of student's needs. When talking about how she would design a dream school, one participant made this point about a welcoming judge free atmosphere:

Participant 1: *My school's going to have everyone; it's a judge free place so you can be bisexual, gay, lesbian, anything like that. You can show up and no one will judge you. I wanted a second home and I know some people that do want a second home because they want to get away from the trouble or they just want to get away and actually be... you know have fun where they are and be feel respected...say they didn't feel respected or*

*loved at their home or cared for or anything. I'd want them to feel like that at the school. I want them to really bring out who they are at the school.*

Most youth also recommended (in regards to physical environment) that smaller schools with more staff held the key to successful happy students because of their increased ability to connect with and have time for students. Each youth who had attended a mainstream high school spoke about feeling overwhelmed with the size and number of students and classes in regular schools. They talked about the teacher's expectations and a lack of individualized support. The alternative school environments and special programs were without question the starting point for each youth when they talked of designing a dream school.

They all felt that the school or program they were currently enrolled in was perfect for them and others who needed a little extra support to be successful should attend schools or programs like the ones they were in. Each youth felt that an increased number of smaller schools with more staff would be the ideal environments in which to be successful. The only opportunities missing in the smaller environments were extra-curricular options, more advanced classes, hands-on-learning opportunities, and classes tailored to specific skill building or training:

*Participant 7: I All those [mainstream] schools they have the same thing in common, it's too big... they don't have time to worry about individual students. I could miss weeks at a time and they didn't care.*

That being said, this student noted that feeling welcomed and accepted superseded all other missing aspects of mainstream programming:

*Participant 2: I feel like I belong here [in an alternative school].*

This participant continued on to discuss the cultural programming available in one school she attended. Though she left that school due to issues with the daycare she enjoyed having access to a culturally focused environment:

*Participant 2: I really liked the First Nations aspect of it, like they have talking circles and speakers come in and different successful First Nations people that will come in and talk to other kids, and they smudge everyday and they have, like, they're always singing. I really liked that.*

The environment, mandate, and programs offered or not offered in a school also had an impact on the students and how they felt about themselves. For example, if the school portrayed an environment that was less academically focused it affected the youth:

Participant 7: *I mean I don't know what they can do about that or if they can do something about that but it would be really nice if they could, if they could see it the way our students see it. Because I know I'm not the only one who thinks like that, all my friends say: "oh everybody says or thinks its just a modified school" and its like no it's not, we just want to show you that, it's not, we want to do the same things you guys do.*

Students can also dictate the environment in the school and participate in welcoming other students or contribute to further alienation:

Participant 2: *Everyone there kind of knew each other and it's kind of it felt like a closed environment.*

*I didn't know anyone and I tried to talk to people and they were like "oh do you smoke?" and I'd be like "no I don't smoke" and they'd be like "okay I'm gonna go outside. Nice meeting you..."*

What participants communicated most about alternative school settings was that fewer judgmental and more supportive peers existed in the school, helping to foster an environment where they felt accepted. The students' would support each other, knowing that the students' were diverse and they were all there because they needed something from an alternative school, that their mainstream school could not offer them. It was like they spoke of belonging to a group of peers who belonged there, because they did not belong anywhere else:

Participant 2: *There's a lot of different people here and they don't really exclude you; um it doesn't really matter who you are here. I feel like I belong here.*

All of the youth in this study agreed, the support they received from the smaller school surpassed that in larger schools or regular elementary schools, and that was the necessary trade-off for the missing aspects mainstream schools could offer. However, most wished the smaller schools would have more classes to choose from and "beyond basics" programming. All of the youth felt that due to their life experiences they needed smaller schools and more specialized programming, but all wanted access to the things mainstream schools offered that helped to push youth forward in their goals for a successful future.

### **Factor 6: Peers**

Closely related to environment and relationships was the peer factor. Codes counted in the transcripts towards this factor related mostly to friends and enemies within the school. Almost all youth remembered being bullied and a couple reported a memory of being severely

bullied by peers. Mostly youth talked about feeling isolated, not having friends or lacking the ability to cultivate friendships in environments where they felt out of place:

Focus Group: *Its like school ain't hard enough without being bullied for looks then my sexuality...*

Participant 2: *I didn't have any friends and I didn't know anyone and the environment wasn't very opening [meaning open]*

The staff at school in many of the special programs or alternative schools served as supports in place of peers for many of these youth:

Participant 7: *When I first came here I didn't really have any friends but it didn't affect me at all because all I do, like at my lunch period, I'm in the daycare spending it with my son, breaks I spend it with my son... I've learned how to do it by myself, all my friends abandoned me when I was pregnant and they never really came around.*

Overall there was a general feeling of being out of place in school or targeted specifically. Many of the youth felt their peers had license to treat them badly because teachers did not notice or seem to care about the negative interactions of the students:

Participant 7: *I got stuck in another grade and everybody laughed at me cause I was older, I was taller than everybody and I couldn't speak proper Spanish and so I really struggled there cause that school definitely caught me off guard like it was really, really intense and really hard.*

Participant 8: *because none of it was physical bullying it really was just verbal bullying you know and a lot of it was just like walking by us and saying something rude or something mean or making fun us or something; so it was kind of really easily hidden from the teachers. I kind of grew up more in a poor family, a lot of the people in my class were pretty rich, or came from a rich family so you know as a kid that division wasn't seen as much, but as we grew older and I wore less fancy clothes and that kind of stuff, there was more of that.*

Elementary schools were reported as apparent breeding grounds for peers to attack and ostracize each other and the fact that many students are together from Kindergarten through to grade eight created environments where if you did not fit in from the beginning that only got worse as you got older:

Participant 8: *Also breaking the grades apart a bit more so we're not with the same people for a full eight years because after a while that gets to the point where the people who didn't fit in are never going to fit in and the people who are popular aren't popular for eight years*

For those with many transitions in elementary school the cliques and groups that form in early elementary made it hard for new students to fit in. Many of the participants simply learned to be alone and many went through elementary school feeling like having friends was a luxury not afforded them:

Participant 7: *I just learned how to be my own person I don't need a social group to fit in like I'm fine with like being by myself it doesn't really affect me.*

For most of these participants the alternative school or special program they attended served as an environment conducive to making friends. All but two students talked about the ease at which they cultivated friendships in their alternative schools. As educators in schools we cannot control how youth treat each other, especially when we are not around; however, we can control what we expect and accept in our schools and classrooms and we can be leaders who support young people in a judge free manner and accept all youth for who they are. If the leaders in the school promote and stand up for anti-bullying policies and follow through with consequences for school bullies we can help support young people who struggle to make friends. It is important to notice students who are often alone and support them to make friends even when they do not speak up for themselves.

### **Factor 7: Mental Health and Addictions**

The number of youth in this study who disclosed issues or concerns around mental health and/or addictions was surprising. All but two brought one or the other or both factors up in their interview. Some youth mentioned these factors in passing and they did not seem to make any connection to the impact one or the other had in their life. Others provided descriptive accounts of worries or struggles related to their mental health or addictions as noted in these three accounts:

Participant 1 (Talking about drug use): *My whole family technically has, well my mom has, my dad, and my sister, all been hard core drug addicts, so it's kind of like it could happen to me or it won't, that's the thing, I'm just nervous, I'm just waiting for life, to, to see, waiting for it...*

Participant 7: *I stayed clean my entire pregnancy, as soon as I found out, I had to go to the hospital twice cause I was like going through really bad withdrawals.*

Participant 9: *A lot of thoughts of hopelessness and everything, I ended up in the hospital that year, for depression. I had actually tried to commit suicide a couple times, so that would be why I ended up in the hospital.*

Accounts of struggles with mental health or addictions were closely tied to supports in the schools, including that of the teachers. It was very important to all the youth who discussed this factor that their teachers would be there to support them in a judge free manner:

*Participant 8: If we are having a difficult day, like whenever I have a down day here and I feel down in the dumps, every single teacher notices that I am down in the dumps and then tells me; if you need somebody to talk to my door is open.*

Many youth from this study accessed supports within the school to help them deal with depression, anxiety, and drug addiction and they were thankful for the supports, stating that it was not always easy to discuss these things with parents and it was not always easy to access supports outside of school. In the following quote, this participant is noting the importance of access to supports within the school because her life outside of school is hectic and busy. She felt that if she could see a therapist in the school it would provide her with an opportunity to seek support when she normally did not have time to do so:

*Participant 7: I know there's a few students who do struggle with depression here and who need that extra. It's hard especially, for example, for me, I'm always working and if not I'm always with my baby when do I have time to go.*

All schools offer supports for youth; however, many mainstream schools have a limited number of counsellors and they are shared between several schools. In addition, in a lot of cases, the counsellors are trained to offer generalized supports and not intensive therapy. When young people cannot count on their parents or families to get them the support they need, they rely on the school. If their needs go unnoticed the problems exacerbate. A myriad of supports must be offered in schools and be visible as viable means of support for students. All of the youth recognized the need for these supports in schools and acknowledge the importance of these supports in schools, even if they did not access them.

### **Factor 8: Transitions**

All of the youth spoke about the difficulty with school transitions and in fact the number of times the participants in this group transitioned from one school to another was quite high. The average number of transitions per youth was five, with one youth transitioning a total of nine times. The ways in which the youth spoke about transitions was two fold: on one hand some felt that a move or a transition to a new school offered a fresh start and on the other hand it further isolated the youth and put them behind in their studies. Transitions, in most cases worsened mental health concerns and affected academic achievement. Few youth spoke specifically about

how transitions affected them, nor did many of them reflect on the sheer number of transitions in their school careers, beyond listing them. However, each youth acknowledged transitions with their answers to question four (describing school experiences Kindergarten to Grade 12).

In response to question six, when the youth talked about designing a dream school and they listed elements crucial to success in school, many spoke of schools that were so diverse in services offered that students would not have to leave in order to receive special supports. One participant even suggested that a school with services from Kindergarten through to University would be ideal. Others offered suggestions around middle schools, in addition to modified or alternative classes and programs that could be offered in the same building to minimize transitions for youth who needed supports.

All youth who were in high school felt the transition to high school to be particularly difficult:

Participant 4: *It was a large switch, I was changing schools, I didn't know anybody.*

Participant 5: *Most of the kids, about 90% of them, knew each other, so that even if they weren't close friends before they were at a new school so they sort of hung together.*

I did not expect transitions to emerge as a theme; however, as was evident in the analysis of all interview transcripts it was directly or indirectly mentioned as a very influential aspect of schooling for these young people. Many of the youth I have encountered in my own work in a special program and alternative high school have transitioned through many different school environments. They are unfortunately used to starting over and just as it was with the participants in this study transitions affect them emotionally, socially, and academically for years to come.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Elementary schools and mainstream high schools emerged as being places where these youth felt distress, loneliness, and uncertainty and where they shouldered many burdens and barriers without perceived support. Many of them felt they were not connected to their peers and educators and they needed supports that were often times not available in the school. Many went through various traumatic experiences in school or at home and slowly disengaged from school. The result was young people who were referred to or chose to attend school in an alternate setting in order to get the support they needed to complete school.

Each participant benefitted from an alternate setting and gained a great deal from the supports offered within those schools. These settings were places where the youth began to feel respected, appreciated, accepted, and supported through staff and curriculum that provided relevant learning opportunities and a chance to be successful and this made them happy. In many cases these young people no longer felt like misfits in school. They were in an environment where they belonged and for the first time in their lives could reasonably expect that they would be successful in school.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

*Lack of success in school not only places severe limits on the career options and earning potential of a young person; there are also potential social and psychological repercussions from failing at something so highly regarded in conventional society, and these may affect the growth of an individual long before they leave school.*  
(Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997, p. 355)

The goal of this research was to determine what educators could do to help prevent school failure and foster successful school experiences for youth at risk. The following research question guided the study:

***What factors are most relevant to the success or failure in school for youth at risk?***

If youth become alienated through impersonal interactions in schools, a lack of supports, or an over emphasis on academic expectations that supersede that of other expectations and beliefs within the school, it can lead to academic struggle. Indirectly, all 12 participants in this study communicated that a dissatisfaction with school can be perpetuated among those most vulnerable when schools are inflexible, cold, unwelcoming, or not understanding of diversity thereby increasing the need for an alternative school placement. If school divisions wish to decrease the need for such programs, groundwork can first be done in elementary schools and then in the area of high school transition to foster genuine relationships, learning, and continuity of the skills necessary to complete high school. Strategies include an emphasis on the social and emotional skills needed to navigate what can be a difficult environment at times in the school. The message from these participants was clear that continued enforcement of open, caring, accepting, and safe practices that are conducive to students feeling connected and wanted in the school must be adhered to.

When a staff member in a school notices a student disengaging it can be a clear sign that something is going on in the students' life. Whether or not the disengagement happened as a result of something at school, the teacher or staff in the school have two choices: (a) figure out the source of the disengagement and work with the student to reengage or motivate them, or (b) ignore the problem, remain static with expectations and move on. The participants in this study experienced the later more often than not and that led to referrals, school suspension or expulsion, and the involvement of school administration; none of which (in their minds) was conducive to success in school. If teachers and staff in schools avoid making judgments about a

student's reason for disengaging and instead ask the student what is wrong, they increase the chance that they may be a catalyst for the student and they can make a plan to support him or her instead of risking further alienation.

The results of this study concur with the literature on student engagement and alienation in that not all schools and teachers provide flexible classrooms with expectations and curriculums that are developed with student input and this can have a detrimental effect on student engagement and thus school completion (McMillan, Reed and Bishop, 1992; Ornstein, 2011; Schulz and Rubel, 2011; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, and Kindermann, 2008; Yount, 2010). The participants in this study became "escape motivated" and disengaged from school when their teachers did not succeed at engaging or motivating them to become resilient learners (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006, p. 6). The special programs or alternative schools they attended after leaving a mainstream environment became the kinds of places that motivated them to get back on track. Almost all eight factors worked in unison in the alternative schools and special programs and holistically those schools met the students' needs. Special education programs and alternative schools were clearly seen as a necessity by these 12 youth. Any policy designed to phase special programs or alternative schools out should consider the ramifications of doing so, and the detrimental effect it may have on youth at risk in their community.

The most prevalent message implied by the youth was that mainstream schools must be aware that not all young people, regardless of risk enhancing factors, come to school with everything they need to be successful in school. Not everyone has the support they need at home or within their peer groups to mature socially, emotionally, academically, and behaviourally and experience the success of completing high school. If the curriculum in each school can be tailored to meet the needs of the unique assemblage of people that exist in that environment then risk can be reduced. The youth in this study disengaged when they felt that their teachers or schools did not understand them, believe them, or support them.

An undeniable theme emerged from the analysis of the interviews: not all mainstream elementary schools were equipped to handle the diverse needs of youth at risk or youth with risk enhancing factors that could become barriers to their success in school. The need for schools to either: (a) provide supports, services, and staff capable of supporting a myriad of needs in all schools, or (b) increase the number of alternative settings that can support those needs became

apparent. Either way the participants encouraged the continued support of programs and schools that work to support struggling youth.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In this section the eight factors revealed through this study as conducive to success or failure in school for the participants are defined, discussed, and linked to student success or failure in light of curriculum and other important elements at work in schools. Suggestions or recommendations are made where appropriate based on either direct statements from the youth or the researchers interpretation of experiences.

#### **1. Teachers**

Though it can generally be accepted that most teachers are kind, caring, and understanding, the 12 participants in this study reflected on vastly different experiences with teachers. Noddings (2005) wrote:

It is sometimes said that ‘all teachers care.’ It is because they care that people go into teaching. However, this is not universally true; we all have known teachers who are cruel and uncaring, and these people should not be in teaching at all. (p. 1)

In some cases these youth loved their teachers, and spoke of “good” teachers who excelled at their ability to connect to students. These teachers had a sense of humor, related to the students struggles, provided them with support, and taught them skills and concepts with enthusiasm. “Good” teachers not only had a keen knowledge of the content areas in which they taught, they had a keen understanding of the students’ needs and effectively weaved them together with curriculum. In a review of all 477 pages of coded transcripts the word *love* was used to describe teachers 25 times; speaking to the very real connections these youth had with the quality teachers they encountered.

Alternatively, “bad” teachers were described as boring or disinterested and lacking in empathy or understanding. Some ignored bullying behaviour or were sometimes bullies themselves. Some were not engaging, and could be judgmental, stereotypical, or condescending. One participant went so far as to describe her teachers as “nasty, horrible, people” (Participant 5). The participants each talked about experiences where they felt that their teachers not only did not care about them or their struggles to be happy and engaged in school, but that they sometimes, mocked them or outright did not believe their issues to be relevant. Some participants reflected on being suspended or threatened with expulsion because of their incomplete

work or lack of attendance at school. Participants with these experiences noted that it was never a good strategy to effect change:

Teachers set the tone in their classrooms. Despite school division policies or specific school procedures, teachers conveyed the opinions of the school community to these young people in their buildings. If students got the impression they were unwanted, not good enough, or on the path to failure with piles of missing assignments, they gave up. It is not surprising that alienated or stressed out young people are at risk of dropping out of school: “Students who are unable to participate successfully in daily classroom instruction, look for ways to escape what they perceive as a highly aversive situation” (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006, p. 6).

The school can be viewed as a “primary institution outside the family within which the development of adolescents can be directed and shaped” and if we aim to shape young people into valuable, hardworking, and caring members of the communities in which they live, we must model those values ourselves in our schools and classrooms and work with students to develop plans to be successful as opposed to further alienating them with threats, and pressure to complete an impossible number of missing assignments (Johnson, 1998, p. 101). Several youth talked about teachers who would apply pressure through threats of failing and conveying a general feeling of never being able to catch up on the work and that simply pushed these youth further away from the school. At some point it should become evident in any situation that focusing on the missing or incomplete work will not benefit the student and in-fact could prove harmful.

All youth in this study agreed that good teachers were kind, caring, and displayed qualities that went beyond their ability to deliver the curriculum. Youth from a variety of backgrounds in various other research reports also concurred with the key characteristics of good teachers identified by the youth in this study (Corbett & Wilson, 2002; McIntyre & Battle, 1998; Thomas & Montgomery, 1998). Good teachers were characterized by their caring and understanding personalities, their ability to manage the classroom and set limits, show flexibility, knowledge of the content areas, sense of humour, and in general their ability to build up students’ self-worth through mutually respectful relationships.

All participants agreed that alternative schools and special programs were overwhelmingly comprised of good teachers and by contrast the experiences of these youth in mainstream schools were far more negative. During interviews with over 400 students attending

inner city, low-income schools, Corbett and Wilson (2002) found that “the students never wavered in identifying their teachers as the main factor determining how much they learned” (p. 18). In this study the teacher as the number one factor in student success tremendously outweighed the other factors. Out of 2100 coded responses, one quarter of the responses were related to the teachers and their role in student success or failure.

## **2. The Work**

In 1897, John Dewey made a famous declaration regarding education. He wrote that learning is both psychological and sociological and that schools must be places where young people can learn about life through experiences that are closely tied to the connections and teachings they have received in the home. He believed that education was life, and conversely that life was education. This notion of the school working in tandem with learning experiences gleaned in the home, amongst peers, and in the community continues to be true today. The only differences are that schools have become even more essential in supporting the increasing number of children at risk due to poverty, trauma, disruptions in family units, and other factors affecting stability at home.

All of the participants in this study talked about the work or the curriculum and either referenced that it needed to be inclusive of real life educational experiences that were relevant to them, or at the very least the work needed to be engaging and interesting. Several participants noted that success in school meant learning how to do the things you needed to do, to become who you wanted to be in life. The schoolwork was always connected to their future career goals and it was important to these participants that in order for school to be engaging it had to be relevant to them. For many of them, they left school altogether when they could not make connections to the work as being relevant for their future.

Other participants noted that in order to be appropriately challenged at school they had to be completing work that was interesting. Boredom came from repetitive work, rote activities, or seemingly meaningless tasks. These youth wanted to be challenged through creative activities where they had the opportunity to express their individual talents and share their own unique ideas. If the work was not meaningful to them they disengaged, eventually leading to further problems in school. One youth noted that so much of the schoolwork was research based; yet there were limited ways to express your own creative side to connect to the work and make it meaningful for you. Copying material off of a whiteboard or taking notes from textbooks

frustrated some of the participants to the point where they lashed out at teachers or ran away from school.

If the goal of education is for young people to be successful by staying in school, then the learning must be individualized, relevant, and student-centered (Aoki, 1993; Bloom, 1981; Dewey, 1940; Glasser, 1982, 1986, 1997; Maslow, 1943; Montessori, 1912/2009; Noddings, 1995; Rogers, 1979; Rousseau, 1762. When asked for feedback on what the schoolwork should be like many of the youth noted highly relevant life skills in addition to learning about science, language, writing, and mathematics. The participants were interested in learning about the trades, being offered hands on opportunities to practice skills in real environments, and in general, they wanted to be prepared for the future with first aid training, home economics, learning how to swim, and be active; they wanted to experience things that were important to them verses what a textbook told them to do. Young people continue to need educational institutions and educators who see them first as an integral part to the process of curriculum planning.

Regardless of how or what we define as curriculum, if we regard education as “a preparation for life, to learn to live, to give the child what he needs, or will need to know, to develop good citizens; to develop well-rounded, happy, efficient individuals” (Dewey, 1940, p. 269), we will be better prepared to find ways to engage and motivate young people. What Dewey described at the heart of successful teaching, throughout his work, were students who left feeling prepared to take on the world, and not only prepared, but happy about their upcoming journey into adult life.

### **3. Relationships to Staff**

The message repeated in this study was that if students have positive and respectful relationships with staff in schools they have a better chance of being successful. If positive, supportive relationships were nurtured then the participants felt noticed, respected, supported, and understood, and as a result they came to school. When the opposite was true, they stayed away. If schools plan to nurture positive relationships that go beyond that of mere academic support then they recognize and teach to the *whole child* (Noddings, 1995). Schools are institutions from which children can be supported through positive supportive role models who encourage them not just academically, but socially, emotionally, behaviourally, and spiritually and the teacher does not have to be the only one responsible for this task.

School administrators, counsellors, support staff, volunteers and even peers contribute to a positive caring environment conducive to fostering relationships in schools. Children grow and learn within their relationships and they flourish in emotionally rich environments (Perry, 2013). Young people who feel alienated, isolated, alone, harassed, or bullied in their relationships run the risk of shutting down and a temporary barrier develops, affecting their learning potential. From a developmental perspective, positive, supportive relationships foster learning and growth and they help to develop healthy attachments:

Successful youth development is strongly associated with access to caring, supportive adults. Young people in all kinds of communities who are involved in negative behavior (sex, drugs, violence) often lack any connection to responsible adults. On the other hand, young people who live in very deprived circumstances do much better if they experience consistent and sustained attachment to adults. (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002, p. 10)

When people grow up with healthy attachments it benefits everyone in a community. In an examination of factors related to high school drop-out rates, Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) found that “early school failure may act as a starting point in a cycle that weakens student’s attachment to school and eventually leads to dropping out” (p. 326). Their findings also supported the “observation that students who feel a sense of belonging and are connected to school are less likely to drop out of school” (p. 333). The young people who participated in this study experienced many disrupted attachments early in life, either at home or in school, meaning that their teachers and other support staff in schools had the potential to be highly relevant factors in their success. When these youth felt connected to teachers and staff they stayed in school. When they did not feel connected or positively supported by the staff in the schools they disengaged.

The youth in this study all noted that a sense of belonging in school included, but was not limited to: smiling faces, welcoming staff, friendly peers, and relevant learning opportunities. Good schools nurtured student success beyond that of academics, providing environments that showed students unconditional acceptance and support. When the school was not accepting of diversity, and social, emotional, and academic challenges were not addressed with care, the students felt alienated. The participants in this study frequently commented on these types of discriminating environments. For each youth their experience in an alternative school or special program was positive and not at all a place where they felt alienated or discriminated. Johnson

(2009) described mainstream high schools as “potent breeding grounds of alienation and boredom” (p. 99), and in light of what the participants in this study had to say, they would concur.

#### **4. School Based Supports**

A great deal was learned about mainstream schools through the course of this study despite the fact that the study was intended to focus on alternative schools and special programs. The participants essentially agreed that their regular elementary schools and high schools were set up to teach to kids who were not really struggling with anything personally, socially, emotionally, or academically. In addition, the regular schools were also not designed (nor had the staff) to adequately support mental health, understand addictions, or handle trauma and other personal struggles for the youth in school or at home. The literature on youth at risk echoes their concerns, “One of the most fundamental reforms needed in secondary and high school education is to make schools into better communities of caring and support for young people” (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan 1996, p. 74-75).

The elementary schools and mainstream high schools attended by these youth were described mostly as places where they felt stereotyped, judged, bullied, average, alone, and in some cases un-noticed. When concerns arose for them, teachers and staff in the school either jumped to conclusions, pushed them away by ignoring their concerns, did not notice any troubling behaviour, and in some cases highlighted their faults to peers and other staff in a condescending manner. All of the youth felt they were not safe emotionally, socially, or academically in most of their elementary schools and that the supports available in those schools were insufficient to help them handle difficult and at times traumatic situations.

For youth with a heightened awareness and sensitivity to surrounding stimuli every day can be a challenge. Youth like those interviewed in this research who reported a number of social or emotional health concerns, academic struggles, and/or a lack of support from home desperately needed support and role models in the school to ensure they did not disengage. The personalities and expectations of the staff in the schools combined with environmental factors impacted their learning significantly. It was discovered that when these students’ basic needs for safety, survival, and support, were compromised they either could not or would not engage in the learning activities in the school. With much on their minds or simply no connection with anyone at school they slowly disappeared. Some stayed home avoiding school, some turned to drugs, or

alcohol, some surrounded themselves with negative peers, and a couple continued to come to school daily, but felt isolated and alone in doing so.

The alternative settings these youth found themselves in following trauma, turmoil, or disengagement helped to reengage them. All youth felt these alternative environments were opportunities for a fresh start and new beginnings. All of the youth communicated goals for themselves to complete high school and go on to other pursuits and each felt adequately supported in reaching those goals in their alternative educational settings. An increase to early interventions available in mainstream school environments, especially at the elementary school level may be crucial to support young people at risk of school failure.

## **5. Environment**

Research in the area of School Wide Positive Behaviour Supports (SWPBS) outlines several criteria pertaining to productive school cultures. SWPBS research showed that productive schools are places where all students can be successful and this can be achieved when the school environment is predictable, positive, safe, and consistent (Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005). Furthermore, Horner, et. al. (2005) concluded that SWPBS benefitted youth by reducing problem behaviour, increasing student engagement, improving academic performance, and improving family involvement through an overall more supportive school environment. None of the youth in this study felt that their elementary school experiences met those criteria.

These youth wanted to practice essential life skills in school. They wanted to succeed or fail, be supported to move on, or try again, and thus become strengthened as individuals. Gossen (2002) defined environments like this based on a restitution philosophy. Restitution is a simple philosophy to follow and has shown incredible results. The teacher simply acts as a classroom facilitator or manager, creating conditions for students to fix mistakes and return to the group feeling supported and strengthened. In 2006 a report was compiled based on the evidence from a restitution based, whole school philosophy, pilot project. The results were astonishing:

In 1999 the Saskatoon School Board did a study and found, to its surprise, that in the previous decade not one student who had graduated from Princess Alexandra had gone on to graduate from high school. In the past four years the board decided to support Restitution training, and dramatic changes are taking place. The school has gone from thirty-seven incidents of discipline a day to two per day. 55% of the students are now at

the median scores of the Canadian Test of Basic Skills, whereas three years ago it was 7%. In the third year each student who left grade one could read. (Restitution Schools Report, 2006, p. 3)

I have seen restitution change the entire environment in a school and classroom, as I have used this philosophy for over a decade to create classroom environments that were safe, comfortable, and conducive to learning in all domains (socially, emotionally, behaviourally, and, academically). I do not understand why a relatively simple school wide environment changing philosophy lost steam so early in 2000. In place of all other courses, training programs, and philosophies I have encountered in 15 years working with children and youth, I have seen nothing as simple and effective to implement that in turn also has such a powerful effect on the school environment as restitution.

## **6. Peers**

Peer relationships emerged as a factor separate from other school-based relationships and played a role for many participants as a factor related to disengagement from school, or increased stress at school. Regarding peer relationships, the participants had varied experiences: some talked about being bullied, harassed, and judged by their peers; others talked about feeling isolated and not having friends; some youth talked about negative peer influences in relation to the use of drugs or alcohol; and a couple youth stated they did not need or really want friends and that other people in their lives filled those roles, either at school or at home. One or two participants talked about having a best friend and most talked about relating better to the adults in schools, as those were people they relied on in place of parents and friends.

Throughout the literature on youth at risk of school failure, peer relationships are explored as factors relevant to success or lack thereof in school and many conclude similar results to this study: that peers do play a major role in a young persons' success in school (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997; Hong, & Espelage 2012; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Masten and Coatsworth (1998) stress that it is critical to all of us that children grow up into productive and competent members of society. They contend that healthy adults exist as a result of adolescents who have experienced positive school interactions with peers and educators in positive school environments that were conducive to school completion. They also noted that peer influences played a major role as a factor in resilience against negative life influences, trauma, and other generally "unfavorable environments", noting that, "In school-aged children,

peer acceptance and popularity have been associated with better achievement, higher IQ, and many other positive attributes” (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 209).

The participants in this study emphasized that, for young people struggling in school the quality of their friendships and relationships within the school significantly impacted their levels of stress and thus their ability to stay connected to the school. Because being connected to the school fostered a general feeling of well being, positive interactions supported a minimal level of stress and a connection to the school conducive to success. Conversely, stress from the fear generated by school bullies, a sense that they had no friends, or stress regarding peers they wished they could count on, were noted as being directly linked to higher stress and leaving school. Increased stress can be linked to a myriad of life-long consequences as well, and schools, where young people spend the majority of their lives outside of the home, should not be places conducive to high levels of stress (McEwan, 2000).

Stress and increased risks of depression, anxiety, and further social isolation well after school completion are possible side effects of repeated exposure to negative interactions with others (McEwan, 2000; Ouellet-Morin, Wong, Danese, Pariente, Papadopoulos, Mill, & Arseneault, 2013). When people are young there are certain behaviours that are accepted or even excused in schools, knowing full well that if an adult were displaying similar behaviours there would be dire consequences. Bullying cannot be underestimated in schools, specifically in terms of its impact on young people. The youth in this study repeatedly stated that the bullying they saw in schools went unnoticed, therefore, not properly dealt with by staff and students. Not only can adolescence be a period where friendships and peer support are essential, but it can be a period where without support, solutions, and follow-up regarding negative peer interactions, young people suffer in school and risk dropping out with potentially detrimental effects later in life with the stress following them well into adulthood (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Idsoe, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2012).

## **7. Mental Health and Addictions**

Ten out of the 12 youth in this study spoke about concerns regarding mental health and/or addictions. Physical and Health Education Canada (2014) reported that one in five children in Canada under the age of 18 suffered from at least one mental health concern or illness. Mental Health and addictions concerns are a significant concern in schools and the need for teachers and support staff that are trained and understand the delicate nature of mental health are imperative:

The critical value of appropriate in-class and practical teacher preparation, especially in the area of whole health and mental health, is underscored by research which suggests that the more preparation teachers receive, the more efficacy and success they will achieve with their students. (Physical Health and Education Canada, 2014, p. 15)

It will be increasingly important for teachers to receive training even as pre-service educators in programs that support mental health in schools across the country.

If one in five youth in mainstream Canadian schools are struggling with mental health concerns, it could be that in alternative education that number is much higher, as was seen with this study. Often supports are lacking in schools, but teachers who are frontline employees, work directly with youth, and as one of the constants in a young person's life, their skill and ability to support mental health and addictions issues could be crucial.

Physical and Health Education Canada (2014) suggested a need for a strategic and coordinated approach through the following set of three core values to support mental health in schools:

1. Teaching practices must be culturally relevant and strengths-based, and incorporate a child-centered, family-driven approach.
2. Strong school-family-community partnerships are a necessary foundation for provision of appropriate and effective learning supports.
3. *Whole child* perspectives and developmentally appropriate approaches are essential.

They further suggested that plans be made for meaningful changes to teacher education programs, curriculum, and supports available in schools. Manion, Short, and Ferguson (2013) noted that mental health and addictions problems lent themselves to increased academic failure and future unemployment, therefore, supporting much research that supports providing mental health services in "natural settings," such as schools (p. 120).

Weston, Anderson, and Burke's (2008) research into mental health concerns and supports in schools, connected mental health with curriculum planning and teaching; they stated, "Schools are a natural environment in which to address the healthy social and emotional development of children and to provide early intervention when development goes awry" (p. 26). Educated teachers could be proactive and responsive to the needs of young people with lessons and activities that reach out to the whole health of young people. Several youth in this study noted that mental health should be an integral part of the curriculum, citing that if they

themselves were not in need of support, others in the school likely were. Education and health have similar goals and much work has been done in Saskatchewan to support youth with mental health in schools. However, the results of this study suggest that more can be done to meet the needs of young people with earlier interventions that continue throughout school to provide easy access to mental health and addictions services in schools.

## **8. Transitions**

The participants of this study identified periods of transition in their lives as particularly troubling and for each of them navigating social, emotional, and academic environments was at times difficult. If significant burdens, barriers, challenges, or worries are present in addition to a transition then a person might feel an increased sense of isolation and loneliness, just as several of the participants in this study reported. Compound challenging circumstances with multiple transitions and/or a difficult home life and you increase the possibility of being significantly at risk of not completing high school. Adequate supports are a must, including trained staff in positions within the school that are capable of meeting students various needs, especially during transitions that can either be brought on by the student, family, or the school.

The importance of teachers, support staff, and administration being open, accepting, genuine, friendly, welcoming, supportive, and understanding of their diverse needs was highlighted in many of the interviews and the participants felt a heightened need for this especially when they were new to a school. Avoiding unnecessary transitions is important because like several of the participants, many youth at risk have experienced multiple transitions in life:

Student mobility has a negative effect on school performance, above and beyond the impact of other stressful features of a child's life...Some of the negative consequences associated with student mobility include: lower math and reading test scores, an increased risk of behavior problems, and a higher likelihood of being held back a grade. Student mobility has also been shown to impact school completion and expected educational attainment. (Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008, p. 2)

As a result of this research the youth communicated clear needs and concerns regarding the schools they attended. They were not only able to share positive or negative experiences in schools, but also made suggestions for schools to improve service delivery. Appendix D contains an extensive list of qualities (organized by factor) summarized directly from the youth

transcripts. The chart format is designed as a quick reference for educators in terms of how the youth viewed positive experiences in “good” schools and negative experience in “bad” schools. The chart can be used as a visual reference in order to see clearly how the youth felt when they were in a school conducive to success or one that contributed to failure.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

The following list summarizes the researcher’s conclusions from the students’ experiences in this study specifically and they are presented as suggestions for either further study or recommendations for practice.

1. High quality teacher education programs that include training and support in mental health, addictions, and special education, for all pre-service and active teachers should be implemented.
2. There are strong arguments for intensive interdisciplinary supports in all mainstream elementary schools; RTI or Restitution based models seem to be appropriate models for considering the needs of the students and planning in response to presenting behaviours, be they academic, social, emotional, or behavioural, but the emphasis can not be on increased data collection.
3. Human Resources: prevention of school failure starts with increased supports (educational assistants, counsellors, other support staff, and resources) in all schools. Emphasize that staff working in schools appreciate their roles as having evolved; and understand that they are in a position of significant power and influence over young people.
4. Early interventions in elementary schools are necessary, including: a focus on bullying prevention, respect for diversity, understanding and support for mental health, academic support, relationship building, and an overall school focus on the safety and comfort level of the students.
5. The consideration of a middle years education model stacked with supports for adolescents is something that might support the unique needs of adolescents at that age. The middle years were an area of real concern and a period of disengagement for all the youth in this study.

6. Increased transitional support: grade 9 was specifically a period of intense stress and disengagement for some, especially when elementary school was difficult. Increased supports in grade 9 are needed in mainstream schools.
7. Alternate education settings are a necessity for an inevitable 5% (or more) of youth who struggle in mainstream classrooms; the closure and downsizing of special programs and alternative schools would be detrimental for struggling youth.

### **Future Directions for Research, Practice, and Educational Policy**

Recently the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education seconded two professionals, as advisors, to complete research with a Student First approach. At about the same time, I was speaking to young people for the purpose of this small-scale qualitative study, two educators, Russ Merasty and Patricia Prowse (2014) explored barriers and challenges to success throughout the province in a much larger study. They found places in our province where education and student success should be celebrated and replicated and they culminated their research with the preparation of a *Student First Engagement Discussion Guide* (2014).

The goal of the research and subsequent guide was to develop commitments from stakeholders to take action where needed to promote positive change for the success of all students in our province, even if that meant starting with the simple act of facilitating discussions in schools and communities based on their findings. The Student First approach uncovered four themes from conversations with communities, schools, parents, and students: 1) relationships, 2) engaging the student/learner, 3) the learning environment and student/teacher supports, and 4) shared responsibility (p. 4). Fortunately, much of what they found was echoed in these findings, providing some validity to this work but also concurring with what needs to be done to ensure students in our province access education in schools and classrooms dedicated to their success.

One step that cannot be ignored from this study and echoed in the Student First initiative was the initiation of conversations at school division levels about the importance of relationships as vital to student success:

Half (55%) of the students felt that stronger relationships with their teachers would improve their education. The majority (71%) of parents/caregivers who participated in the online survey also felt that stronger relationships between teachers and students, built through direct one-on-one teaching, would improve students' education. Negative or poor relationships can result in students not trusting their teachers or administration,

feeling unsafe at school and disengaging from learning. (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 5)

Much emphasis continues to be placed on curriculum (in terms of subject specific areas of teaching and learning), testing of academic skills, and data collection, when the research clearly shows that forming solid relationships and connecting with students positively impacts their ability to be successful: “Student engagement in school has become an integral part of the conversation on dropout prevention and school completion” (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003, p. 30). It is difficult to engage and connect to students when the focus is on covering too many curriculum outcomes, preparing for tests, and recording and analyzing data.

Teachers need to be free to support the youth in their classrooms socially, emotionally, and academically and they need to be properly trained and expected to do so without the burden of outside pressure. One of the paramount reasons for Finland’s success in education was noted in Sahlburg’s speech to Saskatoon teachers in the winter of 2014. He noted that all teachers were chosen, top of their class and required at minimum a master’s degree in education in his country. With high quality, respected, and educated teachers, the landscape in Finnish schools slowly began to change. This is an area that could be further explored in Canada, especially in terms of providing teachers with an increase in special education and mental health training.

### **Conclusions**

This study highlighted the importance of eight factors that affected 12 participants success or failure in school. At the end of each interview there was a feeling of honour and pride to have met the 12 participants who shared a piece of their life with me. Personally, I was left feeling in awe of each participant’s determination to face adversity. Each youth displayed resilience and much pride of their own in their accomplishments, and because of this, communicated hope for their futures. I was also completely taken aback upon the completion of the interviews, where so many of the participants shared intense personal histories so openly. I was surprised that so many of them shared their experiences with their educators, when they could not count on their families and this attests to the importance of staff in schools being there for young people because in some cases, no one else can be.

It was interesting to learn that for each of the participants their mainstream schools were places where they felt alienated. In turn, the alternative schools offered comfort and supports that helped with success in school. The alternative schools and special programs these particular

youth attended felt like dream schools to them. It is hoped that from the accounts of these participants, changes can be made in various aspects of education from teacher training to the direction of government, in order to support schools to be places where all students feel accepted and supported. Everyone should have hopes and dreams for the future and every community should offer schools that foster and support those dreams. Several youth in this study noted how busy they knew their teachers were with grading, reporting, and planning, yet they somehow managed to still be welcoming, supportive and present no matter what; a testament to the quality of educators in special programs and alternative schools.

The 12 youth who participated in this study were thankful for the opportunity to contribute to this area of educational research. However, I felt strongly that they were the ones to be thanked. I was blessed to share an hour of their free time listening to their personal struggles and triumphs in the hope that it would provide some insight into how to support young people to be successful in school. These youth are recognized for their contributions that promote an understanding of youth experiences from the very people alternative schools and programs were designed to reach. Through this research their suggestions will not go unheard. Each participant shared a piece of his or her life by voluntarily stepping forward to be interviewed, and each is credited with providing unique insight into an area with little research involving the perspectives of the people it intends to serve.

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## APPENDIX A

### Youth Interview Questions

The following specific questions will be asked in order to structure the interview process. Because the process involves open-ended questions any related responses and further questions or discussions will be documented via audio recordings and note taking during the interview; the researcher, Judy Butler, will do this on password protected devices.

#### Open –ended Interview Questions:

1. How do you define success in school?
2. If you are a successful person in 5 years, what will that look like for you?
3. What are your academic, social, emotional, physical, behavioural, personal, or other needs? Essentially, what do you need (from the system / teachers / staff) in school in order to be successful?
4. Which schools and/or special programs have you have been involved with (K-12)?
5. Do you feel your former or current programming has met your needs? (Explain why or why not - in the different contexts if you can)
6. If you could help develop a list of things special programs need to offer in order to meet students needs and ensure their success what would be on your list? (Explain if you can)

## APPENDIX B

### Assent for Student Participants

Dear Participant,

I seek your participation in my research project for the partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree, Master of Education in Curriculum Studies. The purpose of my research is to gain youth perspectives on special education; this perspective will be used to guide further research on special programs in Saskatoon and will be shared with educators looking to effect change in our community. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to contact me with any additional questions you might have.

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr. Brenda Kalyn: (306) 966-7566  
Department of Curriculum Studies  
University of Saskatchewan  
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**Graduate Student:**

Judy Lynn Butler: (306) 380-3770  
M. Ed. Student - Curriculum Studies  
University of Saskatchewan  
butlerju@spsd.sk.ca

This research project will offer you the opportunity to reflect on aspects of your educational history and ask you to think about what you value and what you would like to see change in order for young people to be successful in school. There is no requirement for you to participate in this study and your participation or lack of will not affect any standing at school.

For this research project, approximately 10 – 15 students from various special programs in Saskatoon will be interviewed. Saskatoon Public Schools, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, and the Saskatoon Health Region are aware of this research and supportive of it. Through individual interviews, I hope to gain an understanding of factors affecting success or failure in school. Should you consent to participate, you will partake in one or two individual interviews with myself (the researcher). All interviews will take place at your school during a time that is least disruptive for your teachers and yourself, during the school day. I anticipate the interviews to be about 45-60 minutes in length and will be audio recorded using my iPhone.

You may withdraw from the study at any time without cause or penalty and data collected will be destroyed. As this study is voluntary, you have the right to ask for the recording to be stopped at any point in the interview. The recording will be later transcribed and if you wish to withdraw after that point, the transcripts will be destroyed; providing these options eliminates risk during your participation. The right to withdraw data from the study will apply until Feb 1, 2014. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

The researcher will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion and only the researcher will have access to the original data collected.

During collection and analysis, the data gathered from the study, the audio recordings and transcripts, will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home. The information will be stored on a computer secured with a password. Upon completion of the research study, the data will be kept in a secure location at the University of Saskatchewan for five years by Dr. Brenda Kalyn, Department of Curriculum Studies in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan ethics guidelines.

The results of this study will be used to partially complete my thesis for the purpose of obtaining a Masters of Education degree in Curriculum Studies. The study may be published as an article in a scholarly journal and/or presented to fellow Graduate students and professors at the University of Saskatchewan. You will not be identified in any way in the writing of the thesis paper, confidentiality will be upheld and you will be given a pseudonym (fake name). The specific special program you attend will not be named in conjunction with any of your personal/identifiable information; however, with a small population of youth attending special programs there is the possibility of someone figuring out who you are. Direct quotes from the interview may be used; however confidentiality (no names used) will be upheld. These measures will be taken to conceal your identity and promote confidentiality. The final article and all transcripts or notes taken will be made available to all participants upon request upon completion of the study by June 2014 (see below for request).

If you have questions regarding the study, please feel free to contact myself or my supervisor, Dr. Brenda Kalyn at the telephone numbers provided above.

This study has been approved by the Behavioral Research Ethics Board, University of Saskatchewan on \_\_\_\_\_. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Ethics Office toll free at 1-888-966-2084.

Consent to Participate:

I have read and explained this Consent Form to the participant before receiving the participant's consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it."

---

Name of Participant

---

Researcher's Signature

I consent to participate in this study, understanding my right to withdraw data from the study will apply until February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

I have received a copy of the Consent Form for my own records.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I would like a copy of transcripts, notes, final research paper (please circle): YES / NO

## APPENDIX C

### Consent for Parents or Guardians of Student Participants

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I seek your child's participation in my research project for the partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree, Master of Education in Curriculum Studies. The purpose of my research is to gain youth perspectives on special education; this perspective will be used to guide further research on special programs in Saskatoon and will be shared with educators looking to effect change in our community. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to contact me with any additional questions you might have.

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr. Brenda Kalyn: (306) 966-7566  
Department of Curriculum Studies  
University of Saskatchewan

**Graduate Student:**

Judy Lynn Butler: (306) 380-3770  
M. Ed. Student - Curriculum Studies  
University of Saskatchewan  
butlerju@spsd.sk.ca

This research project will offer the student participants the opportunity to reflect on aspects of their educational history and ask them to think about what they value and what they would like to see change in order for youth to be successful in school. There is no requirement for youth to participate in this study and their participation or lack of will not affect any standing at school.

For this research project, approximately 10 – 15 students from various special programs in Saskatoon will be interviewed. Saskatoon Public Schools, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, and the Saskatoon Health Region are aware of this research and supportive of it. Through individual interviews, I hope to gain an understanding of factors affecting success or failure in school. Should you consent to allowing your child to participate, they will partake in one or two individual interviews with myself (the researcher). All interviews will take place at your child's school during a time that is least disruptive for the teachers and the youth. Interviews will take place during the school day. I anticipate the interviews to be about 45-60 minutes in length and will be audio recorded using my iPhone. Students may withdraw consent and or participants may withdraw from the study at any time without cause or penalty and data collected will be destroyed. As this study is voluntary, your child has the right to ask for the recording to be stopped at any point in the interview. The recording will be later transcribed and if you wish to withdraw after that point, the transcripts will be destroyed; providing these options eliminates risk during your participation. The right to withdraw data from the study will apply until Feb 1, 2014 (e.g. results have been disseminated, data has been pooled, etc.). After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your child's data.

The researcher will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion and only the researcher will have access to the original data collected.

During collection and analysis, the data gathered from the study, the audio recordings and transcripts, will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home. The information will be stored on a computer secured with a password. Upon completion of the research study, the data will be kept in a secure location at the University of Saskatchewan for five years by Dr. Brenda Kalyn, Department of Curriculum Studies in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan ethics guidelines.

The results of this study will be used to partially complete my thesis for the purpose of obtaining a Masters of Education degree in Curriculum Studies. The study may be published as an article in a scholarly journal and/or presented to fellow Graduate students and professors at the University of Saskatchewan. Participants will not be identified in any way in the writing of the thesis. Youth interviewed will have their confidentiality respected. Students will remain confidential and will be given pseudonyms (fake names) in any written work that is published as a result of this study. The specific special program youth attend will not be named in conjunction with any of their personal/identifiable information. Direct quotes from the interview may be used however confidentiality (use of fake names) will be upheld. Due to the fact that there is a smaller population of students attending special programs in Saskatoon, there is the possibility of someone identifying a student despite the researcher taking the precautions mentioned. The final article and all transcripts or notes taken will be made available to all participants upon request upon completion of the study; by June 2014 (see below for request).

If you have questions regarding the study, please feel free to contact myself or my supervisor, Dr. Brenda Kalyn at the telephone numbers provided above.

This study has been approved by the Behavioral Research Ethics Board, University of Saskatchewan on \_\_\_\_\_. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Ethics Office toll free at 1-888-966-2084.

Consent for my child to Participate:

I have been read and explained the information above and I understand the contents of the Consent Form.

I consent to my child participating in this study understanding that my child's right to withdraw data from the study will apply until February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw the data.

I have received a copy of the Consent Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Guardian/Parent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I would like a copy of transcripts, notes, final research paper (please circle): YES / NO

## APPENDIX D

**TABLE 2: Summary of “Good and “Bad” Qualities Related to the Eight Factors**

The following chart depicts an overview of points taken directly from the participant interview transcripts. The chart uses the same words the youth used during the interviews along with some paraphrasing and is organized by the eight factors that emerged from the interviews. Information is either represented as an aspect of “good” or “bad” in relation to the school environments as described by the youth. Though the participants in this study were not specifically asked to differentiate between good schools and bad schools, a clear delineation emerged from their responses and a summary presented in this format serves as a good reminder for educators.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>“Good” Schools</b>	<b>“Bad” Schools</b>
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students can communicate on a personal level with teachers</li> <li>• Teach through story-telling and making connections</li> <li>• Ask you what you want to learn about</li> <li>• Joke around and have a sense of humour</li> <li>• Use technology</li> <li>• Positive</li> <li>• Support students</li> <li>• Teacher knows students</li> <li>• Go out of their way</li> <li>• Students can talk to them</li> <li>• Give constructive criticism and feedback often</li> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Knowledgeable</li> <li>• Encourage vs. pressure students</li> <li>• Organized; plans are clear to students</li> <li>• Read students files</li> <li>• Know the curriculum</li> <li>• Care about students success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put kids to sleep</li> <li>• Not flexible</li> <li>• Do not understand students problems</li> <li>• Strict</li> <li>• Do not modify or adapt appropriately</li> <li>• Unrealistic expectations (too high or too low)</li> <li>• No communication</li> <li>• Expect students to ‘know’; do not ‘help’ students</li> <li>• Judgmental</li> <li>• Students feel like just a number</li> <li>• Do not understand students’ commitments / life outside of school</li> <li>• Condescending</li> <li>• Too busy to help students</li> <li>• Nag</li> <li>• No discipline or classroom management</li> <li>• Too serious</li> <li>• Threatening</li> <li>• Put down students; make them feel stupid</li> <li>• Point out your</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find ways to make it work; think outside the box</li> <li>• Hands on</li> <li>• Knows how each student learns is different</li> <li>• Communicate to students that they want them to be successful</li> <li>• Recognize students passions</li> <li>• Make it easy to come to school</li> <li>• Have an open door policy</li> <li>• Fair policies for phones and music</li> </ul>	<p>mistakes in front of others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kick students out of classes vs. working with them to fix mistakes</li> <li>• Do not respect privacy</li> <li>• Make fun of students</li> <li>• Unaware when students are struggling or need support</li> <li>• Students feel ignored</li> </ul>
The Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follows the curriculum</li> <li>• Relates to the interests of the students</li> <li>• Peaks students curiosity</li> <li>• Is appropriately challenging</li> <li>• Teaches relevant skills, trades for a career in an area of interest</li> <li>• Offer more choices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is boring, uninteresting, stupid</li> <li>• No connection to the work or the relevance of the material</li> <li>• Straight out of a textbook</li> <li>• Does not connect to real life</li> <li>• Too basic / modified</li> <li>• Rote work/ work books and work sheets</li> </ul>
Relationships to Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to students, believe them, try to understand concerns</li> <li>• Personable</li> <li>• Helpful</li> <li>• Welcoming</li> <li>• Go out of their way</li> <li>• Feel like family</li> <li>• Are role models and mentors to students</li> <li>• Students are noticed</li> <li>• Show they have faith in the students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No connections</li> <li>• No one asks how students are doing</li> <li>• Relationships that feel fake; do not really care</li> <li>• Think they know what students need; make assumptions about student needs</li> <li>• Students slip through the cracks</li> </ul>
School Based Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for addictions and mental health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff are not understanding of the</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality daycare</li> <li>• Life skills</li> <li>• Access to nurses / doctors</li> <li>• Offer smaller classes, extra support to complete work</li> <li>• Transportation support</li> <li>• Provides breakfast / lunch</li> <li>• Regular classes but in alternate schools</li> <li>• Smudging / First Nations Content</li> <li>• Educational Assistants</li> <li>• Two to three adults in the classroom</li> <li>• Offer on-going enrolment throughout the year (Not just at semester changes)</li> <li>• Understand that everyone has different motives</li> <li>• An hour a day dedicated to homework help</li> <li>• Assist in career or university / college planning</li> <li>• Staff play games and interact with students outside of classroom activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• needs of the students</li> <li>• Refuse to provide support</li> <li>• General lack of supports available / accessible to students</li> <li>• No support when students get behind, only pressure to get work done</li> <li>• No support / understanding of the demands of young parents</li> <li>• No support for homework help</li> <li>• No freedom to work at own pace; too much pressure</li> </ul>
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fun</li> <li>• Supportive</li> <li>• Calm, managed</li> <li>• Clean</li> <li>• Support health: physical, emotional, social, cultural</li> <li>• Zero tolerance for bullying</li> <li>• Safe</li> <li>• Open, welcoming</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chaotic</li> <li>• Loud</li> <li>• Un-safe</li> <li>• Limited expectations of students, staff</li> <li>• Limited access to classes (variety / level of difficulty / access to university prep)</li> <li>• Too many people</li> <li>• Feel lost: socially,</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone belongs</li> <li>• Diverse</li> <li>• Students look forward to being there</li> <li>• Feels like a second home</li> <li>• Structured</li> <li>• Extra curricular activities</li> <li>• Involve the students</li> <li>• Offers something for everyone; socially, emotionally, academically</li> <li>• Smaller school; smaller classes</li> <li>• Variety of clubs, variety nights, talent shows, etc.</li> <li>• People are happy</li> <li>• Supports LGBTQ</li> <li>• Variety of seating options; adjustable desks, chairs</li> <li>• safe lounge areas for students</li> </ul>	<p>emotionally, physically</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Praise high achievers; instead of supporting all who are successful in their own way</li> <li>• No one is smiling</li> <li>• No place to go, to escape, relax, time out</li> </ul>
Peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support one another</li> <li>• Welcoming</li> <li>• Non-judgmental</li> <li>• Support to build friendships</li> <li>• Supports for students in romantic relationships (abuse, pressure, emotional, sexual support)</li> <li>• Teach students how to support one another</li> <li>• Opportunities for peer teaching / peer support</li> <li>• Students stick up for each other and help each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bullying: physical, mental, emotional, verbal abuse in school</li> <li>• Cliques</li> <li>• Socioeconomic status affects peer relationships (division of social classes)</li> <li>• Racism, sexism, stereotyping</li> </ul>
Mental Health & Addictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports in school</li> <li>• Understand that mental</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer no services</li> <li>• Do not teach social</li> </ul>

	<p>health and addictions affect the lives of many students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer stress management / wellness opportunities</li> <li>• Emotional supports</li> <li>• Understand that life is overwhelming for some students</li> <li>• Teachers understand / support / accept a bad day</li> <li>• Have mental health trained counsellors</li> <li>• Understand some students are just in survival mode a lot</li> <li>• Builds confidence</li> <li>• Mental health lessons in the curriculum</li> <li>• Art Therapy , gardening (programs to support mental health)</li> </ul>	<p>emotional skills or support social emotional skill development for students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel lost in school; unsupported, unrecognized</li> <li>• Do not understand that mood affects ability to learn</li> <li>• Minimize the effects or severity of bullying</li> <li>• Minimize mental health concerns; say it is an excuse</li> <li>• Work piling up when absent contributes to further hopelessness</li> <li>• Foster fear, anxiety</li> </ul>
Transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcoming</li> <li>• Support what they can to minimize transitions</li> <li>• Supports are in regular schools so students can stay in their home school if they choose</li> <li>• Alternative schools and special programs offer regular classes for students who struggle in their regular school</li> <li>• All services offered in all schools</li> <li>• Foster relationships during transition</li> <li>• Understand it is a fearful time; stressful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer minimal choices / programs causing students to need to transition to other schools depending on need (behavioural, personal, academic)</li> <li>• Difficulty aligning courses / programs among schools and school divisions</li> <li>• Problems with communication between schools</li> </ul>