

JOURNEY TOWARD KNOWING:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO ONE TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE
WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this inquiry was to retell and represent the life that I have lived as I explore how I adapted my professional practice for students in an alternative program. This naturalistic inquiry is positioned as a self narrative. Retrospection and reflection enabled me to bring together my construction of self and my journey of teaching as I attempted to explain how I know what I know about working with at risk students and alternative programming.

The collection of data comes from my personal experience; thus I am observer, participant, and narrator. Threaded throughout this thesis are interwoven stories which create the fabric of my teaching experience. Each narrative represents justification of teacher knowledge and a refocusing of the lens through which I viewed at risk students and their marginalized position in our education system. As teachers we must first establish a relationship with our students and develop an empathetic understanding of the circumstances of the life experiences each one brings to the classroom. By understanding their past, we can make the school experience a positive influence in their lives and hopefully smooth out their way to a successful future.

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The Journey Toward Knowing details my journey as a teacher of at risk students. Writing this thesis was a journey of its own as I came to know myself and that which I was capable of achieving. I would like to acknowledge the support and contributions of many people.

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CHAPTER ONE

BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

Story answers queries about our daily lives. The stories we tell and retell about our significant moments help us return to those moments that marked us in some way, to search for the moment's meaning. This chapter introduces my journey toward knowing – where it started, how it developed and the changing lens through which I viewed myself, my students and my role as a teacher.

Self as Narrative

Compressed within this text is a story of a life lived and recalled, its beginnings, its turning points, and its closure at the time of this telling. This naturalistic inquiry is positioned as a self-narrative in which the researcher journeys toward understanding an unfolding and developing story. The approach of self as a story is a process of actualizing what is potentially possible in one's life. The emphasis is on who I am as teacher as I reflect, rethink, revise, retell and represent the life that I have lived as I explore how I adapt my professional practice-for students in an alternative middle years program. Threaded throughout this thesis are the interwoven stories that comprise my professional life, my story and a story of an adolescent youth, as I pondered its meaningfulness with all its insights, reflections, and small moments of understanding.

The purpose of the self-narrative is to contribute to the knowledge on teaching at-risk students in an alternative programming and the evolving role of the teacher. The overarching research question that framed this research is, "How did one teacher adapt professional practice-for students in an alternative program?" In the writing of this story

I hope to share perspective and insight into how I adapted my professional practice to understand the culture of at-risk students within an alternative middle years school environment. As I reflected on my lived experiences, my intent was to create an understanding of these students not as misfits or failures but as individuals trying to interpret the events in their lives and the role teachers' play in their support for learning.

Background

I began my teaching career not in a classroom but in a men's Correctional Centre for adult inmates serving a sentence of two years less a day. Initially, I took the job because I was planning on saving up my money then traveling for a year before I began teaching. It never occurred to me that my first job after University was to foreshadow the course of my career twenty years later.

My duties as a correctional worker included supervision of inmates as they moved through their daily routine of work or school and their evening routine of meals, exercise and recreation, quiet time then lights out for the night. Women were only allowed to work in the low security areas. These areas included the dorms and the living units that were separate from the main building and more closely resembled a home like atmosphere. Intuitively, I discovered that counseling the inmates was a naturally evolving process as there were frequent times throughout a shift when an individual would come into the office seeking a compassionate listener and a conversation. These informal visits often involved a discussion of family, plans for the future and how to avoid further incarceration.

The Correctional Centre was located in Northern Saskatchewan. The majority of the inmates were Aboriginal and most of their crimes were alcohol or drug related. I had always assumed that alcohol and drugs were the reasons for their crimes and if they didn't use or abuse these substances, they wouldn't be in jail. I quickly came to learn that alcohol, drugs and incarceration were symptoms of, not the reasons for, their life circumstances. Although I did not realize this until much later, this was a lesson that would forever influence the lens through which I viewed the world. My old ways of knowing were being challenged and I had taken my first step toward becoming a subjective knower. In reading and rereading the words of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule (1986), I saw myself in their explanation of constructed knowing and the subjective knower. These authors claim that constructing knowing is when an individual's way of knowing and viewing the world is constructed by integrating intuitive knowledge with knowledge learned from others. It is a "...weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and of integrating objective and subjective knowing" (p. 134). As a subjective knower, according to Belenky et al. (1986) I was able to use my own intuition as a guide to action and move beyond the accepted ways of knowing as established by the dominant culture. Those words resonated with my evolving philosophical stance. Accordingly, I was moving away from "...silence and an externally oriented perspective on knowledge and truth ... (toward)...a new conception of truth as personal, private and subjectively known or intuited..." (p. 54).

I was raised in a predominately white, middle class community. In that community there were a few families who were not white, some families who seemed to lack income and materialistic advantages and families who seemed to have wealth and

everything they wanted that money could buy. Everyone knew who fit in which category. Both of my parents worked, which was not that common during my childhood. My mother had grown up in relative wealth and comfort. She received her degree in nursing and continued her career at the hospital as well as a career at home with five children. My father had quit school in grade eight during the Depression years. He helped on the farm at home and held down other odd jobs. Eventually he became a journeymen plumber with more than enough experience in all the trades to be able to fix or build anything. He was well respected within our community and within the construction industry. I don't recall ever specifically being told that I had to finish high school or go on to a university career but I do remember that failing at school was never an option and the importance of an education, a job and being able to support oneself were inferred in most conversations.

I knew that there were people in our city who lived in poverty and I assumed most of those were Aboriginal. I also believed that most Aboriginal people struggled with alcohol abuse and neglected their children. This belief was solidified the year we, along with several other families from our church, took in Aboriginal children from a nearby residential school for the Christmas holiday. We were told it was too difficult to get them back to their homes and that their lives up north had nothing to offer them. We believed we were doing a kind, compassionate, Christian act by sharing our Christmas traditions. I clearly remember feeling angry that these children were taken away from their family to live somewhere else. It always seemed cruel and I couldn't quite grasp the logic behind these government decisions. Even then I was unsure as to how we were

supposed to be helping them. I cried for the homesickness I imagined they must have felt.

Over the years my insight changed only enough to realize that not all people who lived in poverty and abused alcohol were Aboriginal and there were some Aboriginal people who worked hard and held down a job. It didn't surprise me that most of the inmates at the Correctional Centre were Aboriginal. It did surprise me that they didn't want to be in there and they did have hopes and dreams for a future. I clearly remember the shift I was working and the inmate I was talking with when I realized that these inmates were people; individual human beings who existed separate from their crimes against society. I couldn't paint them all with the same brush as each one had a unique story. It occurred to me that each one of these men came from a family; parents who loved them, relatives who cared about them and spouses and children who needed them. They had each had a life full of experience before they ended up in jail. I had never before thought about them as more than inmates. I had never before considered that anything other than poor choices had led to their jail sentence. I was moving away from judging the inmates to trying to understand the circumstances of their lives. Belenky et al. (1986) refer to this as connected knowing. My personal experience was giving me knowledge that was in stark contrast to the truths I had always accepted from the authorities in my life. As I attempted to understand the inmates' experiences, I was developing a capacity for empathy and thus, access to other people's knowledge. As Belenky et al. (1986) states, "Connected knowers begin with an interest in the facts of other people's lives, but they gradually shift the focus to other people's way of thinking" (p. 115).

My first teaching job was in a small town with a population of less than five thousand people. It resembled a larger version of where I grew up in with a similar belief system and hierarchy of wealth. The one thing that was noticeably different was my ability to recognize the sheltered, narrow viewpoint from which the people of the town saw the rest of the world. If they even knew what existed beyond their own secure place in the world, they didn't intend to get involved. As a twenty four year old woman with her first teaching position I was not prepared to take on the responsibility of expanding their worldview. I was quite certain that the people of this small town were not interested in using my experiences with the inmates to build their own knowledge and they had no intention of changing the lens through which they viewed those less fortunate than themselves. Following the curriculum and ensuring that their child was receiving the best possible education and preparing for their future was my priority as an educator. This was a setting very familiar to my own upbringing and school experience so I knew how to behave, what to expect and what was expected of me as a teacher.

Three years later, I made another career shift when I moved into the city and obtained a teaching position in a large school with students from a wide array of cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. Many of the students were quite transient as several apartment buildings were located close by the school. We had several immigrant and refugee families as the area had fairly low priced accommodations and was close to shopping malls and grocery stores. Some of our students were well-established middle class families and some were growing up in poverty. Many were neglected and lived in dysfunctional, violent home situations. I remember one young teacher on staff exclaiming disbelief that homes in this day and age were without telephones and that

many of her young students did not know their address, their alphabet or even how to spell their own name. I was neither surprised nor shocked and enjoyed the challenges of such diversity amongst my students. I often wondered if this was the type of school experience many of the inmates had faced when they were young.

As teachers, we were expected to follow curriculum and marks were based on performance outcomes. Many of our students were working far below grade level and we did what we could to adapt our lessons and encourage success for all our students but our responsibilities did not extend far beyond the classroom. Despite such diverse cultural backgrounds and living conditions as compared to my experience in a small town, I was surprised that the expectations and assessments for school performance were so similar. I wondered how these students who lived under such marginalized conditions could be assessed in the same way and with the same tools as my former students who lived a comparatively privileged life. Our job as teachers seemed to be one of making all students fit the identical mold of a successful school experience. I am not sure if I wanted the expectations for my students to be lower or just different. I just knew it didn't seem right to be assessing all students by the same standards.

My next position was a large school in a wealthy suburb far from the chaos and dysfunction of the fringes of society. These were the students who didn't worry about graduating from high school. They were already concerned with what they were going to study at the university level. According to my intuitions, the job description was very clearly delineated. Prepare each one for a successful post secondary institution by ensuring each was ready to meet the demands of high school. Many of the parents were self employed and thus able to drop in and observe their child in the classroom setting.

They were always prepared to discuss academic issues but personal matters such as behaviour and respect were to be dealt with in the home, behind closed doors. As a school community we did a great deal of fund raising for health agencies such as the Cancer Society or the Heart and Stroke Foundation but they were surprisingly unaware and unmoved by the plight of the poor and the marginalized people in our city. It seemed to me that they believed that poverty and unemployment were a choice. Many of the parents had the attitude that they had worked hard for what they had achieved and they weren't prepared to share it with lazy, underachievers. In counterpoint, what I came to acknowledge was that the underachievement in disadvantage students is not individual or personalized failure as much as a product of economic and social structures that regulate their lives.

After 5 years I decided it was time for a change. I had always had an interest in working with inner city students so I applied for a position at St. Jude Middle School*, an alternative program within our system for at-risk students. I considered myself fairly knowledgeable about life and school experience from both extremes of our societal structures. It never failed to amaze me how some children survived the most precarious of life circumstances or trauma and how many people had no idea what life looked like beyond their own community. Armed with understanding, compassion and experience, I began my career at St. Jude and climbed into the trenches where my students fought every day for safety and survival. What differentiated this school was that the students of St. Jude had all been labeled as at-risk. This term was used to describe students who were at-risk of failing and not completing their education. There are a number of reasons

*In the Roman Catholic faith St. Jude is considered the patron saint of desperation and hopeless causes. I chose this pseudo-name because our students often came to St. Jude as a last stop chance for success in school. It is our goal to reaffirm their self-worth and offer them hope for a brighter future. a child could be considered at-risk but at St. Jude it seemed the majority of the students represented poverty, dysfunction and an inability to adapt to the expectations of a mainstream school.

Reflecting back upon this time, I came to the realization that it was in this setting that my life journey and my teaching journey was coming closer into alignment. The knowledge I gained through personal experience and the shared experience of others was connecting. All of the pieces of my life appeared to be coming together so that I could construct the knowledge necessary to develop my own voice in the struggle for at-risk students (Belenky et al., 1986). I was to become what Belenky et al. (1986) refer to as a “passionate knower” (p. 141). They define this as “knowers who enter into a union with that which is to be known” (p. 141). Despite our differences I could develop a relationship with my students and attend to their needs with an intuition for providing the acceptance, acknowledgement and success that all students want and need.

Nolan’s Story

It was a typically hectic first day of school in August when twelve-year-old Nolan showed up to register. St. Jude is an alternative middle years school so all of our students have been referred to us from a mainstream school within our system. We had not received any files or paperwork from Nolan’s previous school but he assured us that he had been sent to St. Jude so we assumed the paperwork was enroute and showed him the way to his Grade Eight homeroom.

As one day led to the next no paperwork was arriving and every time Nolan was questioned about a home address and a previous school, he gave a different answer. Finally our principal sat Nolan down; assured him he would not get into trouble and asked him where he really lived, where he had last gone to school and how he ended up coming to St. Jude.

Not surprising, it turned out that Nolan, although only twelve years old, had not been to school in the last year. He formerly attended school on the reserve where his dad lived but he decided he wanted to come into the city to live with his mom. After hitching a ride into the city he found his mom but soon discovered that she had a serious drug and alcohol addiction problem. He couldn't find a ride back to the reserve so he spent his time hanging out with his friends on the street and when he was hungry he would go to see his grandmother who lived nearby. He didn't know her very well and she spoke very little English and lived in extreme poverty but she always washed his clothes and fed him a meal. Nolan wore the same clothes everyday turned inside out as his one outfit wardrobe was a gang related colour which our students were not allowed to wear.

Nolan had indeed been sent to St. Jude but it was by a friend of his from the streets who had previously attended our school. Patrick was a former student of ours and although we admired his intelligence and wit, he was a disruptive student with a penchant for other people's belongings. His second year at St. Jude was characterized by many visits from the police concerning street issues and extended stays at a juvenile detention facility. Patrick eventually chose life on the streets and running from the law yet he had assured Nolan that St. Jude was a "...cool place to hang out". Based on

Patrick's referral and Nolan's need to belong to a place, we overlooked the paperwork and let him stay.

Although the circumstances of Nolan's story are unique to him, the reality of a twelve year old child responsible for his own survival, well being, and education is far too familiar to those of us who have had the opportunity to work with resilient and determined youth like Nolan. Nolan was not alone. There were many children in our school who wanted to belong, who dreamt of a family and a future, who struggled every day for safety and survival, whose needs are not being met by their own families, social institutions or mainstream education.

For many, these adolescents are more recognizable when described by terms such as at-risk, unacceptable behaviour, unable to fit in, unsuccessful, defiant; all terms that portray a more negative image than resilient or determined. For me, these are the students who kindled my passion in teaching. It is my experiences with them I want to share through the recollecting and writing of my thoughts. It is their struggle to belong and their search for a future I want to tell. It is teacher knowledge and the everyday classroom reality with these students that can add a missing piece to the research on at-risk students, alternative programs and the role of the teacher.

Rationale for the Study

During my six years of teaching at St. Jude there were many memorable moments and events that caused me to question what I knew about teaching and how I knew it. It was not until I began my graduate studies that I truly understood the uniqueness of my experiences compared to colleagues, the mainstream teachers. Throughout my graduate

classes, the articles we read and discussed seemed to have a slightly different focus through my alternative school lens. My shared experiences were often met with shock, disbelief and even ignorance that such realities existed in our city and in our schools. Fellow students would express astonishment and frustration if they knew of a student who couldn't read. I couldn't understand their naiveté. I had a whole class of students reading well below grade level, if at all. Indeed, as a staff, we at St. Jude often marveled at the realities of our alternative world. Patrick and Nolan, two adolescent boys, constructing their own system of survival independent of parental influence, other adult guidance or even a social institution is only one of the many tragic stories that would be unfathomable and unacceptable at a mainstream school. Immersed in an alternative school culture, we at St. Jude were intrigued with Patrick's intuitive sense that Nolan needed to belong somewhere and experienced a heart-warming sense of pride that our program could offer him some of the acceptance and belonging he was searching for in his life. We weren't appalled by Nolan's story. We seemed to have a resigned sense of acceptance for the lived reality of his life and our limitations to changing his situation. There are many children like Nolan and Patrick who have slipped through the cracks in our education system and societal institutions. Typically, students like these are labeled at-risk, that is, academically at-risk of not completing high school. In reality, at-risk refers to a number of conditions and factors that place a student at-risk of not completing high school. For Manning & Baruth (1995) school factors, societal factors, and personal factors, or any combination of these factors can cause a student to be labeled as at-risk. Slavin (1989) expands his definition of at-risk to include not only students who are unlikely to graduate from high school but also students who are unlikely to leave school

with an adequate level of basic skills or who are unlikely to pass criterion-referenced graduation tests. Kronick (1997) and Franklin (2000) believe that socioeconomic conditions define at-risk students. St. Jude attempts to provide at-risk students, whatever the cause or the circumstances, with respite from their daily struggle for success and survival. As we sent them back to the fringes of society anxious and worried about their future, however, I often wondered if our real purpose was not to decrease the likelihood of failure at school but to protect mainstream society from acknowledging failure by their removal from the mainstream schools.

The Story of One: The Story of Many

Nolan spent two years at St. Jude. His first year with us seemed to be a journey of self-discovery for himself and of affirmation for our staff. We watched with pride as Nolan got himself to school everyday and became an active and respected member of our school. We nurtured him, offered him guidance and supported him as he attempted to create the life he yearned to have. He played on all our sports teams, took part in all activities and demonstrated leadership skills. He had found a place to stay with a former neighbour of his mother's and although he struggled with punctuality, accepting consequences and daily use of marijuana, his self-esteem flourished and his attitude became positive and hopeful.

While we all had a role in nurturing and supporting Nolan, he developed a close relationship with his homeroom teacher, Mrs. D. He respected her and recognized her sincere kindness and desire to help. During the course of the year their relationship grew, as Nolan became a weekly visitor to her home for supper and a card game with her

husband and children. He joined them on many family outings. Mrs. D and her husband tried to instill in Nolan the importance of an education, a job and responsible handling of money. They even arranged for some temporary part time work so he could earn some much needed spending money for basic necessities.

Nolan's second year at St. Jude was characterized by disappointment, frustration, and a resigned acceptance of the reality of his life for himself and for the staff. The woman in whose home he was living was exploiting Nolan by using the money she received for his personal care to support her own children and her drug habit. Nolan and two other boys she had taken in were not being fed well or cared for appropriately. Regrettably, they each lived under the threat of having nowhere else to live. She freely provided them with marijuana in hopes of keeping them content and silent about the situation. Every attempt we made to intervene in Nolan's care giving became another closed door. Helplessly, we watched as his hopes and dreams faded; replaced with anger, bitterness, and hardness in his eyes we had not seen before. His attendance became sporadic and when he did show up, we suspected he was under the influence of drugs. Daily, he usually left school early in an explosive display of anger. Nolan, who had once been the epitome of a successful alternative program, became the prime example of a young man struggling within a society unable to meet the needs of its youth.

Increasingly, my frustration and disappointment grew with our inability to help Nolan. My once very positive and proud attachment to an alternative school was being challenged. I began to question our purpose in the educational system. Were we really impacting the lives of these children? Were we even expected to be successful in altering the cycle of poverty or did we simply exist to maintain the status quo of societal

structures and institutions? Were we offering our students another chance for success or were we protecting mainstream conformity? What else could be done for our students? Were we doing the right things to help our students and how would we know? Would anyone care? My view of our alternative program was out of focus and my journey toward knowing was at a critical juncture. I needed to look back at where I had come from to get to this point and consider where I wanted to direct my journey.

Coming to a Research Focus

Responsive teaching cannot be produced through regulated curriculum. To create bridges between challenging curriculum goals and individual student experiences and needs, teachers must be flexible to develop learning engagements that accommodate a variety of cognitive styles, with activities that broaden rather than reduce the range of possibilities for learning. At the same time, teachers must consider the physical, affective, and emotional needs of their students as well as be concerned with moral and spiritual outcomes (Noddings, 2004).

Ours is a postmodern age where educators recognize the importance of personal narrative, the power of stories, and the general recognition of not only perspective but also whose voice is being expressed. Authoritative knowledge becomes antiquated as an emergence of multifaceted research methodologies takes center stage. Using narrative inquiry and reflective analysis on my own personal experiences, my intentions were to research the role of the teacher in an alternative school setting. Through personal narratives of my experience with at-risk students in an alternative program I account for

the evolving construction of my own teacher knowledge both in the classroom and as a professional in the teaching community.

Narrative inquiry is situated in the naturalistic paradigm of inquiry as opposed to scientific or rationalistic inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1999) and focuses on and characterizes the phenomena of human experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Connelly and Clandinin (1999) view narrative inquiry in stating, “It brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived” (p. 134). Despite the available research on at-risk students and alternative programs (Brendtro, 1998; Gold & Mann, 1987; Kronick, 1997; Richardson, 2001; Schissel, 1997; Wang & Reynolds, 1995) the practice of teaching these students and establishing an alternative program is nowhere as neat and tidy and categorical as the theory.

Establishing relationships with my students and helping them unpack their individual baggage of a dysfunctional home life and unsuccessful school experiences makes it impossible to fit them under one label or a specific theory of remediation. Daily, I had to travel right along with my students in order to understand the journey that labeled them at-risk and to help reroute them towards success. Through out the writing of this thesis, I came to learn that narrative inquiry can break down the dichotomy between theory and practice and also between voice, the present and past. It allows me to include other teachers and researchers on a very personal journey toward understanding labels, stereotypes, and the structure of education within social systems from a perspective that differs from my own social and educational experiences. Polkinghorne refers to this reflexive narrative as the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful (1988).

The narrative research report recreates the history or narrative that has led to the story's end, and draws from it the significant factors that have "caused" the final event. The report does not develop generalizable laws that are supposed to hold whenever the initial conditions are repeated; it does locate the decision points at which a different action could have produced a different ending. (p. 171)

Connelly and Clandinin (1999) state,

The process of narrative research revolves around three matters: the field, texts on field experience, and research texts which incorporate the first two and which represent those issues of social significance that justify the research. (p. 134)

Reflective analysis enables me to situate myself in each narrative of my teaching experiences and gives voice to my perspective, intuition and judgment as a woman, a teacher, a mother, a sister, a friend, a tax payer and even a social justice worker (Schratz, 1993; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). Listening to students not only helps me as a teacher understand what our students are experiencing; thus guiding and shaping our classroom activities, but it also "...induces us to reflect on all we do and all we are asked to do" (Noddings, 2004, p.154).

Interviews with Nolan and Mrs. D also contributed to this research. Mrs. D is a teacher who demonstrates what van Manen (2002) refers to as pedagogical thoughtfulness. That is, "...a certain kind of seeing, of listening, of responding to a

particular child or children in this or that situation” (van Manen, p.10). Her relationship with Nolan was pedagogical in that she saw him as a “...unique and whole human being involved in self formative growth” (van Manen, p. 25). Nolan recognized her “pedagogical competence” (van Manen, p.65). That is, Mrs. D demonstrated a sincere interest in her students as unique individuals and offered her students a vision of life and a future worth aiming for (van Manen, 2002). She saw herself as more than a teacher of curriculum; she was a mentor and role model. As I reflected on my relationship and experiences with them it provided insight into the realities of successful alternative programming.

The staff at St. Jude often referred to anything going on outside of our school building as *the real world*. As a staff member I realized that we offered our students a chance to experience success in a relatively controlled and protective environment that is not the reality of their lived world. For only a limited number of hours in a day our students were accepted, safe and treated with kindness and respect. Within this time, our goal was to provide them an opportunity to build their self-esteem, establish positive relationships and develop a sense of control and responsibility for their emotions and actions. While the curriculum guided our academic content, our hearts, our faith, and our desire for a better life for our students guided our focus on life skills. Teaching in this setting for six years has been the most rewarding in my career yet the progress and personal gains of our students seldom go beyond their experience at our school. I have begun to question why this school culture that is inclusive, supportive and adaptive for the needs of the students is considered alternative.

The Overarching Research Question

The overarching research question that framed my study was “What is the role of the teacher in an alternative school program for at-risk students?” Using my own experience and reflecting on my personal journey as a teacher, I wanted to explore some of the questions and concerns that arose both during my years at St. Jude and afterwards while examining that time retrospectively.

Why can our students be successful within our program but not in the mainstream? How is my role as teacher different? What are the expectations for our students? Are the students who are labeled “at-risk” really at-risk of failing school or is it that the school or society is at-risk of failing them? I am hopeful that my research will influence other educators to believe that all students can be successful and each one of our students deserves a chance to consider a future filled with options and possibilities.

I also hope that sharing my lived experience will encourage educators and researchers to refocus the lens through which they view teacher practical and professional knowledge and to respect teachers’ voices as essential to educational research.

The Setting

St. Jude Middle School is located in an old school which had been closed down due to declining enrolments. It was originally built in the early 1960’s and nothing has been done to update the building’s exterior. While the inside has been painted and renovated to accommodate the practical arts program that was offered, from the exterior view one would not recognize it as a school as its façade has the appearance of industrial neglect. The large field around it is not maintained and except for a run down dirt ball

diamond, is pretty much unusable. There is no playground equipment. There is a small pad of cement which is cracked and uneven, a broken basketball hoop and backboard which is not conducive to even a one-on-one basketball game. There are old, rink boards which were put up by staff and students at least ten years ago and have been neglected. It is surrounded by apartments, a main thoroughfare and a major commercial hub only one block away. The students of St. Jude are removed from their home community and isolated in a separate building that reminds one of an abandon warehouse. In no way does the outside appearance and location of St. Jude reflect the warm and welcoming atmosphere contained inside its walls.

When I am asked to describe the program and my teaching role at St. Jude, I often share the story of Patrick and Nolan. It demonstrates the flexibility and compassion that is required when working an alternative school setting. It also reflects what is best about our program at St. Jude. We are welcoming to everyone. We give our students a place to which they can belong and where they can be assured of acceptance, kindness and safety. St. Jude functions quite independently from the other schools in our division. Our school board recognizes our uniqueness and allows us the freedom to adapt to the needs of our students. Although Nolan seemingly appeared from nowhere to become a part of our school, we knew no one would question our decision to let him stay. I dare say that no other school would have taken him once they realized he was adrift in society as he didn't have a home address or even a significant adult in his life.

St. Jude Middle Years School was established ten years ago by a Catholic School Division to meet the needs of students who were unsuccessful in the mainstream school of their home community. These students were labeled at-risk which, by each school's

own definition, included students who struggled with attendance, academics, behaviour, social skills, family life, street life or any combination of these circumstances. The program was established as an attempt to keep these middle years students in school and to help them find success in a previously unsuccessful environment thereby encouraging them to go on to complete high school. We proudly claim that we specialize in establishing relationships and building self-esteem, both of which are key building blocks to learning and achievement.

As a classroom teacher and an administrator, I welcomed middle years' students who had been referred to our alternative program by the mainstream school in their home community. Each one of our students has been labeled at-risk for a wide variety of reasons. Although they each have their own story to tell, a common thread runs through their experience; failure and alienation. Our staff created a school culture of acceptance, caring and compassion. Our first responsibility was establishing relationships with our students. The teaching process began by building relationship with each and every student from diverse family and life circumstances within a dynamic classroom setting.

To fulfill the mandate of being a counseling based program the school is staffed with a team consisting of a full time counselor, a home liaison worker, two teachers in each classroom, a learning assistance teacher and teacher assistants. As well, the principal, vice-principal, secretary, caretaker and cafeteria manager are all part of the team approach. We all need to be available to support our students. Only the school counselor has had formal training but each of us had chosen to work in an alternative school environment so we were prepared to do more than teach academics. Every teacher who expresses an interest in transferring to St. Jude was taken on a tour and

encouraged to spend a day in the school observing the staff, students and interactions within the school. The teaching teams in each classroom consist of one male and one female teacher. Many students relate better to one gender than the other and it also established our philosophy of working together as a team and as a family.

Our academic program was based on the Saskatchewan Learning Provincial Curriculum Guides for Grades six to nine but was modified by individual teachers to suit the needs and abilities of our students. Because of their previously unsuccessful school experience, almost all of our students were at least three years behind in academic performance. This means that they were not functional at grade level in Math and Reading. Many had grown frustrated with failure and simply refused to do any written work; the majority of our teaching was teacher-directed. Classroom groupings were frequently determined by age and grade placement; however, some students were placed in the class where we thought they were most likely to experience success socially with their peers. We needed to meet our students at their individual starting point socially, personally and academically. From there we worked to establish a sense of belonging.

The students of St. Jude were bussed in from their home community. We had three buses that were chartered from the city transit system and their routes brought students from every corner of the city. Classes started at 9:15 am. The students had four academic periods from 9:15 until 1:15. The fifth period of the day was Practical Arts. The students were divided into multi-grade groupings and spent twelve to fourteen days in each of ten practical art sessions which included woodworking, computers, sewing, photography, ceramics, cooking, welding, and electrical and two different art classes. There was one fifteen minute break in the morning, a twenty five minute lunch break

during which the students were not allowed to leave the school grounds and the cafeteria provided a healthy lunch for a minimal cost. Several students were employed to work in the cafeteria getting payment in the form of a meal. If students agreed to sweep the floor or wipe off tables or help in some small way they could earn a meal or a snack. The students returned to their homeroom for closing activities for the last ten minutes of the day. They were then dismissed to the waiting buses to return home. Period six was considered a tutorial to be used at the teacher's discretion for working with students, homework help or planning for the next day. This time offered teachers a chance to build personal relationships with individual students as well as make school a successful experience. Both aspects are critical to an alternative program as it attempts to rebuild self-confidence and make school a positive learning experience. For the staff this period was frequently used to catch their breath and compare notes on the students' performance and behaviour for that day, consult with other staff members and communicate with parents, guardians, social workers, or any other people significant to the students' success and progress.

What made this program successful was its inherent flexibility. Teachable moments are not always in line with a current lesson; however, when that moment involves behavioural or social issues, there isn't a more opportune time. Having two teachers in each class also made it possible to deal with the immediacy of individual behaviours. Teaching partners can also allow one teacher to consult with other staff members about students or phoning parents or workers to share insights. In an alternative school the curriculum is adaptable; however, experience teaches us that basic need, personal survival and social issues need to be addressed before academic learning can

take place. Establishing a relationship with their students provides teachers with the insight to recognize where their students are mentally and physically and thus adapt their teaching to meet the needs of the moment. Integrating intuitive knowledge with knowledge learned from others is what Belenky et al. (1986) refers to as constructed knowledge. As teachers we need to construct knowledge about our students that allows for an integration of empathy, reason, intuition, intellect and the expertise of others. Teachers can construct knowledge as they listen to their students, build relationships and position themselves in the identity of what it means to be a teacher. Similarly, Parker J. Palmer (1998) states, “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves.” (p. 11)

As is typical of most teachers, I can’t describe my daily classroom experience without telling stories about my students and my relationships with them. Some of these stories are endearing and humorous and some are tragic and heartbreaking but each one reflects the norms and ills of our society. These stories became the groundwork and point of reference for my journaling, my research papers and many discussion groups within my graduate studies. My students didn’t fit neatly into studies on norms and accepted best practice. In fact, reflecting on their experiences and my experiences with them often caused me to question the expectations of society and the role of alternative programming. Who were these at-risk children that didn’t fit in? Why couldn’t they find success at a mainstream school? Was it the child who was at-risk of failing or was the school failing at connecting with the child?

I began to question my role as a teacher in an alternative program. What were we doing at St. Jude that reached these students? What skills did we as teachers have that enable us to work successfully in an alternative school setting? Could we be doing more? Were we expected to be a part of changing the future for these marginalized students or was our program intended only to protect the hegemony of mainstream schools? Although we experienced so much success with changing our students' attitudes and improving self esteem, our programming never extended beyond our own building. Most of our students were at least two or three years behind academically yet we had few resources available for remediation and they had limited choices for continuing education once they left our program. Covering the curriculum seemed to be optional as we were often commended for controlling the chaos but never reprimanded for lack of academic success. I was always proud of our attempts to alter the journey for at-risk students. I had always interpreted the autonomy of our school and our program as respect for our unique situation. As I moved along my own journey, however, I sometimes wondered if the autonomy and lower academic expectations for St. Jude weren't indicative of a lack of response to the poverty, inequalities and struggles of our marginalized populations that had placed these students at-risk in the first place.

This chapter presented the beginnings of my journey as I reflected on my changing role as a teacher and the responsibilities I have taken on in order to help all my students experience success.

CHAPTER TWO

CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE IN AN ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM

This chapter focuses on the current research on at-risk students and alternative programming. This research is intertwined with my own experiences and evolving insights into the pedagogy of at-risk students.

Introduction

I grew up with what I believed to be a common understanding of kids who were at-risk, what they looked like and how they behaved. Discussing the societal problems of poverty, unemployment, neglect, abuse or marginalized populations was usually followed by a despairing head shake and a comment that inferred laziness, choice or stupidity. I began to see my world as “us” and their world as “others”. Those people and those living conditions existed in a world very separate from the world where I grew up. My pre-teaching experiences provided textbook definitions of at-risk and alternative programming and even controlled opportunities to observe and interact within these settings. It never occurred to me to consider how these situations evolved or even if there was a solution. It was an accepted fact that some people lived in poverty and dysfunctional environments. Each step of my teaching career seemed to break down these neat and tidy perceptions of the world and the structure of society and cause me to question my own beliefs, judgments and where I wanted to fit. As I became more and more involved and intrigued with this unique group of students, I began to see them and myself through a different lens. I was moving from an epistemological orientation called separate knowing toward an orientation of connected knowing (Belenky et al., 1986). In

other words, I no longer viewed my students through the impersonal rules and expectations determined by mainstream society but through relationships on their terms; trying to understand where they have come from and why they think the way they do. Textbook definitions, preconceived notions and the lived reality of these labels did not fit neatly together. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) use the terms theory and practice to refer to this epistemological dilemma within our educational institutions. Trying to define and understand my own changing concept of at-risk students caused a personal dilemma as I began to question my own understanding of what it means to teach and what it means to know. My practices in the classroom did not always align themselves with the teaching research on best practice and the data in the research did not always reflect the reality of the classroom situation.

An Inside View

I surveyed the class from the front of the room. The second bell had just rung on a Monday morning and I was trying to get a read on just where my students were at after the weekend. There was a loud buzz in the classroom as everyone tried to get caught up on the weekend's highlights. I couldn't help but be slightly amused and dismayed at the sight of one of our students showing off an ultrasound picture of his developing baby while another student was asking someone to look at his Pokeman playing cards!

"Justin missed the bus on purpose," Erica informed me. "I saw him at the bus stop but he walked away when the bus came." I made a mental note to phone home

and check on Justin but made no comment. His dad had been having trouble even getting him out of bed so I was surprised to hear he had made it to the bus stop.

Collin was sitting in his desk looking very bright eyed and attentive. “You’re looking very well rested for a Monday morning,” I commented to him.

“I spent the weekend in Kilburn,” he replied then went on to describe his weekend. Collin had no qualms about sharing the details of his life and often wandered around the class as he spoke. “On Friday we broke into an apartment building. We were spray painting in the halls and the cops caught me. My friend just took off. Man, can he run. I had to spend the whole weekend in lock up.”

“Don’t you get to do anything when you’re in there?” I asked. “Can you go outside for exercise or to the gym or something?”

“Yeah, but if you get off your bed someone will steal your blankets and pillows so I just slept all weekend. Justin was there, too. He cried all weekend! He got lynched for his bedding in the first hour!” There were a few giggles heard around the room.

I had to ask, “Why was Justin in there?”

“He was in the apartment building with me.”

My teaching partner was standing at the back of the room behind Michael’s desk. He nodded his head in Michael’s direction. I took a quick look in his eyes and then back up at my partner. He held up his fingers in the form of a telephone and I nodded my agreement. Michael was in custody at a Young Offenders Centre but was sent by cab to and from school everyday. His workers would be interested in knowing that he appeared to be under the influence of drugs. Michael was an intelligent kid

and had actually raised over fifteen hundred dollars canvassing door to door under false pretenses before he got caught and charged. He was manipulative and did not accept authority. We would have to make sure we had everything in place before we told him he may be going back to the Centre or he could get very angry. Our liaison worker showed up at the door and she and my partner asked Michael to step in the hall so they could talk to him and see where he was at both physically and emotionally.

Daniel was in his desk sketching. He was a fourteen-year-old quiet giant, as we affectionately called him, with a magnificent gift for drawing. He refused to do any work other than art and writing his own creative stories but he was never disruptive and had developed a friendship with two other girls in the school who were equally quiet as him. They had developed their own support group for each other and their improved self-esteem was obvious to all the staff members. Melanie was getting Alex to explain the math assignment to her, Jeff was copying it and Allan had his head cradled in his arm on the desk as he slept off the last of the sleeping pill his foster mother gave him every night. He would join in the discussion a bit at a time until about 9:45 at which time he would be fully awake and become a pleasant, contributing member to our class, except on Tuesdays. That was the day he went to a group therapy session after school and he spent the day in an anxious and edgy state of mind. It was the one time every week when he allowed himself to hate his mother and vent his anger at her for abandoning him in favour of alcohol, drugs, and her boyfriend.

Kristen was quietly chatting with Lori, our teacher assistant. This was a good start although we all knew that at some point during the day Kristen would explode with anger and frustration. Her father was an alcoholic and was mostly verbally

abusive to Kristen, her mother and her mentally disabled brother but could become physically abusive. Kristen had the role in her family of being the distracter. She wanted to protect her mother and her brother so when her father started getting too mean, she set herself up as his target. After having spent many of her hours at home being subjected to belittling and degrading comments and name calling it took very little to reach her limit and set her off on an explosive tirade in which she yelled and screamed everything she couldn't at home. We would give her a chance to talk about it and a shoulder to cry on and usually she would calm down enough to get on with her day. Unfortunately her outbursts made her an easy target for other students needing a distraction or even someone to dump their own misery on so the calm was often short lived. Greg held up a copy of the daily newspaper and loudly announced that he knew who had set fire to the burnt out car pictured on the front page and our morning discussion of current events was under way.

There is no such thing as a typical day in an alternative program. Despite our best efforts to follow routine, it was truly our students' life experiences on the street and in their home the night before and each morning that determined the course of our day. One could never predict or even imagine some of the realities of these children's lives. Drugs, alcohol, abuse, violence, neglect, criminal activity or even parenting younger siblings and struggling adults were frequent occurrences in their life circumstances. As McLaren (1989) states, "Youths drink beer, smoke dope, shoot craps long into the nights; they sometimes vandalize property and break into homes. And they come to school..." (p. 27).

Yet, every morning they would get themselves up and on the bus to St. Jude. Our school was the one place where they could be assured of safety, acceptance, nurturing

and predictable rules and consequences. This is described in Nel Noddings work (as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) which is based on caring and fidelity to relationships. Understanding each child's story is crucial to success in an alternative program. We offered them respite from their usual struggles for survival. We encouraged them to leave their worries and problems outside our doors and welcomed them into St. Jude as children, students and as members of our family. Students who had been labeled as difficult and unable to adapt to mainstream school expectations had found a place to which they could belong and where they could experience success.

At-Risk Students, Challenging Youth and Struggling Learners

The concept of the risk factor began as a medical model for reducing the risk of heart disease (Brown, D'Emidio-Caston & Benard, 2001; Franklin, 2000; Kronick, 1997). Specific risk factors and patients who exhibited these factors were identified early enough for an intervention that might minimize or remove the risk factor. This medical concept has been applied to education for the last twenty to twenty five years (Brown, et al., 2001; Franklin, 2000). Using this model enabled researchers to identify general characteristics that made success in school difficult. The term at-risk still carries with it a negative connotation, as if being considered at-risk is a disease or embedded in the genes. Kronick (1997) and Brown et al. (2001) refer to this as a deficit model causing educators to look for what is missing from their students rather than looking for the strengths and gifts each child possesses. Many of these identified characteristics were based on sociodemographic criteria such as race, ethnicity and social class (Franklin, 2000). This resulted in stereotyping minority and marginalized populations. The term "at-risk" was

being used as a politically correct version of cultural deprivation (Pallas, 1989). Most commonly today it refers to any students who are in danger of failing in the regular school program whatever the reason may be (Lounsbury, 2000). Manning & Baruth (1995) define at-risk learners as students in danger of failing to meet their potential in some way. They also differentiate between a student being academically at-risk and students who exhibit at-risk conditions and behaviours that make them academically at-risk. It is generally acknowledged that at-risk factors are multifaceted and cannot be neatly categorized. Manning (2000) defines at-risk students as

...those who experience one or more of a number of difficult conditions, including dietary disorder, substance use and abuse, dropping out of school, pregnancy, AIDS and other STDs, underachievement and lack of motivation, depression, suicide, poverty and gang-related behaviour. (p. 198)

Curwin (1992) lists a number of characteristics frequently used to describe high-risk students such as lazy, turned off, bored, unable to reach full potential, angry, hostile, anti-social, irresponsible, unmotivated, alienated, low skill development, suffering emotionally, disruptive, withdrawn, dislikes school, negative attitude and learning deficient.

Lounsbury (2000) believes that:

The scourges of alcohol and drugs, the prevalence of violence and sexual promiscuity and the changing natures of families and communities have combined to make the very natural business of growing up a riskier-than-it-used-to-be business. (p. 211)

Much of teacher training has focused on methods of instruction, assessment and classroom management. Success in these areas is based on observable and measurable outcomes; little attention is paid to the quality of relationships within the classroom, interpersonal processes and social, emotional and spiritual needs of students (Paul & Smith, 2000; Schratz, 1993). These needs are acted out in school through irregular attendance, challenging behaviours, learning difficulties and inappropriate social interactions. Kronick (1997) states that “the problems of at-risk youth can often be unraveled to reflect homelessness, family or community violence, learning difficulties or cultural differences – the kind of issues public education has extensively stayed away from” (p. 20). How risk is defined, considered and approached are all social constructions (Kronick, 1997). The discourse that places children at-risk also imply that they are troubled children and we blame them rather than addressing how they have been positioned in society.

The routine nature of institutional structures pushes us to work to sameness and conformity rather than to respond to difference (Jean Rudduck as cited in Schratz, 1993). The at-risk label refers to an entire group of people who cannot conform to mainstream, middle class expectations. They feel unwelcome in the school environment and that they are not valued or appreciated. Goodman (1999) refers to these children as disaffected youth who have been “alienated by competitive and hegemonic school models” (p. 3). Frieman (2001) believes that children are at-risk because society has labeled their attributes as problematic or they are members of a group considered to be inferior. Certain living conditions or personalities are correlated with certain behaviours at school.

Curwin (1992) says at-risk students are the ones who have stopped believing that school will make a positive difference in their life. At-risk students have accepted the limited expectations society has put on them due to the circumstances in their lives. He states that “the central characteristic of a student at-risk is either the potential or actual loss of hope” (p. 8). They have not had enough successful experiences in school thus they expect to be told in one way or another that they are stupid, lazy, slow, useless, in trouble or arrogant. Their energy is spent on protecting and escaping, not learning.

Every student who has been labeled as being at-risk has unique life circumstances that cause him or her to be at-risk. The experiences they bring to school are often extreme and beyond the mainstream school scope of institutional learning. By simply attaching a label it is easy to clump all these students together, ignore the causes of their at-risk designation and prevents deeper investigation into why these students behave as they do and what they truly need. van Manen (2002) warns of the dangers in only thinking professionally about children:

...then I am inclined immediately to reach into my portfolio of professional tricks for a specific instructional intervention, or a behavioral therapy or a medical solution. What happens then is that I forgo the possibility of truly listening to and seeing the specific child. Instead, I put the child away in categorical language. This language is as restraining as a real prison. Putting children away by means of technical, diagnostic, or instrumental language is really a kind of spiritual abandonment. (p.25-26)

Descriptors such as falling through the cracks in the system, cultural differences and lack of adult support and guidance seem to place the blame on the children themselves. Richardson (2001) prefers to call these students challenging youth, thereby, putting the impetus on the relationship between helping professional and the youth. The adults are challenged to meet the needs of the youth. He defines challenging youth as youth who struggle to express and manage their emotions in constructive ways, struggle on a daily basis to responsibly meet their daily needs, often elicit from others the opposite of what they need and seldom seek help from adults voluntarily.

Gold and Mann (1984) believe that “delinquent behaviour is a defense against the external realities that threaten a young person’s self-esteem” (p.5) and that “no other role incumbent upon young people in our society is as fraught with failure as studenthood” (p. 6). The role of a student has standards of achievement at its core and there is little room for flexibility or adaptation in meeting those standards.

Alternative Programs

Alternative programs were primarily designed to assist students who ordinarily would have dropped out in school. These were the students for whom the traditional classroom was frightening and degrading and they felt powerless and incompetent (Kronick, 1997). Developers of these programs believed that the students’ behaviour, attitudes, self-concepts, self-esteem and environmental conditions had to be addressed in addition to their school performance (Garibaldi, 1995). The programs were structured around the needs of the students and assisted with development through the teaching of values and socially appropriate behaviour as well as their learning. The staff and the

environment were expected to be understanding, humanistic and build on respect, trust and empathy (Garibaldi, 1995; Kronick, 1997). Understanding why a student breaks a rule is essential to finding the best solution to the problem (Curwin, 1992).

While there are many definitions of alternative programs, most were designed as a response to the problems of disruptive behaviour, truancy and deviance. These were the students who lacked the social skills necessary for successful interaction with the mainstream culture in which they lived. Mainstream classroom teachers are already overburdened with the ever changing criteria required to prepare students for the future and are afforded neither the resources nor the time required to uncover these students' circumstances and needs in order to help them acquire new social behaviours (Kennedy & Morton, 1999). A unique characteristic of alternative programs is their unconditional acceptance of each of their students. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs recognizes that the students' need for warmth and acceptance takes priority over their need for achievement. To motivate students to achieve, we must first care for them as a person (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994).

We must welcome high risk students as human beings, not simply brains to be trained. Our assumptions about their social behaviour need to include the understanding that their negative behaviours are based on protection and escape. They do the best they can with the skills they have under the adverse conditions they face. (Curwin, 1992, p. 27)

Glasser (as cited in Richardson, 2001) lists survival, love and belonging, power and achievement, fun and freedom as the five basic needs common to mankind (p. 39).

Richardson believes that the need for love and belonging and power and achievement are

particularly crucial for challenging youth. At-risk behaviours need to be understood as a struggle to meet these two basic needs. Alternative education programs demonstrate creative and flexible approaches beginning with an atmosphere of caring and sensitivity.

The typical teacher-student relationship is significantly different in an alternative program. They develop more informal, personal relationships that consider one another's unique characteristics and personality. The students feel connected, accepted and genuinely liked by the teacher. These relationships allow a significant and caring adult to disapprove of some kinds of behaviour and help the child work through the situation without fear of judgment or a loss of self-esteem. Personal, positive and supportive relationships are often cited as the distinguishing factor in effective alternative programs and facilitating positive changes with at-risk youth (Gold & Mann, 1984; Richardson, 2001; Kennedy & Morton, 1999). Nel Noddings (1991) refers to these special kinds of relations as a caring relation that requires contributions from both parties. "The one-caring, or carer, comes with a certain attitude, and the cared-for recognizes and responds to this attitude. The relation provides a foundation of trust for teaching and counseling alike" (p. 6). Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern (1998) believe that an adult can have a potent behavioural influence when an attachment has formed. A positive, caring relationship allows the adult to use social reinforcement and modeling as teaching tools.

Another distinguishing factor of alternative school programs is that they strive to give each student successful experiences in order to change his or her negative self concept. Self confidence and self respect are established as primary goals for alternative programs as they attempt to reverse the negative experiences of school. They provide opportunities for students to become competent in meeting goals and to evoke feelings of

connectedness, power and self-worth. In order to provide these opportunities, the staff must get to know the child as a unique individual in a variety of settings and interactions. In this way, the teachers can determine the starting point or reference for the child's performance and behaviour and work toward developing the child's full potential. Alternative programming allows teachers the time and space to develop a relationship with their students and determine the type of social interactions that have guided each child's learning. Understanding where the students have come from should dictate the guidance, support and social dialogue facilitated by the teacher to help the students perform learning tasks independently (Dixon-Krauss, 1996).

Alternative programs can provide the safest, most positive experience in a child's life. No matter what is happening in their life at home or on the street, children should be able to count on school as a place where they are treated with dignity, accepted for who they are and where the possibility for success exists. Unfortunately, many alternative programs are believed to be for bad kids with criminal intentions and slow kids with too many learning problems. Even within our own school system, St. Jude had a reputation as a holding tank for at-risk students in order to protect mainstream classrooms from their disruptive behaviour. My experiences at St. Jude have refocused the lens through which I view at-risk students and alternative programming. This is truly the part of our educational system and society that is the neediest yet the most misunderstood and neglected. It will be neither understood nor changed by detachment and abstract analysis. We need to become connected knowers and develop procedures for gaining access to and sharing in other people's knowledge. Belenky et al. (1986) define this as connecting in order to understand how other's think and responding in other's terms, not our own.

In this chapter I connect the commonly accepted beliefs of at-risk students and alternative programming, the current research on best practices and the reality of the classroom as I adapt my role and my teaching techniques to the needs of the students.

CHAPTER THREE

FINDING A PATHWAY

Story provides examples of the social context in which I can retrospectively see the real-life relationships between the at-risk students and others being acted out and resolved in the everyday world. This chapter defines and describes the methodology I used and why I chose narrative inquiry as my method of research to examine the role of the teacher in an alternative school setting and how I adapted my professional practice to suit the needs of at-risk students.

Introduction

Designating students as being at-risk is quite simple when it is done by judging their performance and trying to explain their lack of success in school. There is much research on at-risk students and alternative programming aimed at helping them to discover and develop their gifts and talents as they journey toward a productive and successful future. The difficulties arise when you come to know them as individuals and as victims of their life circumstances. What is missing from the research is the reality of their experiences both at school and at home. At-risk students cannot all be painted with the same brush simply because they have all been placed under the same label. My research invites the reader to view my students as I saw them; unique children with unique, individual lives in unique situations (van Manen, 2002) and to view the role of the teacher as a mentor in their lives. My methodology, therefore, is based on my own personal experience teaching at-risk students in an alternative school program. A retrospective narrative inquiry combined with the available research on at-risk students,

alternative programs and best practices creates a realistic picture of these students, their struggles for academic success and the role of the teacher. As I reflected back on these resilient students and my relationship with each of them and with my colleagues in this unique setting, I also needed to consider my own personal journey. The lens through which I viewed my experiences was constantly being filtered by my changing roles as a student, as a teacher as well as a daughter, a mother and a member of the mainstream culture that determines the societal standards for success by which we are judged. For Polkinghorne (1988) the narrative research report

...is a retrospective gathering of events into an account that makes the ending reasonable and believable. It is more than a mere chronicling or listing of the events along a time line: it configures the events in such a way that their parts in the whole story become clear. (p. 171)

The goal of my research and journey of coming to know what I know about teaching at-risk students was to provide an emic perspective of my experiences as a teacher of at-risk students. My methodology therefore was built upon the construction and sharing of my lived experience as a teacher in an alternative school setting. Through narrative inquiry and reflective analysis I created a storied epistemology (Code, 1987) of at-risk students in an alternative program. According to Code, “Stories invite us to come to know the world and our place in it. Stories call us to consider what we know, how we know, and what and whom we care about” (p.13).

The Reality of an At-risk Label

Mrs. H. and I were casually walking down the hall a few steps behind a student and her parents who were being given a tour by our school counselor. We required that all prospective students tour the school with their parent or guardian so that they can make an informed decision about attending St Jude. Mrs. H. and I had taught together at another school many years ago and were enjoying a rare opportunity to catch up with the most recent events in each other's life. As the tour progressed a class of grade eight students came out of their classroom and down the hall toward us on their way to the gym. One of the students came up to us with a big smile of recognition for Mrs. H. Chris stopped right in front of us and said, "Hello, Mrs. H.!"

Mrs. H. hesitated only slightly before she replied with an equally enthusiastic, "Hello, Chris! How are things going here at St Jude?"

"Good," Chris answered with a smile. "I like it here." And he moved past us with his friend continuing on their way.

"I had to look twice to recognize him," Mrs. H. said in a disbelieving tone, "What have you done to him?"

"Chris is an awesome kid! He's one of our star students! We can't believe you sent him to us!" I answered. I was not prepared for her response. Mrs. H. explained to me that she knew him from his previous school. He had been shy and withdrawn. She described a boy who walked down the halls with his shoulder against the wall, his head down and his fists clenched in both an attempt to be unnoticed and in anticipation of another belittling glance, gesture or comment from other students. His peers had ostracized Chris since he lacked academic and athletic ability, both of which

were held in high esteem in his home community. Despite supportive parents and a determined effort to try his best academically and socially, Chris lived with the daily stress of alienation. Mrs. H. couldn't believe that this cheerful young man walking down the middle of the hallway with a group of friends and with the confidence to walk right up and greet her was that same person.

I was so proud of us at St. Jude! Reclaiming lost kids is our main goal and restoring Chris' self esteem and helping him discover his own strengths was not to be taken lightly. Later that day during lunch period I sat down with Chris and his friend in the cafeteria. I told him that Mrs. H. didn't recognize him at first and that she had commented on what a fine young man he had become.

He gave me an all-knowing glance and in a very matter of fact tone said, "That's because I was a loser at that school."

I attempted to turn this into a positive moment. "Did it occur to you that those kids are the losers? That St. Jude is the school for winners?"

He gave his friend that same all-knowing glance he had given me earlier and with a little laugh replied, "Yeah, right." Chris and his friend looked at each other and rolled their eyes in mutual agreement of the naivety of adults in thinking anyone would believe that.

The students of St. Jude acknowledge the negative reputation given to at-risk students and alternative programming. Despite knowing and respecting that each student has unique experiences and life circumstances that brought them to St. Jude and despite their own success, our students often admitted to being embarrassed by the school's reputation as a place for stupid or bad kids. Even though St. Jude provided them with a

variety of positive and successful experiences, they still accepted the labels and low expectations given to them by mainstream society. They recognized how society perceived them and thus lived up to those standards. They often left the safety of St. Jude feeling abandoned and scared with little hope for the future.

The Lived Experience

Whenever I am asked about the students who attend St. Jude Middle School I start out by explaining that they are students who have been unsuccessful in their mainstream school for academic, behavioral or social issues and often a combination of these. Most people are willing to accept this definition and seem to have a preconceived, stereotypical picture of the type of students who would be in our school. This explanation leaves me feeling like I haven't given a fair description of our students and I end up relaying my personal stories and experiences with at-risk students and the unique circumstances that brought each of them to our school. The term at-risk seems to be accepted as a description of character rather than of a set of circumstances (Curwin, 1992; Frieman, 2001). Simply labeling a student at-risk and sending he or she to an alternative program is a stereotype and a quick fix for those children who do not fit into mainstream schools. It is not an attempt to discover the source of their "at-risk label" and work toward removing the stigma. Each of our students had a unique story that reflects rejection, non-conformity, anger, and heartbreak. I taught in this alternative program for six years and the resilience shown by our students in the face of so many hardships in their young lives continually shocked; yet impressed me. Rather than viewing our students as representations of the ills and evils in our society and our program as a holding tank for

the kids who don't fit in to mainstream schools, they should be seen as survivors attempting to create and understand order in the reality of their world. Their behaviour and attitude is an appropriate response given the circumstances of their lives. It is the whole reality of their circumstances that allow researchers and other educators to get beyond the label and examine the personal and human dimensions that cannot be quantified into facts and numerical data (Burton & Bartlett, 2005; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995; Schratz, 1993). The at-risk label and alternative programming should be viewed as an intervention that can help prevent the cycle of poverty, inequality, and indifference (Conrath, 2001).

Teachers' Stories

Historically educational research has been conducted in an attempt to meet scientific standards of inquiry. I don't believe there is a scientific study that could accurately reflect the in-depth needs of at-risk students or evaluate the success of an alternative program since each student presents such unique circumstances and experiences. As the roles of schools and teachers must adapt to the changing demographics of society and education, so must the type of research that is being carried out about children and their experiences. The nature of educational research and discourse about teaching and learning needs to be refocused from observable and measurable behaviours and outcome accountability to a constructivist understanding of teaching and learning and its implications for the work of teachers and students (Paul & Smith, 2000). "Educators have begun to move out of the rigidity of traditional research

into interpretive ways of knowing that construct textured narratives of educational contexts through engagement in those contexts” (Paul & Smith, p.6).

Using reflective analysis of my lived experiences and narrative inquiry as my research methodology I explored how I, as a teacher, strived to meet the needs of at-risk students in alternative programming. Reflective analysis began with asking myself what was this experience like? I reread my field notes gathered from general observations, documents, artifact collections, and reflective journals, following the work of Bogdan and Biklen (2002). They define field notes as the “written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (p. 107). I wanted to personalize the relevant educational literature on at-risk students, alternative programs and the role of the teacher.

Retrospective thinking about my experiences through journaling, anecdotal records and memory books enabled me to give a sense of humanity to the research and discourse on at-risk students and alternative programming (Paul & Smith, 2000). In including memory books, I used a resource that is often used by staff at St. Jude’s. The memory books allowed teachers to records those unique teachable moments immersed in classroom engagements. Often, the entries were coloured by humour and honesty. Memory books were kept in the staff room so that teachers could readily access them. More importantly, the books served as reminders of why the staff had chosen to work at St. Jude’s. I believe that my personal, tacit and intuitive knowledge would be a valuable addition to other types of knowledge in this area. While tacit knowledge is defined as the accumulated portion of experiences and skills one gains through cognition in their lifetime, intuitive knowledge transpires as a continuing process of constructing coherence

and meaning out of the sensory phenomena occurring around you. In this study, I wrote a thick description of my own relationships and experiences within this alternative culture and interpreted them at many different levels. This enabled me to provide both an emic and an etic perspective on the role of the teacher in alternative programming for at-risk students. This means assuming a research stance from both the insider and outsider point of view.

Teachers as individuals possess pedagogical content knowledge. Their wisdom of practice or craft knowledge can provide important and insightful information about how teaching should go under specific circumstances (Gaea, 1990). This way of knowing is most often expressed through personal narrative. Code and Schon (1998) refer to this as a storied epistemology. “Teacher’s stories are part of teachers’ lives and the study of their stories helps us understand the relationship between their lived experiences and their craft knowledge” (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994, p. 122). Narrative inquiry, then, is “a representation and explanation of social reality that is communicated through various story structure, such as anecdotes” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003, p. 481).

Anderson, et al. (1994) states that the narrative story has become a method for studying teaching that is concerned with “the personal histories of participants embedded within the social history of schools and schooling and is solicited and collected not merely to describe a person’s history but as a meaning giving account, an interpretation of that history as a way of explaining and understanding the participant’s action in a classroom” (p. 122).

Each student I worked with over my six years at St. Jude evokes a unique memory of his or her story and my experiences with them. I believe that sharing these narratives

means sharing the complexities of what it means to teach at-risk students in an alternative school setting. “Narrative creates its meaning by noting the contributions that actions and events make to a particular outcome and then configures these parts into a whole episode” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 6). Reflecting on these stories is both a mirror to learn about myself and a window to examine past beliefs, behaviours and insights. Narrative inquiry can break down the dichotomy between theory and practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Jalongo, Isenberg & Gerbracht, 1995).

In addition I used two semi-structured interviews each one hour in length which were designed to elicit a rich understanding of the participant’s way of thinking. In these interviews the same general questions or topics were raised to each of the key informants (Appendix A). Interviews were audio taped to record the thoughts, attitudes, insights, and experiences of the participants. My research included interviews with Nolan, the student who brought himself to our school and found a place to which he could belong. After quitting school, he spent two years coping with day-to-day survival on the streets, and now has returned to a special program at one of the city high schools. The program runs from mid-morning to mid-afternoon and focuses on one subject at a time. In a very honest, straightforward interview Nolan shared his personal experiences with the educational system and our alternative program. Mrs. D, Nolan’s grade 8 homeroom teacher, was also interviewed. She offered us insight on her relationship with Nolan and other at-risk students and her own experiences teaching in an alternative school setting.

Every school day is live action research on educational curriculum, methodology, assessment and behaviour modification. Jalongo & Isenberg (1995) refer to students as individual case files that teachers will often use as a tool to build an ever-expanding

knowledge base and understanding of teaching and learning. The narratives that teachers share capture a personal and human dimension of education that cannot be quantified into factual and numerical data. The end result of narrative inquiry explains the multiple realities and provides us with insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world (Morse & Richards, 2002).

The success of teachers has often been measured by student performance on achievement tests. High test scores are often equated with good teaching. This simple definition of success excludes many teachers, particularly those who teach at-risk students. Test scores cannot measure our achievements and those of our students. The high priority placed on intellectual development and objectively measured outcomes often override concern with the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of children. Yet, interpersonal processes and classroom culture are the building blocks of alternative programs. Throughout my professional practice, I came to know our students have a different way of knowing and their experiences and learning do not match the outcomes expected in a mainstream school. By sharing my experiences and my stories I created a text that can "...provide insights into dimensions of education which have often been overlooked" (Paul & Smith, 2000, p. 106).

Beers (2003) in Saskatchewan Learning's English Language Arts: A Curriculum Guide for the Middle Level, states that teachers, not programs, are the critical element in a student's success. "We must also know what we believe about teaching, about learning and about our role in both. We can make intelligent choices about the instruction that best suits the needs of our student" (Beers, 2003, p. 38). Narrative inquiry is a tool that provides educators an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs, behaviours and insights.

Simple stories can reflect the lived experience in the classroom and capture the complexities of what it means to teach (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995; Paul & Smith, 2000). Personally, my stories uncovered my passion. Through reflection on my experiences I am touching base with my social conscience and recognizing my work with at-risk students as my vocation. Teaching is a human endeavor and every day in the classroom allows me to be a part of the future. I am seeing the difference that caring makes.

Ethics

I met with the participants individually to inform them about the research study and explain consent in detail by reading the informed consent form and using plain language to interpret the points. After, transcribing the audiotapes, participants were asked to sign a Data Transcript Release Form to release their words for publication in this thesis and in conference presentations or in journal articles. In keeping with a respectful research protocols, I explained to participants that they are free to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty and if so, all their data sources from interviews and observations will be destroyed.

This chapter explains my retrospective research methodology and my use of narratives as an effective means to examine how I adapted my teaching philosophy and methods for at-risk students.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTING AND ANALYZING THE DATA

As my story unfolds through detailed narratives, I share my experiences with several students whose stories best exemplify the reality of at-risk students and the role of the teacher in guiding them toward success in school.

Introduction

Assembling and analyzing all the data was a sentimental journey, a hilarious recollection and a reflection of sadness and despair intertwined like fingers clasped together in prayer. Reflecting on and sharing these stories was an opportunity for me to situate myself and my experiences in an educational and a social framework. These memorable experiences caused me to question what I knew about teaching at-risk students and how I came to know what I know. In this chapter, I present some of the stories of these unforgettable students who taught me about being a compassionate teacher.

My use of narratives as research data represents my own human experience and interpretation in an alternative setting for at-risk students. Narrative also enables me to make meaning of school situations and “bring theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived” (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 134, 1999). I think the fact that stories are temporal emphasizes the importance of my narratives. The definition of at-risk students has changed and continues to expand as cultural diversity in education increases. Yet, traditional methods of instruction and

assessment are not changing to meet the needs of a dynamic and diverse society. Observations, experiences and educational research need to be juxtaposed in order to present schools and classrooms as entire cultural scenes (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994). Each day with the students of St. Jude was another step on my journey of coming to know the incoherence of my own system of knowledge and a more public system of knowledge (Code, 1987).

Jessica: Start With Where They Are

We could always tell how Jessica's morning was starting out before we even laid eyes on her. Every morning she came crashing through the front doors either full of exuberant energy, loud, laughing and swearing or full of anger and rage, loud, yelling and swearing. If she was laughing all of the staff had the responsibility of reminding her to settle down and be respectful of others' personal space. If she was yelling, it was my job, as her homeroom teacher, to follow her down the hallway and help her avoid any confrontations with other students while we waited for her anger to subside and her medications to kick in. I had a bond with this very outspoken, scrawny bundle of dynamite and she was usually willing to let me help her calm down. The bell had gone and all of the students had gone into their classrooms. Jessica and I were still in the hallway discussing appropriate social interactions but she wasn't calming down at all. I suspected that something had happened at her foster home that morning or the night before. Jessica's mother has moved to another province with her boyfriend and Jessica's two siblings but wouldn't take Jessica as she was too hard to control. Jessica's biological father was in jail. Although her mother had signed

temporary custody over to Social Services, she remained in contact with Jessica by phone.

Sensing that it was going to take a bit more convincing to calm her down, I told Jessica that I couldn't continue our conversation until I had coffee and some breakfast. I asked her to accompany me to the cafeteria so I could eat and we could still chat. She began talking rapidly and without pause about my caffeine addiction and how she hadn't eaten this morning and wasn't it weird how I could come to work and then have my breakfast and she wanted me to know that lots of kids were eating their lunch on the bus on the way to school even though food was not allowed. The angry exchange between her and another student was already being forgotten. With a nod of my head in Jessica's direction the cafeteria manager asked Jessica if she wanted some toast to eat while I ate my breakfast. The three of us began discussing our favourite toast spread and our idea of a perfect morning breakfast. Settled into this very casual, non-threatening atmosphere Jessica began talking about breakfast at her foster home and breakfast with her mom and in answer to a few well placed questions, she disclosed that her mom had phoned her last night. She told Jessica that she had changed her mind and Jessica couldn't come and visit during the upcoming holidays. Jessica then pulled out a couple of well worn pictures to show us and we admired her brother and sister and how much she resembled her mom. All Jessica really wanted was to be back with her family but her own and her mother's unpredictable mood swings combined with poverty, drug use and lack of stability made home a very volatile and unhealthy setting. As the sadness she had tried to hide behind anger emerged, we took the opportunity to counsel and advise Jessica on some coping

mechanisms and making her day at school more positive. My own childhood experiences would not allow me to comprehend my mother moving away without me. I would often wonder what kept Jessica coming to school each day. I learned two things about many of my students from Jessica. Children in the care of social services don't have a choice about coming to school. There is no where else to go. Two, school offered them safety, security and consistency. I remember feeling an almost overwhelming sense of responsibility to make school the home Jessica never knew.

Changing negative attitudes is complex. Loehrer (1998) believes that changing a negative attitude involves establishing a meaningful relationship with our students and teaching them about virtue, which he defines as taking knowledge and turning it into wisdom that creates the desire to do what we know is right. "Virtue can be taught in two ways: by exposure and by transfusion" (Loehrer, 1998, p.6). Exposure is through example and transfusion of virtue happens at critical moments in life. Loehrer (1998) states:

Teenagers yearn for such people to take an interest in them. If a virtuous person is available at the moment of crisis to give a transfusion, to supply the memory with positive input, involve the imagination for problem solving approaches or techniques, they are teaching virtue. (p. 7)

The two of us strolled back to the classroom where my teaching partner was discussing current events with the rest of the students. Before we entered the

classroom, I thanked Jessica for having breakfast with me. She pinky swore² with me that she wasn't mad anymore, gave me a quick hug, told me I was weird and went on to have a successful morning in the classroom.

In our debriefing period after the students left for the day, my teaching partner and I marveled at the flexibility, ingenuity and ability required to help our students experience the success they had long lost hope of achieving in their mainstream school. We discussed Jessica's first few months with us when settling her down could be an all day process while we attempted to discover the source of the hidden hurt and pain. We fondly remembered the time she took the weights out from the bottom of the vertical blinds and was throwing them at us because she was refusing to go home on the assigned bus. An important part of our role at St. Jude was to "...recognize crisis situations for what they are: not as distractions from your routines but crucial opportunities to give a transfusion to someone who is bleeding internally" (Loehrer, 1998, p. 7). We wondered; as we had many times before, what the future held for our students and how could they ever cope in a mainstream society where, much like at school, they are judged by socio-economic background and performance outcome.

²To pinky swear is a child's method of making an oath or a promise. It is similar to a handshake but is accomplished by intertwining pinky fingers.

Ronald: A Non-Confrontational Approach

Ronald was quiet, smart, and bitter towards the world and took pride in being uncooperative, especially with women. I don't recall exactly why he had to stay after school but I do distinctly remember the conversation, and probably always will. My teaching partner had asked Ronald to move his desk right to the back of the room so it joined his and mine in a distorted circular shape. He was on the internet searching for recipes. That was where he started our discussion. He asked Ronald if he liked cooking. He then shared a recipe with us and asked each of us for our opinion. In the next half hour, while still sharing recipes and baking secrets, we discovered that Ronald loved to bake desserts but ever since he had started a fire in his aunt's oven, she didn't want him trying any more recipes. He lived with his aunt and several younger cousins. His mom had taken him to his aunt's house on the city bus a few years ago but when he got off at the stop, his mother told him to go on ahead. She never got off the bus and he never saw her again. He hated living with his aunt although he recognized how hard she tried to make him feel like a part of the family. He had joined cadets and was working his way toward a higher position and higher education. He was going to look after himself and he didn't need any help from anyone. We offered him our best advice and gave him a bus ticket for the ride home. And, as always, we ended our day with, "See you tomorrow."

Success with at-risk students means having a firm belief that in order to uncover a negative pattern and work toward changing it, every day was a new day and a fresh start toward success at school. In order to reverse the negative impact of school failure teachers need to reach out to the students who are accustomed to being excluded.

Goodman (1999) refers to these kids as disaffected youth and believes that rebuilding their self-esteem is the central issue. In the math journal we kept as a class one student contributed his only memory of math. He remembered spending recesses in the teachers' photocopy room. He had a desk in there that he had to sit at until his math was done but he never knew how to do it so he hardly ever got recess. Curwin (1992) states that dignity, power, escape behaviour and attack behaviour are the most common reasons why rules are broken by students at-risk. "As long as they believe that they do not belong in school, their energy will be spent on protecting and escaping not learning" (Curwin, 1992, p.24). They are often resistant to efforts to help them because it creates the notion that they are helpless and incompetent.

Darcy: Strategies for Coping

By 11:30 every morning, Darcy had had enough. He was no longer able to sit still in his desk or be cooperative in the classroom in any way. Earlier in the year we had all tried to find the project or distraction that would keep him in school but half way through the year and after many discussions and phone calls with his mom, it was decided that Darcy would be leave the building by 11:30, if not before, and make his way down the street to where his mom worked. When her day was done at 3:00 pm, they would drive home together. Darcy was an intelligent young man with impressive insight and compassion for others. He had a great memory for detail and was very skilled at working with his hands. Making his way down the street toward his mom meant stopping in at every business along the way and making conversation with the owners and employees he encountered. He would even help out in small ways when

they asked him. When he got bored or restless he would move on to the next shop. Many of these business people had contacted the school concerned about Darcy. We assured them that as long he wasn't causing trouble, his mother had agreed to his half day in school program and we were aware of his journey from business to business. All of the people we spoke to expressed surprise that such a smart, courteous young man wasn't able to stay in school. We at St. Jude were always frustrated with the fact that his mother wouldn't consider taking him to a doctor or trying prescription medication which might help ease his anxiety and restlessness. They did, however, smoke marijuana in the home and in front of their children on a daily basis. During one of our meetings Darcy asked his mom what difference there was between using Ritalin and using marijuana? None of us had an answer for him but we had gathered some insight as to why Darcy, despite his inability to sit still in his desk and accomplish any written work, won an award for excellent attendance every month.

Darcy's ability to help out at the various businesses he visited allowed him to feel useful, competent, important and in control. This influenced his attitude about himself and toward school. He had found a way to feel connected to others and to build his self worth (Curwin, 1992). Despite the fact that he never made it through a full day of school, Darcy showed up on time every morning to try staying in school. Every day as he left he would poke his head in my office to let me know he was on his way to meet his mom and to remind me to mark down how long he had lasted in school that day. Often he would sit down on my couch in my office and along with discussing any events from his daily life; we would analyze his successes and failures in school that day and set a goal for the next day. He was rarely angry and often expressed empathy for his teachers' frustration.

I always felt like we had given up on him and this was a way for everyone, Darcy, his mom, his teachers, the school, to cope. We weren't really fixing anything or offering him an alternative. We just had the flexibility to adjust his programming.

The School Climate: Acceptance

The other students were unconcerned with Darcy's early dismissal times. They all seemed to accept the fact that everyone in our school had their own needs and a unique way to deal with those needs. They understood the quest for safety and survival. For six years the compassion the students had for each other and their acceptance of differences impressed and amazed me. The most bizarre event could transpire or someone could have a total break down and other students at St. Jude would not judge you. A boy who would only wear rubber boots, a girl who believed she was dating rock stars, kids with speech impediments, twitches and compulsions caused by prescribed medicines, language barriers, mental or physical handicaps, odd or unique characteristics – none of these made you a misfit or excluded you from school activities. The staff and students at St. Jude were a family. We understood that each student there had their own story of failure and exclusion at another school. These children understood frustration, anger and coping. They experienced not fitting in to the accepted mold of success and inability to adapt. Every day they lived the reality that equal is not fair.

A favourite part of my day at St. Jude was what we referred to as the welcoming committee. We always made sure at least two staff members were standing near the front doors as the buses arrived in the morning and most other staff were down the hall and into the classrooms. We greeted our students with a smile and a positive comment;

“Welcome! Good to see you! Is that new? Way to go! You made it on time! Nice hair cut! You look great in that colour!” For students who have previously felt exclusion from school it was a new experience for school to be welcoming, caring and personal. They each felt valued and that this was where they belonged (Goodman, p. 18). Even students who arrived late were not reprimanded. Rather, they were congratulated for getting themselves to school and for the extra effort it required once they missed the St. Jude bus. I know of students who literally walked across the city to get to St. Jude because they had missed the school bus and didn’t have any money for a city bus. They may have been asked why they were late but only out of a sincere concern for what was happening in their lives and to offer some suggestions for positive changes. Sometimes it was as simple as giving a student an alarm clock and sometimes it was a startling discovery about the events of the night before. When it was the latter, I was impressed that coming to school even occurred to them. Goodman (1999) states:

Alternative education views the process of personal change and growth as dynamic. Although this process encompasses the mistakes and learnings of the past and aspires toward a healthy future, alternative education exists in the here and now. The focus is immediate and very much in the present tense. (p. 18)

Meeting Their Needs: The Reality of At-risk

Each memory book, every picture, every anecdotal record and yearbook chronicles my experiences at St. Jude. It not only names a student but includes an entire story about the circumstances of each individual life, the burdens they carried and the

strength they need to survive each day. Some of the stories evoke an overwhelming disbelief that despite wrestling in a life of turmoil and trauma, these students showed up at school each day. Many can imagine what life may be like for some children who are categorized as at-risk such as the child in charge of a home; children raising their siblings; children parenting their parents; abuse; neglect; poverty; addictions; grandparents raising their grandchildren; children in transience; and child prostitution and crime. Stories flood back about other specific students whose lives as lived are inconceivable. For example, the girl who was sexually assaulted by her mother's boyfriend and then had to live with him when he was released from jail as her mother did not want to break up with him; the girl whose mother was killed when she was six then her grandmother died when she was twelve and she had no where else to go; the student whose parents were both in jail for trafficking drugs; kids with mental health disorders and no services available; the student who watched her step father beat her mother to death; the brother and sister who were forced to watch their father have sex with other women; the boy who discovered his father's body hanging in the basement; the students who don't remember the last meal they've eaten; the three children whose grandfather used them to traffic marijuana and pornography. Failure at school is a symptom of the problems faced by at-risk students. Teachers in an alternative program must be able to acknowledge the harsh reality of their students' lives and then rely on the wisdom of practice to establish a relationship and reconstruct their school experience. Leinhardt (1990) refers to this as craft knowledge or pedagogical content knowledge.

Schools cannot cure all the evils of society. Schools might not be able to guarantee a successful future for all students. But

schools can, at the minimum, provide an oasis for those children who desperately need one. The school may be the only place where all children are treated with dignity, where they learn to behave responsibly and discover the magic of learning. (Curwin, 1992, p. xv)

The Teachers: Job Description

Our maximum enrollment at St. Jude is one hundred and twenty five students. There were a total of five classrooms for grades six to nine. Our students represented only a small percentage of the at-risk students struggling in a mainstream classroom. What about the ones who have already given up? What was being done in the younger grades to break the cycle of failure in school? These kinds of questions often evoke a shrug and a sigh about the ones who fall through the cracks in the system. Much like the term at-risk, falling through the cracks seems to put the responsibility for failure on the students. I saw the role of the staff at St. Jude as filling in the cracks to prevent students from falling through them but in retrospect I wonder if we weren't just a temporary safety net delaying the crash. Our mandate from our school board was the same as for any other teacher. We had the responsibility to educate our students according to the curriculum but our setting and the implementation of programming was unique and considered modified. Often our students were not included in system wide data collection and if they were, the results were never acted upon. At one time I viewed this as compassion and understanding. Now I look back and realize that it had nothing to do with concern

for the students' success and everything do with the perceived success of our school system.

As a staff we were not accountable to anyone for our students' lack of academic achievement. Despite our protests, we were still required to administer standardized testing and other provincial and local assessments. Except for a few of our students, this was an exercise in frustration for each of us. We often had to use food or other treats to bribe the students to complete the tests. Many who couldn't read or understand the questions simply filled in any blank. Sometimes we had to adapt the implementation instructions by reading questions or information aloud to them or by providing more of an explanation than was officially allowed. Followers of Vygotsky would argue that giving the students cues and other supports is based on his model of dynamic assessment. This model "looks at both what the students can do individually and their potential growth as indicated by the interaction between the examiner and students" (p. 152). The child's potential to learn from instruction is a far better assessment tool than independent problem solving (Dixon-Krauss, 1996).

I have not seen the results of most of those assessments for our students nor have I ever been questioned about the skewed data they must have received. Other administrators and school staffs seemed to expect and accept that the students from St. Jude couldn't perform at grade level. Most standardized tests are based on white, middle class groups of students. Sociocultural variables are not considered in the test scores yet the results of these tests help determine a child's placement for instruction. Students' status as at-risk precludes any expectations of success and excludes them from the adult and peer interactions they need to develop their potential.

As I look back, there is a growing realization that we were not expected to be successful. For four of the six years I was at St. Jude, we never had a learning assistance teacher and there were only three teacher assistants in the whole school. All of our students had been designated at-risk but few had any other designation; therefore, were not entitled to assistance. Even though the majority of our students experienced success at St. Jude, very few went on to complete high school. There didn't seem to be any accountability. Many of our students were not accountable to any adults for their academic performance. The parents we did meet with seemed more concerned with attendance and acceptable behaviour than acceptable grades. Over the years I came to realize that many of our parents were uneducated themselves. They had some control over their child's behaviour but could not influence academic achievement. These parents had suffered their own negative experiences with academic institutions and were not confident enough to question the school about their child's academic abilities and programming.

Over my six years of belonging at St. Jude I heard many comments that represented success:

I never had a friend before.

People like me here.

I've never played on a team.

No one asked me anything at my other school.

I didn't do Phys. Ed at my other school.

I've never passed a math test before.

This is the best school. I love being here.

The teachers are fun and crazy.

Did you teachers get kicked out of your other school too?

Is this your job or do you just help here?

I hate holidays. There's nothing to do.

Can we just stay here?

Everyone's nice to everyone.

I've never had fun at school before.

If I fix it, can I come back?

I'm good at this school.

Are you going to kick me out too?

How come you don't kick me out?

Unfortunately, these comments also represent another school that was not meeting the needs of all of its students. To a mainstream school these kids were rude, uncooperative, defiant, unable to learn, violent, threatening and disruptive. A characteristic common to all students labeled at-risk was that of not conforming to mainstream standards. Despite the circumstances and challenges in their young lives, all students were subjected to the same criteria and standards for success. Mainstream requirements could not adapt to their needs. At St. Jude, our students had life circumstances that interfered with their learning. These students did not lack the ability to learn. They lacked the tools and the necessity to learn what educational institutions wanted to teach them. Our school philosophy of teaching in the moment allowed us to deal with what was important at that moment in time.

Lorenzo: Building Relationships

One of my favourite stories is about a young man who attended St. Jude for three years. When he arrived in Grade 6 he wanted to prove to everyone how tough and independent he was. He thought he could fight everyone and he needed no one on his side. By Grade 8 he had matured to the point that he could be part of a team that was acting to help another student. He would talk to kids who were struggling to be a part of the St. Jude program. He no longer bullied and had become an advocate for the vulnerable students. He encouraged students to cooperate and offered them advice to turn a situation around. If a student had stubbornly backed themselves into a corner he would arrive to give them an out that saved their dignity. He was cool, tough and successful at school. He didn't prove his abilities by being violent but rather by preventing it. I often talk about him and the example of leadership and positive role modeling he set in our school. He still comes by to visit me and tell me about his latest business venture and how his family is doing. He talks about how much he enjoyed St. Jude and that it was the best school he ever attended. He has fond memories of team sports, developing positive attitudes and experiencing success. I like to remind him of his bad attitude in Grades six and seven and ask him if he remembers the time I had to sit on a desk so he wouldn't throw it. He is always embarrassed and thanks me for putting up with him. I always tell him I could see his heart shining through his clenched fists. I am so glad that St. Jude offered me the opportunity to get to know this student and to give him a chance to change. He never did finish high school but he gathered enough confidence and self-esteem to start his own business and provide for his family.

Many of the people who toured through our school would ask what special training the staff had in order to work with the students at St. Jude. In fact, we had no special training. We had patience, compassion and a desire to help our students. In our setting we also had the time, the staff and the support to get to know our students and discover the source of their anger and frustration. How did we know what to do? There were no rules. We tried understanding and explaining and guiding. We worked toward building relationships. We had a lot of people available to step in and support the students and the staff. No one worked alone but we did work without a net. Teachers who work with at-risk students place themselves at-risk of failing to change the course of a student's life. Despite the safe and nurturing environment of St. Jude we could never change the tensions in their out-of-school environments. Unfortunately, schools and society seem to only be surprised and impressed by the children who do make it to the other side of the tight rope. The rest are left to fall to the bottom where they started.

I have never clearly understood what prepared me for teaching in this unique, demanding and rewarding school setting. I grew up in a predominantly white middle class working neighbourhood. We lived a lifestyle as far from wealth as it was from poverty. We were raised with a strict work ethic and an understanding of the need for an education and an occupation. It was never an option for us not to go to school and not to get a job. Perhaps it was my view from the middle that allowed me to see how much easier it would have been to fall toward the side of poverty and stereotypes rather than head towards the hurdles of higher education and prosperity. Whatever the reason for the necessary empathy and compassion, I have never judged my students by their life circumstances, their parents or their immediate behaviour. I believe they have a reason

for being labeled at-risk and it is our responsibility to help them rise above it. I have even questioned a school system that has no resources available for those students who need it the most. I love the challenge of discovering the child beneath the anger and hurt and rebuilding some of their lost self esteem. There is no greater reward than watching their faces light up as they realize they are capable and can experience success or make close approximations to school goals. There is no training for the skills required to make someone feel good about themselves. It is a process of discovery for teachers to realize the impact they have on their students and the possibilities they can create. I have learned that responding with anger and rejection is what these students have come to know and expect. I was far more effective with my students by responding with the respect and compassion I wanted them to learn to use in their relationships.

Caring For Students: Teachers At-Risk

One of my colleagues was a young, vivacious teacher named Mrs. D. She had a warm greeting and a beautiful smile for every student. The students fed off her endless energy and were motivated by her sincere interest in them. In my interviews with Mrs. D. she reported that since moving to a mainstream school she feels neither as influential nor as involved in her students' progress. She only has vague ideas of what is happening in other classrooms and there is no attempt to involve others in the day to day running of individual classes. She describes many of her relationships with students and staff at her mainstream school as superficial. The atmosphere there is neither loud, chaotic and unpredictable nor caring, warm and relational; all qualities she used to describe St. Jude.

Mrs. D tried to explain her special bond with Nolan, the boy from chapter one who brought himself to our school. When she met Nolan's grandmother she was a fragile, desperate figure. She described Nolan as a good boy with a good heart but nowhere to share his kindness. He needed guidance. With tears in her eyes she asked Mrs. D to help her grandson. That image has stuck with Mrs. D ever since. Nolan was no longer just an at-risk student who wasn't attending school. He was someone's grandson. At some point in time he belonged to a family. He was a person who mattered. He was a twelve year old boy with no one to care for him.

In my interviews with Nolan he explained that he came to school every day in grade eight because it was fun, everyone was nice and he was good at things. In grade nine he started hanging around with his brothers more, which meant doing more drugs and staying up late at night. He had given up on the idea of changing his life and he was embarrassed to see Mrs. D. because he was letting her down. Nolan was no longer experiencing enough success to encourage him to continue taking risks with his education and he no longer believed that any of it had a purpose (Morton, & Kennedy, 1999). I also believe that all of the positive reinforcement Nolan received in grade eight was being interpreted as pressure to change and succeed in more areas of his life. Curwin (1992) explains:

Learning requires taking risks because learning changes you. It challenges your perceptions and understandings of the way things are. It makes life more complicated. Learning provides not only new skills and tools but also the need to use them. (p.23)

We had raised our expectations for Nolan but were unable to provide the necessary means to achieve those goals. His fear of failure prevented him from climbing any further up the ladder to success. As Curwin (1992) puts it, “The closer to the bottom, the smaller the fall” (p. 87).

Mrs. D. explained that she never gave up on Nolan but she realized the pull of the streets was too strong. School was no longer offering him enough success to keep him motivated. As well, we had tried to involve other community agencies to help Nolan and each of these had no or few options for him. His attempts to get an education and live a life that didn't include drugs and gangs were met time and time again by closed doors and frustration. It didn't seem like a realistic goal for him. Nolan returned to what was familiar with and was competent and successful at – surviving day to day on the streets.

I was impressed with Nolan's insight. He seemed to have a very clear picture of the positive influences in his life and the turning point which led him to incarceration several times in the last few years. He knew what has to be done to change the cycle of poverty, abuse and incarceration in his family but when we discuss the steps involved and the possible positive outcomes he appears already defeated. Nolan is an intelligent young man and has always yearned for a “normal family life like at Mrs. D.'s” but loyalty to his brothers and the skills required for survival on the streets often blur the lines between right and wrong, legal and illegal. Much as the line between disappointment and accepting is blurred for the teachers who want these students to succeed.

Katie: The Importance of Humour

Katie was a loud, outspoken, opinionated young girl who, at the age of 13, had learned to make herself noticed. In her violent, drug filled home, it was easy to be forgotten but Katie did not want to be forgotten. She carried the anger of rejection like a shield protecting her broken heart.

On this particular morning we were reading Shakespeare's play, Romeo and Juliet, aloud with the class. A few students with good reading skills, my teaching partner, Mr. H, and I each took on a role. The students loved this story. Gangs, violence, and forbidden love were themes they were familiar with. Once they had developed an understanding of the language, they loved to try and figure out what was being said between the characters. These informal lessons on context clues were often quite hilarious as our classroom was a place where students were willing to risk being wrong and the personal experiences from which they drew their knowledge was certainly diverse. Our more street wise students had a vocabulary we teachers often didn't understand so they enjoy comparing and contrasting Shakespeare's language and their street language for us. We were equally enthusiastic about sharing our present day interpretation as well as that of our parents' generation.

Mr. H read his line as Capulet. "Fetch my sword, ho!" As I was responding with my line as Lady Capulet, Katie yelled out, "Hey, Mrs. McKay, Mr. H just called you a whore!" I feigned a shocked and offended reaction. The other students picked up on this in an instant. Cat calls, threats to send Mr. H to the office and offers to defend my honour echoed in the room. Mr. H raised his hand in the air for silence and attempted to explain the misunderstanding. His explanation was an exaggerated

performance of Lord Capulet as a gangster, home boy, rapper type of character using the word ho and a contrasted performance of a British Shakespearian actor using the word ho. It was a slightly inappropriate dramatization and probably crossed the line of acceptable strategies for teaching Shakespeare to students. Mr. H and I could have chosen to reprimand Katie for her outburst and her use of unacceptable language as she was attempting to disrupt the class and focus some attention on herself but it was a teaching moment we couldn't pass up. The students definitely understood the concept and were able to apply their knowledge. They took great delight in telling the other teachers that Mr. H had called me a ho then, after enjoying the look of shock and disbelief they had caused, explaining the situation. When they were asked to memorize and perform some lines from the play most of them searched the entire play to choose a selection that allowed them to demonstrate the inappropriateness of Shakespeare's language by today's standards.

These types of interactions are teaching moments which, according to Dixon-Krauss (1996), are the beginnings of the formation of higher mental functions. Dixon-Krauss believe that verbal dialogues and guided social interactions restructure the child's mental processes through a process of internalization. We were able to observe our students as they attempted to apply their new knowledge to their existing knowledge. Their peers helped expand vocabulary and comprehension by sharing their interpretations. As well, the cultural diversity of our class was emphasized as individual students shared their cultural interpretations.

Chapter Summary

The difficulty I encountered with compiling my data was deciding which experiences to leave out of my research. I tried to include experiences that encompassed the uniqueness of our students and the need for adaptation. Each student represents a story of resilience, adaptation and determination for themselves and for the staff at St. Jude. We wanted to give them a place to which they could belong. They no longer believe that they belong in school and they have given up hope of achieving success at school. As Curwin (1992) puts it, "At-risk students are, in a sense, students who will not take risks" (p. 24). At St. Jude we work toward rebuilding self-worth and a sense of purpose for education in their lives. Our focus is on the individual and his or her development as an authentic self (Goodman, 1999). Why is only one school afforded the staffing, support and facilities to support these students? Why is a school that makes students feel welcome and sets its priorities as establishing relationships and building self esteem in order to teach curriculum considered alternative? Despite the fact that our society has changed so dramatically in the last decade, our school system, methods of assessment and determinants of success have steadfastly refused to change. The students themselves are perceived as responsible for their failure at school.

My experiences at St. Jude have been the most rewarding and the most unforgettable in my career. My at-risk students opened my eyes to a world I had only previously glimpsed. They allowed me to share in their experiences and thereby refocus the lens through which I view my world and theirs. The curriculum determines my destination but it is relationship and compassion that guides my course. I want all teachers to experience the culture of caring we fostered at St. Jude. I want all students to

experience the empathy, acceptance and guidance offered at St. Jude. I want all schools to share in the alternative school philosophy such that it will no longer be considered alternative.

Through personal reflection and retrospection this chapter paints a very real picture of academic life for at-risk students, their struggles and the challenges faced by one teacher attempting to understand their situation and guide them toward success and hope for the future.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

This concluding chapter brings together all the elements of my journey toward empathy and understanding for at-risk students.

Introduction

Narrative meaning is created by recognizing that each part contributes to the whole and each part is related to yet another part. For this reason my narratives run throughout the chapters and are not neatly packed into one chapter on data. Throughout, I take the roles of observer, participant and narrator. “The meaning of each event is produced by the part it plays in the whole episode” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 6). Each narrative is an interpretation of experience through my own personal lens and its contribution to my evolving construction of self. “Narrative enrichment occurs when one retrospectively revises, selects and orders past details in such a way as to create a self-narrative that is coherent and satisfying and that will serve as a justification for one’s present condition and situation” (p. 108).

Describing these lived experiences is very different from being in the midst of emotional confusion surrounded by fear, anger and loneliness. I have tried to display these emotions through my writing. The hallmark of subjective knowing is the emergence of ‘the inner voice’. This perspective marks a developmental shift from passivity to action, in effect, from silence to a “protesting inner voice” (Belenky et al., 1986, p.54) which facilitates a sense of self, agency and control. Each student required me to refocus my lens. My experiences at St. Jude cannot simply be defined as working

with at-risk students. It was so much more than that. It changed my world view and altered the lens through which I viewed education and social justice.

The Road Less Traveled

When I began teaching at St. Jude I was prepared for a different climate of school and needier students. I was looking forward to the change. I assumed that this school for at-risk students was simply filled with children who could not and would not learn. Much like my experience at the Correctional Centre, I soon came to realize that my students weren't a single group of people with an inability to learn. These children were unique human beings who demonstrated strength and resilience in the face of unfathomable life circumstances and challenges. I came to know each one and their story of survival in the educational system and on the streets. It no longer mattered that they couldn't read or write or multiply. It mattered that they were hurt and suffering and developing their potential for the future only reached as far as having a meal and a safe place to sleep that night. Labeling student behaviours allows us to distance ourselves from the pain and chaos our students suffer while still giving the illusion that we are helping (Minuchin in Richardson, 2001). Belenky et al. (1986) contrast this as the difference between separate knowing and connected knowing. For me, these were no longer students who wouldn't learn. They were children who needed to be more concerned with survival than academics. For them, preparing for the future meant meeting basic human needs and staying safe until tomorrow. As the designation of at-risk became more and more of a human experience for me, my awareness of and frustration for their situations increased.

My contributions to discussions during graduate studies always came through a slightly different lens than that of my colleagues. I was often hesitant to share some of my experiences and even watered down some that I did share so as not to offend anyone's sense of propriety. Drugs, sex, abuse, respect and safety were regular topics of conversation at St. Jude yet I worried about the reality of my at-risk students offending other social circles. That was an "aha" moment for me; a moment in which my sense of fairness and social justice was awakened to the reality of a culturally and economically diverse society; A moment in which I wanted to do more than deal with these issues one day at a time at school; A moment in which I wanted others to know what was really happening in our city and in our schools and to our youth. In looking back on my journey I now recognize that experience as a conversion to being a passionate knower as stated by Belenky et al.,

...by making the unconscious conscious, by consulting and listening to the self, by voicing the unsaid, by listening to others and staying alert to all the currents and undercurrents of life about them, by imagining themselves inside the new poem or person or idea that they want to come to know and understand. (1986, p.141)

My silent voice became a voice of action. I needed to tell my stories not only for my students' sake but in order to understand my own journey of coming to know what I know. "Teachers' stories involve constructing versions of one's teaching self within the context of relationship and institution. These constructions of self help us know ourselves, reflect on our place and provide us an opportunity to change ourselves" (Paul & Smith, 2000, p. 108).

Lessons Learned

In reviewing the transcripts of my interviews and reflecting on my narratives, certain themes became apparent: acceptance, humour, safety, survival, the real world, maintaining the status quo, expectations and, perhaps the over-arching theme of all of these, sanctuary. For me the word sanctuary had always seemed to be more appropriate for a Hollywood drama not the everyday life of children. Yet, in my reflections and analysis it was the descriptor that seemed most appropriate. St. Jude was a safe haven where our students didn't have to worry about survival or protection. It was a refuge from the responsibilities of their home and the expectations of the street. Even their anger was acceptable as it was viewed as a teachable moment and a learning experience for the staff and the students. They were only at-risk of experiencing support, concern and care, not failure and exclusion.

I was attending a Science Curriculum in-service at one of the inner city high schools recently and I got a chance to catch up with two of my former students from St. Jude. The first encounter was outside. I was walking from the parking lot into the school when a tall, lanky fellow in a big, down filled parka called out my name. He was having a cigarette break with two of his friends. I turned and looked to see who it was and as he threw down his smoke and came striding towards me, I recognized him as Lyle, a student I had taught in Grades eight and nine at St. Jude. As he approached me he exclaimed, "I can't believe this!" and gave me a big bear hug. We each excitedly exchanged our "how are you?" and "what's new?" I commented on how much he had grown. I asked about his dad and other members of his family and told him to be sure and say hello to them for me. He gave me a big smile and a wave and I

made a mental note to tell his other former teachers how great he seemed to be doing. I overheard him telling his friends that I was one of his teachers from St. Jude. He sounded proud.

Later that same day during a coffee break, I walked past a group of students sitting on the floor outside their lockers in the hallway. I did a second look as I recognized a few of the faces from St. Jude. “Hey, how are you guys?” I inquired. They looked up and smiled and asked me if I was teaching there now. One of the boys, Roland, jumped up and said, “Hey, P. McKay! You remember our handshake?” He and I performed the greeting handshake we used to do every time we passed each other in the hall at St. Jude. Then, he showed me a new one and we practiced it a couple of times. I talked to the other boys and asked each one how school was going and what grade they were in now. There were other students around but they didn’t seem to mind showing off our student/teacher friendship. They volunteered some news about other former students then I turned to Roland and asked him how Patrick was doing. Patrick is the student from the first chapter who sent Nolan to our St. Jude family. Roland is Patrick’s younger brother. He told me that Patrick was back in the Detention Centre then proudly bragged that he had never been there. Roland then walked with me to the classroom where our in-service was being held. He waved at one of his high school teachers and told him that he knew me from St. Jude. His high school teacher then informed me that Roland was one of his star students and doing really well at high school. Roland grinned from ear to ear performed a waving salute toward all of us in the room and walked back to his friends. I felt so proud of him and so happy for him that I had trouble concentrating on my own school work for the next

hour of the lesson. It was a heart warming experience running into those former students. It was a reminder of how strong our sense of belonging and community was at St. Jude. I once again felt hopeful for their success in a school system that had once excluded them.

With a few exceptions, most students are slightly embarrassed to be recognized by their elementary school teachers in front of their friends. The exact opposite is true when I run into former students from St. Jude. They always seem to want to share a fond reminiscence and usually some current news about themselves. It is equally as exciting for me as a teacher to be able to greet them and see how they are doing. I believe it is because we have that shared sanctuary experience. St. Jude allows the staff to meet the students “on their own turf” yet at the same time offers them the welcome, dignity and healing that hasn’t happened in other schools and isn’t happening in other areas of their lives. The school climate at St. Jude is one of service to others, not one of power over others. People need to know they are respected and valued for who they are right here and right now. St. Jude offers the safety of being who you are and helping you discover what it is and who you want to be. The program offered hope for transformation as our students came to realize that they could change their destructive situations. St. Jude is a place of security and refuge. It is a place of encouragement and acceptance. It is a welcoming community seeking to establish healthy relationships and a healthy sense of self. St. Jude offers sanctuary from the failure and exclusion our students had previously associated with school.

When Nolan, Mrs. D. and I first sat down together it was in one of the visitors’ rooms at a youth detention centre. Nolan was serving time for a drug related offence. He

confided in us that he had taken the rap for his brother as Nolan was still a young offender and his brother would have been tried in adult court and received a stiffer sentence. Mrs. D. and I began questioning him about the whereabouts of other students who had attended St. Jude. Nolan was very matter of fact about who was in jail, which had children, who was addicted and even shared a few stories about events on the streets. Each name that was mentioned brought forth a shared memory from St. Jude. It was a very warm, easy conversation with much laughter about potentially serious situations. Nolan was able to share his stories with us because he trusted us. He knew that we weren't there to judge but rather to listen and care, accept and guide. It was a fond reminiscence of a time when we all thought our students had a chance for a future. We took pride in helping them discover their gifts and talents and spent time discussing alternatives and options available in their young lives. "The power of teacher recognition and belief in a student's identity, learning and development is truly inestimable" (van Manen, 2002, p. 89).

Unfortunately, outside the halls of St. Jude most at-risk students are judged at face value. They are labeled as defiant, uncooperative, unable to learn, a criminal, a misfit and unsuccessful. Any further treatment or attention they receive is based on this label. At one time Nolan had dreams and a plan for a future with a family. By the age of seventeen when I interviewed him, poverty and the challenges of survival had clouded over his dreams. At times he seemed embarrassed by his actions or the events in his life. He knew and we knew that he had the potential to be successful but the burdens he carried, the obstacles he faced and social structures prevented success. I always experience a sense of despair when I hear people dismiss children like Nolan because

they don't have a chance for success from the beginning of their impoverished, minority and marginalized lifestyle. To me, that always sounds like an assumption that they choose to live this way or that they deserved it.

Mrs. D. talked about Nolan's grandmother asking for help with Nolan as a turning point in her career at St. Jude. That was her "aha" moment when she realized that at-risk students weren't labels. They were someone's children. They were loved and there were dreams for a brighter future for the next generation. To watch Nolan grow and mature in so many positive ways inspired all of us to want more for our students. He represented a glimmer of hope in an otherwise dark future. The sad reality exemplified by Nolan's story and the other narratives I shared is that these children don't have a chance for success because we don't allow them one. Society expects them to continue the cycle of poverty and lack of education and they are treated as such. Despite colonization, a disadvantaged life and desperate circumstances, these students are judged by social structures that don't include them. They are expected to fit into the same data driven curriculum, the same assessment rubrics, and the same goal oriented teaching strategies as dictated by the dominant culture. Without support and mentorship, they could not overcome the physical and emotional challenges that faced them every day in order to meet the academic challenges the school system put in front of them. We built them up only to send them out into the real world where, without transitioning support, they were almost destined to fail. I felt ashamed when I realized that very few people even expected success from, or for our students. The freedom of programming that we were allowed was more about coping than it was about achievement. Too many people viewed St. Jude as a holding tank until these students were old enough to no longer be the

responsibility of the school system. The culture of caring that we had created and nurtured could be quickly destroyed with policies of zero tolerance, standardized testing and impersonal record keeping. Ellis (1997) states that the practices of teaching equal the practices of culture which equal the limitations of response of schools and society to difficult students in the classroom puts the blame on the children for failing at school. The reality is that colonized, marginalized and disadvantaged children are further victimized by of the pedagogy of our schools. They are left to slide down the slope of failure and isolation until they disappear through the cracks and into the tunnels of despair. It is our constant hope and our guiding light at St. Jude that we can provide our students with the necessary tools for them to continue their education and to keep themselves from falling through the cracks. Fortunately, there are more secondary alternative program options available for at-risk students. Although their struggles for success and academic achievement continue, each positive experience combined with the care and guidance of a concerned role model is another step on their journey to altering the circumstances of their lives.

The success behind St. Jude and other alternative programs is not a secret formula. Nel Noddings (2004) writes about listening to our students to determine individual needs and how best to meet them. Max van Manen (2002) concurs in describing a tone of teaching as cultivating "...a certain kind of seeing, listening, and responding to each child in each particular situation" (p. 10). Richardson (2001) writes about meeting youth where they are – individually, developmentally and culturally. At St. Jude we attempted to provide social interactions that were very different from the interactions our students were used to at home and on the streets. Differences were

respected. Compassion and empathy were encouraged. Implementing successful strategies for at-risk students, however, requires additional time, staff and community support. Success cannot be measured by exam marks but by attitude, effort and willingness to try. I agree with Noddings (2004) who remind us that we need to be concerned with moral, spiritual, social and aesthetic outcomes, not just achievement scores. This type of assessment requires building relationships with students and shaping our teaching to what our students are experiencing. We need to teach to the children, not to administrative and corporate agendas.

High schools appear to be coming to the realization of what will keep secondary students successful and in school. Secondary schools are putting more effort into ensuring a successful start for their grade nine and ten students. There are transition experiences offered before the students attend the high school so that they feel more comfortable and familiar with their new surroundings. Senior students are paired with the younger ones to establish a mentorship type of relationship. They are beginning to offer options similar to those programs that made St. Jude a success; more teachers and smaller class size enable students and teachers to establish a relationship of respect and understanding. They are recognizing that the basic needs of some of their students are not being met and are attempting to use interagency links to establish a support system for students. This support can include food programs, counseling and access to medical care.

One of the most important differences in what happens to students in school depends on the philosophy of the teachers such as what they understand about students and about learning and whether they are able to respond to different approaches and

experiences that the students bring with them to the learning setting. Banks (1993) calls this equity pedagogy, one that makes knowledge accessible to all students. Moreover, this requires teachers who are able to connect diverse experiences of their students and their learning to a wide array of strategies. Teacher expertise is one of the more important predictors of student achievement. Unequal access to good teaching sacrifices student potential or the opportunity for each to find a place to value or be valued in their community.

The Journey Never Ends

My research has merely uncovered a map on which we can begin a journey toward success for all students. Our pedagogical knowledge needs to be restructured around the qualities of individuals in their own culture. We need to share our stories in order to engage the hearts and minds of everyone involved in education and connect through a shared purpose of discovering potential. More importantly, our responsibilities as educators cannot stop at discovering potential. It must be guided and nurtured toward fulfillment. Those same skills that are used for survival by our marginalized youth should be viewed as untapped cultural capital. They need to be recognized and channeled in positive directions for the mutual benefit of both the individual and society. Polkinghorne (1988) states:

The goal of research into the production of meaning is to produce clear and accurate descriptions of the structures and forms of various meaning systems. This type of outcome does not provide information for the prediction and control of behaviour; instead it

provides a kind of knowledge that individuals and groups can use to increase the power and control they have over their own actions.

(p. 10)

In interpreting my data, I was drawn to Bernard Schissel's book, *Blaming Children-Youth Crime, Moral Panics and the Politics of Hate* (1997). In reading and rereading a text I had been assigned years ago as an undergraduate student I could see parallels between youth in school and youth in the justice system. Reading his work enabled me to refine my analysis and interpretation of my teaching experience. Both the education system and the justice system express theories of why youth are unsuccessful and how society is responsible for creating these conditions of failure yet neither system fully implements constructive theories of remediation. Marginalized youth (or in this case a colonized youth) are further victimized by institutions that view them as problems and the need to dispose of problems.

I resonate with the work of Belenky et al. (1986) who describe ways of knowing that women reported to them, based on their individual life experiences. In the process, Belenky and her colleagues identified particular ways of knowing that women have cultivated and valued, ways of knowing, they argue, that have been denigrated and neglected by the dominant intellectual ethos of our time. In developing their theory of knowledge, Belenky et al. (1986) were concerned to understand 'how women know what they know'. They believed that what women considered to be truth and reality affects the way in which they see the world, including perceptions of self, and views of teaching and learning. By placing myself as knower within this text, I show how the conducting of this research and its subsequent critique was for me, not an activity of detached

intellectual curiosity, used to produce a traditional thesis, but rather a process of engagement with ideas in which I as a knower was intimately connected and attached to that which was also known to and communicated by others.

Narratives are open ended and can be interpreted in many different ways depending on culture, personal experience, prior knowledge and societal teachings and expectations. When I began teaching at St. Jude, my stories were told through a lens of ignorance and disbelief. I created pictures of adolescents in desperate situations who struggled for survival, love and acceptance. Over the years my lens was continually being refocused toward empathy, responsibility, frustration, success and hope. Paul and Smith (2000) refer to this as connected knowing as we bridge the difference between the ordinary and the unexpected. I want my stories to create pictures of youth who are strong, resilient and capable. Stories allow us to cross boundaries of all types until we are all just people sharing our experiences and our understanding of the world. We come to know each other as human beings with feelings and hurt and desires. Belenky et al. (1986) refer to connected knowing as seeking to understand other people's ideas in the other people's terms.

Cross-cultural experiences unsettle and transform us. At times the process entails loss, at other times it yields change; invariably it involves risk and requires engagement. We learn about others and ourselves by taking into account our own values, beliefs, and attitudes and critically examining them as we try to understand the unfamiliar. In so doing, Gertz (1983) believes we link "the processes of self-knowledge, self-perception, and self-understanding to those of other-knowledge, other-perception, other-understanding" (pp. 181-182). In this way, learning about the culture of others was

autobiographical as I broke through the ordinary frames of understanding. Through the writing of this thesis I came to understand how I was learning to know how to teach children. In the words of Belenky et al. (1986) I had become a passionate knower, "...knowers who enter into a union with that which is to be known" (p. 141). I was able to make connections between that which I was trying to understand and my own experience. If this was just a study of detached participants, my research would have clear boundaries and a chronological story line but in writing this thesis I had to think retrospectively about all aspects of my twenty years of teaching experience. With each student, each experience and each new story I had to continually re-examine, re-evaluate and refocus the lens through which I viewed my students, my classroom and, indeed, my whole world. As Marcel Proust wrote, "The voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." In this writing, my eyes focused anew. My own journey has not ended. My narratives have united my experiences and the events of my life to give them meaning and a significance I can understand in order for my future to become a continuation of my story. It is my hope that my writing will inspire others to view the landscapes of our classrooms with new eyes so that together we can change the journey for all those children to whom the school says they didn't pass.

In this final chapter I review all that I learned in my journey from childhood to adulthood as a student and as a teacher and, most importantly, as a member of society who hopes to make a difference for students in their academic career and in their future.

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**UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN BEHAVIORAL ETHICS RESEARCH
BOARD**

Application for Approval of Research Protocol

File Number #BSC 2007-
Date Received_____

RESEARCHER'S SUMMARY

1. RESEARCHER: Patricia McKay, Graduate Student, Department of Curriculum Studies

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Department of Curriculum Studies

1a. ANTICIPATED START DATE: March, 2007

1b. COMPLETION DATE: December, 2007

2. TITLE OF THE STUDY: How Teachers Alter Their Practices for At-Risk Students

3. ABSTRACT: I spent six years teaching at-risk Middle Years students in an alternative program. It was an unpredictable, emotional and rewarding journey that forever changed my perspective on education, social justice and the marginalized people of society. At-risk students are typically described by the circumstances in their lives that prevent them from conforming to mainstream expectations. I came to know my students as strong, resilient children surviving in a world not of their own making. Using self-narrative inquiry and reflective analysis I want to use my experiences with at-risk students in an alternative program to refocus the lens through which they are viewed. My personal and professional journey enabled me to come to know their world both as insider taking part in their education and as an observer of life circumstances opposite of my own. I want to provide insight how flexible programming, curricula, and the role of the teacher can make a difference to their success personally and academically. I want to answer the research question: *how teachers of at-risk students alter their teaching practices in an alternative program?*

4. FUNDING: Funding is not required for this research.

5. PARTICIPANTS: I am the main participant in this research as I share and self-reflect on my personal experiences with at-risk students in an alternative program. Other participants who may be interviewed include a former teacher and colleague in my professional network in addition to a former student of the program. There is no potential for coercion as the former student is no longer in the alternative program who is now 18 and over the age of assent. Since, this student has been a street kid for 6 years and not under the auspices of Social Services, not under legal services, no longer affiliated with his reserve, he has slipped through the cracks in the child welfare system. He will be signing the consent form as he has no guardian or significant adult who would be signing for him.

6. INFORMED CONSENT: The researcher will meet with the participants individually to inform them about the research study, the interview process and explain informed consent in detail. In addition, it will be explained to participants that they are free to withdraw at any time without a penalty and if so, all their data sources from interviews will be destroyed. The consent form will be read aloud to the student and teacher and there will be opportunity for the participants to ask questions. (See Informed Consent Appendix B).

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: The researcher intends to use two data gathering strategies. One is in-depth conversational interviews (Mishler, 1989) with the former teacher and former student that use open-ended questions as a probe in order to gather a wide range of perspectives (*in depth interviewing is designed to elicit a rich understanding of the participant's way of thinking. These interviews are less structured than a typical interview and involve the researcher probing into topics that the participant may bring up*). The interviews will be audio taped to record the thoughts, attitudes and insights of the participants about their personal experience with alternative programs. The audio taped interviews will be transcribed and returned to the participants who will be asked to sign a Data Transcript Release Form (See Data Transcript Release Form Appendix C) after checking the transcripts for both clarity and accuracy.

Secondly, the researcher will also use personal anecdotal records, memory books and journal reflections to provide a self-perspective on her experience as a teacher in an alternative program and the professional decisions she has made to adapt her pedagogical practices to meet the needs of students who are considered to be at-risk.

8. DATA STORAGE: Upon the completion of the study, all data (field notes, transcripts, tapes, documents, and artifacts) will be securely stored and retained by the researcher for a minimum of five years with Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Department of Curriculum Studies, and College of Education in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan guidelines before being destroyed.

9. DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS: Participants will be informed that their contributions (which they agree to share in the Data/Transcript Release Form, Appendix C) will be used in a Masters Thesis and may be written in a scholarly journal article or in conference presentations.

10. RISKS: There are no risks or deception in the study. Participants will be made aware of the purpose of the study and why they are participants. It is not anticipated that any of the interview questions will become uncomfortable.

11. CONFIDENTIALITY: The study will not take place in the alternative school as the graduate student investigator is no longer working in that school, nor is the participant teacher and the student has moved on to a senior high school placement. All participants will be assured that third party privacy (anonymity and confidentiality) will be maintained throughout the gathering of information and the writing of the study. Pseudonyms will be used to identify participants and any identifying personal information about them or their attributes will not be used in any publication and/or presentation.

12. DATA TRANSCRIPT RELEASE: (See Appendix C). Since the interview records opinions, feelings, recollections, and descriptions the participants will have the

opportunity to read the transcripts to clarify add or delete information so it will accurately represent them and their intellectual property. In keeping with respectful research, they will be told orally what the researcher would like to share about what they said and later they can read/edit what is written in the draft of the report or journal article and the specific words used.

13. DEBRIEFING AND FEEDBACK: Since this study aims to achieve respectful research, the participants will be involved throughout the study as they review their transcripts and their contribution to the draft of the study to feel reassured that the researcher is interpreting and representing their intellectual property, that is their thoughts, feelings, and knowledge about their professional practice.

14. REQUIRED SIGNATURES: The Research Proposal has been reviewed by:

----- Dr. Barry Brown, Department Head Department of Curriculum Studies	----- Date
----- Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Professor Department of Curriculum Studies	----- Date
----- Pat McKay, Graduate Student, Department of Curriculum Studies	----- Date

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE QUESTIONS
FOR THE STUDENT

1. Where were you teaching / going to school before you were at St. Jude [a pseudonym]?
2. What did you know about St. Jude before you became part of that school community?
3. How did you learn about its existence?
4. How did you become a part of the St. Jude School community?
5. What was your initial impression of the school, the other staff and students and the program available there?
6. How did St. Jude compare to your previous school or your prior school experiences?
7. Would you consider your involvement at St. Jude as successful? In what way was it more or less successful than your prior school experiences?
8. Did you notice a difference in the material that was presented?
9. How would you describe the student body at St. Jude?
10. How would you describe the staff at St. Jude?
11. How would you describe the St. Jude school climate?
12. Why did you leave St. Jude?

FOR THE TEACHER

13. As you look back at your experience at St. Jude, what memories really stand out in your mind?
14. How does your experience at St. Jude compare to the school experiences you have had since leaving that environment?
15. Is there any part of your experience at St. Jude you would like to see implemented at other schools?
16. Reflecting back your experience, are there any changes you would make that you think would improve the program at St. Jude?
17. Students who attended the alternative program at St. Jude are referred to as being at-risk of not successfully completing school. How would you define at-risk students?
18. What do you think any school in any community could do to help at-risk students achieve success at school?
19. Thinking of the students who attended St. Jude and / or your own experience, what do you see as the future for at-risk students?

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS

RESEARCHER: Patricia McKay, Graduate Student, Department of Curriculum Studies, 955-8178

GRADUATE SUPERVISOR: Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Department of Curriculum Studies, 966-7578

I appreciate your participation in the research study: How Teachers Alter Their Practices for At-Risk Students. The purpose of the study will describe the adaptations to teaching and the curriculum in an Alternative Program. I will adhere to the following guidelines which are designed to protect the interests of everyone taking part in the study.

1. I would like to use conversational interviews. I will also like to interview you once (45 minutes per interview) about your perspective on alternative school programs as a culturally relevant instructional tool. The interview will be audiotaped. You may turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview or choose not to answer some questions if you so wish. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without a penalty or loss of services. If this happens, the tape recordings and interview data will be destroyed.

2. After your interview, the audiotape will be transcribed as a smoothed narrative version of the transcripts with false starts, repetitions, or “um” and Aok@ removed to make it more readable. The transcript will be analyzed to discover the major themes which were discussed. You will be able to check the transcriptions to clarify and add information in your own words so as to construct the meanings that become “data” for later interpretation by the researcher. You will be asked to sign a data release form. In discussing the data with the researcher, you may delete anything you do not wish to be quoted in the study. You will be able to see a copy of your contributions to the study before the final draft and you will receive a copy of the study.

3. The tape recordings made during the study will be kept in a secure place and will be held by Dr. Wason-Ellam at the University of Saskatchewan for five years according to the University of Saskatchewan guidelines.

4. There are no risks in participating in the study. Although there may not be any benefits to you, the study will illustrate how skilled teachers continually alter their teaching practices to meet the needs of students searching for a place to succeed. In participating within the study, your identity will remain anonymous and what you say in the interviews will remain confidential. The results of the study will be published as a thesis and may be disseminated at scholarly conferences and in journal articles. Pseudonyms will be used for your name and identifying information will be eliminated.

The proposed research project was reviewed and approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on _____ 2007. If at any time you have any questions about this study or your rights as a participant, you can contact us, Pat McKay, Saskatoon Catholic Schools at 306-659-7300 or Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Department of Curriculum Studies, telephone: 966-7578 (home 653-5844); or e-mail: linda.wason-ellam@usask.ca or the Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan at 306-966-2084 by calling collect.

I, _____, agree to participate in the above study as explained to me. I understand the guidelines outlined above. I have received a copy of the consent form for my records.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: TRANSCRIPT/DATA RELEASE FORM

I, _____ have read my transcripts and agree to release them. I have had the opportunity to read the transcripts to clarify add or delete information so it will accurately represent my words. The procedure and its possible risks have been explained to me by Pat McKay, and I understand them. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from this study at any time without a penalty. I understand that my direct words may be quoted or paraphrased in the writing of the data and if so the researcher will share with me the final draft of the research for my approval. Although the data from this study will be published as a Masters thesis, and/or presented at seminars and/or conferences, my identity will be kept completely confidential in the writing through pseudonyms. Any other identifying information will be removed.

Participant Signature

Date

Pat McKay, Researcher

Date

I have retained a copy of this form for my records.