Alternative Education within an Inclusive System: A Participatory Case Study of
A Secondary Alternative Education Program on Prince Edward Island

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Education
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Education
University of Prince Edward Island

Kendra MacLaren
Summerside, PEI
April, 2011

Canada

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Abstract

This participatory case study investigated an alternative education program for students considered at risk of dropping out of school in Prince Edward Island. The case study sought to reveal how the program changed students' experience of school, the different teaching practices used by the program teachers, and the elements of this program that could be applied to other programs in public education. The study followed a small group of at-risk students participating in the tier one cohort of an alternative education program in a Prince Edward Island high school. The study also presents data from the cohort teachers, resource teacher, youth worker, and principal of this program. This study took a constructivist theoretical frame and data were gathered in the following ways: personal observations; student focus groups; staff focus group; individual interviews with the principal and youth worker; and one teacher's diary. Data analysis followed Patton's (2002) first cut, the constant comparison method, and the theory of convergence. The findings of this study supported the continuation and improvement of the cohort program. Recommendations for improvement included continuation of the breakfast and lunch programs; assignment of cohort teachers before other placements; continuation of resource support in afternoon classes; an increase professional development opportunities for teachers; development and implementation of meaningful, current, real-world curriculum for students; implementation of a employment placement; addition of a personal development course; and development of supports for working students.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1   General Problem Statement

The ever-changing climate of education continues to adapt and adjust to the needs and demands of society. From black boards to smart boards, biblical education to global awareness, and yes, even from corporal punishment to mediation, education has functioned in a multitude of ways, fitting a variety of purposes along the path to the present. No matter the need society has placed on the education system, the system has striven to meet it, to find success, whatever that may mean at that moment in time. According to the Canadian Labour Force Survey, first adopted in 1991, drop-out rates have decreased immensely (Bowlby, 2005). As a result, schools are serving students who at one time never would have made it to high school. At the same time, family dynamics are changing, and the roles of home and school have blended almost so completely that the lines can be blurred as to who should be responsible to teach what skill or fulfill which need. D'Angelo and Zemanick, authors of "The Twilight Academy: An Alternative Education Program that Works" (2009), comment on the situation of roles for educators and parents. They state:

> School-aged children are different now for many reasons, primarily because the environment they have grown up in has changed...school settings have become the "dumping grounds" for problematic students, and the expectations for these children have diminished with the decreased emphasis on schooling that occurs in the home (p. 211).

Living in the angst of these undefined, unfulfilled roles are the students who we may define as truant, inappropriate, impossible, or "unteachable." These students, for one reason or another, do not fit the traditional mould of a classroom. Although it is easier to blame this lack of connection on the students, their family, or economic background, it is quite likely that the public education system may

actually be a major contributor concerning their learning. By not addressing the realities these students face with their academic learning, the education system is reproducing social inequality. Furlong (2009) explains how society often wrongly perceives past notions of social class as having been eliminated. He claims that this is incorrect and there are actually patterns currently reproducing social inequality in our society. He illustrates this in the following quotation: "On the contrary my position is that while outcomes are largely determined by a set of structural resources and contexts, personal agency is central to the mobilisation of capacities, and, hence, the reproduction of social inequalities."(p. 349) By not having their needs met in the public school system, these students are geared toward a lower socioeconomic status in the future. By ensuring all students' needs are met, students at risk of dropping out of school may then have a real chance of improving not only their academic skills, but their socioeconomic status as well.

Murawski and Hughes, authors of "Response to Intervention, Collaboration, and Co-Teaching: A Logical Combination for Successful Systematic Change" (2009), suggest that there is a distinct connection between the child and the learning environment. They quote Batsche and Witt (2006) speaking to new approaches to teaching:

> The identification process shifts the focus from the assumption that something is wrong with an individual child to the examination of the fit between the child and the environment. The new approach assumes that something is wrong with the instruction for that particular child, which needs to be considered and addressed (p.268).

Legally, educators must teach students. Morally, one may argue that we must try to see the truth , even when it puts difficult pressures on an already pressured education system. In reality, it may be easier to turn a blind eye, to let someone else worry about "these" students. Our reluctance to sincerely and actively help these students will not make them go away. Surely they will not disappear ·

or figure it all out on their own.. Teachers concerned about these students may argue that students will pay for our inability to meet them where they are. By not addressing their needs in the classroom, students may be more at risk of finding unproductive and harmful ways to fit in in other groups. This choice may lead to more destructive behaviours such as breaking the law, or harmful choices such as drug use. As a society, we may pay for our inability to meet these students' needs as well. Whether it is a personal cost of a criminal act or the funding of a social or justice program, we may all pay a cost for this failure.

The issues surrounding at-risk youth and education have prompted my interest in this field. In some small way, I hope my study is able to move these problems forward. Throughout this participatory case study, I will examine a specialized program for at-risk youth. By doing this, I hope to uncover students' opinions and examine their views of this particular program, assess the program's effectiveness, and identify areas for potential improvement and growth.

I became aware of the need for effective alternative education very early on in my teaching career. I was actually a pre-service teacher at the high school level. I worked under the leadership of a very gifted teacher who worked with at-risk students. I will call her Ms. Angel for the purpose of this study. In reality, that name describes her much better than her own.

Truthfully, I responded to "these students" with much reservation in the beginning. They were the students I saw in the principal's office, and the ones I observed fighting in the parking lots. They were continuously getting caught for drug use and for skipping school. Their behaviour frightened me, and the bursts of anger they displayed throughout the school were difficult to ignore. They yelled, threw desks, disrespected teachers, and were confrontational with their peers. If their behaviour was not going to be enough to scare me, the comments I heard in the staff room would have done it. These students had reputations, and they had burned a lot of bridges in their short time in high school.

Little did I know that the first day I stepped into Ms. Angel's classroom, my life would be forever changed. It was within the four brick walls of room 316 that my real education would begin. This windowless classroom made of bricks would have conveyed a prison-like setting, but Ms. Angel painted it colourful green and plastered bright motivational posters on every open space. Even her colourful ceiling tiles beamed positively down on her students. There were no desks in this classroom. In fact, this classroom looked nothing like the conventional rooms I experienced in my own education. Instead, there were five large tables, seating five at each. There were cabinets filled with construction paper, markers, scissors, glue, and just about every other necessity for creative work. As their English teacher, Ms. Angel ensured her students could tackle the curriculum outcome of representing their learning creatively at no cost to them. She provided all the materials for their artistic work. In the far corner, there was a huge sectional couch, a coffee table, and six bean bag chairs. Opposite to this, there was a ghetto blaster and a number of CDs for students to pick from. This area did not look like a cold classroom. It looked like a comfortable place to be; a happy place where students' needs would not only be considered, but would be made the focus of this teacher's plans for their education.

The first day I worked with Ms. Angel and her students, I was shocked. These rough teenagers melted in her presence, and their anger was replaced by hope. Hope for themselves, and hope for each other. By the end of my time working with Ms. Angel, the students had transformed. For one reason or another, Ms. Angel's class was not a place for the knee jerk reactions they displayed in other areas of the school. Instead of showing anger, they discussed what made them angry. In this caring, and nurturing environment, these students excelled. It was here where I first began to ask the question "why are these students successful in Ms. Angel's classroom, and not in other environments in the school?"

Ms. Angel's teaching philosophy was special. She lived by the motto "Not every student is created equally, but each student is equally deserving of our trust and respect." Ms. Angel was not a

push over; in fact, she often used tough love. But I think that was the real difference. The students knew she cared about them, and, over time, they eventually cared about themselves too. They knew they had someone in their life supporting them, and expecting them to succeed. I wanted to bottle up this gifted teacher's knowledge and carry it around with me. She became a real mentor for me, and even today when I am faced with a tough situation with my students, it is her voice that I hear in my head:

> love them, push them, and be there for them. From this they will learn how to hope, and then eventually, they will learn how to be resilient to the negative forces in their lives—even when they are the negative force in their life. And then eventually, one day, they will want more for themselves, do more for themselves. On that day, you will have made all the difference. You may not be there to see the good work you have done, but nonetheless, you will have succeeded.

Today, five years later, I am teaching my own group of at-risk students. As the science teacher in this program, I have Ms. Angel to thank for preparing me for this opportunity and privilege. Instead of looking at this task negatively, I have learned how lucky I am to be so influential in someone else's life. It is such a gift, and I must never forget how important it is, even when it gets tough, and nearly impossible.

1.2   A Cohort Science Class: A Typical Day

As the homeroom teacher of my cohort science class, I welcome the students each morning. Often they have not had breakfast, nor gotten a full night's sleep. For one reason or another, there is always some issue waiting to be addressed. As I put the kettle on in the far corner of my room and set out the hot chocolate and granola bars, the hum in the room starts to dull and the calm of the morning begins.

Issues that need to be addressed immediately go straight to the youth worker or guidance counsellor. Other than that, we "park the drama at the door, and get the books out." I pass the pictures around from last year's field trip to the beach. They laugh and comment on their silly faces and poses. They smile remembering our wonderful day learning about dunes and sea life, all while having fun. This was the first day I saw them act like kids, running around in the sand, wading in the water, burying each other neck-deep in sand, and taking pictures. School was not so bad a thing that day; in fact, school was a pretty great place. They ask "Where are we going to go this year?" I smile, and say, "We will talk about that after chapter nine."

Currently, we are studying human biology. The students groan as we begin reading for our nutrition unit, but quickly become engaged when they have to write down their food log for the week. They want to know where they stand on the nutritional standard. It is not as fun as Monday's class when we dissected a cow's eye, but it does pertain to their life so they are interested. As we move on to plan what we will plant in the school greenhouse that we have painted and restored, we make a list of things we would like to grow to cook a nutritious meal at the end of the semester. We decide we would like to book a cooking class at the local grocery store before we embark on our tour of the post-secondary sites in November. The students reminisce happily at the thought of the first week's class when we had to create 3D animal and plant cells. They ask "When will we make play dough again? When will we bake a cake again?" They giggle at the thought of their edible creations where they demonstrated their knowledge of cells, and got to "eat their cake too." As we move to the next section of our nutrition chapter, we all smile. Despite the obstacles ahead, there is a lot to look forward to over the next few months together. It is during moments like these that I am reassured of the pedagogical soundness of our program and the unique ingredients for success it offers these deserving students.

1.3   Specific Research Questions

The reason for doing this study is simple. I believe our tier one alternative program accommodates a variety of students who may have gone unidentified in regular classrooms. The students this program focuses on are the students in "the gap." I believe these students often receive little attention because they easily blend into the background. They are not behavioural problems; they do not speak out, but they have struggled academically for their entire education and despite this struggle, still have the tenacity and perseverance to continue to come to building every day that may not make them feel that good about themselves.

Throughout my study of the tier one section of our program, I have uncovered positive elements that may be adopted and shared with other schools. Over the course of this study, I have provided opportunities for students and staff to share their thoughts about school culture, student life, teaching practices, and the alternative program. This research study will hopefully help to improve our program. Throughout this study I focussed on the following research questions:

1. How does the alternative education program change how students experience school?

2. What are the different teaching approaches and practices used by the teachers involved in this program?

3. What elements of this program could be applied to other programs in public education?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 At-Risk Students

He stood at the crossroads all alone,
The sunlight in his face;
He had no thought for an evil course,
He was set for a manly race. But the road stretched east and the road stretched west,
And he did not know which road was the best;
So he took the wrong road and it led him down,
Till he lost the race and the victor's crown.
He was caught at last in an angry snare
Because no one stood at the crossroads there
To show him the better road.

Another day at the self-same place
A boy with high hopes stood;
He, too, was set for a manly race
He was seeking the things that were good.
And one was there who the roads did know,
And that one showed him the way to go;
So he turned away from the road leading down,
And he won the race and the victor's crown;
He walks today on the highways fair
Because one stood at the crossroads there
To show him a better road.
- Sadie Tiller Crawley

I begin with the poem "At the Crossroads" because it illustrates the choices students must make in life, and clearly identifies how a guiding hand can ultimately influence students to make the right choices. As an educator, I have to believe that this is possible. If I didn't, I would not see much purpose in my work. Today, students' backgrounds are so diverse. This can be a gift to the classroom when looking at cultural differences, family dynamics, and celebrations. However, when students' lives break apart, and the differences become negative, students begin to feel inadequate. For the students who are left at a crossroad with no one to help, life can get pretty messy. Some educators may argue that some

students are just "bad" and it is no one's fault but their own. The notion that some students are unreachable is a possibility, but I have to believe that these cases are few and far between. For the most part, I believe students can redefine themselves and overcome problems in their lives. It is important not to generalize all at-risk students as the same. They are unique, just as all students are, and have individual unique characteristics. However, the program of study, the cohort program, does focus on a particular type of at-risk student who predominantly is at risk due to a history of academic failure. For the students in this study, academic failure is often coupled with other issues outlined in the defining at-risk student section of this literature review.

Nel Noddings, a renowned author and philosopher, regards education in a holistic manner. I tend to agree with many of her ideas as they support the growth of students' intellectual, social, and emotional development. Her writings also tend to complement Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Prince & Howard, 2002). Many of her notions make sense and definitely correlate well with the attempts this program is making for teaching the whole child. The holistic approach to education is certainly controversial; however, I believe Noddings' philosophy would support such a program. Although there are other authors I will reference in support of holistic education, Noddings is the primary philosopher I will highlight. Her dedication to students and her admirable reputation have led to this choice. In Noddings' article, "What Does it Mean to Educate the Whole Child?" (2005), she states:

> Some people may argue that schools are best organized to accomplish academic goals and that we should charge other institutions with the task of pursuing the physical, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic aims that we associate with the whole child. The schools would do a better job, these people maintained, if they were freed to focus on the job for which they were established. Those who make this argument have not considered the history of education. Public schools across the United States- as well as schools across different societies

and historical eras- were established as much for moral education and social reasons as for

academic instruction. (p.10)

The idea that schools may not simply be a facility for academic learning is a controversial issue. Many

educators and parents have different ideas of what education should be. However, my experience

teaching at-risk youth and working in alternative education tells me that in order to teach students so

they reach their potential, we must also consider the variables that affect their learning. Along with this,

we must consider what type of society we are trying to secure. In order to ensure that we are doing our

job, we must consider moral education as part of our role.

Despite economic difficulty within the province, Prince Edward Island has made significant

progress in alternative education for at-risk youth. The initiative began in 1993, when a committee was

developed to find better ways to serve these students. In 1995, the Department of Education funded five

Alternative Education sites. The purpose of the whole initiative was:

to provide an opportunity for the students who have dropped out to re-enter the school system

so that they are able to graduate and/or develop the skills to find meaningful employment

[Alternative Education Provincial Initiative: Progress Report, 1996]. In 1997, the Faculty of

Education of U of PEI was commissioned by the department of Education to conduct an

evaluation of the alternative education program. In December of 1998, a final report titled

Report on the Alternative Education Programs in Prince Edward Island: Making Connections

was submitted. This report concluded that the Alternative Education program was working. At

one point it stated: "*What stands out clearly is that the Alternative Education program in P.E.I.*

is a success story. (Coalition for Educational Opportunities, 2006, p. 20)

In 2001, Vianne Timmons, at the time a faculty member of the University of Prince Edward Island, noted that there were actually six sites for at-risk students at the junior and senior high levels. She notes:

> These programs are in schools or separate sites and are designed to provide more personal approach to education which pays attention to the adolescent's personal issues as well as educational. School drop out rates are a national concern and particularly high in Prince Edward Island. Statistics Canada recently released information on the rate of high school drop outs in each province. Prince Edward Island has the highest rates, along with Quebec, with a 16% drop out rate. The drop out rate for males is 20%. The school drop out rates have decreased over the last decade, but the rate is still unacceptable. (p. 188)

As stated in the beginning of this thesis, drop-out rates are continuing to decrease nationally. In December 2005, Statistics Canada reported that:

> For a three year period 1990/91 to 1992/93 about one in five young people aged 20 to 24 were without a high school diploma and were not attending school in Newfoundland and Labrador and in Prince Edward Island. This was the highest rate in the country at the time. In contrast, during the most recent three year period, the dropout rate in both provinces was in the 8% to 10% range, ranking them among the lowest in Canada…young men continue to experience a higher likelihood of dropping out that their female counterparts. (n.p.)

From these statistics, it appears that progress is being made within the province. However, these numbers do not account for how skilled Island students are after they graduate. The Latest PISA results (Program for International Student Assessment) indicate that a significant number of our students are not scoring as well as we may have thought. With 20% of Prince Edward Island students not functioning at a literacy level capable of being effective and productive in society, it makes one

wonder what are students' actual gains of achievement? ("Upper Grades Need Resources", 2010)

When Prince Edward Island students are handed their graduation diploma, how well does that illustrate

how successful they will be in the work force and in society? The current PISA results certainly prompt

one to question how well things really are going in Prince Edward Island. These results are indicative

that the province should not believe the task of meeting the needs of at-risk youth is completed. Along

with continuing to stay in school, we must also ensure all students are gaining a quality education.

Vianne Timmons and her team of researchers conducted another study in 2005, *An Extensive*

Look at Early School Leavers on Prince Edward Island. The study looked at who was dropping out of

school and why. The data for the study was accumulated in both Island school boards using, at that

time, the server for tracking attendance and marks. That system was Trevlac. The Island has since

switched to the Students Achieve System. The report noted that out of the students who had dropped

out of school, 45% believed the content of what they were being taught was "useless". Out of the

students surveyed, 75% dropped out of school for school related reasons, 27% dropped out for work

related reasons, and 26% dropped out due to personal/family reasons. This valuable study also

informed Islanders that two thirds of the early student leavers were male and one third were female. As

the students aged, so did their likelihood of dropping out of school. 3.5% of early student leavers

dropped out in grade 10, 5.1% in grade 11 and 6.6% in grade 12. 40% of these students were

academic, 56% of the students were general and 3% of the students were practical students. 60% of the

students reported that they did not have the finances to continue their education after high school. (p

146-151)

This study aids in describing the type of students dropping out of school and also the reasons

they chose to leave school. Despite this meaningful study, I have found little data to indicate that there

was any significant application of this knowledge into preventative action. If we know who is dropping

out, and why, is there not a reasonable solution that can assist these identified youth in attaining their education? If we know who is at risk, we must be able to put solutions into action. With $220 million a year, one of the highest in Canada, being spent on the public education of Island students, there must be funds available to target the concerns outlined in Timmon's study, particularly student engagement. ("PEI Drop Out Rates Plummet", 2010)

A 2005 study by Community Health Systems Resource Group The Hospital for Sick Children in Ontario also reported on student dropout rates. The results relate to Timmons (2005) study in many ways. The report notes that "One of the most common school related reasons mentioned by leavers are poor teacher relationships" (p. 71). The report also discovered that there was a number of job related reasons students left school early.

Forty percent of male leavers, as compared to 15% of females cite work related factors (favoring work over school or having to work due to financial reasons) for their early withdrawal. There is an important interaction employment pull factors linked to job market structures and/or family cultural values or needs, and early school leaving particularly in the short term. This has significant long term applications both for the 'at risk' student any children he or she may have presently or in the future (p. 71-72).

The report also concluded that "Thirty percent of young women leave school early due to personal and family reasons. These reasons are mainly due to pregnancy, childrearing and marriage, but also are attributed to substance abuse issues, conflicts at home and medical conditions" (p. 72).

Understanding who leaves school early and why can ultimately help educators develop better programming and offer more effective interventions. This relates to the alternative education programs on Prince Edward Island that try to implement interventions to meet the needs of students at risk of leaving school early. There are regions within the province where no official alternative education sites

are receiving funding. The lack of funding puts students in those regions at a higher risk of not completing high school. The tier one Cohort Program this study focuses on does not receive any funding from government. The school's tier two Alternative Program does receive funding, but it does not cover the entire cost of the program. The school is located approximately one hour away from 100% funded senior high alternative education sites. Because the funding does not adequately support the program, the school administration compensates by drawing from other budgets in the school to make up for the insufficient support from the board and department level.

This literature review will focus on themes that apply to alternative education students and programs. In the first section of this literature review, I will define what it means to be an "at-risk student." Secondly, I will look at at-risk students' needs and the reasons why many struggle to work within the existing framework of the classroom. This review will focus on themes of care and teaching strategies that can bridge the gap between failure and success. The third part of this review will discuss a number of alternative education programs across the United States and Canada.

Students at risk are typically the type of students alternative education caters to. Because of this, understanding factors that cause students to be at risk of not completing high school is important when developing their programming. Teacher philosophy and teaching strategies are other key factors that affect student success. By examining these beliefs and practices, a much better understanding can be found regarding what works with these students and what doesn't. Examining other alternative education programs across North America highlights what other schools are doing to ensure that these students succeed. By focussing on these themes, the following literature review will highlight the gaps in student learning and demonstrate how educating the whole child is everyone's responsibility.

2.1.1   Who Is An At-Risk Student?

For the purpose of this study, the term "at-risk" is used to describe students who are in situations of risk, causing them to be in danger of not meeting their academic potential, and/or dropping out of school. There are a number of factors to consider when identifying who is in a situation of risk. Coming from a lower socioeconomic background is one of the major factors leading students to become at risk of not completing high school. This is primarily due to the fact that other issues often accompany poverty. This relationship is noted in Prince and Howard's (2002) article "Children and their Basic Needs." They state:

> Not only do children who are poor have higher drop-out rates, higher rates of retentions at grade level, and higher special education placements then children who are not poor... they are also more likely to have serious physical and mental disabilities and ill health. Being poor is also associated with poor nutrition, living in substandard housing and dangerous neighborhoods, receiving substandard child care, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquencies, child abuse, and death in childhood....Therefore, not only is poverty a powerful predictor of children's academic achievement, it is also an indicator highly associated with the care and well being of children, in this case, the lack of it. (p. 27-28)

Because poverty plays such a significant role in a child's performance in school, it is critical that it be considered when designing and implementing programming for students who struggle academically. Despite the fact that not all students in specialized programs are poor, it is evident that many of those students may be, and their needs must be considered in order for them to be successful.

Issues of agency and resistance are other factors to consider when understanding students in risk situations. Raby (2002) defines agency and resistance in the following quotation:

I consider agency to be the ability to make choices, to reflect on and influence one's own actions, and to potentially make change to the world around us. Such interventions do not, however, require a pre-discursive will. Agency can be viewed as a product of both the discursive formations that allow for insight and therefore resistance. Here resistance can be considered a subset of agency wherein actions are directed towards or against an entity or an idea perceived to be in opposition. (p.442)

Raby (2002) also indicates that rebellion and conformity can both be acts of resistance. Some examples of this reported in this document include a student "sucking up" to a teacher, so the teacher will like them, and in turn, make the student's experience with the teacher easier. This is noted as a way for students to use their power. Rebellion is exemplified as an alternative method students may exercise to assert their power. (p.442) "Teenagers exercise agency in their strategic use of the category of rebellion to make room for their independent activities, arguing that their activities are simply natural and thus should be given more leeway than if the same actions were taken by an adult" (p. 445). By reacting to their environment and deciding how they may use their power, students may choose to conform or rebel. It is important to note that all at-risk students are unique, and have a variety of coping methods. Not all students in risk situations are behavioral issues, or struggle in school. However, Raby's descriptions of rebellion certainly indicate that students may lead to dropping out of school, as it allows students to maintain self-esteem by making the choice to leave school, not fail, or continue to struggle academically or socially.

The British Columbia review on alternate education by The McCreary Center Society (2008), categorizes at-risk adolescents in two categories. The first is "at-risk students," defined as "youth who are marginalized, for example as a result of abuse, sexual exploitation, substance abuse, bullying, discrimination, mental health problems or street involvement" (p.7). The next classification is called

"high-risk youth," described as "disconnected from school, family community, compounding the risks and challenges in their lives" (p.7).

In the elementary years, an at-risk student is often described as a student who is behind in academics. It has been discovered that children who experienced academic difficulty in their early years, were already two years behind by sixth grade. More than half of these struggling students never graduated and those who did, functioned at a grade 8 level (Levin & Hoffenberg, 1991, p.48). Stanley and Plucker's study (2008) noted that 60% of future drop outs could be identified as early as grade 6. They also noted that:

> other studies have found that the transition between middle and high school is a critical point at which many future drop outs are lost. A study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that students who have obtained a sufficient number of credits to be considered "on track" to graduate by the end of Grade 9 are far more likely to actually graduate high school than those who have already fallen behind. A study conducted at the University of Michigan found that the rigour of math courses correlates with drop out rates…Additionally, school attendance is a heavy predictor of risk level…Also, it should be remembered that this transition is a crucial relationship building time…students who fail to make connections with adults in the school community are more likely to feel unconnected to the community and leave. (p.3)

From this quotation, it is clear that early child development programs as well as early intervention in elementary and junior high school would benefit students. For one reason or another, accessing support is not always possible. This leaves the unassisted students who are having difficulty in elementary school to continue their struggle into their junior and senior high years. In fact, 75% percent of students with reading disabilities who do not receive early intervention continue to have reading difficulties throughout their life (Elliot, 2004, p. B1). Of course, as the years pass, the

frustration intensifies and the gap in learning continues to grow. It is not surprising that by senior high, many of these students have given up, or have become deeply discouraged and disengaged.

Elliot's article (2004) also discusses how students with learning disabilities, even those who are diagnosed at an early age, can have difficulty with their self-esteem. People with learning disabilities often feel that they are not as good as their peers. Sadly 35% of students with diagnosed learning disabilities drop out of school and 30–50% of young offenders have had difficulty achieving success in academics. It has also been found that 50% of students who commit suicide have been previously diagnosed with learning disabilities (p.B1). Clearly, students with learning disabilities are included in the at-risk group. Being diagnosed with a learning disability can be confusing, and students can have a hard time handling and adjusting to the diagnosis.

As mentioned in Elliot's work, often when struggling students' progress through the educational system, they experience new problems. The designation "at-risk" tends to encompass a variety of issues, along with academic difficulty. Issues such as drug abuse, poverty, single-parent families, large families, and outside problems all factor into the definition. It is evident from the literature that students often do not believe they have the ability to succeed. Wehlage, Rutter, and Turnbough (1987) highlight this in their article, "A Program Model for At-Risk High School Students," where they note students often feel like they have lost control over their futures and think that no one cares about them, particularly their teachers. They tend to think of the schools' disciplinary system as unfair, and truancy becomes a common shield to hide behind (p.71). In "Engaging At-Risk High School Students: Perspectives," O'Brien and Dillon (1996) discuss how many at-risk students struggle with literacy skills, even in the community. The students often do not appear to value the skills that most of their peers strive to attain (p.13).

In the study, *Classifying At-Risk High School Youth: The Influence of Exposure to Community Violence and Protective Factors on Academic Health Outcomes*, Solberg, Caristom, Howard, and Stones (2007) noted that adult support played a key role in whether students in their study were classified as vulnerable. They state:

> Youth in the most vulnerable group reported lower perceived family support and teacher and peer connections than did youth in other groups. Although reporting relatively higher parent support, youth in the vulnerable group reported lower teacher and peer connections than did youth in other groups. Similarly, youth in the disengaged group reported lower perceived family support and connections with teachers and peers than did youth in other groups. (p. 323)

Students at risk may not feel they have adult support, and, as a result, do not feel they belong, or that it is important that they participate in school. Parental perspective is an important factor to consider when learning about at-risk youth. Knoeppel (2007) argues that "young people whose parents strongly support education know that in order to participate in other aspects of high school, they must keep up with their grades and studies. But students who do not enjoy this kind of parental support do not share this understanding" (p.37). As a result, students who do not have the home environment supporting education may have a more difficult time believing that getting their high school diploma is important. Many families are dealing with obstacles that prevent them from making choices, or focusing on the future. Some focus on day-to-day living and do not focus on how the consequences of choices today will impact their children in the future.

Why do these students not fit into a traditional classroom? Perhaps a better question is, "Why would they?" By their senior years, many of these students have already gotten used to the notion that they are "stupid" or just completely incapable of attaining the same success as their peers. They may feel isolated from the school community, and feel like an outcast. This experience can be

detrimental to their self concept, although if the student does not value the skills they are missing, it may not affect their view of themselves or their ability. This relates to agency and resistance. Maureen Manning, author of "Reframing How We See Self-Concept" (2007), states: "students may feel incompetent in domains valued by others without necessarily feeling bad about themselves: Self-esteem may be protected if the students feel competent in areas that they value and discount the importance of the domains others value" (p.39).

Elliot (2004) highlights a situation that Margaret Burnett encountered with her son. He was diagnosed with a learning disability, and at the age of five was aware that he was different from his classmates. At five, he already "knew" he would not be going to university like everyone else (p.B1). It is terrible that a child's self-concept can be so tainted by the early age of five. Manning (2007) notes that improving skills and ability will improve a student's self concept. She also states that a good self-concept does not necessarily mean that a child will do well in school. On the contrary, a child who improves his or her ability will improve how they feel about themselves and how they compare his or her abilities to the abilities of his or her peers (p.38).

Regardless of whether the school has the support of the family, teachers must do their best to meet the educational needs of their students. By providing opportunities to make real-life connections and improve students' self esteem, teachers can help students become motivated for improving their futures. Despite the obstacles in the way of ensuring student success, schools need to educate the whole child so they can make the best decisions for themselves.

2.1.2 The Needs of At-Risk Students

Students' needs often encompass a variety of areas, and it is not always easy to know how to reach them. When discussing the aims of education, Noddings (2005b) states:

> Surely we should demand more from our schools than to educate people to be proficient in reading and mathematics. Too many highly proficient people commit fraud, pursue paths to success marked by greed, and care little about how their actions affect the lives of others. (p.10)

These notions are potential truths for all students, but where at-risk students are concerned, it becomes even more important for their needs to be identified. If behaviours of greed and selfishness become unordinary for the average person, what does that say about the struggling student, trying to survive in a chaotic environment? It becomes even more important for schools to step up and address the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of students as the consequences for not doing so may be detrimental to those students and their communities.

Through my reading, it is clear that many factors directly involve students' academic learning, social development, and likelihood of succeeding in an educational setting (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Gibbs, 2001). At-risk students have a difficult time feeling connected to the school. They do not necessarily have a sense of belonging. By becoming part of a supportive environment, a student can learn to feel more comfortable. Elements contributing to a supportive environment are caring, diverse teachers who create individualized, experiential classes (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Gibbs, 2001). D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009), state: "Hiring teachers who desire to work with this population is essential. Teachers who are unwilling should not be assigned to the program because the students will suffer" (p.213).

Creating a sense of belonging is key for students. Learning to work in groups can be beneficial for social skills and it has also been proven that a teacher student ratio of 1:3 may be more effective

than a 1:1 ratio (Helf, Cooke, & Flowers, 2008, p. 114). By having "clear objectives, prompt feedback, concrete evidence of progress and an active role in learning," students can learn to feel a sense of purpose and develop a persistent attitude for achieving success (Wehlage, Rutter, & Turnbaugh, 1987, p.72). These things are important for at-risk learners to experience as it helps them build on academic and social skills. In order to rebound from negative experiences in school, Stanley and Plucker (2008) suggest that high school students must "have a strong relationship with one or more adults in the school...they must understand that what they are learning is connected , i.e., is relevant...[and] students must be challenged intellectually by a rigorous curriculum" (p. 2).

Ultimately, a classroom can become a type of family: a group of support outside the home. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) suggest that within the classroom, it is important for these students to have clear expectations and clear consequences. Consequences for misbehaviour should be educational. Punishment such as out of school suspensions do not provide an opportunity for students to learn from their mistakes. At-risk students need a lot of structure; too much free time can result in a lot of behavioural problems (p. 212).

O'Brien and Dillon (1996) note that while learning, these students need to be challenged. Things that seem too elementary for them, will make them feel stupid and will not encourage them to become involved. It is extremely important to involve these students in their work. By allowing them to emphasize their strengths, students will learn to feel more confident, and become better able to take risks in their learning. They also note that students must be able to succeed in a skill everyday. This feeling of success is an excellent motivator to continue the process of learning (p.13).

Aside from academic needs, many at-risk students are also in need of life skills. By including sexual education, nutrition, parenting education, and social development, students can learn a spectrum of skills that will enhance their ability to succeed in life (Wehlage, Rutter, Turnbaugh, 1987, p.73).

D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) note that this variety of learning will also give students an opportunity to experience various conversations that would not occur in the traditional classroom setting. At the Twilight Academy, D'Angelo and Zemanick advise schools to have guidance counselors available to support students whenever they may need it. Many students do not have enough home support. By providing this extra service, students will have an alternative to expressing their feelings, which in turn avoids truancy. This means students will not suffer consequences of negative behaviour and can focus on improving their skills. When teachers acknowledge students' problems and issues, it can give the students an opportunity to see that the teacher hears their concerns, knows about their difficulties, and is willing to support them in overcoming problems. At the same time, this gives the teacher an opportunity to meet the students where they are, but assure them that standards are important and expectations will be upheld. Keeping expectations high while meeting students where they are, encourages students to do their best (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p.215).

Cefai and Copper's *Promoting Emotional Education Engaging Children and Young People with Social, Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties* (2009), voices the concerns of at-risk students. "Poor relationships with teachers, victimization by staff and peers, oppression and powerlessness, unconnected learning experiences, [and] exclusion and stigmatization" are the key factors that lead many students away from mainstream schooling (p. 40). Students in their study identified that they needed to have good relationships with their teachers and this could only be achieved with "teachers who respected them and believed in them despite their difficulties" (p. 50). The students "underlined the need for a more humane, caring, inclusive, democratic and relevant [school] system" (p.50).

Knoeppel (2007) also acknowledges the importance of teacher effectiveness. Knoeppel discusses continuation high schools, another form of alternative education, and how they support at-risk youth. "Continuation high schools are quite successful in helping their students. This is due to their

small class size (usually 20:1 enrollment), the philosophy of educating the whole child, and the

willingness to take a risk and experiment with differing instructional strategies" (p. 36).

Continuous assessment, research based lessons, and proactive and intense instruction can help

students immensely. From the literature, it is clear that when teachers incorporate real life, practical

learning into daily lessons, students can more easily see the purpose in their learning. While many

"non-at-risk" students would certainly benefit from these things as well, at-risk learners may benefit

more dramatically from them. In the article *Identifying and Responding to Needs in Education*, Nel

Noddings (2005) states that "by ignoring expressed needs, we sacrifice opportunities to develop

individual talents, intrinsic motivation, and the joys of learning...When I am cared for in a situation, I

hope my need is heard and, if not actually satisfied, at least treated with regard and understanding" (p.

147-148). Ensuring students feel heard is a very important need to address for at-risk students. This

will ultimately aid in developing trust between teachers and students, thus enabling students to open up

to teachers and develop authentic relationships with them. By knowing and understanding students,

teachers can do a better job of addressing their learning needs in the classroom.

Asking students for their opinions ultimately reveals what students perceive as the truth of the

educational system and may help researchers bridge some of the gaps between teachers, students and

school programs. Evidence above from Noddings (2005b),highlights how at- risk students in particular

need to feel heard. By allowing them to voice their concerns about school, teachers, and curriculum,

students may learn to believe in school and its importance for their future.

In Brooker and MacDonald's 1999 study, *Did We Hear You?: Issues of Student Voice in a

Curriculum Innovation*, the authors concluded that students' input could enhance the development of

curriculum. Brooker and MacDonald state:

...practices must be structured and enacted in ways that promote the gathering and reporting of student voice rather than perpetuating the assumption that 'educators stand above their students, and guide them in their struggle for "personal empowerment" and "voice"....students could conduct peer interviews or provide responses that were not structured by interview schedules or specific data collection timetables (p. 95).

Cefai and Cooper (2009) discover the voices of students suffering from social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties in their study. Their study highlights some of the key frustration students encountered. One student reported: "We can fix things in the school if they listen to us more. The teachers don't know everything....I think we have good ideas" (p. 46). Another student stated: "If they ask what we like in lessons, we won't get bored (because) they will do what we ....enjoy... and not what they want all the time....We know what we like and maybe we will learn more if they do this" (p. 47).

Of course, it would be impossible to meet all students' needs. This is especially true when some students confuse a "want" with a "need." Teachers can easily confuse this as well. In Noddings' book, *Happiness in Education* (2003), the author attempts to come up with a method to differentiate between a need and a want. She reveals the following four points that should be noted before turning a "want" into a "need." She lists:

1. The want is fairly stable over a considerable period of time and/or it is intense.

2. The want is demonstrably connected to some desirable end or, at least, to one that is not harmful; further, the end is impossible or difficult to reach without the object wanted.

3. The want is in the power (within the means) of those addressed to grant it.

4. The person wanting is willing and able to contribute to the satisfaction of the want

(p. 61).

Students can easily confuse needs and wants. For example, they may make a habit of meeting with a guidance counselor every morning for an hour. This may, in fact, be a need on the day they initiated this pattern, but by missing an hour of class each morning, they are missing out on much needed curriculum. As a result, they get behind in school, and even put themselves at risk of not attaining a credit. Because of this, teachers and support staff need to be able to identify the needs of the student and provide proper interventions that allow these needs to be met without compromising their success in other areas.

2.1.3   The Philosophy of Holistic Education

Nel Noddings' work focuses on the development of the heart of the student and how this can ultimately inspire growth in all other areas of life. Her empathetic and nurturing writing encourages teachers and others to help young children and adolescents learn to care for themselves and for others. To do this, they must first be shown through daily modeling. Teachers must demonstrate what caring behaviour looks like. In her article "Teaching Themes of Caring" (1995), Noddings states:

Caring implies a continuous search for competence. We want to do our very best for the objects of our care. To have as our educational goal the production of caring, competent,   loving, lovable people is not anti-intellectual; it demonstrates respect for a full range of human talents. (n.p.) Modeling this behaviour is of utmost importance. Not all children are shown care in their own lives, and, as a result do not always feel cared for themselves. These children must first feel what it is to be cared about, and then from there, they can learn how to care for others (n.p.).

Borowiec and Langerock (2002) reflect on Noddings' theories and note how critical thinking can ultimately be pushed to higher limits when implementing themes of care:

Empathetic, critical thinking requires a kind of concerned skepticism. It requires one to set aside self in order to address the possibility and feasibility of the views of another. Certainly developing a critique must involve a rational, logical engaged essential to production, participatory democratic deliberation. The premises of an assertion, the search for errors in logic and the identification of bias and inaccuracies are equally important components in this process. But so is the practice of care and empathy. To think with care participants do not remove themselves, but insert themselves in exploring the potential of different possibilities rather than passing judgments. (p. 82)

As a result, students become better thinkers when taught empathy and care. They are able to rationalize more effectively and make better choices. Compassion and understanding of others are strengths. Their incorporation in critical thinking allows students to develop their own philosophies and priorities. This thinking promotes positive leaders and active participants in society; members who will not be pushed around by others focused purely on economic gain, or self serving policies. Themes of care will allow students to gain a broader sense of our world, and enable them to make choices that reflect the best interest of all people in society. By modeling themes of care in the classroom, educators help prepare students for their future roles at work and in the home. This can only positively affect society as a whole, promoting citizens to value and accept one another equally.

Teacher instruction affects how themes of care are implemented into the regular school day . Parker Palmer (1997) author of *The Heart of a Teacher,* advises teachers of this concept. He states:

In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood—and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning. (n.p.)

Being able to teach from one's heart allows the teacher to show students who they are as a person. Teachers are not simply resources of content, but mentors for life. This model can help students, in turn, share who they are as well. This provides an opportunity for commitment to subject and student and teacher relationships. When students feel safe to share who they are, real learning can begin. Teachers will know what strategies to best use with their students because students will feel safe revealing their weaknesses to them.

Morrissey, Bohanon, and Fenning (2010) argue that "teaching appropriate behaviours on a prevention-orientated basis, rather than reacting through suspension once a problem occurs, may be the first step in turning the tide toward safer schools designed for keeping students in school and experience success" (p.27). The method they encourage is called Positive Behavior Support (PBS). By demonstrating positive behaviours for students, and taking a proactive approach, students can learn skills in a non-threatening environment. It is unreasonable to expect students to learn solely from disciplinary measures. If the climate of the classroom and school consistently promoted positive behaviour, students would not need to get in trouble to learn a social lesson. Like Noddings' theories, to gain support, this notion will take a change in philosophy by the province.

Clarken (2010) explores the qualities that make up an "ideal and whole person," and how educators can and should play a key role in aiding students in this development (p. 1).

In our present society, it seems the moral aspects of child rearing and education are less emphasized than in the past, leaving children less equipped to deal with challenges of life and living. Because of its neglect in the early years, schools and educators are often left with the task of compensating for faulty, poor or missing early training. In the absence of moral education and modeling, young people are strongly influenced by the examples they see in the media, and among their peers to form their moral frameworks and worldviews. Education

influences both individual and collective moral development. What takes place in the classroom can either encourage or discourage the ability and desire to seek truth and serve the greatest good. Education is a moral endeavor... as is life. The classroom is saturated with moral meaning. . . . Teachers are to create a moral environment in their classrooms where justice and caring prevail. . . . Educational leaders, administrators and teachers are to be models of moral intelligence, exemplifying the virtues they seek to engender to others. (p.5)

Just as students' social and emotional development are influenced by their home, and media, it can also be influenced in the classroom. Teachers and educational staff can play a very important role in ensuring students become competent, compassionate people, capable of serving our society in a positive way. By assuming responsibility in teaching moral education, educators can ultimately influence not just what children can do, but who they will be as people.

Upon his acceptance of a Nobel Peace Prize, Archbishop Desmond Tutu responded to Adolf Hitler's followers by stating that "educating the mind without educating the heart has produced brilliant scientists who used their intelligence for evil" (Schonert-Reichll & Hymel, 2007, p.20). The truth of this example not only supports the above writer's suggestions, but recognizes the urgency of educators' support. Teaching themes of care supports students' social, emotional, and intellectual growth. Teaching themes of care particularly applies to at-risk youth who are far more vulnerable than many of their peers. Students do not always get this social and emotional learning at home and must be able to receive it at school. If school does not partner up with parents in this role, many students will not get the education they need to be contributing members of society.

To be cared for, to be the recipient of the complete and single-minded attention of another, simply because of our need for such attention, is to be initiated into and invested in the moral life. In this way, caring is not just one important or even essential element in the moral life, a

complement to a commitment to justice, but indeed the very source of all moral striving and ideals.(Bergman, 2004, p. 151).

2.2   Reaching At-Risk Youth: Strategies that Support Students

Recognizing that each student and class is different is important, but it is equally important for teachers and administrators to educate themselves on strategies that work on building the environment, and relationships necessary for all students to be successful. These strategies definitely benefit all students, not just those at risk of dropping out of school. However, it is important to keep in mind how building trust and a sense of belonging can dramatically affect students at risk. For some students, school is the most predictable, safe part of their day. Despite the fact that these strategies are useful for all students, at-risk students are particularly vulnerable, so it is even more important to note what a positive affect they can have on their experience in school. In this section, I will discuss strategies for building social and emotional competence. I will also discuss strategies for developing a community-type setting in the classroom. These strategies are of great consequence and may make all the difference in a classroom for both teachers and students. They can ultimately allow a student to gain a sense of belonging, a sensation most at-risk students do not have. As mentioned previously, this can be a major contributor in their decision to leave school.

2.2.1   Social and Emotional Competence

Trying to get through the curriculum each year, straining to get it all in, teachers and school administrators must pause and ask themselves, "Why are we doing this?" The most important skills in life are not always the most measurable. In Beland's article, "Boosting Social and Emotional

Competence" (2007), she urges teachers to look at the skills they are teaching in a new way. She states: "educators need not view academic learning and social and emotional learning as opposite ends of a tug-of war. When both support each other, students are more apt to be engaged in learning and develop themselves personally" (p.70).

Resnicket al. (1997), authors of *Protecting Adolescents from Harm. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health* complement Beland's (2007) argument. They argue that students can learn much about life and academia by becoming socially involved in class activities. By improving their social awareness, students can learn to understand others, and develop empathy. One key way to do this, is for schools to train their teachers in building relationships and creating supportive environments for students to take part in. The article states: "Students need a sense of community to perform well academically. Research correlates school connectedness, a feeling of belonging in school, with academic motivation" (Resnick et al., 1997). Beland (2007) argues: "When students feel safe to speak up in class and take on academic challenges and when they have peers and a caring teacher they can turn to for support, they are more likely to adopt school norms, follow rules, and apply effort in classes" (p.70). Addressing themes of care supports this theory as it highlights the importance of caring and education of the whole student. Teachers must nurture students' whole person so that students can become fully developed, contributing members of our society. Students already identified as at risk, may particularly benefit from these strategies as they often do not feel they fit in to the regular school paradigm.

The Coalition for Educational Opportunities (CEO) in Newfoundland submitted a proposal to their government in 2006 requesting a new alternative education school for at-risk youth. They noted strategies that would best serve at-risk students:

Alternative Schools/programs can vary depending on whom they serve, where they are located, what is the focus of the curriculum, and how they are administered. The successful ones though, do have some common characteristics. They include such things as: comprehensive approach, recognition of importance of self-concept and social skills of the student, high expectations, qualified and suitable staff, low student teacher ratio, focus on student needs, links to outside social service agencies, a fair progressive discipline policy, and the creation of a sense of community. (p. 2)

By working in this type of environment, teachers are able to teach academics and social skills simultaneously. In fact, teaching these social skills can truly improve one's academic potential. A safe environment can also aid in developing self-awareness and self-management. These skills require a student to know his or her strengths, weaknesses, and abilities. Relationship and decision-making skills are also key in developing one's ability to be successful in life. Teachers can model these skills in the classroom and can also create scenarios that replicate situations where problem solving and social skills are tested. Having the opportunity to overcome real-life problems in a controlled setting can help prepare students for real-life situations in their futures. The work force is certainly telling the school system what is important to them, and it is important that the system respond to these needs so students are really prepared for their future jobs, relationships and roles (Beland, 2007, p. 70-71).

Schnoert-Reichl and Hymel's (2007) article "Teaching the Heart as Well as the Mind," agrees with the basic principles in Beland (2007) and the CEO's (2006) article. They identify five competencies in social emotional learning: self awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Certainly academic skills are important, and it is critical that teachers meet these needs; however, it is becoming clearer that there is another side of education that needs to be addressed as well. Social and emotional competence is important in all areas

of life, and its proficiency can only improve one's academic abilities (Schnoert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007 p. 20). This idea correlates with Noddings' notions of the themes of care, and what is important for students to learn. In fact, it has been proven that "changes in academic achievement in grade 8 could be better predicted from knowing children's grade 3 social competence than from their grade 3 academic achievement" (Schnoert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007 p. 23).

The fact that there is a relationship between academic achievement and social competence cannot be ignored. It is crucial that schools realize the importance of teaching care and recognizing that students can actually learn to care for others through a series of steps. In fact, in a recent nursing study, Crigger (2001) studied a group of nursing students who were followed and tracked for their empathetic responses. Crigger cites Dorsch and Wentzel (1997) in discussing Noddings' themes of care: "A number of researchers and educators believe that caring for others occurs through a learned process...In education, students learn to care through modeling; they internalize the process and mimic what they learn from teachers in their personal and professional relationships with others (2001, p. 616). For nurses particularly, their ability to care ultimately affects their ability to do their job. For a patient, the notion of being cared for is quite important. The outcome of this study identified the act of caring as a combination of mental choices and affective responses. As a result, caring can be taught if the person is open to it (Crigger, 2001, p. 622). Teaching how to care ultimately applies to the at-risk student as often they do not know how to care for others because they are constantly in a situation of chaos, or survival. By teaching students how to handle these situations, and providing support for them, they can learn how to be caring individuals who have a greater understanding of relationships. This lesson can ultimately affect the choices they make in the future and may even put a stop to some of the cyclical problems they have experienced in their home environment.

The CEO in Newfoundland delineates the rights Canadian students have in their 2006 proposal for an alternative education site. These rights not only promise the development of students' intellectual ability, but their social and emotional competencies as well. All students need programming that meets their needs and ensures that they feel a part of the learning process. Ignoring these rights, results in an unjust school system. The CEO states:

> Once an option for a chosen few, a high school education has become both an expectation and a necessity for all young people. Access to such an education has come to be legally entrenched at several levels. It is referenced in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The equality rights that apply to education are contained in Section 15(1) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of Canada. Finally, the right to access to educational services by all children is guaranteed in section 3(1) of the Schools Act, 1997 of this province. Yes, graduating is both "a right of citizenship" and "a rite of passage." (p.4)

Because education is a right, ignoring the factors that are cause students to fail is irresponsible and reproduces social inequality, a clear violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Schools must ensure that students' needs are addressed so that they can gain the skills required for survival in Canadian society. Care is so essential as it provides the basis for teachers to break down the barriers which at-risk students protect themselves. By experiencing a sense of being cared for, students can learn to trust teachers, and eventually open up their minds and hearts to a purposeful and productive education.

2.2.2 Building Community in the Classroom

Creating a community of learning is key in developing students' skills. Caring teachers are able to do this through a number of different strategies. Targeting student interest in a flexible, yet structured environment and curriculum can allow great things to be achieved.

Nel Noddings' article, "Educational Leaders as Caring Teachers" (2006), states:

> Caring teachers recognize these intrinsic interests and try to protect them. A good reason for promoting smaller class sizes is that teachers and students are more likely to form the kinds of relationships conducive to 'making a difference'. Leaders who recognize this do not require proof that smaller classes will produce higher test scores, but higher test scores are not the main point. Similarly, a reasonable degree of choice with respect to curriculum must be protected. No vital teacher-intellectual want to teach a tightly prescribed curriculum and she or he may not want to teach the exact same topics year after year. Indeed, such a system encourages intellectual laziness. The intellectual excitement that comes with choice should be cherished and actively promoted. (p. 343)

By ensuring teachers have small class sizes and a flexible, engaging educational program, students' needs can be kept at the forefront of educational priorities. Teachers need to have the environment and resources to support these students and ensure their needs are met. These supports allow teachers to get to know students individually and plan lessons that are engaging and challenging.

Morrissette (2010) also identifies this need for belonging for at-risk youth in his case study. His study followed at-risk high school students who had previously dropped out of school and were now a part of an alternative program. He, too, focuses on the critical element of student teacher relationships:

> Notwithstanding the determination of learners to return to school and complete their academic requirements, the role and expertise of teachers and staff cannot be overestimated. According to

the results of this study, these professionals were instrumental in co-creating a nurturing

environment that maintained academic integrity while re-engaging young people in academics.

The ability to accomplish these two critical goals speaks to professional skill, commitment and

vision. (p. 27)

Morrissette also commented on the trust that this created between teachers and students. He

notes:

Although not mentioned directly, the element of trust between teachers and learners was

addressed by Bill who remarked, "we talk about life there. They don't look at you just as a

student. They try to be your friend as best they can without compromising anything and you

could really share things with them. They want to help you but you really have to want to do it

yourself. (p. 19)

Creating a sense of community in the classroom allows students to open up and share the things that are

holding them back. The element of trust is so important in this process. Strategies to create this caring

environment can be as organized as implementing a specialized program like Tribes or Gruwell's;

however, it can also start with the teacher's approach and teaching philosophy.

Parker Palmer's article, "The Heart of a Teacher" (1997), recognizes the importance of creating

a community of learning. He speaks more to the conception of teaching philosophy and approach, as

opposed to programs. He believes that teaching from the heart is the best way to reach students and

help them feel connected to the classroom. He argues that no matter how great a program is, if the

teacher does not teach from a standpoint that is comfortable to them, they will not deliver lessons

representing their potential. Palmer states: "Good teachers join self and subject and students in the

fabric of life because they teach from an integral and undivided self; they manifest their own lives, and

evoke in their students a "capacity for connectedness" (n.p.). He recognizes that no place in our world

is completely safe, and they cannot be, but as teachers, we should do our best to create more of these safe places for our students and for ourselves. When we are honest with ourselves and others, we are able to reach our teaching potential, while encouraging students to achieve success and joy in their lives (n.p). Noddings (2006) supports this idea in her own writing. She states:

> When we force people to employ specific means we risk losing the very ends for which the means were chosen, we have no cogent reason for examining means. We just go with 'what works', never mind why we are interested in the things toward which we are working or what may be lost in our choices. We can do better than this, and caring leaders must show the way. (p. 344)

Building this community and excitement in a classroom may not be the most natural skill for all teachers. To assist in creating this environment, teachers may look at existing programs for guidance. One very effective way to build community in the classroom is to incorporate an already proven strategy. Tribes is a program that is known for fostering inclusion, influence, openness, and community. It was developed in the 1960s by Jeanne Gibbs, a professional with a background in working with teens with drug addictions. By following a few easy steps that include incorporating some fun and educational activities, the process of building community in a classroom becomes quiet doable. Tribes developers believe the program helps students achieve success because "they feel included and appreciated by their peers and teachers, are accepted for their differences, are actively involved in their own learning [and] have positive expectations from others that they will succeed"(Hammond).

Jeanne Gibbs (2001) identifies that there is a major correlation between how children learn, how teachers teach, and how students behave. The Tribes program is based on the four classroom agreements. These are things that are necessary for teachers to be able to teach, and students to learn.

The agreements are as follows: mutual respect, attentive listening, the right to pass, and no "put

downs." These agreements provide the backbone to the structured class activities that build on social

and emotional competence (Gibbs, 2001, p.88). The idea of Tribes is to build students' resiliency to

outside stress in their lives. The Tribes program accomplishes this by improving students' social

competence, problem solving skills, and autonomy. When students have control over their behaviour,

and gain independence, they are better able to move forward in their lives with purpose and control

(Gibbs, 2001, p.43-45).

Teachers can inquire about training in this program from their departments, and education

students can often take this course as a part of their education program. The Tribes program can be very

successful when teachers learn the strategies and adapt them to suit the needs of their students. This

program is about inspiring young people and encouraging students to believe in themselves. It meets

the needs of at-risk learners in many ways, and provides teachers with a way to create a community in

their classroom (Hammonds).

Another approach is one developed by Erin Gruwell, the popular young teacher who united a

group of at-risk teens and helped them reach potentials they never could have dreamed of. The

blockbuster movie hit, *Freedom Writers* came out in 2006, and highlighted the experience that Gruwell,

known as Ms. G. to her students, encountered when trying to overcome the many obstacles in

convincing her students and coworkers that these students had the ability to move toward bright

futures. As an English teacher, Gruwell used powerful stories that related to struggles her students

experienced every day. From these stories, Gruwell was able to unite her students, and not only

developed their academic skills, but their social and emotional competence improved as well. The once

hard-faced teens, softened and showed care for the survivors of the Holocaust. Over time, Gruwell's

strategies and caring nature won the students over. They came to trust her, and started to believe in themselves (Freeman, 2006, p. 23).

To ensure that other students and teachers have the same opportunity to experience success in their lives, Gruewell has developed a guide to recreating this family-type of atmosphere, where students feel safe and comfortable enough to allow themselves to be vulnerable, take risks, and dream big. *The Freedom Writers Diary Teacher's Guide* (2006) targets middle to senior high students and provides teachers with strategies, lessons, and success stories for inspiration. In January 2007, Gruwell partook in an interview for Scholastic Action. When asked "How could schools be effective in changing the lives and attitudes of students?", she responded: "Schools can be more effectively making connections to students' lives with lessons and teaching to a student and not to a test. That way, students are more likely to become interested in the learning process" (E.Gruwell, interview, January 15, 2007). Today, Gruwell's guide is used by many teachers, and is used to inspire both teachers and students to become the best that they can be.

There are certainly many approaches to creating a sense of community in the classroom. Whether it is a directly guided program, or a personal choice to be approachable and show students a nurturing, caring standpoint, teachers have the power to help students feel connected or disconnected. It is incredibly important that all teachers understand how influential their approach with students is.

In a study conducted for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, *The Silent Epidemic Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, researchers worked solely with students who had left high school early, and found that only 56 percent of students had felt they could go to a school staff member about school problems. Only 41 percent felt they could go to a staff member about personal problems. While all students need to feel as if they are cared about and that their presence in school is valued, this is particularly true for students already at risk for dropping out. While some students indicate leaving

high school for personal reasons such as financial hardship, becoming a parent, or caring for another member of the family, these same students indicate that they may have stayed if they received more support from adults in the school, bolstering the premise that strong school relationships are a key component of improving graduation rates (p. 2).

2.2.3   Meeting Academic Learning Needs of Students

In the past, the vision of a classroom teacher was that they would give one lesson to one group of students. Today that idea has changed significantly. Rulloda (2010) discusses this change in the article *Effective Student Learning: By Implementing Three Major Components.* The article notes:

Teaching and Learning Foundations presents a new paradigm for effective teaching, which consisted of three major components for effective student learning. First, by understanding the concept of multiple intelligences and secondly, by comprehending the process of students' learning, where teachers would be able to implement proper teaching strategies for helping students learn effectively. And finally, by utilizing the concept of reflection, the students would learn effectively and teachers would improve their personal teaching practices (p. 4).

Acknowledging that not all students learn the same way is critical for developing effective lessons plans. At-risk students in particular need the special attention. Stanley and Plucker (2008) articulate this need in their article focusing on policy perspective. Step four and five relate to at-risk students' individual learning needs. They suggest that schools:

...create structures and processes that meet the learning needs of the students, not just the needs of the adults. Decisions in schools are generally made by adults for students. An engaging school will ensure that students are apart of decision making processes and that structures are continually refined to meet the learning needs of all students...Engage all students deeply and

equally. There is a persistent and pernicious engagement gap that mirrors the achievement gap. Students are reporting differential levels of engagement by gender, race/ethnicity, academic track, eligibility for free/reduced lunch, and length of time in the school. To begin to address improvement in graduation rates, all students must be engaged deeply and equally (p.50). Student engagement is an ongoing concern for teachers and by getting to know students' learning styles and unique educational needs, teachers can better prepare for their learning. The days of focusing on one way of learning for an entire group of students are gone. Teachers must learn how to teach students skills in a way that makes sense to them and allows them to be engaged in the learning process. Understanding multiple intelligences supports differentiated instruction. By getting to know students' individual strengths and weakness, teachers can create lessons that promote student engagement and student success.

The process of teacher reflection, suggested in Rulloda's (2010) article, notes how this promotes active learners and knowledgeable teachers. The reflective teacher is "a person who stays focused on education's main purpose, which is student learning and development, a person who assumes responsibility for his/her own learning, a person who demonstrates awareness of self and others, and a person developing the thinking skills for effective inquiry" (p. 14). The article notes how teachers may reflect through observations, video-tapping their classes, making home visits to better understand students' individual needs (p.14-15).

By reflecting on practice, teachers can gauge how successful their interventions are. This would ultimately benefit all students, including at-risk students. Although this may be a natural act for some teachers, it may be a skill others need to learn. Also, making home visits may not be a feasible reflective activity as teacher safety cannot always be ensured. However, alternative reflective activities

certainly can help teachers evaluate their own classes and may assist them in making positive changes to help ensure that students succeed.

Project-based learning is another strategy teachers may like to incorporate when trying to engage students in their learning. This type of learning has created positive experiences for many at-risk students as it is unique in that it focuses primarily on real life problems. Stanley and Plucker (2008) note how the

> Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supported the development of a new type of high school which would do away with traditional passive learning techniques and instead center on collaboration and projects...The schools are small communities without the traditional arrangements of desks and black boards; rather the school tends to be set up more like a place of business with offices and corridors for group work. There is a 1:1 ratio of computers to students and the school work is project based. Text books are not regularly used in the school, and teachers act more as facilitators of projects because learning is student-driven and not teacher-driven...despite having students who would normally be considered at-risk, New Tech High Schools graduate nearly 100 percent of their students and nine out of ten students attend college or university following high school. (p. 8)

Even though most educators do not have access to such facilities, project-based learning can be implemented in any school setting. Teachers interested in this type of learning may take on professional development opportunities to learn more about it and how it may be implemented in their teaching context. Notions like project-based learning are exceptionally relevant to at-risk learners because they demonstrate how school skills transfer directly to the real world.

Noddings (2008) notes how the trends in education must change in order to best suit students of today's society. In her article "Schooling for Democracy," she argues that the school system needs to support all students, and not devalue the student who is not college bound. She states:

> The crucially important goal for today's urban secondary schools should be to keep kids in school until they get a diploma… With an adequate education for democratic life, these privileged young people would understand that no person who works full time at an honest job should live in poverty. Instead of concentrating on this message, we divide our kids into winners and losers and pretend that, by "preparing" them for college, we can make them all winners. . . . Today we give far too little attention to the possible contributions of extracurricular activities. …Within each program, teachers and students should strive for excellence, but excellence should not be defined in terms of grade-point average, or the number of Advanced Placement courses taken. Excellence is rightly defined in the context of particular endeavors, but it should be appreciated across the entire society. John Gardner had it right when he said: "An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher"…Not only should we admire excellent plumbers in our adult society, we must also respect students who will become plumbers and offer them genuine educational opportunities. Not everyone needs to go to college, but everyone needs and deserves a genuine education. (p. 37)

Clearly, offering a diverse course load for students is a strategy that traditional secondary public schools should support. By focusing on students' strengths and interests, and providing opportunities to develop related knowledge and skills, the education system can help students prepare for life after high school.

2.3   Existing Alternate Education Sites and Programs

The various alternative education sites and programs I will review in this study are all unique. Each school focuses on alternative education aimed at addressing specific needs of a particular population and setting. As a result, these schools function differently from each other. However, these schools are analogous in that each hopes to improve students' success, and is committed to doing whatever it takes to make this happen. The schools and programs discussed in this study are located in the United States and Canada. The geographical zones were selected because of general similarities in culture and in the challenges faced by youth and their families. Additionally, because these regions are alike in many ways, features in one program may be transferable to another.

Morrisette (2010), notes that although alternative education has existed since the 1960s, three main models exist in society today. He states:

> Although variations of alternative education reside with the public system… three primary models exist. . . . Type I otherwise know as *Popular Innovations*, reflects organizational and administrative departures from traditional models. Type II, otherwise known as *Last Chance Programs*, are programs to which students are sent prior to expulsion. These programs include in-school suspension programs, time-out rooms, and long term placements. . . . these programs have been likened to soft jails and focus on behavior modification principles. Finally, Type III, otherwise known as *Remedial Focus Programs*, are designed for students who require remediation or rehabilitation. These programs are based on the assumption that students will eventually return to a mainstream program. . . . particular programming can be a mix of the aforementioned models. In essence, Types II and III rest on the assumption that the problem lies with the student, whereas Type I assumes that difficulties may be a result of poor student-school

match and thus, a change in program and environment may alter a student's performance and achievement. (p. 5)

2.3.1 Accelerated Schools

One of the most interesting programs at the elementary level takes place in a variety of schools across the United States. It is called Accelerated Schools. Daniel Webster Elementary School in San Francisco, Hollibrook Elementary School in Houston Texas, and Fairbanks Elementary School in Missouri are just three of the fifty schools implementing this accelerated school program. Unlike other alternative programs that often work at a slower pace, focusing on particular aspects of remediation, the accelerated schools program for at- risk learners, does the exact opposite. The premise is that "at-risk learners need to learn faster than more privileged students—not at a slower rate that brings them more behind. An enrichment strategy rather than a remedial one, offers the greatest hope for achieving this goal" (Levin & Hoffenberg, 1991, n.p.).

Despite the fact that moving more quickly seemingly appeals more to the advanced student, this program claims to work with struggling students as well. This program requires a team approach from the school, home, and the community. Without this teamwork, it would be difficult to achieve successful results. The hope is for the students in this program to rejoin the regular academic stream by the end of their elementary years. Their results rely on the strengths of the school and the student. By allowing students to focus on what they are good at, they are able to connect skills they already have to new skills. As they continue to grow, they become more capable and have a better attitude towards their schooling. In fact, many of the students in this program proceeded to advanced programs later on. Some of these students outshone classmates who were not part of the accelerated program (Levin & Hoffenberg, 1991, n.p.).

2.3.2 Response to Intervention (R.T.I.)

Response to Intervention (R.T.I.) is becoming very popular because the program helps identify students with learning disabilities and provides all learners with the support they need to be successful. In this three tier system, students are able to get general instruction, right through to small group and one-on-one coaching. This approach encourages team work and co-teaching. By pairing specialist teachers up with classroom teachers, students receive a higher level of support and the teachers learn from one another. Instead of trying to change the child, this program changes the environment to suit the child's needs. As a result, it has proven to be very beneficial. This proactive approach ensures regular teachers are teaching all of their students, as opposed to waiting for a group of specialists to confirm a diagnosis and allow for extra supports. This program treats all children equally, ensuring everyone gets help when they need it (Murawski & Hughes, 2009, p.267-269).

Tier one of this program houses regular classroom students. Three times a year, all students are tested and their results are compared to a point of reference. As long as a student meets or exceeds the point of reference, they stay in tier one. If they fall below the benchmark, they move to tier two. Tier two focuses more on the individual and ensures they get extra one-on-one support. Students can stay in tier two as little as eight weeks, or as many as thirty. The length of time is individualized as there is not enough research supporting an optimal time length for this intense instruction (Murawski & Hughes, 2009, p.268-269).

If students are not improving in tier two, they may be moved to tier three. Tier three houses less than five percent of the student population and is known as "special education." Some students in tier three stay in the tier for their entire education. This is not the case for everyone; some students move back and forth between the tiers throughout their schooling. These decisions are based on evaluation results.

If the student improves, the student moves on. If the child struggles after being put in the new tier, the child moves back down to the former tier (Murawski & Hughes, 2009, p. 269).

2.3.3   Twilight Academy

One of the most distinctive studies I came across in my research was D'Angelo and Zemanick's 2009 study on the Twilight Academy. This program was first implemented in southeastern Pennsylvania. This program was developed due to the high number of at-risk high school students in the region . Many students were not fitting in to the traditional classroom setting. The authors postulate that the changes that have taken place in the home may be partially to blame for this problem. With single-parent families, divorce, and two-parent wage earners, many children are spending too much time on their own. This can ultimately result in some problematic experiences for youth such as experimenting with drugs or becoming part of more troublesome peer groups (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p. 211).

Blame aside, teachers and administrators at the Twilight Academy are trying to encourage students to engage in school in an entirely new way. Although some people initially responded negatively to this new approach, it has proved to be successful. The organization of this school is much different than one with traditional classes. Students attend classes in the late afternoon at the same school that other students attend during the day. Sending students away to different schools makes them feel more like outcasts. Keeping them at their home school also keeps the costs down for the program. Classes begin at 3 pm and end at 7 pm. During this time, there is one administrator, who is titled "assistant principal." There are four classroom teachers: one each for math, science, social studies, and English. There is one physical education teacher and one guidance counselor. There is also one secretary and two security guards. Students have limited movement throughout the school. All of their classes take place in one wing, limiting potential problems and making security easier (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p. 212).

Students are selected by teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors, and are informed of the gift this "last chance, or turning point" can bring to their lives. The class size is capped at 15 students and the students take four one-hour classes a day. On Wednesdays, the students have two academic classes, one elective, and one session of group counseling. The small class sizes allow the teachers more time to work with each student, and it is easier for the teacher to manage the behaviour of a smaller group. Along with their academics, students must work twenty hours a week during day-time hours. If they are too young to gain employment, the school will find them a place to volunteer. Each student is assigned a job coach:this teacher will work with them during their school day as well. This not only keeps students focused throughout the day, but gives them an opportunity to gain social and work skills. The opportunity to work with a teacher as a job coach encourages meaningful relationships between students and staff. Each teacher is assigned 15 students to mentor as a job coach. The job coaches are responsible to check in on them once a week at their job site (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p.212).

Professional development is critical for the teachers working with these students. All teachers in the Twilight Academy are offered seven professional development days a year. These educational opportunities can involve anything from learning more about working with certain behaviours, or learning disabilities, or it can include visiting another alternative education site. Along with professional development opportunities, teachers at the Twilight Academy have a curriculum to implement for students that is well developed and meets the needs of individual students. Teachers use computer programs and other technologies to assist in remediation (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, 213-214).

The school runs on the motto of "give respect to get respect." This is followed with clear expectations and clear consequences when these expectations are not upheld. However, building strong

working relationships with students can be a key action in keeping discipline problems to a minimum. Positive relationships, combined with limited movement and little free time, means that discipline issues are kept under control. However, the Twilight Academy study asserts that out-of-school suspensions do not serve a purpose. Students don't take them seriously and many view out-of-school suspensions as a day off from school. These researchers recommend alternative discipline policies that provide opportunities for students to learn from their mistakes (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p. 215).

2.3.4   Hamilton Wentworth District School Board: James Street.

The Hamilton Wentworth District School Board in Ontario, Canada, outlines an appealing alternative education plan that supports a wide variety of students. The program, James Street Alternative Education, acknowledges the importance of "a sense of belonging." Their mission and vision aim toward including all students in the process of education by ensuring student success is at the heart of their program (Alternative Education, 2009).

The program targets six key student profiles: the outsider, the medical case, the catch-up, the second chance, the victim of circumstance, and the eager newcomer. A student may fit into one, or more of these categories. For each student profile, there is a path to success. Normally, the students involved in a program at James Street Alternative Education program are "capable of working at the applied, or academic level, [are] fluent in English, with at least a grade nine reading level, [are] between 16 and 20 years of age, [do not have] serious behavioral issue[s] in the classroom ,[and] do not pose a danger to other students or staff" (James Street 2009).

The outsider is a student who does not feel as though he or she belongs in the regular classroom. They are often students who have suffered from bullying. The alternative program leads them to success by ensuring they are part of a small, nurturing class. This environment allows the students to

focus on their academics instead of their social difficulties. The program attempts to provide experiences for social development through cooperative placements (James Street, 2009.).

The medical cases are students who have health issues. "Students' medical issues may be mental or physical; common examples include Depression, Crohn's disease, and severe migraines" (James Street, 2009). The program allows students to work at their own pace. This ensures that students do not miss out when they are unable to come to school. When they return, they are able to continue where they left off (James Street , 2009).

The catch-up students are typically described as students who dropped out of school, and are now ready to continue their education. These students are often between 18 and 20 years of age. They tend to be farther behind than other students profiled, usually still working at grade 9 or 10, and often need more one-on-one time. This program ensures they get this time. The path to success for these students is providing them with a comfortable environment. Many students would not be comfortable in a regular classroom, with much younger students. This program "eases them back into the school setting, so they can finish their OSSD (Ontario Secondary School Program) and be ready to compete at the post-secondary level" (James Street, 2009).

The second chance students have been removed from their regular school because of poor attendance and/or because they were unsuccessful in attaining credit in their courses. Their purpose in attending this alternate education program is to redeem themselves, to show the teachers that they are in fact capable of being cooperative. If they do this, they may given the opportunity to return to their home school. Their path to success is focused on providing them a safe, quiet area to work. From this, they must show they are serious about school (James Street, 2009).

Students who are victims of circumstance are students who are experiencing some intense struggles. Many need to work in order to survive. Because of their issues, they may not be able to

attend school on a regular basis. The program provides these students an opportunity to work their schooling around their hours of work and will even allow some students to gain co-op credits at their current work site (James Street,2009).

The eager newcomer profile describes students who are currently transferring to a new school mid-semester. This means it is too late to join the regular program. This program allows students to work on their own and to attain credits, and it can also prepare them for the programs they will be taking at their home school. This is a temporary placement that ends when it is appropriate for the student to enter the regular program (James Street,2009).

Coordinating these services for everyone is done in a tactful, student-centred approach. The 2010 webpage for this school notes:

> The James Street Alternative Education Program provides programming for students aged 16-21 who are currently unsuccessful both in academic accomplishment and in finding a positive sense of direction for their future. Students in the James Street program complete secondary school credits at the Applied and Academic levels in a supportive classroom environment. Credits are completed independently or in a small class setting. Students in this program work towards the completion of their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Cooperative Education opportunities are available to students in the James Street Alternative Education Program, and in all Secondary Programs served by the Student Achievement Center. (Hamilton Wentworth District School Board, 2010)

Needless to say, this program offers a wide variety of alternative education choices to many students. By targeting so many student profiles, there is a path to success for everyone. The teachers of James Street Alternative Education program definitely aim to meet students where they are and do what it takes to support students in meeting their potential. This program is unique as it operates on a drop-

in-as-needed basis, whereas many programs are more structured in terms of the amount of commitment students must make to coming on a regular basis.

2.3.5   Provincial Adolescent School, P.E.I.

The Provincial Adolescent School is the longest running program on Prince Edward Island. In the past, it ran out of Hillsborough Hospital. Today, it runs out of the Provincial Group Home for Adolescents in Charlottetown. Some students are wards of the crown; others enter the program through admission procedures, often dealing with social services. Students of the group home are automatically accepted into the program; however, the school does accommodate some day students. Day students have exhausted all resources at their home school and board. They are in need of extra supports particularly in terms of their behaviour. The program focuses on language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science. While admitting day students, the admissions committee has to narrow down who can be admitted due to limitations of space. The committee is made up of a member of the school board, student service designate, Department of Education, Manager of Adolescent Services, and the Department of Social Services and Seniors. Day students return to their home school as soon as they have fulfilled their obligation at the group home. This may be a behavioural, academic, or social goal. It is based on a case by case basis (Provincial Adolescent, 2005, p. 1).

The program has two youth workers who assist teachers and help fulfill supervision and discipline roles. Youth workers are a key component to this program as they build strong connections with students and work hand-in-hand with teachers and coordinating staff. Teachers fulfill academic responsibilities and foster social and emotional growth. This school is unique because it runs from a group home, where students live independently from their families. Because parental involvement is not always a given, the school must teach a variety of life skills to these students. The program is able

to provide extra supports not always available in a traditional classroom. The provincial Department of Social Services works very closely with this program and as a result, many services are at the doorstep of the school, making them much quicker to access (Provincial Adolescent , 2005, p. 4-5).

2.3.6   Liberty Alternative Education

Liberty is located in Kentucky and is a part of the largest school district in the United States. The school itself hosts up to 450 students and offers three main programs students may take part in. The first is the regular, comprehensive program; the second is the crossroads program targeted to grade 9 students identified at risk of dropping out of school; and the third program is the high school preparation program, targeted for grade 8 students (Munoz, 2002, p. 8).

This alternative education site aims to help at-risk youth redirect their lives, and gain skills that will allow them to succeed after high school. The school staff aim to

> develop a community of learners who demonstrate acceptance, leadership, and academic success through a caring, collaborative, and engaging learning environment…Liberty enrolls students voluntarily, from throughout the district, who have the following characteristics: Have been in high school for at least one year and has less then 5 credits; Have been in high school 4 years and have less than 14 credits; Are frequently absent from school; Has failed 4 or more classes; Are 16 years of age. (Munoz, 2002, p.8)

The school's class sizes are limited to 20 due to the nature of the students and the needs they present. To help ensure students' successful transition, the school has implemented a nine week Discovery program that occurs at the beginning of the school year. The program encourages a sense of community within the school and ensures that students' social and emotional needs are addressed (p.8-9). "Essential components of the program include the following: Effective groups and team-building;

Anger management; Transactional analysis; Assertiveness training; Problem solving; Conflict

resolution; Chemical dependency; Career exploration" (p. 9).

The research Munoz explored in the study proved that this alternative education school was able

to decrease behavioural problems in students and improve the overall attendance rate of students.

Munoz (2002) noted:

> There are certain factors that may strengthen children's resiliency and help them cope with
>
> socio-demographic risks. These could include personal characteristics, such as temperament,
>
> disposition, and behavioral and cognitive skills, as well as environmental characteristics such as
>
> social support from the community, parental warmth, adult monitoring and supervision, and
>
> positive role models . . . . Liberty High School is trying to apply all this needed components in
>
> their school-based programs developed to target their needed population. (p. 15)

As a result, it is clear that this school attempts to meet the needs of the whole child and provide

opportunities for academic, social and emotional growth. The vision of the school, small class sizes and

specific programming help promote student success.

2.4   Conclusion

It is clear from the literature that identifying and meeting the needs of at-risk youth is not an

easy task. However, it is possible to get better as we learn more about what works with these students

and what doesn't. By looking at students from a holistic perspective, we are better able to understand

them, and perhaps come up with better strategies and interventions to help them become successful in

school. In the article "What Does it Mean to Teach the Whole Child?" (2005), Noddings argues that

"although reading and math are important, we need to promote competence in these subjects while also

promoting our other aims. Students can develop reading, writing, speaking and mathematical skills as they plan and stage dramatic performances, design classroom murals, compose a school paper, and participate in established school rules" (p. 11). Miller discusses Noddings' theories in his article "Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach-By Nel Noddings" (2009). He states:

> Noddings suggests that sensitive issues can be addressed through literature and historical examples rather than by directly confronting students. For example, the question 'what does home mean to you' can be discussed this way so that students are not forced to share material that they feel is private. Noddings states that good teachers can go back and forth from literary and the historical to the present to make the discussions of the issue interesting and relevant to students. (p. 91)

Through the development of appropriate programs for at-risk youth, teachers can target key issues that may have been holding those students back and give them opportunities that they never believed were possible. By first caring for our students, we can start to solve some of the problems in our education system. We can come to understand why some students fall through the cracks and then seek to create bridges so that this does not happen.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1   Context of the Study

The cohort alternative education program at the high school I work at is the focus of this thesis. Over the course of the past year, I have completed a participatory case study of this unique plan. Administration, support staff, and teachers have worked closely with our feeder schools to identify who is at risk, and how best to meet their needs. Through this study, I hope to share the story of the cohort program and raise the overall level of awareness regarding their needs. At this school, we take a holistic approach to education. We do not just teach curriculum; we teach the student. This means we must ensure students learn social skills, get assistance for anger and addiction problems, and make use of counselling when they have been victims of violence, or have had negative factors impact their lives. We provide the students with a lot of support and have high expectations of them. When we are not able to meet the needs within our school ourselves, we connect students with the appropriate supports they need in the community. Whether it is addiction support, mental health counselling, or accessing self-esteem or leadership workshops, the staff at this school try to bridge students with outside services. We even welcome these service workers into our school to ensure students have easy access to them.

Although there are a variety of ways to define what it means to be an at-risk youth, the school defines at-risk students as those who have experienced a history of academic failure and are at risk of not meeting their potential and dropping out of school. Although there are at-risk students in the regular program within the school, and each are unique in their needs, the alternative programs are dedicated primarily to two types of at-risk students. Tier one, the cohort program, targets at-risk students whose primary reason for academic failure is learning difficulty. The tier two program targets at-risk students whose primary reason for academic failure is behaviour issues. One of the key areas both alternative education programs target is class size. The Cohort program is capped at 15 students per class, while

the alternative education program is capped at 10 students per class. This is very different from the mainstream teacher-student ratio. The 2010-2011 Ministers Directive No. 2010-05 states that at the high school level, the teacher student ratio should be 1:30.

3.1.1 Tier One: Cohort Alternative Education Program

The alternative program has two tiers. Tier one is the primary focus of my research. To fully understand the program, it is beneficial to know about both tiers. The first tier is for at-risk students.. These are often students who have demonstrated moderate behaviour problems in class and have experienced serious difficulty in academics. Usually students' academic abilities fall into the elementary to junior high year range. Often they are working at a grade 5 level or lower. Some students have been diagnosed with learning disabilities; most are just struggling learners. Students are also admitted to the program if they have had a lot of personal issues in the past, and have proved that they are unable to have their learning needs met in a regular classroom. This is primarily due to the large gaps in their learning that have caused them to fall far behind the rest of the class. Students are often identified by junior high resource teachers, classroom teachers, and school guidance counsellors. These staff members refer them to the high school's student services team, and the students are considered for programming from there using a team-based approach. Along with academic difficulty, some of the other issues students experience range from a break down in family dynamics, abuse, addictions, and a variety of obstacles that life has thrown their way.

The tier one alternative education program was developed by the administrative and teaching staff of this school and was designed to meet specific needs of the school. Previous to the current program, there was an alternative program that mixed all types of students together. The previous program was set up just like the current tier one program, but it accepted all students who had fallen

behind in school, regardless of the reason. This system proved to be problematic as it mixed extremely

vulnerable students with students with more serious behavioural issues. Mixing vulnerable students

with students with server behaviour problems resulted in some vulnerable students joining social

groups with students involved in drugs and criminal behaviour. As a result, students' academic needs

were able to be met, but social problems occurred that actually made some of the students' lives even

more problematic. The new program is designed to create an environment that best suits students in

different situations: students who experience serious learning difficulties versus students who have

problems getting through school because of their behaviours. Identification can be difficult at times, as

it is similar to the old question: "What came first? The chicken or the egg?" To ensure that proper

placement occurs, students are monitored closely and the high school student services team (made up

of an administrator, resource teacher, two youth care workers, a guidance counsellor and the four

cohort teachers) meets each month to evaluate student progress. .

When placing these students in the tier one cohort program instead of the tier two alternative

program, staff look for markers like a chronic past of failure in school, family dysfunction, and

socioeconomic concerns. Cohort students do not typically display violent behaviours, have a history of

trouble with the law, or have serious addictions to drugs or alcohol. The cohort program that this study

focuses on deals with students whose primary issues arise from learning difficulty. Once admitted to

the cohort program, students meet the four teachers they will have for English, math, social studies, and

science. The teachers they have for these core subjects are the same teachers they have for their three

years of high school. This model has been adopted in the hopes that teachers will build strong

connections with students and develop a trusting relationship. For this reason, it is crucial that teacher

turn-over is minimal. Teachers typically sign up for a three-year term and commit to students for this

length of time. In rare cases, teachers accept different teaching positions, go out on maternity leave, or

move away. However, this is very uncommon as the group of teachers is so small and are dedicated to working together to ensure that these students are successful.

The teachers will not represent the only commonality these students will experience in their high school years. Students will be grouped together as a cohort for all three years of their education. This means that they will take English, math, social studies, and science together, for their entire high school education. With a few exceptions, students are often able to stay together and graduate as a group. If a student does not want to be a part of the program, they may leave. Teachers may also remove students if it becomes clear that the program is not a good fit. Students found to be misplaced often present with more aggressive behaviours, or do not require the intense learning support that others do.

The cohort program also includes a youth worker. This youth worker works closely with teachers and students and is there for added support when problems arise. The primary role of the youth worker is to establish a trusting relationship with students and to act as the liaison between the student and the support staff they need. This may be child and family services, community mental health, or even income support. The youth worker also has regular contact with parents and is often the first one to contact home. The youth worker is a great support to the teacher and can address issues that teachers are concerned about. Students often see the youth worker as additional parental support that they do not necessarily have at home. Thus, the youth worker position is essential in ensuring students are supported and feel a sense of belonging in the school.

The program has been beneficial in promoting a safe classroom environment where students can take risks as learners and meet their potential. Meeting potential, whatever that may mean for each student, is the driving force of this program. Some students in the program are able to fill in the gaps that have developed in their education over the years. They are able to catch up to their peers in the

general program and some even go on to post-secondary studies. For others, they maximize their time and learning, and work on transitioning into the work world. To ensure adequate access to supports and resources so that students are able to meet their potential, class sizes are capped at 15. This ensures that each student gets one-on-one time with the teacher. These small classes ultimately allows school staff to zone in on each student, and to try to identify the key reasons that each has experienced difficulty in school. Through analysis made possible by having resource teachers and classroom teachers working closely together, staff design interventions to improve student success rates as quickly as possible.

The school operates on a four period cycle and has two semesters. All students have the opportunity to take eight courses a year for a total of 24 courses by the end of their third year. They need 20 credits to graduate, five of which have to be at the grade 12 level. Students take their two cohort classes together in the morning, and then take part in two regular classes in the afternoon. This schedule allows them to interact with students in the regular program, and ensures that they are not alienated from the rest of the school culture. For example, during first semester, grade 11 cohorts take social studies and science in the morning from two of their cohort teachers. In the afternoon, they take two electives they have chosen. In the second semester, they take their cohort math and English courses in the morning, and then take two electives in the afternoon. There are a number of courses for students to choose from: some examples are graphic arts, carpentry, welding, aerospace, automotive, culinary, and child studies. This set up slips them back into the regular school culture, allowing them to interact with a larger peer group and to maintain connections with other teachers and students in the school.

In the past, the cohort teachers took on students each semester to track. This meant that the cohort teacher maintained communication with those students' teachers and ensured that there were no problems taking place in the classroom. The teacher also tracked the students' marks, and ensured that

they were being successful in and out of cohort classes. If they were not succeeding, the cohort teacher attempted to find out why, and took steps to support the students and their subject teachers.

This method changed in September 2010, after focus groups were held in June 2010. Administration and teachers were aware that this system was not working as well as it should, and students voiced their concerns to staff. The focus group prompted students to further discuss their concerns. At that time, there was only one resource teacher supporting a population of approximately 100 students requiring learning support. With the exception of the specialized education program designed for special needs students, this resource teacher was responsible for all students in the school population. This teacher had also requested more support as she felt she was not able to meet students' needs. In response to staff and student concerns, administration sought an additional .25 full-time equivalent resource position to help specifically with cohort and alternative education students. The board approved this position, and since then, these students have had additional supports in their afternoon classes.

The resource teacher assigned to cohort and alternative education is responsible for organizing and facilitating monthly meetings with cohort teachers, administration, guidance counsellors, and youth workers. At these meetings, staff report on student progress and brainstorm solutions to problems that have arisen over the past month. Teamwork is very important for staff and students and the resource teacher takes the lead in ensuring that communication is clear. The resource teacher also interacts with the students' afternoon teachers on a regular basis and provides additional teaching strategies to help the teacher meet the students' needs. This resource teacher also helps classroom subject teachers with assessment and making proper adaptations and modifications for their course. This additional position dedicated to the cohort and alternative education students has provided more direct leadership for the program and also ensures students have access to help when they need it.

Cohort teachers have been selected carefully. Not all teachers are meant to teach this program. A teacher must want to be a part of this process in order for it to be a success. The teachers must also be willing to be creative in their instructional practises and to participate as a team player in these students' educational plan. Teachers are selected by the principal with consultation from the student services team. Typically, the teacher commits to a three-year term; however, teachers may remain in the program longer if they choose to. If the placement proves to be a poor fit, alternative measures are taken. Keeping teachers in this position who do not want to be in it, is not good for the program. Because there is tremendous support available from administration and the student services team, teachers who take on this role tend to like it. Just as the classes become a family outside the home for the students, the members of the cohort team become a constant support network for each other.

Although there are very little funds available, as there is no official budget dedicated to the cohort program, administration tries to offer extra supports. Teachers do tend to pay out-of-pocket for some things, but administration tries to help when possible. The students in the program tend to be more needy as many come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers often work together to find items like winter coats, boats, and even groceries for some students. The fact that there is no practical curriculum for teachers to follow for the practical students in the cohort, means that teachers have to seek out their own material to help meet students' individual learning needs. This often represents an out-of-pocket expense as well. As a whole, cohort teachers probably pay more out-of-pocket expenses than regular teachers due to the fact that the basic needs of many of the students go unmet and materials for practical curriculum must be purchased.

The tier one cohort program is entirely funded and supported by the school. There are no extra supports provided by the school board or provincial Department of Education. The staff-to-student ratio is justified to the rest of the school staff and community by explaining that without this program, these

students would be made part of the regular program without the supports they need, subsequently, significantly increasing the risk of behaviour and learning problems in the regular classroom and potentially preventing teachers from teaching their academic curriculum. One student can certainly change the dynamics of a classroom. Teachers understand this and are extremely supportive of the program as they know this is something that is in everyone's best interest. They understand that the cohort students require more help than they would be able to provide while teaching a larger class. The following table details the staff involved in the tier one cohort program:

Table 1

Staff Involved in Tier One Program

Staff Title	Duties
Math Teacher	Teaches grade 10, 11, and 12 Mathematics; participates in monthly meetings
English Teacher	Teaches grade 10, 11, and 12 English; participates in monthly meetings
Science Teacher	Teaches grade 10, 11, and 12 Science; participates in monthly meetings
Social Studies/Literacy Teacher	Teaches grade 10, 11, and 12 Social Studies; teaches grade 10 Literacy; participates in monthly meetings
Youth Worker	Meets regularly with students; maintains contact with parents; supports teachers; acts as the liaison between students and support networks; participates in monthly meetings.
Vice-Principal Assigned to Alternative Education programs	Participates in monthly meetings; supports teachers in meeting students' needs; deals with discipline issues
Resource Teacher	Provides educational support for students; educate teachers and parents about learning exceptionalities; maintains contact with cohort teachers and afternoon teachers; organizes and facilitates monthly meetings; provides leadership through monthly adjustments/interventions of student programming.

3.1.2   Tier Two: Alternative Education Program

Tier two is a new section of the program that was added in September 2009. This program takes on students who have been identified as "highly at-risk." This means that they have demonstrated extreme problems with behaviour, and may have displayed violence in the past. Some of these students have addiction problems and have broken the law. Students are often, but not always, on probation, or have recently been removed from probation. Probation officers and drug counsellors regularly work with these students. Some students are submitted to monthly drug testing. This testing occurs at an off-site location arranged by the addictions councillor. These students often have academic difficulty as well. Some students have diagnosed learning disabilities, or gaps in their learning. They are academically stronger than the cohort students as they are able to complete regular general or academic programming. Their personal issues are not unlike tier one students, but their response to these factors is more intense and problematic.

Tier two students are part of a full-day program. They have one teacher in the morning who teaches them two courses, and one teacher in the afternoon who teaches them another two courses. Teachers in this role have administrative privileges, so students' behaviour is managed immediately. This means that they can decide on student discipline. Students are aware that their teacher can immediately enforce administrative consequences if their behaviour is not conducive to learning. A youth worker is assigned to this class and works with the teachers as needed. The youth worker also helps ensure students' behaviour is kept in check. This class size is capped at 10 students so behaviours are kept to a minimum and teachers can closely monitor students' progress. Ultimately, this program helps ensure students get the extra help they need so they can learn the skills to be a part of the regular classroom by their grade 11 year.

Unlike the tier one students, tier two students don't have the opportunity to work in other classes until the second semester of the school year. However, they do get a hands-on class such as wood working, or physical education so they get out of the classroom for part of the day during first semester. The main focus of this program is to teach grade 10 students the skills they need to be successful in the mainstream program. Because these students are usually strong general or academic students, their behaviour is the main reason they have not experienced success in school. Often there are good reasons students' behaviour have been problematic. Many have experienced traumatic events in their lives like physical and sexual abuse. Others come from families with cyclical problems such as drug and alcohol addiction. Some students have just gotten mixed up with the "wrong crowd" and have subsequently started on a path of destructive behaviour.

The morning teacher of this program is also the resource teacher assigned to all tier one and tier two students in the school. Because of this arrangement, students needing support from outside agencies like community mental health and addictions get that help built right into their program. This teacher meets with probation officers, mental health counsellors, addiction counsellors, and community youth workers bi-monthly. As a team, school staff and community workers plan and implement interventions for these students to help ensure their success. These outside agencies work with the students as a class and one-on-one. In order to be in school, students sign a contract agreeing to accept help for the problems preventing them from being successful. The goal of the program is that all students can return to the mainstream program by their grade 11 year. Although it is not officially a three-year program, students continue to get support from the youth worker, resource teacher, and outside agency community workers for as long as they need it. The help is available for all three years of their high school education.

By second semester, all students are out of the alternative education classroom for at least one regular class. Students who have experienced more success regarding behaviour are given more choice for programming as they have proven they can follow the rules of the school. Often programs like trades and other hands-on electives are given as incentives for positive behaviour and academic success. For students who prove themselves capable of following rules, these programs can begin as early as second semester. For others, they will have to wait until their grade 11 year. Students typically want these programs and are usually willing to do what it takes to be a part of them. They enjoy these programs primarily because they are hands-on, and provide a much different experience than they have had in their previous schooling. Students must follow the rules and are held accountable for their actions. The resource teacher and youth worker continue to monitor these students when they transition out for courses second semester. By continuing the support of the resource teacher and youth worker throughout their high school education, a connection with alternative education staff is maintained. If the student is unsuccessful in the regular program during the second semester, they can come back to the alternative education classroom and work on the skills they were lacking. By ensuring that students work with limited staff throughout their day, they are able to get to know their teachers and support workers quite well.

In both tiers, school staff attempt to set students up for success. By providing them with adequate support and avenues to voice their concerns, students improve their social and academic skills. The focus is kept on student achievement in both programs and teachers and students work very hard to ensure its success. Because each student is unique, their paths are not all the same. Some students require more help and direction than others. As a result, every student's experience is unique and staff does their best to support each student's individual experience in school. Teachers are not just

teachers of content, they are teachers of students. Taking this holistic approach to education allows

teachers to connect with students and get to know them personally. This approach ultimately builds a

trusting relationship between students and teachers, and this is key to student progress.

Unlike the tier one program, the tier two program does receive support and funding by the

school board. A .75 full time employment position has been allotted to the school, along with an

operating budget of $1,500 per year. Although this does not cover the cost of the program entirely, it is

an enormous help. The rest of the school staff are also supportive of the tier two program, and

understand that extra resources in the school need to be used to ensure students successfully transition

to the mainstream program by grade 11.

The following table details the staff involved in the tier two alternative education program:

Table 2

Staff Involved in Tier Two Program

Staff Title	Duties
Morning Teacher: teaches two periods of the morning. Semester One: English Writing, Personal Development Semester Two: English Literature, Human Biology	Instructs course content while incorporating personal development opportunities for students.
Afternoon Teacher: teachers two periods in the afternoon Semester One: Social Studies, Wood Working Semester Two: Math, Social Studies	Instructs course content while incorporating personal development opportunities for students.
Youth Worker	Meet regularly with students; maintains contact with parents; supports teachers in meeting students' needs; acts as the liaison between students and support networks; participates in bi-monthly meetings with outside agency workers.
Vice- Principal Assigned to Alternative Education programs	Participates in bi-monthly meetings; supports teachers in meeting students' needs; acts as the liaison between the teachers and student and the school board; supports teachers in student discipline.
Resource Teacher	Provide educational support for students; educate teachers and parents about learning exceptionalities; maintains contact with teachers when students begin to transition out of the program; organizes and facilitates bi-monthly meetings with outside agency workers; provides leadership and follow through for monthly interventions.

3.2 Approach

The design of this study is based on qualitative research. I feel that the qualitative approach best suits my study because my goal is to learn about students' and staff's personal experiences with the tier one alternative education program known as the "cohort program." Newman (2006) defines the qualitative approach in his text, *Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches.* He states:

> Qualitative rese archers often rely on interpretive or critical social science. They apply "logic in practice" and follow a nonlinear research path. Qualitative researchers speak a language of "cases and contexts". They emphasize conducting detailed examinations of cases that arise in the natural flow of social life. They try to present authentic interpretations that are sensitive to specific social-historical contexts. (p.151)

For this study to be truly comprehensive, I had to understand the students' and teachers' beliefs about the program, and also how they constructed their beliefs. Unlike those who expose the positivist view, I do not have a hypothesis I am trying to prove, or disprove. I examined one particular case in the natural setting of the classroom. The findings are grounded in the data.

From this setting, I was able to examine, understand, and describe how this program operates and how students and teachers feel about the program. The strategies for sampling and data collection are flexible and allow for the participants to tell their story. As a result, the constructivist philosophy is a natural fit for my research. Patton (2002), author of *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, describes constructivism. He states:

> Constructivism begins with the premise that the human world is different from the natural, physical world and therefore must be studied differently . . . . Because human beings have evolved the capacity to interpret and construct reality-indeed, they cannot otherwise- the world

of human perception is not real in an absolute sense. . . . constructivists study the multiple

realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and

interactions with others. (p.96)

The constructivist perspective is "an ontological position (often referred to as constructivism that

asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being created by social actors. It is

antithetical objectivism" (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009, p. 342).

3.3   Methods

Quantitative methods would not easily allow me to fully understand the beliefs of the students

and teachers I was examining. As a result, qualitative methods were the focus of data collection for my

study. Bryman, Teevan, and Bell define qualitative research in their book, *Social Research Methods*

(2009). They state: "Qualitative research uses mainly words and images rather than numbers in its data

analysis. Those using this strategy tend to produce inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist

studies, but qualitative researchers do not always subscribe to all three of those perspectives" (p128).

Throughout my research, I have learned what factors in this school environment enabled at-risk

students to succeed and improve their social, emotional, and intellectual competence. It was necessary

to accumulate and analyze the results from data collection before knowing what exactly the study

contributed to the field of alternative education. This is much different than the deductive approach

where a concrete hypothesis is established at the very beginning of the study and the key goal of the

study is to prove or disprove the hypothesis.

Using the constructivist perspective, I gathered data using the following qualitative methods:

observations, focus groups, standardized open ended questions, and a teacher diary.

As a participant in this case study, observations were a key component for my research. By

observing these students for four months, I was able to collect 100 hours of data.

Patton (2002) states:

> Observational data, especially participant observation, permit the evaluation researcher to
>
> understand a program or treatment to an extent not entirely possible using only
>
> insights of others obtained through interviews....the purpose of observational analysis is to take
>
> the reader into the setting that was observed. (p. 22-23)

This strategy allowed me to fully explain the daily happenings of the program and the responses people

have to these events.

Focus groups have been very important for my study as they allowed students and teachers

involved in the program to voice their opinions. I chose focus groups as opposed to individual

interviews so that I could maximize the number of people with whom I could communicate. I also

believed that the students and teachers would be confident and comfortable sharing their thoughts as a

group due to the fact that they work so closely together during the regular school day. Focus groups

allowed participants to build on one another's ideas and to give ideas and suggestions they may not

have come with on their own. Jackson (2003) defined focus groups in his text, *Methods Doing Social*

Research. He states: "A focus group typically consists of six to twelve individuals who are asked to

discuss topics suggested by a facilitator. The idea is to have the researcher observe the interactions

among focus-group members, detecting their attitudes, opinions, and solutions to problems posed by

the facilitator" (p.175). He also stated that "the rationale of focus groups is that they provide a dynamic

in which participants learn from one another and develop ideas together. The researcher is able to

detect whether a view being expressed is limited to one or two individuals...the responses may lead into

important issues unanticipated by the researcher" (p.178).

Standardized open-ended interviews took place with two people who work as a support to the

program. Patton (2002) explains this interview approach: "the exact wording and sequence of questions

are determined in advance. All interviewees are asked the same basic questions in the same order. Questions are worded in a completely open-ended format" (p. 349). Both the school principal and program youth worker participated in these interviews. I chose to conduct individual interviews with these people because their roles in the school may have lead them or the other participants to be uncomfortable or intimidated in the larger focus-group setting. Teachers may have held back opinions with the principal there, and the youth worker may have felt that she could not give her true perspective in front of the teachers. Individual interviews ensured I would get the most honest answers from each participant. This strategy was helpful as it ensured consistency of content and process and allowed responses to be compared and analyzed in an organized manner. The specific questions asked to these participants are found in the appendices section of this study.

Document analysis was another key component of this study. A teacher diary and my personal field notes were used to verify responses. I feel my observations are useful for this study, but by having a second teacher involved, a more thorough analysis has been achieved. Neuman (2006) suggests that "personal notes provide a way to cope with stress; they are a source of data about personal reactions; they help to evaluate direct observation or inference notes when the notes are later re-read" (p.402). Like my field notes, teacher diaries provided observations and opinions about the program. The following diagram (Figure 1) represents the design of the study data collection components.

3.4   Study Design

I have chosen to carry out a participatory case study of a single program: the cohort program . As a teacher involved in this program, I have an intrinsic interest in learning about student and teacher interpretations. Through data collection and analysis, I have come to understand the program and the attitudes of the students and teachers that belong to it. Bryman, Teevan, and Bell (2009) define case

studies as "a research design that entails a detailed and intensive analysis of a single case or a small number of cases for comparative purposes" (p.343). Patton (2002) explains that

> A case study is expected to catch the complexity of single case. The single leaf, even a single toothpick, has unique complexities-but rarely will we care enough to submit it to a case study. We study a case when it itself is of very special interest. We look for details of interaction with its context. Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances. (p.296)

Reilly (2010) define the participatory case study as

> ... a mode of case study research that involves the participants, local groups, or the community in all phases of the research, from conceptualizing the study to writing up and disseminating the findings. It is ideologically orientated in its focus and explicitly emancipatory in its goals. It generally takes the position of social critic, and proposes radical change in social structures/processes, as well as reformulating the entire approach to research, voice, power, and knowledge production/ use. Emerging from the liberation and anti-colonial philosophical approach of Paulo Freire, participants are not incidental to the curiosity of the research, but are experts into the underlying causes of the issues within their social world. The research process becomes a means of moving their voice from the margins into a place of centrality. In participatory case research, the case participants become contributing researchers (p. 1).

From these definitions, it is clear that a participatory case study was the natural fit for my study. The purpose of my study is to tell the story of the cohort program so that the school can make informed decisions when planning for future program development. By raising the level of awareness regarding the details of this program and its effectiveness, additional support may be sought after and attained. Within this case study, the stories of the students are also defined. Patton (2002) acknowledges that a

"single case study is likely made up of many smaller cases—the stories of specific individuals, families, organizational units, and other groups" (p. 297). This study ultimately gives the students in this program an opportunity to voice their own experiences before and after their participation in the program. As a result, their personal stories became a crucial part of the case study.

3.5   Study Sample

The sample for my study is purposive because the students who belong to the program have already been selected by the school. As a result, the cohort group for the tier one program was already identified. All participants were given the choice as to whether to participate. Teachers and support staff involved with the program were included as well. Because their positions were predetermined, their selection for this study was as well. The site selection was the natural setting of the classroom. The location was easy to access and the school administration was extremely supportive of the study. This resulted in both access to the research site and the sample group. The school itself is a large building with approximately 900 students and 60 instructional staff.

The general level of risk for students was quite low. There was a risk that emotions might run high due to the fact that each student is so personally involved in this program. Their past choices, current living conditions, or difficulty "fitting in" in the context of the regular program may have triggered affective responses related to past and current circumstances. The level of risk for teachers was also low. However, like students, teachers become quite involved in this program too. Cohort teachers see things every day that many mainstream teachers don't observe on a weekly, monthly, or even yearly basis. Cohort teachers and support staff become a family outside the home for these students and, as a result, feelings can run quite high. Many teachers are not only passionate about their subjects, but are firmly dedicated to their students as well. They invest a lot of who they are into this

program. Steps to mitigate risks were taken by giving out focus group and interview questions ahead of time. This way, participants were more prepared for the topics they discussed. Also, engaging in debriefing with youth workers and/or guidance counsellors was an option for participants after interviews and focus groups. The following chart indicates data collection methods and participants whose comments were used within the study. Three other grade 10 students were present during the focus group, but did not actively participate. As a result, I did not use comments from those students. Also pseudonyms were used for all participants. All participants were made aware of this before agreeing to participate in the study. This was shared with them on their informed consent forms and was approved by the UPEI research ethics board.

Table 3

Participants involved in Data Collection

Administration (1)	Teachers (3)	Support Staff (2)	Grade 10 Students (4) 7 participated	Grade 11 Students (4)	Grade 12 Students (3)
Principal: Denis	Darryl	Youth Worker: Tina	William	Susie	Todd
	Amy	Resource Teacher: Nancy	Rick	Jocelyn	Janet
	Jerry		John	Samantha	Sandra
			Caitlin	Tony	

*Please note that all names used in the description and reporting of the study are pseudonyms.

3.6   Data Collection

The research was conducted in the school where the program operates. All interviews and focus groups took place in the classroom. This helped ensure that students and teachers were at ease in a comfortable, familiar setting. The interviews and focus groups took place at a time when other students were not in the classroom. I was easily able to schedule my interviews and focus groups during the work day. There were no problems accessing people or providing a venue in which to conduct interviews and focus groups. This was largely due to the fact that administration was so supportive of the study and was flexible and forthcoming with options. The following flow chart outlines the types of data collection and the time frame in which each occurred:

Table 4

Data Collection Time Frame

Literature Review: July2009-February 2011
52 Documents cited in Literature Review

↓

Documentation of Observations: May 2010-
October 2010
Daily log of teaching days

↓

Teacher Diary: May 2010-October 2010
10 significant entries

↓

Grade 10 Student Focus Group: June 2010

↓

Grade 11/12 Student Focus Group: June
                                                    2010

↓

Staff Focus Group: June 2010

↓

Interview Principal: June 2010

↓

Interview Youth Worker: June 2010

The first focus group included grade 10 students while the second included grade 11 and 12 students. These focus groups took place for one hour. The same 10 questions were asked to each group. (These questions are found in the appendices section of this thesis). I extended an invitation to participate to all cohort students; participants declined or accepted confidentially in writing. I then selected seven students for each focus group. I narrowed the volunteers down by ensuring that I had an inclusive sample that reflected a range of characteristics in terms of demographic and personal circumstance such as gender, family status, addictions, behaviour and learning exceptionalities.

After student focus groups were completed, I sent an invitation to the cohort teachers and the resource teacher to participate in a teacher-based focus group. The resource teacher was a cohort teacher for several years before taking on another role in the school. This focus group took place in one session for one hour. Teachers were asked 10 questions and were given the opportunity to share their own experiences (See Appendices). Teachers are used to working together as a team, and so a focus group was a natural choice for them as they work very well together and encourage one another to give honest feedback.

The social studies and literacy teacher kept a diary of her experiences working with the cohort group. She was very interested in my research and has a personal desire to further implement interventions with the cohort students. The literacy program in particular was a huge driving force for her participation. With the risk of it being removed from the provincial program, she wanted a venue to share her knowledge and expertise. She had four months to write this diary, documenting events she perceived as meaningful. She also documented her emotions, observations, frustrations, and accomplishments. I did not ask for a certain number of entries. She used her own judgment to log what she deemed reasonable. With her permission, I collected the diary at the end of the four months.

As the participant observer in this case study, I documented my observations daily in my field notes. I allowed myself four months to document events I deemed sufficiently meaningful to mention. These events occurred in the school and I noted how students responded to them. They involved typical days where I noted a set back or a forward advance in the program. I also documented my own interpretations, emotions and frustrations. At the end of the four-month period I coded this document for major themes that complemented, or opposed data I had acquired from other venues. All interview and focus-group data was recorded with an audio recorder, and then transcribed and coded. As previously noted in chapter 1, the three research questions this study sought out to answer are:

1. How does the alternative education program change the experiences of students?

2. What are the different approaches and practices used by the teachers involved in this program?

3. What elements of this program can be applied to other programs in public education?

All questions were answered through the focus groups, interviews, and document analysis of field notes and the teacher diary.

School staff and students were all able to comment on how the program changed their experience in school. Students were easily able to reflect on their past experiences in regular classrooms, and also how their experience in the cohort program changed year-to-year. Teachers were able to comment on their perceptions of change from the time the students arrived at the school, to becoming members of the cohort program, and eventually graduates of the school.

Students and staff were also able to give concrete examples of how teachers used different approaches and practices than other teachers in regular programs. Students were able to identify what worked for them and what didn't. They identified why the experience of being a cohort student was different from any other experience they had in school. Teachers were able to comment on their

perceptions of what worked with these students and what didn't. They were able to comment on their abilities to create a community in their classroom, thus providing a sense of belonging for students.

Finding out what elements of the program could apply to other alternative programs was illustrated in the student and staff responses as well. Students and teachers spoke candidly about their own experiences and were able to offer insight as to how others might benefit from similar strategies. The students in this study were able to relate to one another and empathize with each other's circumstances. As a result, they can speak to what it means to be an at-risk student, and how they feel about school now and in the past. Teachers in this program have a strong sense of pride in this program. They work very hard to meet students where they are and to help them improve their abilities. As a result, they can speak to what it means to be a teacher of at-risk youth, and can identify how they have overcome obstacles that are similar to those of other teachers teaching at-risk youth.

3.7   Ethics

The University of Prince Edward Island's Research Ethics Board (REB) approved this study on May 18, 2011. The approval certificate was issued June 8, 2011. I chose to begin my research immediately following the REB approval in May and continued my research into October 2011. The fact that the students and teachers remain the same in the program ensured that there were no problems continuing research from one school year to the next.

The data will be retained until the thesis is completed and published. Three years after the thesis defence, the hard copies will be shredded and destroyed. The audiotaped recordings of focus groups and interviews will also be destroyed at this time. All participants will remain anonymous throughout this study. Few students or people in the community are even aware that this program exists at our school. To ensure that students have this privacy even in our own school, we keep things very quiet and do not advertise the program. Throughout the data collection and write up of the thesis, pseudonyms

were used in the place of participants' real names. All students were made aware very early on in our program that if we (school staff) are made aware of information that puts them or others in harms way, we must report it to the proper services. They were told this again, before they participated in the study. Few specific facts have been reported about participants' as individuals. Specific details about students' home lives or family that may jeopardize their anonymity were left out of the study. Because students and teachers work so closely with each other over a period of three years, we already have a code of confidentiality that is respected. "What is said in class, stays in class"— This motto was discussed again to remind all participants how important it is to honour each other's right to confidentiality.

To ensure that students, parents, and staff were informed and given a formal method to consent or decline participation, I passed out letters to students and staff to inform them about participating in the study. I also provided consent letters that clearly outlined that participants had the choice to participate or decline participation in this study. They were not made to feel pressured, or that there were negative consequences to their rejection. The right to choose was respected.

3.8   Data Analysis

The data analysis section of my research was intense and took a lot of time. I used an audio recorder during all interview and focus groups. I then transcribed the recordings on my own, using a word processor. Once the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, I began to code all of the data for major themes. I did this manually instead of using a software program because I felt more comfortable going through the material myself, and had already had experience with this from a former research project. Patton (2002) affirms that "software programs provide different tools and formats for coding, but the principles of the analytical process are the same whether doing it manually or with the assistance of a computer program" (p. 462). While manually coding, I wrote comments in the margins

of the pages, highlighted key points, and used sticky notes to indicate overlapping and repetitive themes. Patton also identified this as an acceptable method in coding: "This constitutes as the first cut at organizing the data into topics and files. Coming up with topics is like constructing an index for a book or labels for a filing system: You look at what is there and give it a name, a label. The copy on which these topics and labels are written becomes the indexed copy of the field notes or interviews" (p. 463).

After the initial "cut" was made through the data, I read the data again and again looking for subthemes. I applied the constant comparison method to ensure I identified appropriate and meaningful themes. Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, and Coleman (2000) discuss the constant comparison method: "This method combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed" (p. 58). As social phenomena are recorded and classified, they are also compared across categories. Thus, hypothesis generation (relationship discovery) begins with the analysis of initial observations. This process undergoes continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process, continuously feeding back into the process of category coding. "As events are constantly compared with previous events, new topological dimension, as well as new relationships, may be discovered" (2000, n.p.) Once the constant comparison method was carried out, I attempted to develop categories of things that fit together. Patton cited Guba (1978) in defining "the challenge of convergence" (p.465).

Patton (2002) defines the constant comparison method as:

>Figuring out what things fit together. Begin by looking at the *recurring regularities* in the data. These regularities reveal patterns that can be sorted into categories. Categories should then be judged by two criterion: internal homogeneity and external homogeneity. The first criterion concerns the extent to which the data that belong in a certain category hold together or "dovetail"

in a meaningful way. The second criterion concerns the extent to which differences among

categories are bold and clear. "The existence of a large number of unassignable or overlapping

data items is good evidence of some basic fault in the category system . . . ." The analyst then

works back and forth between the data and the classification system to verify meaningfulness and

accuracy of the categories and the placement of data in categories (p.465).

After several readings through the data, I was able to organize the data into meaningful categories and

cross check themes to ensure they fit effectively. To test for completeness, I followed Patton's (2002)

instruction: "The set should have internal and external plausibility... the set should be reasonably

inclusive of the data and information that do exist... The set should be credible to the person who

provided the information. From there, I was able to apply Patton (2002) theory of convergence.

the analyst must "flesh out" the patterns and categories. This is done by the process of extension

(building on items of information already known), bridging (making connections among different

items), and surfacing (proposing new information that ought to fit and then verify existence). The

analyst brings closure to the process when sources of information have be been exhausted, when

sets of categories have been saturated so that new sources lead to redundancy, when clear

regularities have emerged that feel integrated, and when analysis begins to "overextend" beyond

boundaries of the issues and concerns guiding the analysis. (p. 466)

Once this process was complete, I was able to answer the research questions outline in my

thesis. I chose to organize data in the following way: student responses, staff responses, and field

notes and teacher diary. I chose this approach because I wanted to clearly separate what students and

staff thought about the program. I also opted to organize the data within these categories according to

the chronological order of the discussions. This organization allowed me to easily apply the

triangulation method and to ensure that information was cross referenced. As a result, suggestions for

improving the program were highlighted by students and staff. Topics that came up repeatedly, were used as themes. I did not have a specific number of times a topic would have to come up to become a theme. However, it had to come up several times to demonstrate that it was meaningful. These themes were discussed in detail in the findings section of this thesis. The information acquired from the literature review was also applied to the findings section of this thesis. A lot of the literature was meaningful to this study and often supported the cohort program philosophy. Many articles also suggested new interventions staff could apply to the program.

3.9   Study Rigour

Proper steps were taken to ensure the rigour of the study was met. Research issues regarding credibility were safe guarded with proper documentation of time and events. Results of thick descriptive documentation resulted in an accurate depiction of reality. Typical and non-typical events were noted. Also, I applied the triangulation approach to ensure I minimized personal biases through the study. I was sure not to let my voice overpower the voices of the other teachers and students. I did this by allowing others to speak in the focus groups and interviews. I asked the questions, and documented the responses). My personal field notes became my main avenue for expressing my ideas.

Some examples of my biases about the program are: I do believe that alternative education is a necessity for some students. I also believe that students' basic needs must be met for them to learn to their absolute potential. I believe every student should have the right to meet their academic potential. I believe that schools in conjunction with social services must voice and respond to concerns when they arise. I believe that by not responding to these problems, society is creating social inequality in schools. In terms of how this affected others, because I am involved in this program, I know the students and staff very well. Because of this, many participants knew my biases and may have felt obligated to

participate, or give certain responses. However, as noted above, every effort was made to ensure this did not happen.

One way I ensured rigour was by using a variety of tools to gather data. By doing this, I applied triangulation. Bryman et al. (2009) define triangulation as: "the use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomena so that findings may be cross-checked" (p.347). By implementing this technique I compared findings from each data collection strategy and was able to represent all points of view. Also, by checking back with participant members and allowing them to read their comments, I am sure that I am interpreting the information they gave me correctly. The following diagram (Figure 2) symbolizes the three methods I used for data collection and how that applies to triangulation.

Figure 1. Triangulation Method

Observations

Document Analysis   **Single Interviews, Focus Groups**
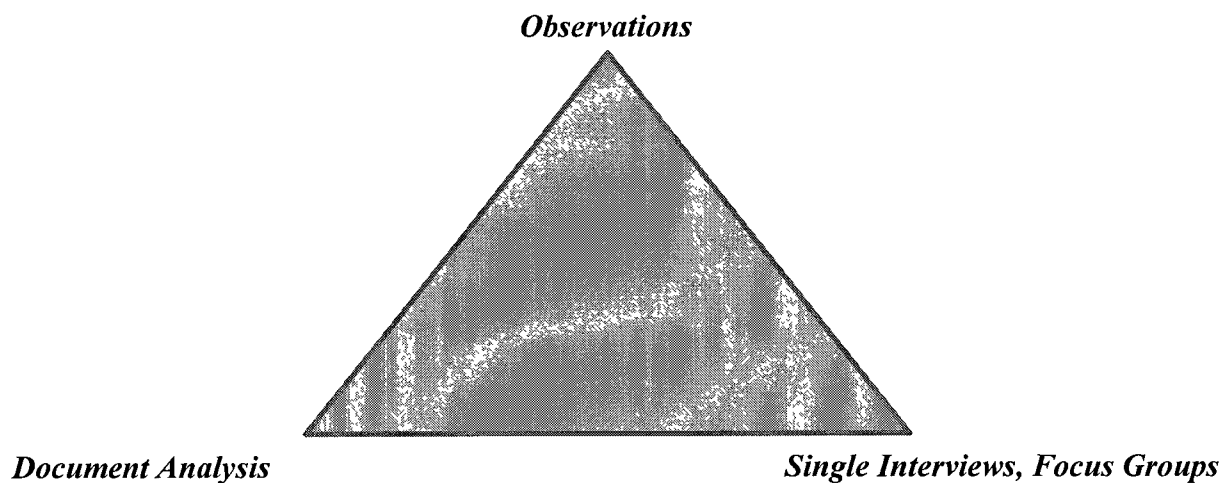
The validity and reliability of this study were ensured by applying scientific coding methods and the triangulation method.

3.10   Study Transferability

Because this is a case study, the research procedures do not transfer to another study. Although this study cannot be transferred, by reading the study design and methodology, another researcher could hypothetically go into the same setting and follow the steps to come out with a consistent outcome. Another limitation of the study is that I did not interview students who had been part of the cohort program and have left. The main reason I did not do this was because there were only two students left in the school who fit this description; both were removed from the program by the staff and did not choose to leave on their own. Another limitation of this study is that I did not include the parent perspective. Parents did not participate in this study.

3.11   Summary

The current research findings will be particularly useful for the alternative education program that was explored in this study. The findings of this study can help teachers and administrators make better decisions regarding this program in the future. The study will also help schools in similar situations understand at-risk youth, their needs and the best teaching methods to use. Seeking to emulate the environment of the program and actual set up may prove to be an effective way for other schools to meet the needs of their at-risk students.

Chapter Four: Findings

After careful evaluation of the data, I have organized the findings into three main categories. The first category deals with student responses;the second deals with staff member responses through the interview and focus groups; and the third category focuses on the findings from the diary entries from the social studies/literacy teacher and my field notes. I will first explain each category individually, so that students' voices are able to be heard separately from those of staff. I will then identify how these responses answer the research questions outlined in this thesis.

4.1   Student Responses

Thematically, student responses reflect the following five topics: "Sense of Family," "Advantages of the Cohort Program," "Defining a Cohort Student," "Defining a Cohort Teacher," and "Areas for Improvement." Students spoke candidly throughout the focus group process and definitely demonstrated a keen interest in expressing their opinions and feelings about the program. Most students clearly valued the program and were able to offer great insight from a young person's perspective. Each focus group included seven students; however, the grade 10 focus group included three students who were reasonably quiet, and who despite prompting, chose not to participate actively. As a result, only four students' comments were used as evidence in this study. The participants in the grade 11 and 12 focus group all actively participated, so all seven students' comments were used in this study.

4.1.1 Sense of Family

The setup of the cohort program certainly encourages a sense of community within the classroom. Students referred to the program as "a home away from home." They jokingly referred to the female teachers in the program as "The Mommas." Many students see themselves as one big

family who serve to support and encourage one another to reach their potential. The theme "Relationships" definitely became a key point of this focus-group discussion. Students know that many of their classmates have obstacles aside from education, and can empathize with one another. When asked about what it is like having the same four teachers for three years in a row, students responded honestly by revealing the pros and cons of the situation. Susie stated:

> You get really close to the teachers and if you're in a class with a few students multiple times, you get closer to them and you feel safer to speak up and be who you are. Teachers are the ones who keep us together. They are the ones who help us deal with our problems and if any of us are arguing with each other. And they are the ones to help us get through everything. William

supported this stance. He stated: "If you go to school and you have the same teachers for that many years, you don't have to worry about getting a new teacher. It's more comfortable when you have the teacher again cause you can trust them."

Trust turned out to be a key issue in both focus groups with the students. Many students did not feel they had a lot of success in school before the cohort program. They noted that even though there were negative things about the program, they still found the positives to far outweigh the negative. Jocelyn responded to the negative side of having teachers for such a long period of time. She stated: "Well, the fact is the teachers get to know you and stuff and they are gonna call you on stuff and that might get on your nerves easily. They are harder on you and they know what you're going through and everything. It can get really annoying and it can start arguments." John noted that having the same teachers for three years in a row meant that "you have to do your work and you can't get away with anything." Todd's comments supported this: "You get less chances cause the more teachers know you, the more they hold you to what you can do. You can't pretend not to know something. But it is good to get less chance. If you're not gonna listen, you might as well not be here".

Along with creating that sense of trust with teachers, students noted that the relationships they made with one another were another positive outcome of the cohort program. Samantha stated "Well, we can get on each other's nerves now and then. But with some people it's like you can feel closer to them and you can feel like you have somebody to go to and stuff and like with me and Jocelyn, we got really close." Jocelyn added to Samantha's comments: "At first we hated each other. We don't even know why. But yeah, we had to learn to work with each other and we had to learn to make things better for each other. It was a really big positive experience."

Building positive relationships with students and teachers can help students feel connected to their class and school. These students do not always have positive relationships with their real family members. This program teaches students how to develop positive relationships and work through real problems. These experiences ultimately will affect them positively in their futures as they will have developed enhanced awareness, knowledge, and competency to bring to their relationships with others.

Just like a parent would set their child up for success, teachers try to give students the skills they need to be successful in the classroom. Because teachers work so openly with students, students learn their rights very early on in the program. Students know the words "adapt" and "learning style." They are easily able to tell others what they need and how they learn. When discussing academic education, students made remarks regarding their teachers' ability to meet them where they are and to bring them up to where they need to be. The students bring up hands-on activities, field trips, and alternative ways to assess learning. Todd stated: "You learn at your own pace." Jocelyn noted that "you get to learn about stuff you actually want to learn about. She stated,

> I had people who were supportive and who were telling that I could do it all the time. And
>
> well, I realized that I am going to listen; I am going to do my work and it made it really easy.
>
> And knowing that I go to class everyday with people that knew how to help me, that just made

me really comfortable and it made me feel like I could just be myself and help other people, even.

Students recognize that the teachers in their program adapt the curriculum to their needs. They still meet all the outcomes of the general curriculum, but often do so in a hands-on, alternative way. John noted that he really enjoyed the field trips. He stated: "I learned a lot at the Yeo House Museum." While exploring oceans in Ecology, the class took a trip out to the museum to make the learning more relevant. Once students were able to connect the ocean to the real world, and history, they were better able to relate to the material. Building on past knowledge is key for these students. When they don't have any prior knowledge on a topic, the teacher must create an experience that gives them that knowledge to build upon.

Rick noted that he worked really hard to receive the rewards. Teachers incorporate their own individual reward system for the students to help motivate them to work as hard as they can. When asked about this, Rick stated: "Well, you know when you work hard, there is a reward at the end and you get excited for that." When asked what types of things they would be rewarded for, William responded: "working well in class, doing good on tests and always paying attention." Rick noted that behaviour was a key motivator for rewards as well. By showing respect in class, having good attendance, and working hard, students could earn rewards such as pizza parties, a movie, or even go on a field trip. John commented that "you just got to use your common sense and be prepared. You can't curse, act up or be a fool."

Not only did students see the use of rewards and field trips as positive for their academic education, but for their moral education as well. Rick stated that "teachers step in and be your parents for the day. They teach you right from wrong and expect you to act with respect." Teachers refuse to take students on field trips who do not know how to behave and act with respect. Practices of courtesy

and mutual respect are modelled for students every day by their teachers. Teachers expect them to

behave in a way that makes them proud of their actions. When asked about moral education, Susie

stated: "So basically if you take a group of random people from different sections in the school and you

put them together, the next thing you know, they all start to get along. It's actually pretty cool." Jocelyn

stated that in the cohort program, "you get to know yourself a lot more. And you have people who want

to get to know you. It's not a judgmental place because the people with you are all like you in a way.

Like they are all learning like you." Susie commented that

> being in a class like this is best cause we don't just learn about work. We learn how to
>
> socialize and make real friendships with others in the class. . . . People who have troubles at
>
> home or with the law can learn more here because if they have stuff like we have, and they are
>
> in a class like this, they realize that people care about them and then maybe they might realize
>
> that they are better than they think. That they can have something in life. They can get their
>
> work done. They can make friends. They can have a life that is not just involved in doing crime

or doing drugs and stuff like that.

Jocelyn followed up by stating, "I feel smart because of what has been done for me in this program.

And I feel cared about and loved. I really do; I feel loved."

4.1.2   Advantages of the Cohort Program

The cohort program is unique in many ways. Students in the mainstream have a much different

experience in school than the cohort students. One key difference students noted was the "team

approach" the teachers have with one another and when dealing with the students. When discussing

how the four cohort teachers work together, William noted: "I find having cohort teachers is good. We

learn similar things and they connect in classes." Rick noted that cohort teachers are different than the

other teachers he has worked with. He stated: "If you have no one to talk to and there is a teacher who makes you work hard, it's cause they care about you and maybe you can go to that person if you got no one else. The cohort teachers are just different. They actually care." William expressed how the cohort teachers refuse to give up on their students and are willing to try various methods to connect with them. He felt that they cared more than other teachers he worked with because they took the time to get to know each of them. He used the metaphor of getting into a locked house to represent the baggage some of the students carry with them into the program. This often affects their attitudes. He stated:

> Like in other classes when you do certain things they won't let you back in. But here, teachers try lots of things. Like when they can't get in through the front door, they try the back. If the back door doesn't work, they try a window. These teachers help us get rid of our bad attitudes. Everybody should get a chance [to feel important] and sometimes teachers need to try lots of ways to get us on track.

William's quotation also expresses how students don't always know what is good for them, and they often need someone to try and try again to get them to buy in to coming to school.

Other key differences students noted were the "absence of homework" in their cohort classes. Rick commented that "It is great that we don't have to worry about homework. Except for the tests. A lot of parents of kids in the cohort can't help them with their homework." William noted that students "have jobs and it is hard to do work after school. You come home late at night and you are tired." John commented on long bus rides for students who live farther out of the city. He stated: " I just have a lot to do. I have a long drive to and from school. I don't have time for homework." This correlates well with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Students need the necessities to survive before they are can accomplish other tasks.

Because cohort students often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, many students work to help support their families, or to provide themselves with the extra necessities to fit in at school. The basic needs are not always met in the home, so teachers need to consider this when lesson planning. In 2000, when the program officially began, teachers and administration decided not to give a lot of homework to these students. With the exception of studying for tests, teachers try to limit the amount homework. Most of the time, students don't have any at all. Parents of these students are often single parents, or have large families to provide for. They are not always able to help students with their academics due the stresses of up keeping their homes. Other factors teachers must consider are the literacy levels at home. Nancy, the Resource teacher noted that: "When you have a non-reader in class, you most likely have a non-readers at home. Parents don't always have the skills to help their kids and they put an enormous amount of trust in the teachers and school system." It is critical for teachers to get to know students backgrounds so they can offer the right types of support to their students. This level understanding and empathy from teachers would be useful for all students with special needs in schools.

Aside from the teaching philosophies and strategies teachers implement in their program, there are several other types of supports offered to students. These supports are used to help ensure student's needs are met and that they are set up to reach their utmost potential.

Students identified "food" as one of the major advantages of the program. The cohort program has its own breakfast and snack program for students. Breakfast is provided every morning for all cohort students and healthy snacks are available in teachers' classrooms should the students get hungry throughout the work day. Student Services is also provided with meal tickets from administration. When students do not have any food or money for lunch, they can pick up a voucher from Student Services and redeem it at the cafeteria for a meal. Not all students need this support, but many do and

are very thankful to have the support. Janet commented on this: "It's a very good support. It's really important because you need to eat before you can work and think." Sandra added to this by stating:

> Even though it costs money and stuff, I think it's really important and a good thing to have. Especially, well, the fact is that there are a lot of students in this school that do not have money and they really need food. It makes me feel cared about. Like teachers know our situations and we matter to them". John noted that "at first, [the available food] was the main reason I came [to school].

Another advantage the students commented on was the "boxing classes" available to them through the full-time, male youth worker on staff. ""Mr. B" does a great job of making connections with students and one of the strategies he uses is boxing. William commented on the boxing program and how it helped him with his anger. He stated: "Usually when I get angry and mad I just take a deep breath, but sometimes I am so angry I just have to run around till I am out of energy. I like to go to the gym and hit a punching bag." When asked if there was a connection between what happens in class and in Mr. B's boxing classes, John stated: "No. We just learn skills and techniques." This may be the best "head fake" of the program. Students may think that they are just learning about boxing at the time, but they are really learning a variety of other skills such as self-discipline and attitude. Because so many students are dealing with anger management issues, or have experienced difficulty learning in the past, this program helps motivate them and improve their self-esteem. Girls and boys alike enjoy the benefits of this program. This becomes one more reason to come to school and be successful. The only concern the students had about this program is the lack of equipment. Rick suggested that the boxing program could be improved by "getting more equipment." Most students agreed with him and expressed the desire to improve the program.

Students comment on the advantage of having youth workers available to them. Although youth workers are available to all students in the school, teachers identify cohort students early on in the year to assign to youth workers' case loads. John commented how he had a better relationship with his youth worker than he did with his real parents. He stated "If I was kicked out of my house and had nowhere to go, he would help me find a place. . . . .If I have to go to court, he helps me with that. He will go to court with me.". I asked John if his youth worker expected a lot from him. He replied: "he expects me to go to school and stay out of trouble. That is all he expects from me, so I guess it's not that hard to do. I care what he thinks." This quotation demonstrates the high level of respect this student has for this staff member.

The only problem related to youth workers that the students identified was that the youth workers were so busy. They did not feel that they could access them every time they needed them. Janet stated: "When you do talk to them, they are very supportive. . . . They help a lot of people." Sandra also responded to this. She stated that youth workers help with "problems in relationships, friends, family, and school. Even if I am nervous about a class, like anxiety and stuff. They help me to get around it. They help me work through it." Janet noted that the cohort program would be improved if "students had more quality time with youth workers."

Another positive factor of the program students noted was the literacy course taught by Mrs. B. This course is the only course students take that focuses on specific reading and comprehension strategies. Many of these students missed out on these strategies the first time they were taught to them. This is why this class is so important to them. In the beginning, students often feel insecure about their reading, but within a short period of time, they begin to experience success. The Rewards Program is just one of the key components of Mrs. B's literacy class. This program allows students to experience some level of success every day. Within one semester, most students in the program moved up two

grade levels in their reading and comprehension skills. This ultimately impacts other classes as well. Literacy is a skill that applies to all classes and is perhaps the most powerful tool the students take with them when they graduate from the cohort program. This Literacy class is key in that development.

Susan commented on this program and how it has affected her life. She stated: " I am more confident in myself, in my work and in my work ethic. I feel a lot better after having this opportunity and I wish more students would have an opportunity like this." Janet also responded to this question: "I loved the literacy class. It was my favorite class. I was able to do the work and learn fast. I feel really good about that. And I feel smart." Todd remarked: " I don't think as many students would graduate without the literacy course. A lot of people wouldn't graduate cause they couldn't read as well."

4.1.3 The Ideal Cohort Student

After experiencing the cohort program first hand, the students were able to identify what type of student would most benefit from the program. They came up with various qualities that would describe a good candidate, as well as qualities that would indicate that a student was not a good candidate. One of the key areas students focussed on was "learning difficulty."Students from all grade levels unanimously supported the notion that students who have not experienced success in school in the past, would be good candidates for this program. Sandra responded to this question quite openly. She stated:

There are people with real learning difficulties exactly like me. And in a group like this, it really helps. Like I may not be at the point where I have special needs, but I am at a point where I do learn very differently and it is hard for me. To be in a class like this makes it a lot easier. Janet noted that "because people [in the class] are like you, it's not a judgmental place. Others are learning just like you do." From this conversation, it became clear that students felt very vulnerable at the beginning of their cohort experience. However, they were able to take risks in the small group and show their insecurities to others. This is one key example of how inclusion doesn't have to be everyone

together in one class. The separate program allows students to have the support they need to improve their skills.

Being able to show weaknesses ultimately helped students overcome their problems and become stronger students. Todd indicated that school became a better place for him because of this program: "We get to work at our own pace and we get to go on field trips. I am a hands-on learner, so I like that there are different ways to do things."

The second suggestion students made was students from "troubled backgrounds" would benefit from this program. The group believe that students like this have trouble trusting others and making good friendships. They thought that students like this may not have the structure in their home to support success at school. Students suggested that the structure of the program may help them become successful. Tony stated that "people who have it rough . . . that do not have people to check on them, or act like they care about them" may be good candidates. John also noted that a student like this needs someone to care about them. He stated that being in the cohort program "gave, [a fellow student] a place where he could have someone to go to, and have someone in his life who actually cares."

Someone who needs "small class sizes" was also noted as a characteristic a student may represent to be a good candidate for the cohort program. Rick commented on his own experience of school. He is a student who has a very supportive home life and his parents are able to provide more than his basic needs. He believes that the need for a small class is the key reason he is in the cohort program. He stated: "I know for me in big classes, it was even hard to pay attention. It was hard to do basic work." The small class size was very important for him as he experienced a lot of anxiety in larger classes. This shows the cohort is not just a place for students who act out. Students believe that the cohort should be an option for students like Rick who just need a quieter, less intimidating place to learn.

Sandra also commented on the small class size. She compared this program to her last alternative education site. At the last site, she did not get to experience the freedom of lunch breaks and recess. She stated: "I feel like I can be my own person here. I get the supports I need, but I get the freedom, just like all the other students." Janet stated, "I find these kinds of classes we get more time to do stuff. In other classes I feel too rushed." William agreed with this. He stated:

I feel a lot more comfortable in a class like this. It just seems a lot easier. Right now I'd be failing if I weren't here. In a normal class there are like 30 people and that is ridiculous. You just feel a lot more comfortable in the class knowing that you are really close to the teacher. That never really happens in other classes.

Another factor students suggested teachers consider is "lack of social skills." Some students do not easily make friends and in a program like this, making friends becomes easy. Sandra stated:

I was thinking about this and there are people around the school who don't have many friends and I think it would be best if they were in a class like this because they cannot only learn their work, but they learn how to socialize and maybe build on friendships with the people in the class. [The program] doesn't just help them with school; it helps them with opening up and being able to have friendship or have something they never had before.

Overall, the students felt that they all developed friendships they had not expected to. Divisions in peer groups often discourage students from interacting with one another. Janet stated: "I like the fact that we get closer to people we never thought we'd get close to." In the students' opinion, the program nurtures social skills as much as it does academic skills.

Along with identifying students who would make good candidates, students identified major traits that would make them unfavourable to the program. John suggested that teachers

only put people [in the cohort program] who will do the work and who want to get the work

done. Being here and acting a fool is stupid. I also know people who quit school for a week,

come back for a day and then quit again. [Students] should get fewer chances [with attendance]

in here and it should be like that for everyone.

Many students agreed with John as they found it disruptive for someone to act out in the room. They

also disliked having someone in the program who did not come regularly and commit to the program as

the rest of them had. There is a real sense that students only wanted classmates who were equally

committed to achieving success.

4.1.4   The Ideal Cohort Teacher

This particular section evoked a lot of emotion from students. They passionately contributed

their thoughts and opinions about their past experiences. While discussing these experiences, they,

unanimously agreed that having the right teachers is the most important factor of the entire program.

They felt that a lot of their success was not only because of the cohort teachers teaching philosophies,

but also because of the natural qualities that made up their teacher's character. Students want an expert

teacher and a compassionate, authentic person who can not only talk the talk, but can walk it too.

The main qualities students requested cohort teachers have mainly describe a good person.

Some of the qualities they listed are: patience, caring, respectful, open minded, and compassionate.

Caitlin, a student who remained quiet for most of the interview, spoke up at this point. She stated: "a

teacher should care about kids. They should be kind and nice and someone you can get close to."

William noted that teachers should be "someone who is trustworthy and who respects everyone." When

I asked what respect looked like from a teacher, John replied: " Like if something is going on and the

teacher doesn't care, that is not a good teacher. [A good teacher] would ask the person if they needed to

go for a walk, or if they want to go and talk." Sandra noted that respect from a teacher looked like "treating us like young adults. . . . People say they care, but it doesn't actually mean anything until they actually show that they care." Rick stated that "sometimes you have a rough day and teachers make a big deal about it. They need to realize that something is wrong. When there is something wrong, you can't concentrate." This demonstrates the need to resolve problems before being able to focus on school skills.

Students identified that for cohort teachers, "good teaching" goes hand-in-hand with being "trustworthy." When discussing teaching styles, Tony stated: "Well, we catch on to your right away because we get your teaching styles. When another teacher comes in, we don't know what they mean." Tim recalled a time Mr. M was out for a day and they had a substitute for math. Samantha noted that: "we did not understand anything she was talking about." To clarify this, I asked students to be a bit more specific with their descriptions of their cohort teachers' teaching styles. Samantha stated: Well, they get to know you and how you learn right? Like some people learn by just talking, some people learn by visual, or all hands on. [Cohort teachers] learn how each child, or person learns and how they understand things. So, its' easier to come across and explain things to us, or show us to be able to do it. William commented how important it was for students to be able to trust their teachers and share their stories and ways of learning with them. He stated: "I think trust is something you have to earn. [Teachers] need to prove to the students that they can trust them." Rick agreed with William and stated: "Teachers need to be patient with this. [Teachers] shouldn't find a way to put us down." This ultimately highlights this students perspective on past teachers he has had.

By the students' grade 12 year, many of them are much more self-confident and believe they can learn. Many of them overcome enormous odds to achieve this. For years they often felt like there was something wrong with them. They believed that they were so flawed that they could not keep up

with their classmates; It was all their fault. After realizing that there are alternative teaching styles to

suit learning styles, they begin to ask for what they need. Instead of acting out in frustration, they

advocate for themselves. Jocelyn noted: "Teachers shouldn't try to act all smart. Like they shouldn't act

like they are so much smarter than everyone. [They] should be on [students] level and at their pace.

They should be a friend." When I suggested that it is hard for teachers to be students' friends and have

authority, Samantha commented: "You don't need to be all about showing us you are in control of us.

We know you are in control of us, but if you treat us as a friend, and be on our level, it will be easier."

It was at this point that I concluded that the notion of being a friend had a different meaning for

the students than it did for most teachers. Being a friend to students had more to do with treating

them like human beings, not lowering your authority, expectations, or diminishing your role in

the classroom. These students just want their teachers to care about them, encourage them, and

help them achieve their goals. Jocelyn commented on her overall experience of the program by

stating, "Thank god for these classes. I would not be here right now." Samantha added to

Jocelyn's comments by stating: "I would be here, but I would not be getting the high grades I

am. I wouldn't think I could do it. I am so much more confident in myself now."

4.1.5   Areas to Improve Upon

Students made several recommendations for improvement of the cohort program.

They commented on their cohort courses in the morning, as well as the afternoon classes that immerse

them back into the regular program for their particular grade level. Many students responded to

supports they would suggest for afternoons, as well as alternative ways to send information home to

parents.

The afternoons proved to be the most difficult part of the program for most cohort students. This is the part of their day where students return to the regular, mainstream program. This switch is important because it allows students to reintegrate into the school and feel included as other students do. To improve afternoon conditions, Jocelyn recommended that the school create cohort electives, so the program would extend from a half day, to a full day. She stated: " I find these kinds of course make me feel rushed to do stuff. I'd do [cohort] all day." Samantha stated:

> Well, I have one bigger class in the afternoon, but it's personal development so you feel close and trustworthy of those people and stuff because we are trying to be more trustworthy, but in other classes it has nothing to do with being trustworthy and how you feel. It's just about the subject. So you can't really feel good and connected to the people in the room."

Jocelyn added on that " the teachers don't know us as well. They don't know who we are or how we learn." Todd disagreed with the girls. He stated: "I like the afternoons as they are. You get sick of people having to be with them all day." Todd was the only student in the focus group who did not see a reason to change the afternoon support at all. Most students felt that they needed more supports.

To overcome the challenges the afternoon presented to students, Tony suggested that an educational assistant could be assigned to cohort students. Jocelyn thought that was a good idea but noted that "a resource teacher would be awesome." Having a resource teacher assigned to all cohort students in the afternoon would help ensure they were supported in their educational struggles. Students felt that a resource teacher would be the best fit because they were a teacher and they knew a lot about learning difficulties. This person would also not be in the classroom with them, but students could access them as needed. Students did not want to stand out in the classroom with additional adult support.

Having a resource teacher specifically for cohort students would also give afternoon teachers a person they could access at all times if and when they needed help. Rick suggested that if afternoon teachers were trained to deal with cohort students, they would be better able to meet their needs. He stated:

> I think there should be more done with tests cause we all find them hard. I know I do. If we could get someone to help adapt [our courses] in the afternoons. Like woods. I am going in with a 57 and I did good on all my projects, but I just found the tests hard.

William noted that his cohort teachers "help us out if we don't know how to do something and you show us. Like better than some classes in the afternoons."

From this, it became clear that the relationship with the teacher was a very big deal to the students. They want to find a way to feel comfortable with their afternoon teachers in a similar way as they do in the morning. The suggestions they offered were very well thought out. Although students were not given the questions for the focus group ahead of time, they were told what the focus group would be about. This allowed them to take some time to reflect on what was important about the program.

Another area students suggested for improvement was communication from school to home. Many of the students do not have internet or computers at home. As a result, parents cannot follow their progress as closely other parents who use the Island network, Students Achieve. To improve communication, William suggested monthly, hard copy updates could be sent home with students to show their parents the success they have achieved that month. He stated: "It would be nice to get something to take home to our parents to show them how we are doing. So they don't worry about us cause they'd know we are doing good. A monthly progress report would let them know we're doing a good job." Even though there is not a consistent presence of parental support, students still felt the need

to ensure they were aware of their academic achievement. This ultimately highlights how even though there are problems students work through with their parents, they are very important to them, and they want to make them proud.

4.2   Staff Responses

Much like the student responses, teacher, resource teacher, youth worker, and principal responses fell into a number of similar themes. The six themes identified by teachers were: "Defining a Cohort Teacher," "Defining a Cohort Student," "Sense of Family," "Lack of Resources," "Social and Emotional Development of Students," and "Areas to Improve Upon." The teachers expressed a distinct passion for teaching these at-risk youth and were able to make key points regarding what they felts was best for their education.

4.2.1   The Ideal Cohort Teacher

Finding a cohort teacher is not an easy task. Often, teachers are put off by the idea of teaching at-risk kids, and the stigma that goes along with that. The teachers in this study acknowledged that this type of job is definitely not a job for just any teacher. Teachers commented on how important it was for the students to have "consistency." Nancy and Amy noted that "it is incredibly important to have the same teachers commit to these kids for at least a three-year period." The group also acknowledged that academics were just a part of the program. Teachers working with cohort students need to be willing to stretch their teaching into various pockets of life. Darryl conveyed the importance of consistency for students but also noted that "flexibility" of the teacher was equally important. He stated:

These [teachers] need to be willing to go in and work for different people [each student is going to need something different to be successful], and we need to realize that as a society, everyone is different. The flexibility that a teacher brings to the classroom is just as important [as consistency].

Nancy agreed.with Darryl:

As long as the teachers are compassionate, empathetic, people and they are willing to work with kids that is key, and we all have different personalities and teaching styles because kids need to know that. But, this program is not for a first-year teacher. You need the teachers with the biggest tool kit and I think what has happened over the years is that it has become the last course to be filled. It should be the first course to be filled because it is a specialty. The teacher with the biggest tool kit has to be the teacher because you have to be gifted in teaching.

The real problem in doing this is that many of the experienced teachers are needed in their current teaching areas as well. Also, many of these teachers do not have an interest in working with at-risk youth. Denis, the principal and lead developer of the cohort program, stated

when I select teachers, I am looking for those teachers who can build relationships with students. That is number one. That is more important than being masters in their subject area. They have to build relationships with students. They have to work as a team to address students' needs. After that, our specialized needs, like I ask people, what do you know about some of the issues these teenagers live, what do you know about addictions and family dysfunction? What do you know about mental health and referring people for help?

These teachers get this knowledge through past work or personal experiences. As a result, not all teachers have this background and, therefore, may not have the skills to socially and emotionally reach these students.

Teaching at-risk students requires a great deal of creativity and strong classroom management skills. Despite the fact that this was the first place a couple of current cohort teachers began their career, the group acknowledged that this was not the best starting point for a new teacher. A new teacher in this program would have to have a lot of natural skill for dealing with students, and creating innovative, differentiated lessons. The group acknowledged that these kids need the best teachers who can focus their attention on them. New teachers often take a while to figure out who they are, and what teaching philosophy best fits them. Nancy noted:

> you have to define yourself as a teacher in your first 3-5 years of teaching. I remember being in my first 3-5 years of teaching and not being able to even know who I was as a teacher. Who I was, what I stood for, and you know you have to work through it. And you make mistakes.

Amy, a teacher who began her career with the cohort program noted: "When I was a new teacher and was assigned cohort, I was very, very overwhelmed. I didn't have the resources and I didn't have the skills. I did work like a dog to create lessons."

Darryl added:

> it's the experience in dealing with kids that allows you to be a little more flexible...not every swear word takes you to the office. Ya know we have to let these kids straighten themselves. They are only here for three years and I think that is where the maturity of the teacher comes in. You've been here, you've seen it, not a big deal. Where as a younger teacher with less experience will act, and should act in a different way. These kids need someone who can set a standard and hold them to it. Teachers need to be able to stick to their guns and not be terrified. Some of the kids are big kids and they are not scared to let you know what they are capable of. That is possible with these kids, so you need to be tough skinned.

Flexibility, experience, and skill proved to be key areas to focus on when considering who should teach these at-risk youth. The differentiated instruction required from teachers demands that they have a creative and solid knowledge base of curriculum and teaching strategies. Amy also commented on personality: "personality needs to be a factor when you are choosing these teachers. The students need to see that their teachers believe in the program and in the students." Darryl commented on how personality was the main reason Amy was able to work with these students in the early stages of her career. He stated: "You are special person with a strong personality, and that is what got you through." Not all people have the charisma, creativity, or dedication that a cohort student needs. Personality needs to be strongly considered when choosing cohort teachers because students need to be able to connect with them, and the teacher needs to want that relationship to happen. They need to be willing to put in the time, and dedication to making that relationship. A cohort teacher needs to be patient because each student is unique and each one will require something different from them.

4.2.2   The Ideal Cohort Student

This section of the focus group proved to reveal the most inconclusive answers. The cohort program has changed so much in the past few years that teachers had a hard time narrowing down who specifically fit into the program. Teachers acknowledged that two big changes created this shift. First, the alternative education stream that was implemented in September 2009 took most of the major behaviour challenged students out the program. Second, there has been an increase of cognitively delayed students coming into the school. Due to these changes, the organizers of the cohort program had to rethink the criteria of who gets accepted into the program. Often it is a case-by-case basis, and teachers work with resource teachers and guidance counsellors from other schools to ensure as many students are considered for the program as possible. As of January 2011, a profile was constructed to

outline what type of student would best fit the cohort and alternative programs. Teachers from the junior high schools came to the high school for a presentation of all programs in the school. This gave junior high and high school teachers the opportunity to discuss details of programs and have questions or concerns addressed. The following table illustrates the characteristics separating cohort students from alternative education students:

Table 5

Qualities of Cohort Students vs. Qualities of Alternative Education Students

Qualities of Cohort Program Students	Qualities of Alternative Education Program Students
Weak academically—history of failure in school	Behaviour is problematic—a key reason they are unsuccessful in school
Small class sizes and/or resource support is a necessity for success	May be involved with justice—probation officer
Benefit from structure and routine of the cohort program: math, English, science, and social studies	Often, but not always, a drug user
Express a need for a continuous school adult mentorship	Does not attend school regularly
May have shown moderate behaviour problems in the past, but this is not the primary reason they have been unsuccessful in school	Academic ability fits general or academic program
May have problems in their lives that make meeting basic needs difficult	In need of social learning to succeed in the classroom
Intention is to stay in the program until they graduate	Intention is to transition out of the program by grade 11

Table 5 illustrates the difference between the types of students in each alternative program. Where the alternative education program, designed for students with behaviour problems, intends to transition students out of the program and back into the mainstream, the cohort program retains students for all three years. The traditional school system cannot fit the cohort students' needs; therefore, a new framework is established in the cohort program to ensure students are supported. The alternative education students in the second tier can go back to the mainstream program after they have learned the behaviour skills to do so. This is what sets these students apart from one another.

Denis, the school principal, commented that:

> Our definition of cohort has probably changed over the years. At first, we just called them at-risk students [students in jeopardy of dropping out of school]. Now, we have narrowed that definition. They are still at-risk, but now the cohort has taken on learning issues as much as behaviour. I see a cohort student as someone who hasn't had success in previous schooling, needs additional supports and we are trying to transition them into their next step in life where they are more independent. I see the alternative education program as separate from the cohort program. The alternative education program deals with the most profound behaviours and a lot of the time, these behaviours are related to drug addiction. They need to be separate because the cohort students tend to be vulnerable, and have problems fitting in. You don't want to mix a kid like that with students who are using drugs, or are partaking in very destructive behaviours. It is easier to fit into that scene [than in other cliques in the school]; all they have to do is use drugs. It is not in their best interest to put them in that environment.

Tina, a youth worker, agreed. She stated

the alternative education program primarily deals with kids who are unsuccessful due to justice, or addiction issues. The cohort program allows teachers to deal with the kids who just need the

extra [attention and care] to get through. A lot of the time this is a family issue, learning issue or social issue. It would not be wise to ever transition an Alt. Ed kid into the cohort program. They are entirely two different types of needs. I think it would be an unethical move. The Alt. Ed. kids transition to the mainstream after they have learned to cope with the serious issues in their lives.

Nancy commented on this by stating:

I think the needs have increased over the years. The intellectual level of students coming in has lowered since we started in 2000. It was like we had a practical group and a general group and now our special education teacher has so many students in her realm that it's hard to decide who gets to come in. Students need to be there for a variety of reasons . . . so you could be in there because of your attendance, you could be there because of your social challenges or whatever, but there are some kids that are there because of intellectual challenges and that can make it tough to pair a really strong kid with a really low level kid.

Amy added to this by commenting on the difference in behaviour and attendance and issues she has had since the implementation of the alternative education program. She states: "I found this year's cohort group was pretty well behaved. Attendance wasn't really as big of an issue like with other groups I have taught. Anyone who was flagged with major addiction issues was put into the Alt. Ed. section." Nancy commented that due to this change she was able to "focus on the teaching probably more so than the behaviours."

Just like every teacher is not meant to teach cohort, not every student is meant to be part of the program. Nancy comments that:

in some cases where we have a scenario where the kid just wasn't [receptive] to the whole cohort experience, there is always the regular general program with a peer helper's support. We

have cut kids loose from the cohort program before and said, you know, this doesn't really seem like the place for you. And I think its always been treated as a privilege, not a right. You know kids always say the first day of class, "okay, great. They put me in the crayon class". And then you show them the student teacher ratio, and the activities we get to do, they clue in pretty quickly that it's a good place to be.

4.2.3   Sense of Family

When asked how they felt about having the same students for three years in a row, teachers responded in a variety of ways. However, it was evident that even though there were some negative aspects to this, the positive outcomes far outweighed the negative. Nancy stated:

> having done this for eleven or twelve years, the kids constantly say they felt like they were coming home. You get to know their patterns; you're not starting fresh with a new group; you're not even starting fresh with a new set of classroom expectations. When coming to grade 11, they know the drill. They know your style and you can do so much more then every time having to start fresh, and every time having to train them. Because I always felt that by the time January came in grade 10, I actually had them at a point that I could actually get them to do a lot of stuff, so then to have them again in grade 11 and 12 was such a treat . . . and I think the small class sizes give us an opportunity for individualized programming in a sense. [The lack of practical curriculum] sometimes gives them a better educational experience because you start with what interests them, especially with English.

Darryl added that

> you learn so much about them, their learning styles, social skills and abilities. And it carries on to the next grade. It makes it easier. You learn what to do, what day to push, and what day

not to. Also there is a negative side; if you do get a student that you many not get along with, you don't have the change. That student knows they are coming back the next year and you know it. That can be a negative, no doubt.

Another area teachers were able to comment on in this section of the focus group was relationships with parents. Many felt that often, parents of disengaged youth are also disengaged from the school system. Whether it is because they lack interest, are intimidated by school staff, or simply don't have the time, it is common for these parents not to be the most active parents in the school. Jerry stated: "These parents often have not had positive experiences in school and having to deal with less people, for them, can make the school less intimidating. And I know in the Alternative Education class it was easier to have the parents in." Darryl agreed:

> when the parents know your name and you, it makes it easier for them. I don't think a lot of these parents are engaged in education. A lot of these parents may not want to be engaged in their child's education. When they know your name, there's some rapport there and that can make things a lot less difficult over the next few years.

Nancy indicated that this set-up really helped her develop positive relationships with parents. She stated:

> When I only have 15 in my class, I can make good news phone calls home as well as when things go wrong. That way, not every call is perceived to be bad news. And for many of them, that is all they have had. But you know I did a poll once. I had a lot of parents not show up for parent teacher, and the person in charge at the time said it was because these parents didn't care. So I called every home to see why they didn't come to parent teacher and a lot of these kids come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and some parents are working three jobs; some families didn't have a car. I've had parents come drunk to parent teacher night because the

smell of an educational institution throws them back to a negative time in their lives when school was such a horrible time. It's intimidating to come to a case conference with teachers who they perceive to be against them. And it's just that vicious cycle.

Jerry agreed with this. He noted that "we used to bring interviews to their house with the youth workers. Like a CE, or whoever, depending on their experience to make sure the situation was safe before getting there so the interviews take place at the house." Nancy stated: "I do that now. . . . Some parents can't get here." Although this proved to be a positive way to connect with students, some teachers just did not feel safe going to the home. At the present time, there is no method for protecting teachers during visits outside the school. Cohort teachers seemed to bounce ideas well off of each other, and this question provoked some thought for how to improve this part of the program.

In terms of being a group for three years, students often have strong reactions to this. Teachers are the front line in this observation and were able to make interesting comments about this. Amy stated:

> I think for the students, on their behalf, being together for three years, they know each other's ability within their group and so the kids that really struggle, those students know what supports they need and those students are not afraid to show who they really are and their true abilities because they know it is okay. They are together for three years, so they don't have to shelter that anymore.

Nancy agreed whole heartedly with Amy's comments. She stated:

> trust takes time. . . . I think the year we started this program we saw the positive effects immediately. We have retained more kids because of the cohort than we ever did prior to. Just because it is exactly what those kids needed. Out of the graduating class last year, there was only one who did not graduate on time.

4.2.4 Lack of Resources

The teachers commented on what excellent support they have from their administration at the moment, but worried that because there was not an official budget in place for these students, that this meant the program was only as good as the administration wanted it to be. A change in administration could mean the end of the program. Teachers wanted more support at the board and department level for these students. When asked how available supplies and materials that they needed were, the teachers unanimously responded "not available." Nancy reported that "the curriculum is not even available for all students." Darryl remarked "the attention is just not there [from board and department levels because the focus is on other programming right now]".

Nancy noted that some resources were purchased through other budgets in the school. She stated: "when we can hide it under a resource budget we do. But there is no cohort budget." Amy commented that "it's a lot of planning when you don't have a practical curriculum and you don't have the resources. A lot of this stuff takes time." When discussing this further, teachers remarked how some of the students were reading so below grade level that they were unable to complete the general program and needed a lot of modifications. Individual learning plans are probably the best description of what students receive, but most of these students have not had resource support in the past, and do not have a diagnosed learning disability. As a result, they are not a part of the resource budget. Because there is no practical curriculum or current modification program to help teachers, many teachers were forced to create the work on their own. Darryl commented that "everything has to be individualized for these kids." Nancy agreed with Darryl, but suggested that

> a starting plan would be helpful. Like when we have a staff member who is sick, it's very hard
>
> for a substitute to come in and teach. We are kinda winging it here. Like we might say okay do

numbers 1-50. One kid might do that, another kid may to 45. Someone else may not even have that text book. There are provinces out there that do have programs for this, but we   don't.

Jerry agreed with this. He stated: "while I was in Alberta, we had a program for grades 7-12. So there are programs out there."

In response to the lack of program support from the province, Nancy stated:

I always thought it was a value statement on the part of the department. You know we have a set curriculum for all the higher end kids, but we have never had anything for the practical kids. When you look at the documents for English at the practical level, they list every text book available to any English teacher. It's like *The Chrysalides,* and *To Kill a Mockingbird.* So then you have a teacher who might end up as a cohort teacher who ends up teaching an academic text to cohort kids which A- don't get it, B- don't need it, and C- have not interest. And on the other side of that, nobody ever checks. You know it's a good thing we have always made sure we had good teachers because there isn't a lot of checks and balances for what we are doing.

Jerry urged that the cohort students needed more support at the board and department level. He stated:

We need a champion for our cause at the board. I think the board has to step up to the plate here because these are the kids in the gap that we are always talking about. And you get the AP and the trades that seem to be benefiting from money. There has to be money put towards these kids and staff and professional development to make the program grow.

Darryl felt that this was a necessary step for the kids in the program, but noted that "the person would have to know every area." By this he meant math, English, social studies, and science.

Most of these students do not qualify for resource support. It is not unusual for a student to arrive in the program in grade 10 and have never had any formal testing completed. As a result, the

cohort program is serving the students in the gap. They are not strong enough students to complete the regular general program without additional supports, but do not have a diagnosis allowing the school to adequately provide them with added support. Therefore, the school does not have enough resources to serve all the students who actually need extra assistance. At the present time, the cohort program supports approximately 40 students. Out of these 40 students, less than half have received formal testing, and of those who have, only a few have a diagnosis related to a learning exceptionality. As a result, there are a lot of struggling learners with no financial means of having their educational needs supported within the school resource budget.

The cohort teachers unanimously felt that more support and attention was needed for cohort students by people in powerful positions. In June 2010, when this focus group took place, Amy noted that things seemed to be changing for the better. She stated:

> There is a provincial Literacy Committee that are piloting a grade 10 literacy program.
>
> Hopefully there will be a grade 11 and 12 program in the future. There will be great resources.
>
> Right now it's just a waiting game [for additional funding and support].

Unfortunately for Amy, and the cohort students, her optimistic view was crumbled when a shift was made at the department level. By October 2010, teachers were made aware that the progress of literacy program was jeopardized as more focus would be placed on the advanced programs for the elite students.

This is why it is so important that these students are first identified, and named. By ensuring school leaders are aware that these students exist in these numbers, it can make it possible for their needs to be addressed. Education is for everyone and at-risk students shouldn't have to worry about the limited resources they have falling through the cracks. There needs to be more support for them than this. The program is fragile and it is too important for it not to be supported by people who are making

the big decisions about education. Some framework must be implemented to ensure all students' rights are upheld. The system needs to build safeguards for these students so they will be supported.

4.2.5   Teaching Positive Behaviours

Social and emotional development of students became a key area of focus during the focus group. Teachers are passionate about ensuring the needs of their students are met, and are committed to working hard to ensure this happens. Teaching to improve the social and emotional development of students allows teachers to teach positive behaviour to students. Each teacher personally takes on the responsibility of teaching students the curriculum, but also recognizes that along with this, they must also teach students to be good citizens who can thrive and give back to their community. Amy commented that,

> I think we invest a great deal of time in students' emotional and social needs. They know that
> and that is how that trust is built and that rapport and relationship. They are proud to be a cohort
> student and they realize they are privileged and they want to come back. We can't just focus on
> academics. We need to focus on those relationships and building that trust.

Nancy noted,

> while we are teaching curriculum, like English for example, but at the same time you are
> teaching good citizenship and how to be a nice person. You know "don't poke him. Sit and be
> respectful. I mean that is not in the curriculum, but it happens. Basically you are parenting. You
> are starting with these kids where maybe no one else has gone. And you are doing it in grade
> 10.

When asked what the greatest challenge was in teaching these skills, Nancy replied:

The baggage they bring to grade 10. The school experience they have had so far and convincing them that it is still worth trying. I always tell them that the fact that they are still here is huge because of their tenacity to continue to come to a building every day that makes them feel badly about themselves. I think that for a lot of them that grade 10 is a fresh start because they actually get in a situation where they can do the work that we are asking them to do. And then we start to see their self-esteem improve and some of them don't stay in cohort. Some of them have been identified learning disabled or some of them go to general, or some into academic. That sense of hopelessness that they just don't know where they are going to go when they are done here. They don't have a plan. Other kids have a sense of what they want to do, but these kids don't. They haven't even thought about post-secondary training. These kids have learned that it's easier to get kicked out, than to try and fail.

Jerry agreed with this. He stated: "I think for a lot of them it's their way of dealing with academic difficulty. It's better to act out than to ask for help. You know, some have had such a bad experience and some of them can't read." Darryl noted that

I am pleased with outside support for dealing with anger or addiction issues. But I guess it is a catch 22. Sometimes these kids want to become successful in class then all of a sudden they are missing so much time. I had one young lady who missed 40 percent of her classes, some of which were meetings for outside drug or anger help. These meetings are taking place during class time. She'd get behind and then she's frustrated and can't catch up on her own. So that's where I see it as a catch 22.

Amy agreed. She stated: "these kids can't afford to miss class time. So pulling them out during class should not be an option. Lunch is an option, after school is an option. They need this service, but they need to be in school. They need to be in class."

Jerry believed that these services were very important for the students, but found that:

It's not systemic. People fly in for a few things on addiction and mental health. You know

parachute in and parachute out. They have not committed to these kids. Kids need the

therapeutic component, especially the hard core kids. And some of them need it before you can

dive into academics. Mental health is a huge issue. Over the years we teachers have become the

addiction counsellors, social serviceperson and mental services people. But we just band aid it,

and we need the professionals that know what they are doing.

4.2.6   Areas to Improve Upon

Although teachers were happy with many things the current program provided for students,

there were also several changes they suggested. The most important change teachers noted was that it

would be extremely beneficial for the department of education to take a lead role in helping to support

at-risk students. By having a "champion for their cause," students would have someone at the

department level fighting specifically for their rights. Jerry noted "there is often no parental push for

change for these students, so they need someone to organize and advocate for their rights." Denis

commented how huge of an impact just the school program has had on students' lives. He stated:

I see these students need structure so we have a definitive structure. We have limited the

number of students in the program, and we have committed teachers who often have specialized

training both in the subject area and how to deal with these students. I see the results [of this

program] on graduation night. I see these students graduating where as before, these types of

students would not have graduated in such high numbers. The most profound success I see is

some of these students go on to post secondary which to me is extremely exciting because these

are the students that you may of thought would never graduate, and to decide they will go further is pretty interesting.

Tina noted that so often there is a stigma that goes along with being an at-risk kid. She stated:

> Sometimes people underestimate the ability of the students. Sometimes people assume they don't have the ability to succeed, but so many of them do, and I think it's important to be able to bring them out. When they start to feel good about themselves and start to feel good about learning, we bring so much more out of them. For so many years, these students have not had a good experience in school and I think that is one of the big things. Like yes, you do fit in to school and school is a good place for you. It is a positive. I think schools, as a whole, identify students with special needs, but there is a whole group of students we are missing. Students can [underachieve] for a variety of reasons. It might be because they don't have ability, but it might be because they have a learning disability and have gone unidentified. Or maybe there is a home issue, or a social issue holding them back. Students don't succeed for a variety of reasons and we need to find out what those reasons are. I believe most students are able, but they need support.

Without department leadership, there will never be a solid framework for students. As a result, teachers, youth workers, and administrators concluded that this one change would make the greatest difference. They felt this way because it would allow students to have proper curriculum and supports. Denis noted "there was a time that schools were perceived as strictly institutions of learning curriculum. That is no longer the case. We need to teach the whole child."

Another significant change teachers suggested was that teachers of at-risk students should be provided more opportunities for professional development. A Bachelor of Education cannot prepare teachers for the experiences they will have with students of this nature. Teachers felt that they needed

much more training in areas like dealing with students who experience aggressive behaviour, anger, addictions, and dysfunctional home lives. Jerry argued that "staff need professional development so that the program can grow . . . there needs to be money put behind this because this stuff is not free." Amy agreed by stating "professional development is something that has been unavailable for us and it needs to be."

Teacher selection was another key area staff addressed. Personal development and teaching social skills had to be a conscious part of every cohort teacher's program, regardless of the subject area they were teaching. Tina noted that it was incredibly important for teachers to "have lots of patience and an understanding of how these kids learn, so they can bring to the classroom different ways to teach the students what they need. Being creative is very important." Nancy argued that "this teaching assignment needs to be assigned before all other assignments. Cohort teachers need to be gifted in teaching and must have the ability and desire to make relationships with kids." Because of this, teachers acknowledged that the cohort program was only as good as the teachers involved in it. The most important choice was to place the right teacher in the right classroom. New teachers should never be assigned to the cohort program as a first assignment. Teachers recommended that teachers not be assigned to this program until they had at least five years of teaching experience.

The final recommendation teachers made was that the cohort not be used as a placement for special needs students. They noted that there have been a number of times socially and cognitively delayed students have been placed in the cohort program alongside the "regular" struggling general and practical level student. Nancy noted "this is how you get the crayon class scenario." Jerry agreed. He stated: "It's a self-fulfilling prophecy that we are seeing. [The class dynamic] says, we are all in the same boat." Amy also argued that putting kids in the classroom that are not cognitively and socially behaving like high school kids "confirms to these kids that they are stupid." Darryl noted that

a lot of the time when you explain the program to the grade 10s, you explain who is eligible to get into the program. You explain that certain people have different weaknesses. . . . We have to explain why we have this class, and I feel it's very important so they don't get the illusion that "you're dumb— so you are here."

The cohort student does not have the self-esteem to have special needs students in the same classroom as them. By "special needs," teachers mean students with diagnoses such as down syndrome, autism, or other disabilities that socially and cognitively delay students. Cohort students have the academic challenges, but function socially just as other general and academic students do. Even though the class size is small, and may appear like a positive place for special needs students to work with others, the cohort students do not have the ability to separate themselves, and often misunderstand their placement. They believe teachers are categorizing them as special needs as well. This became a real issue for some teachers and students because in the past, cohort was used as a place where some special needs students would attend. Teachers continue to argue that this is not the best setting for the placement of special needs students because cohort students' behaviour is not always conducive to peer modeling, and the cohort students do not have the self-esteem to recognize that placement of the special needs student has nothing to do with their own ability.

4.3   Diary Entries and Field Notes

The diary entries and field notes used in this study provide interesting data that support findings from other methods of data collection. There are certainly a number of consistent themes that support one another throughout all data collection means. Three major themes came from the analysis of diary entries and field notes: "Obstacles in the Way of Student Success," "Teaching Caring," and

"Student Engagement." These themes rely on many of the ideas mentioned already, but give specific detail of teaching and dealing with students.

4.3.1   Overcoming Obstacles

As a teacher reflected on her day, she mentioned how teaching curriculum was sometimes a very difficult task. The "baggage" these students bring to classroom often takes time to work through. Monday, particularly, can be a hard day as the weekend often involves fairly dramatic events for these students. Amy responded to a student coming into her class on a Monday morning. She wrote about the girl coming into her classroom furious and was immediately taking her negative emotions out on everyone in the classroom. This took place in October, so by this time, Amy had established the beginnings of a relationship with this girl. Amy reported:

> For a second I forgot how difficult it was to teach these darlings after they participated in a very eventful weekend. . . . From the time they entered until 10 am I put out fires! First off, picture this, I am sitting at my desk when one of my cohort girls comes in and says: "Nobody talk to me! I had a crappy weekend, and I don't want to be here right now! Now in response to this, I say: " Now Susan, I'm sorry you had a rough weekend, but you know I don't appreciate nor tolerate such a greeting. Please don't ruin my Monday based on your mood!" Well, that didn't help matters any. This gave Susan the impulsive response: "I don't care! I had a shitty weekend and I'm pissed!" At this point, Susan has OFFICIALLY crossed the line. What to do? Report her or deal with it myself, knowing that she is famous for blurting out disrespectful, foul language? The rest of the student's eyes lay on me waiting for my response. I decided to deal with Susan by pulling her out one-on-one sifting through the weekend events that have lead to this outburst. It was this one-on-one discussion where I learn she did indeed have a crappy

weekend. She needed me to walk her through appropriate reactions to this and for me to just listen. After 10 minutes of conversation, she is ready to go back to class and apologize to the rest of her classmates and myself for her mood swings.

These outbursts unfortunately are very common on Monday mornings; the players change, but the game is still the same. The students feel angry, or let down by someone, and attempt to blow off steam by sabotaging themselves in the classroom. When they look in your eyes you can see the message: "and what are you going to do about it?" Cohort teachers learn early that traditional disciplinary action simply does not change this type of behaviour. Usually students are justified in their feelings, but don't have the coping skills to deal with their emotions in a reasonable way. They need to be taught these skills, and they go to their teachers and youth workers for answers. When teachers take the time out to listen to students, they see that staff care about them, and want them to make the right choices. As they mature, these outbursts tend to change. By grade 11, many of these students learn to ask for help. What once was a loud outburst turns into them heading to the youth worker's office for the first few minutes of class. Even though their circumstances outside school often don't change over their three years at high school, their reactions do, and this helps them learn how to handle the stress in their life and overcome obstacles.

Meeting basic needs is another obstacle students have to overcome to achieve success. For some students, this is the basis for survival: food, clothing, and shelter. For others, it is feeling cared about and having a sense of belonging. Whatever obstacle students face, cohort teachers are eager to help them meet their basic needs. Sometimes this involves providing a healthy breakfast or lunch. Other times, this involves stocking up their back pack with food from the school food bank. It might also mean bringing in some old clothes from home, or visiting a second-hand store for a winter coat. Another instance might be giving them a hug, or just taking the time to listen to their problems.

Whatever the obstacle, teachers are compelled to reach out and support the student using school resources or community support. When necessary, outside agencies such as child and family services, as well as mental health services are made available to students. Building strong relationships with students allows them to show their vulnerability and go to teachers and staff for help. Once their "secret" is out, it becomes easier. Students become more open with their circumstance, and teachers and staff know what to do and also what questions to ask.

During the fall of 2009, my personal log of notes described how students were able to improve their self image and self concept:

> Things are starting to improve. Students are starting to work for themselves. In the beginning they work for me, either to impress me, or to receive praise. The most interesting and fulfilling change happens when they start to do well for themselves. They know that I care about them, and have high expectations for them. Eventually they start to care too. I expect them to succeed; sometimes I am one of very few in their lives with this expectation. From this experience, they learn not only to care for themselves, but for each other as well. In the end, they will have learned their outcomes for science class, but the most profound learning will be in the learning they gain about themselves. Through the nurturing of the cohort teachers and classmates, students are able to redefine themselves and what they want for themselves in their lives. Some days, like today, can be hard. This job can break your heart, and push you to evaluate yourself in every way. But it is worth it in the end. These changes certainly have growing pains, but things are getting better each and every day.

Overcoming obstacles can be very overwhelming for students. For many of them, the obstacles are so great that they need help from others. They cannot do it on their own. The cohort teachers are eventually able to gain students trust, and as a result, students open up to them and share their concerns.

Once this happens, students learn how to overcome these obstacles and improve their own lives.

4.3.2   Teaching Positive Behaviours

Modelling positive behaviours for students proved to be a key theme through document analysis. Although teachers share a common philosophy for teaching these students, teaching styles differ to some extent. Some common trends found among cohort classes are that students are provided with breakfast during their first period classes and can access snacks throughout recess and lunch breaks. Lunch is provided for students who need it as well. The routine of having breakfast together every morning allows students to have a good start to their day, and ensures those who may have missed breakfast to have access to food before they begin class work. This act makes students feel cared about. It also provides a time for students and the teacher to discuss their day, weekend, or any problems they may be having. This gives teachers an idea how students are doing at the very beginning of the class. As a result, they are better able to decide who to call upon in class that day, and who not to. Students experiencing stress are often referred to the youth worker or guidance counsellor at this time. This shows students that the classroom is a place for work, but at the same time, offers a solution if they need help.

Most teachers find breaking their 72 minute class into three, 25-minute sections works better to keep students' attention. On a typical day, the first section is a teaching block where the teacher takes the lead and instructs students in the lesson for the day. The second 25-minute block typically becomes a student block where students practice the skills they learned from the teacher's lesson. The third and final block is usually an activity-based block that reinforces the learning of the day. During this final part of the class, students get a chance to work together in groups or in teams. An example of this may be a trivia or jeopardy game. It may also be hands-on, team-building activity. These activities improve

social interaction among students and provides them with an opportunity to work together to achieve a goal.

The primary quality teachers try to model every day is respect. Teachers give a lot of it, and expect it back in return. One diary entry discussed how students can put teachers on the spot to react to topics like underage drinking, fighting, and problems with relationships within families as well as with peers. This entry states:

> So, she dominates the next 30 minutes with questions surrounding underage drinking, drugs, parties, and decision making skills. Nowhere in my education degree taught me how to answer these burning questions. So, I decided to trust myself, and open these topics up for discussion. Together we looked at the pressures and routines built into their every day. Now I'm not sure I handled that right . . . I expect big things from my students. Our relationship is built on mutual respect and that indeed is a two-way highway.

Instead of discouraging the students from talking about these issues, this teacher put them right out in the open for the whole class to look at. By facilitating this discussion with respect, the teacher was able to get her students to think about their decision-making skills. She also acknowledged that yes, these issues were certainly important for discussion, even if they had little to do with her curriculum outcome for that date. Taking the time out to discuss issues outside curriculum can help establish that mutual respect and relationship between the students and the teacher. Although it is very important these issues do not take over the teaching of the curriculum, taking part of a class to address these issues, can help students make better choices throughout their day. Should they need extra support, they are directed to a youth worker, or a guidance counsellor. The teacher needs to find a healthy balance in managing these questions and ensuring curriculum is covered.

Positive behaviours can be contagious. After a few students buy in, it is not long before the

class as whole begins to accept a new way of interacting with one another. The diary entry

discusses how a student in the class was having a really hard time staying focussed on school and

getting her work done. Another student decided to speak up and help this person. The writing states:

> Destiny and Susan worked through some tough things today. Susan has been having a hard time
>
> staying focussed. She has been making some pretty bad decisions. Destiny spoke with her today
>
> about this. It is funny how something coming out of my mouth can fall on deaf ears, but when a
>
> peer says the same thing, it makes sense to them. Susan was able to calm down and get back on
>
> track. Thank Goodness.

In this case study, teachers found that once they were able to connect with a student, they

then become a role model for others in the class. Often times, students respond even better to their peer

models then they do to their teachers.

4.3.3   Student Engagement

The whole idea of engaging a group of at-risk students can be very overwhelming. There is no

doubt that it is challenging, and that teachers have to be willing to meet the students where they are at.

They can't start with traditional teaching strategies. These students have been participating in that type

of structure for years, and it hasn't worked. The classroom instruction needs to feel very different from

anything they have experienced before. Otherwise, the class experience becomes "just like every other

class they struggled through." At the same time, the teacher needs to ensure that they are meeting

curriculum outcomes just like the other students in the building. In fact, they often have to teach even

more skills to the students as they come with lots of gaps in their learning. The whole atmosphere has

to change. Curriculum needs to be made "real" and relevant. Teachers need to be creative, but they

need to have high standards as well. One diary entry expresses a teacher's emotion regarding this. She states:

> my cohort's heads are so far from mine right now. Engage! Engage! Engage! Time to switch things up. I have to move on to an activity. Activity completed: students are once again awake and ready to finish the book work. Thank god I've learned to create things on the fly- never a dull moment! They really do make me, or force me to be a good teacher..

For creative, risk-taking teachers, this type of challenge can be very fulfilling, and can be quite thrilling. Taking on this challenge and being able to succeed can make these teachers feel very satisfied and enjoy the process. An example of this occurred during a science class I was teaching. We were doing a review for a test on ecology and students were quickly loosing interest in the assigned worksheet. In response to this,

> I had to spice things up, toss my original plan, and come up with an alternative on the spot...I decided to put the students into teams of 2 and had them respond to questions in a competitive game of trivia. I passed out laminated pieces of construction paper, and white board markers with erasers on the top. Students wrote their answers on the laminated piece of construction paper. Correct answers received one point, and teams that gave wrong answers were deducted a point. Once there was a competitive edge, students became more engaged.

The next day, we went over the answers to the worksheet as a class while the winners from the day before gloated about their success and bragged how the test would be easy for them.

Using engaging activities, even during assessment can be positive for students. After our nutrition unit came to an end, I wanted to find a creative way for them to show their learning. They had previously taken quizzes on the information, but I needed to find out if they actually got it for real. I decided to do this through a hands on experience. My observations from that date note:

We had a great midterm assessment today. We made a breakfast to conclude our nutrition unit. We had planned on using some of the food we grew in our class greenhouse, but not of it seemed to suit for breakfast, so we just ate the vegetables as snacks. Because the midterm took place first thing in the morning, breakfast seemed to be the most appropriate meal to prepare. To conclude our nutrition unit students had to prepare a meal that used all parts of the food pyramid. The calories had to be less than 400 and it had to be less then 10 grams of fat. They loved it! Jenny, a student whose father suffers from drug addiction, tells me this is the best activity she has ever participated in. It also made sure she got a good breakfast. She tells me it would be so nice to be able to have a good breakfast like this every day. At the moment in the kitchen, where they are just cooking up a storm, I think they are just like the other kids in the school. This comment quickly brings me back to reality. A small number of these kids don't eat much during the day outside what we provide for them. At least I have shown them how to eat healthy on a budget. I think today was a good day. They felt smart! All of their bellies were full.

A diary entry also noted examination period. The teacher notes how the routine of the classroom is so critical for the students. They need to know what is expected of them. The entry states: Test day! Wow, students reading through review during silent reading—always a good sign. Two students clarifying possible responses to two of the major short answer questions. Another good sign! Test handed out at 9:20am and turned in completed at 10:15am. All test sheets are filled with answers. Not one complaint comes from any of the students- impressive! This shows that the students strive on structure. They know their review sheets parallel their tests, so by studying their tests, they guarantee themselves a great shot at doing well— they love to do well! I'm so excited to mark these on my prep and hand them back.
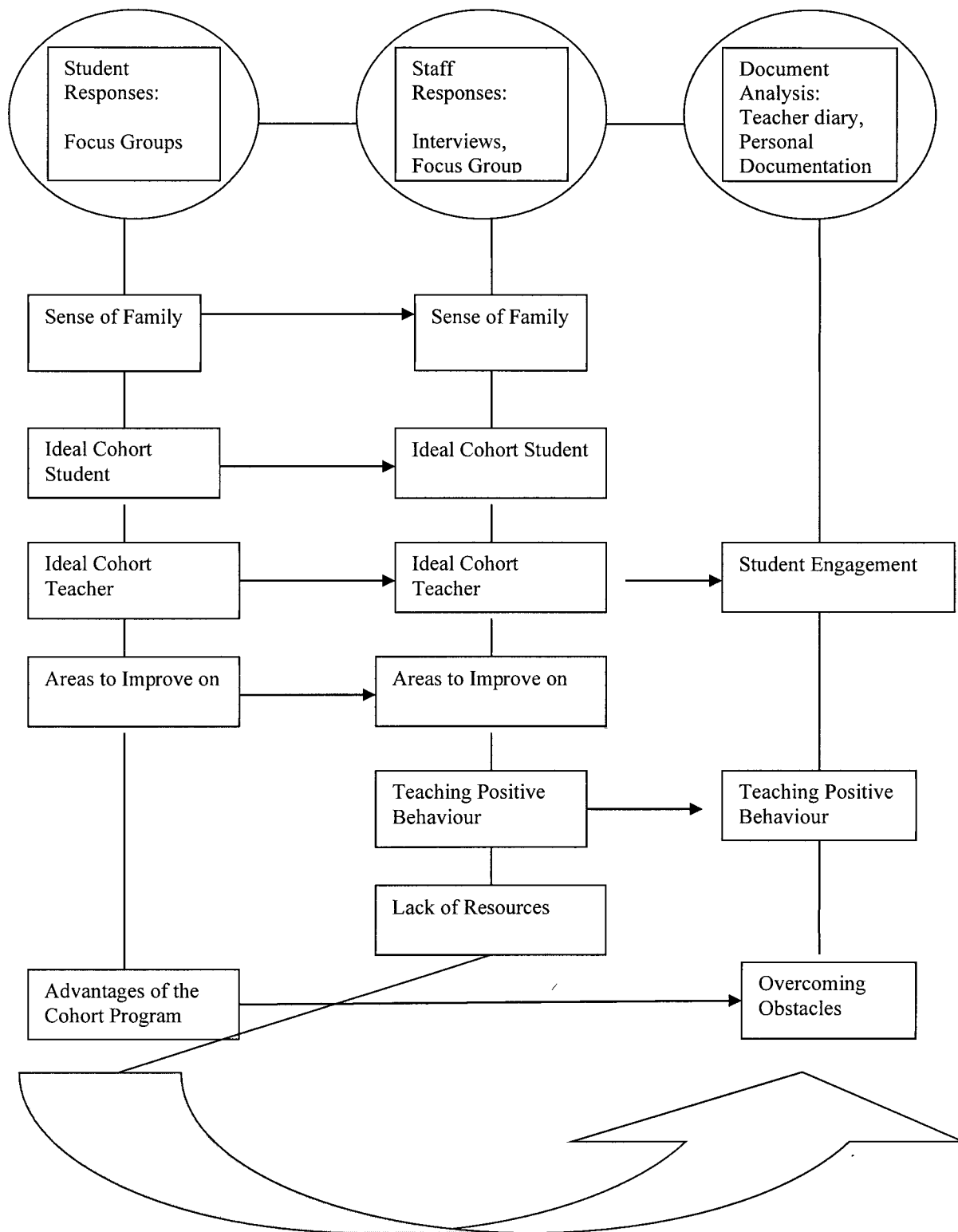
Before students graduate, they work on transition plans with the resource teacher. The transition is moving to the work force, or post-secondary schooling. Students are able to receive support with making resumes, practicing for interviews and even visit different educational sites to see what interests them. Teachers begin this dialogue early in their grade 10 year, and a plan for the future becomes an on-going conversation. It is our hope that by the time students graduate, most have a plan and are ready to take on the next step in their life.

Through the rigorous routine students experience in their cohort class, they learn how to have a good work ethic. By participating in hands-on learning activities, they learn how to apply their knowledge to the real world. They learn how to succeed, and most importantly, they learn to believe in themselves. They learn how to have hope. They learn how to dream. All of these factors come together by the end of the three years in high school and in most cases, they walk across the stage on graduation night ready for whatever the world is going to throw at them next. Teachers sit together, often bursting with pride. Darryl, notes: "teachers invest so much into these students; it's like a little piece of them walks across the stage with them. It is probably one of the most rewarding experiences a teacher can have in their career." Although there are no formal follow-up contacts with these students, many of them come back to visit teachers. Some keep in contact via email. They are proud to come back and share their "adult" lives with the staff. It is always meaningful to have them come back and share their stories.

4.4   Summary of Findings

Figure 2.

Diagram of Findings

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┌─────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────┐
│ Student         │          │ Staff           │          │ Document        │
│ Responses:      │──────────│ Responses:      │──────────│ Analysis:       │
│                 │          │                 │          │ Teacher diary,  │
│ Focus Groups    │          │ Interviews,     │          │ Personal        │
│                 │          │ Focus Group     │          │ Documentation   │
└─────────────────┘          └─────────────────┘          └─────────────────┘
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| Sense of Family | → | Sense of Family | | |

| Ideal Cohort Student | → | Ideal Cohort Student | | |

| Ideal Cohort Teacher | → | Ideal Cohort Teacher | → | Student Engagement |

| Areas to Improve on | → | Areas to Improve on | | |

| | | Teaching Positive Behaviour | → | Teaching Positive Behaviour |

| | | Lack of Resources | | |

| Advantages of the Cohort Program | → | | | Overcoming Obstacles |

As indicated in the diagram above, five themes were found among the student responses, six themes were found among the staff responses, and three themes were found among the document analysis which included the teacher diary, and personal field notes that incorporated my daily observations and reflections. Although no framework was used during the coding process, I did ask specific questions to each group that lead them to discuss certain topics of interest. As a result, students and staff were directed to specific issues to give their opinions on. The themes that reoccurred in the different groups will be analysed in this section.

4.4.1   Sense of Family

The theme "Sense of Family" came about many times during the student focus groups as well as the staff focus group and interviews. Students came to this idea by being grouped together with the same students and core teachers for three years. This dynamic proved to support students while teacher philosophy and teaching practice ensured students had individual attention from the teacher, and specific programming to ensure their success in school. The idea that social and emotional intelligence was focussed on, in conjunction with academic study, allowed students to be honest with teachers and share their stories with them. This ultimately led to getting to the truth regarding their history of academic struggle and failure. As a result, teachers were better able to assist students and zone in on their individual learning needs. Students saw this as a caring act, and felt that this program better suited their needs than past educational plans. The fact that emotional supports were put in place with the youth worker and guidance counsellor also made them feel valued by the school. They gained a sense of belonging within the program, and for many, this became the first time they felt school was a good

place for them. The notion that staff assisted in meeting basic needs also gave students the impression that the staff genuinely cared for them, and wanted the best for them.

Staff indicated that the relationship they were able to have with the students in the cohort program was the key element in supporting student success. Teachers also noted that these relationships allowed students to trust their teachers, and, as a result, reveal the obstacles that have been in their way of academic achievement. The program also allowed teachers to connect with parents in a more meaningful way. Teachers found parents were less threatened and intimidated when working with the same teachers for three years. This fact improved home involvement which can play a very important role in student success. Teachers noted that the students became so close that they often acted as supports to each other. By being with the same students for three years, students had to learn how to work together, and overcome conflicts. Teachers felt this was an important life skill and that it would help them in the future. From the student and teacher input, it is evident students do indeed have a sense of family in this program and that they see this as a positive contributor to their success in school.

4.4.2   The Ideal Cohort Student

The second theme outlined in the diagram for student and staff responses is the "Ideal Cohort Student." Throughout the student focus groups and teacher focus group and interview, participants tried to define who would be an ideal candidate for the cohort program. The definition proved to encompass a variety of factors, primarily academic difficulty. Students felt that students who needed extra support due to family, social, or personal problems would also make good candidates for the program. Students noted that an ideal student would want to be a part of the program, and would behave appropriately in class. Students did not want others in their class if they were going to be behaviour problems.

Staff also noted that academic difficulty would be the main factor leading a student to the cohort program. They also recognized that not all students who struggle fit into the program either. The

student should want to be a part of the program, and open to getting the additional supports to ensure their success. There are only 15 spots per grade for the program and approximately 275 students make up the entire grade for the school; therefore, choosing appropriate students is important. The program can only hold a small number of students, so the students who are there, should eventually be able to demonstrate a willingness to work with staff and students.

4.4.3   The Ideal Cohort Teacher

The "Ideal Cohort Teacher" is the next theme that shows repetition between student and staff responses. Many students perceive their past experiences with teachers negatively. Certainly not every experience with a teacher could have been negative, but students perceive their failure as a lack of teacher support. Because of this, they felt strongly that having the right teachers in the program was the most important factor of the program. They focussed primarily on the characteristics of the teacher. They noted qualities like patience, kindness, and being a friend to them. They also noted that the teacher had to be able to teach to their skill level and know how to help them improve.

Teachers also expressed the importance the teacher plays in the program. They noted qualities like being a team player, having the desire to make relationships with students, and the skill to help them succeed. They noted that the teacher would have to be an expert teacher who had a lot of skill as they would need to differentiate instruction, and be able to change and adapt programming to student's needs. The notion of being flexible and meeting students where they are, as opposed to expecting them to be where they want them right away, surfaced as well. The teachers also felt that this was not the most appropriate placement for a first-year teacher even though two teachers, myself included, taught within the cohort program as a new teacher. Teachers felt this was not a fair place to start a new teacher who was still in the process of defining their own teaching philosophy and practices. They did note that the personality of the teacher was equally important to skill and that the new teachers working in their

program succeeded because their personality fit the nurturing role the program required. The fact that they were also open to learning from the experienced teachers played a key role in their success as cohort teachers. Both acknowledged that this was a difficult first placement, and may not be the best fit for any inexperienced teacher. However, I personally believe if a new person is a natural fit in way of personality and teaching philosophy, and has strong mentorship, they can learn the skills. Not all teachers would want to start with this assignment, but those who do, and are able to demonstrate their ability through past teacher practicum placements, may be a good fit for the program.

4.4.4   Areas to Improve Upon

The fourth and final common theme found among staff and student data was "Areas to Improve Upon." Both parties found that although the program had many positive features, there were areas for improvement. The areas students identified as needing improvement were the afternoon courses. Most students felt they needed more support to ensure they were successful and that their marks reflected their ability. They noted that the teachers did not always teach the same way as their cohort teachers and this made things more difficult for them. By ensuring afternoon teachers know how to meet their learning needs, students could be more comfortable and experience a greater level of success. They thought having a resource teacher to help the afternoon teachers address their needs would improve their experience. They also recommended an educational assistant be placed in the afternoon classes with them to provide the one on one instruction as needed.

Staff also expressed a desire for professional development to learn how to best meet these students' needs. The most profound change they wanted was more support from the Department of Education. In one sense, these students are "officially" unidentified, as they often have not had access to testing, or resource support. However, the schools they attended before high school often modify programs for them, so they are not entirely invisible. They are on the radar, but ensuring these students

are officially tested early on by psychologists, would help ensure they received supports as soon as possible. By going through this process, the students would become identified, and the Department of Education would have a greater idea of the number of students needing programming such as the cohort program. This ultimately would result in more funds going to support their needs. It would also allow more attention to be placed on practical programming for math, English, science, and social studies. When students' ability level falls below the general level, there are few resources for teachers to properly assist students. An updated, official practical program would help ensure students' needs are met.

Staff also recommended that the school take the directive of placing cohort teachers first, before they fill any other teacher assignment. Because these students require a special kind of teacher, ensuring these positions are placed first, allows principals to ensure the best fit is made. Teachers also requested that the school not place special needs students within the cohort program. Cohort students mentioned being placed in a literacy class with special needs students and how it made them feel badly about themselves. As stated in the student findings, one student had his mother call administration, as he refused to go to school if he was going to be placed with special needs students. As noted above, cohort students do not have the self-esteem or self-efficacy to place them in a small class, and then put special needs students with them. They are not able to see themselves as separate, and believe the teachers think they are on the same academic level as the special needs students.

4.4.5   Teaching Positive Behaviour

"Teaching Positive Behaviour" became a common theme between staff responses and document analysis. The responses were not exactly the same, but certainly reflected and influenced one another. Staff noted that they felt it was their responsibility to teach social and emotional intelligence along with academic skills. They noted how teaching students to be good citizens was crucial in developing these

positive behaviours. Staff commented that students can sometimes act out in response to academic difficulty. Their self-esteem often needs be improved so they can see they are worth the effort of doing well in school and planning for their futures. Staff noted that outside agencies regarding any family dysfunction, addiction, or mental health issue need to be brought in and follow these students for the three years they are in high school.

The document analysis also noted that teaching positive behaviour had a lot to do with improving students' self-esteem. Modelling these behaviours was one way staff could help students learn these skills. By talking about key issues in students' lives, and by nurturing a supportive environment in the classroom, staff and students can support positive behaviours among all students in the class. Both staff responses from interviews and focus groups paralleled teacher diaries and field notes in addressing the need for teachers to teach students appropriate behaviours and how this ultimately can help them gain the academic, social and emotional skills to be successful.

4.4.6 Overcoming Obstacles and Advantages of the Cohort Program.

The other themes found among the data certainly influence one another. "Overcoming Obstacles" correlates with solutions found in "Advantages of the Cohort Program." The experiences students bring to the cohort program were noted by staff as one of the greatest obstacles in the way of students succeeding. The cohort program aims to support students' needs and as a result, the program has proved to be a beneficial experience for students. This was agreed on by staff and students.

4.4.7 Engaging Students

The theme the "Ideal Cohort Teacher" also shows a relationship with "Engaging Students." Along with all the characteristics and ideals the staff and students identified, the ability to engage

students is a part of what it means to be an ideal cohort teacher. Differentiated instruction and

addressing multiple intelligences were concerns that staff and students identified as being important

skills for a cohort teacher. The notion that these are also methods of student engagement, highlight the

relationship between these themes.

4.4.8   Lack of Resources

The overall "Lack of Resources" affects all major themes found within the data. Staff and

students both acknowledge that improving the number of resources in the cohort program would

ultimately improve the program itself, and the students' experience in that program. Whether it is

providing an actual budget for the program, or providing curriculum, professional development, or

strategies to identify students earlier on in their schooling, improving resources could not negatively

harm any part of the program; it could only improve it. Similarly, the lack of resources results in many

areas being more problematic. The lack of resources makes it more difficult for the school to ensure the

students' needs are being met. As a result, teachers strongly recommended that the department and

school board take on a more active leadership role for these students province wide.

4.5   Discussion

Budgets, trends, and public opinion often influence the direction of education in each province.

Trades, technology, and advanced placement programming are just a few of the key directions

education has taken over the past years on Prince Edward Island. But, how does a province accurately

read the needs of the students? This study prompts key decision makers in this province to pause and

take a wider look at the needs of all the students on Prince Edward Island. This study asks that they

analyse more than the test scores and look at the culture and society those test scores have been achieved in. Take a look at the dynamics of the homes, the economy, domestic violence rates, and addiction rates. This culture is reflected in our classrooms, so it is important that these factors are considered when designing programs for students.

When basic needs are not being addressed in the home, how reasonable is it for society to expect test scores to rise? If students do not have a sense of belonging in their homes, or in their classes, can we really expect them to take the risks necessary in achieving self-actualization? It seems very reasonable to me that we need to look closely at the overall student need in Prince Edward Island, and organize our budgets accordingly. Many educators and parents may feel that ensuring students' basic needs are addressed is not the responsibility of the school. It certainly isn't the school's responsibility to provide shelter, food, and clothing to all students. And it is not the school's job to be the only practitioner of care and nurture. However, it is a joint responsibility between all of society to ensure students are getting what they need to be successful, contributing members of society. By helping students and families access resources they need to be successful, teachers can play a very important role in supporting student achievement.

One of the major issues teachers argued was the lack of practical programming for students. Practical level resources are not readily available or accessible. The funding for revamping a practical program for all core subjects would provide a resource for teachers to build upon. Unlike advanced programming, resources for practical students are not as plentiful, or as easily accessed. Age appropriate literacy tools are not found in the local library whereas other material such as advanced literature is. The study of the cohort alternative education program certainly begs the question, "how can we stretch our money and resources to best serve all of our students?" Teachers need support from their school boards and the department of education to ensure this is possible.

The cohort alternative education program is unique in the philosophy of care it gives the students in the program. On a shoe-string budget, teachers help students with severe learning difficulties succeed. This is not because of fancy equipment, or advances in technology. It is based on the foundation of making all students feel good about themselves in the classroom. Students are inspired by good teaching, which only partly has to do with the curriculum. Even though students often arrive in the program functioning at an elementary level, the administration and staff at this school have been able to raise literacy rates and provide the tools for students to achieve success. The notion of success is different for everyone, and one person's version of success should not be overlooked just because it does not fit the traditional mould of society. Success for these students may not mean heading to university, or even to community college. The definition of success also means having the ability to provide for oneself and family, to raise children in a healthy environment, and be a productive member of our society. This is supported by Noddings (2008) who argues we need to stop dividing our students into winners and losers. They all need to be winners, and going to college can't be the defining factor for success (p. 37). This measure of success may not be as impressive to some as others; however, it goes a long way in ensuring the strength of our economy and communities.

When students' basic needs are addressed and they feel connected to their classroom, they are then able to improve academically (Prince, Howard, 2002). Even though cohort students are often behind the average general students, many times they are able to think and analyse issues at a higher level. They just don't have the means to read, write, or express their knowledge. Step-by-step they can catch up to their peers. Some even surpass them. As a result, it is very important that the education system does not write these students off before giving them a real chance to succeed. Ignoring them will not make the problems go away. In fact, if we continue to ignore their needs, we will continue to see the consequences of that choice in our society, and then back again into our classrooms.

4.5.1 Change in Self Perception

The findings section of my work revealed a number of interesting factors. By addressing each research question, I will identify staff and student responses. The first question "How does the alternative education program change how the students experience school?" involved many interesting ideas. Student responses certainly demonstrated that the program did allow them to change their experience of school. Most students expressed that they did not have a very good experience in school until they came to the high school cohort program. Most indicated that they did not feel smart, or feel like school was a place for them. By building personal working relationships between teachers and students, the teachers earned the students trust, and as a result, were able to target the main problems causing academic difficulty. For example, many students found reading problematic, and were several grades below reading level. This proved to be a key reason holding students back from academic achievement. The cohort program model supported teachers in building relationships with students so that students could trust them with their weaknesses. By being able to address reading problems, students gained academic skill and stated that this improved their confidence and self-esteem.

Building positive relationships with teachers was a factor that came up again and again in the literature. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) argued that students need to be able to build positive relationships with teachers and that if teachers did not want to build these relationships, the students would suffer (p. 213) The Community Health Systems Resource Group The Hospital for Sick Children (2005) also recognized that the lack of relationships with teachers was one of the main reasons students left school for school related reasons (p. 71). Beland (2007) is another supporter of teachers building positive relationships with students. By ensuring students can build relationships with their teachers, they will feel safer and more secure in class. This will ultimately support students in having a more positive experience in school (p. 70).

In Nel Noddings's article, *What Does it Mean to Educate the Whole Child?* (2005), she states:

Some people may argue that schools are best organized to accomplish academic goals and that

we should charge other institutions with the task of pursuing the physical, moral, social,

emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic aims that we associate with the whole child. The schools

would do a better job, these people maintained, if they were freed to focus on the job for which

they were established. Those who make this argument have not considered the history of

education. Public schools across the United States- as well as schools across different societies

and historical eras- were established as much for moral education and social reasons as for

academic instruction (p.10).

Noddings's (1995) states in her article *Teaching Themes of Caring* "Caring implies a continuous search

for competence. We want to do our very best for the objects of our care. To have as our educational

goal the production of caring, competent, loving, lovable people is not anti-intellectual; it demonstrates

respect for a full range of human talents" (n.p.).

Staff involved with the cohort program used themes of care to inspire students to see themselves and school

differently. They ultimately learned that education was the "how" in what would change their lives and make them better.

By showing students that yes, they belonged in school, and yes, education could get them out of the chaos in their lives and

give them a sense of control, they began to make better choices for themselves. This evidence suggests that Nel Noddings'

theories work well in this particular case. This group of students are proof that when given the right circumstances and

supports, student self-perception can be improved and by doing so, they can reach a new level of success. It also supports

the idea that teachers can create this environment for students when they are given reasonable class sizes and extra supports.

4.5.2   Approaches and practices.

The second question this study focussed on was "What are the different teaching approaches

and practices used by teachers involved in this program?" Teachers acknowledged that the overall

difference with this program was that they got to know each student very well. The ability to have a relationship with every student in the class allowed them to tackle academic challenges, as well as social and emotional challenges. By allowing teachers to work under the condition of small class sizes, and maintaining those students throughout their high school education, they were better able to get to the root causes of problems in students' lives. They also had the relationship with them that allowed them to offer supports in various areas. By bridging students to outside services, teachers helped to ensure students' needs were addressed. This ultimately allowed students to be honest with them about problems, and made them feel comfortable to go to them when they needed help. Teachers did not feel the "burden" of this social and emotional education, as they saw it directly relating to students' academic success. Teachers cannot be the solution to all problems, but they can certainly direct students in need to the proper resources. This is strongly supported in Prince and Howard's (2002) article that focuses on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. They argue students who live disadvantaged lives have a higher drop out rate, higher rate of retention and higher special education placement that children who are not poor (p.27).

Aside from the set up and philosophy behind the program, teachers were also willing to differentiate their instruction, and meet students where they were. The use of hands-on learning, field trips, and making learning relevant to life are all very important for cohort teachers. By setting the tone for the three-year experience, teachers usually found they were able to connect with students and target the real problems holding them back in their education. They believe it is their job to find out what holds students back, and then plan accordingly so that students can overcome the obstacles in their way. This personal approach to teaching works very well at this particular high school because just as Nancy stated in the findings section of this thesis, "it works, because this is exactly what these students need." It is a philosophy that I imagine all students could benefit from, particularly at-risk students.

These forms of instruction are greatly supported in the literature. Rulloda (2010) asserted the use of multiple intelligences as being an essential change in educating students (p.4). Stanley and Plucker (2008) also emphasize the importance of engaging students, and how this can have a profoundly positive impact on students' experience of school (p. 50). By targeting individual needs and interests of students, teachers can help ensure they reach their academic potential. Project based learning is another method of instruction teachers should consider when trying to engage students. This was recognized by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that focused on the areas of projects and collaboration in the high school they supported (p.8).

Chapter Five: Recommendations and Conclusions

The final question this thesis proposed to answer was: "What elements of this program could be applied to other programs in public education?" The following section outlines the recommendations and conclusions this study generated.

5.1 Recommendations for Regular Education

There are several recommendations I feel are applicable to regular education, including holistic education, adherence to smaller class sizes, an effort to have teacher consistency in the program, and better diagnostic measures for early intervention. The following section develops these ideas.

5.1.1. Holistic Education

Nel Noddings's (2005) philosophy of teaching the whole child, in conjunction with Prince and Howard's (2002) agreement with meeting Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Prince and Howard, 2002), are other elements of the cohort program that other programs may like acquire. This philosophy has proved to help the teachers build relationships with students and vice versa. Prince and Howard (2002) identifies that poverty is often accompanied with a variety of other issues (p.27). Teachers can be alert to this and address basic needs through breakfast and lunch programs and school food and clothing banks. It makes sense that when students' basic needs are not fulfilled, they will have a much harder time reaching their academic potential. Helping alleviate some of this stress for students can profoundly impact their experience, and allow them to be much more successful in school.

Although these methods are not unique to this program, they are the foundation for the program. The principal who developed the program focussed on ensuring the vast array of needs

students had, would be best met with this system. This philosophy is the key to the program, and affects

all decisions surrounding it. By ensuring basic needs such as nutrition, and emotional support are met,

students are often able to work through their issues and stay in school. The school has attempted to

help student's meet their basic needs through encouraging trusting relationships among teachers and

students as well as students with one another. Breakfast and lunch programs, youth worker and

guidance counselling services within the school also help ensure students' needs are met.

Issues of agency and resistance in Raby's (2002) article highlight how students use their power

through conformity or rebellion. Raby's article makes me think that the holistic approach to education

would help teachers develop more authentic relationships with students where students could be honest

and true to their beliefs and opinions. Because the holistic approach would nurture a safe relationship

with the teacher, the students could learn to trust their teachers. This becomes increasingly important

when students' emotional or social problems become outside the range of the professionals in the

school. By ensuring a genuine and trusting relationship is developed with students and school staff, the

school staff is able to connect the students to outside services such as community mental health. Many

of the cohort teachers and cohort students believe that students would not be as successful without this

program. Several students noted that they likely would have dropped out of school had they not had

the support of the program.

5.1.2. Small Class Sizes

The small class sizes, is an element of this program that other alternative programs may like to

consider. Having smaller classes should also be considered for the regular mainstream program. The

small class size allows the teacher to get to know each of the students in the class and allows them to

have more one on one instructional time. Knoppel (2007) argues that small class sizes are important

(p.30). This dynamic also sets the platform for creating community in the classroom so students gain a sense of belonging. This is a universal concept in a sense as it may be applied to all classes and levels. However, from the research, it has been a critical component in ensuring at-risk students succeed in school. Palmer (1997) emphasized that it is a teacher's job to ensure the classroom is a safe place for students to be themselves so that they may reach their true potential (n.p.). Although the small class size does affect the sizes of other classes in the school, it has proven to be manageable for this particular program. Class size continues to be a problem in the mainstream program, and would require additional funding by government for this to be addressed. Because class size plays such a critical role in this program's success, it is something government should consider when allocating funding to education in the future.

5.1.3. Teacher Consistency

The consistency of teachers over the three years is not a support that costs extra money, but it does require the support and buy in of other teachers in the school. By eliminating the number of student teacher interactions during the day, students can establish more meaningful relationships with staff. This can be an important step in student achievement. Cefai and Copper's (2009) report that "Poor relationships with teachers, victimization by staff and peers, oppression and powerlessness, unconnected learning experiences, [and] exclusion and stigmatization" are the key factors that lead many students away from mainstream schooling (p. 40). Students in their study identified that they needed to have good relationships with their teachers and this could only be achieved with "teachers who respected them and believed in them despite their difficulties" (p. 50). This could established by ensuring teachers sought to build a connection with each student in the room, and were given the necessary professional development and class composition for doing so.

5.1.4. Student Selection for Alternative Programs

The cohort program targets a student who normally does not particularly receive extra support in a school system. This student is not typically diagnosed with a learning disability, nor has he or she proven to be an extreme behaviour problem in class. This student has experienced a past of severe academic difficulty in school, and the reason for this is often unique to the student. The idea of targeting a student like for alternative programs may be a concept that other schools may like to adopt.

5.2 Recommendations: Specific to Cohort Alternative Education Program

The following implications focus specifically on the cohort program itself. These suggestions give concrete feedback to staff and students working in this program. The suggestions may be applied right away to the program:

5.2.1 Breakfast and Lunch Programs

Continue breakfast and lunch programs. Students have noted that this service specifically improved their ability to function in the classroom. It also helped to build trust between the students and teachers. Students saw this as an act of care, and appreciated the fact that their teachers took the time to ensure they were not hungry.

5.2.2 Assigning Cohort Teachers

Administration should ensure teachers are assigned to this program before most other assignments. Teachers and students noted the importance of having the right teachers in these classes, and as a result,

administration should ensure that the most skilled and nurturing teachers are assigned to this role. Having the wrong teacher fill this role can negatively affect a students' experience in school. It can also have a negative influence on the team approach of the cohort teachers.

5.2.3   Resource Support

Continue to have resource support for students and teachers particularly during the afternoon classes when students are out in the mainstream program. The school board will have to continue to support the .25 resource position to ensure this will happen. However, it does ensure these students are tracked, and supported throughout their high school years. This also alleviates some pressures from the current full time resource teacher who supports close to 100 students, not counting those involved in the cohort and alternative education programs.

5.2.4   Professional Development

The teachers and support staff need more professional development opportunities to further their learning and teaching ability. Meeting the needs of at-risk youth is challenging, and staff need to be supported in their efforts. They should also be given opportunities to meet with other alternative education teachers on the Island so that they may collaborate and help each other improve programming for all alternative education students.

5.2.5   Practical Curriculum

Administration can support efforts in finding practical curriculum for struggling students. By accessing other programs, curriculum for these students may be found. By requesting more support from the board, and department of education, more resources may be provided. By identifying these

students, their needs are known, and they run less risk of falling through the gaps. This may also be improved by ensuring students who have not received formal testing in their elementary and junior high years, receive formal testing in their high school program. This would ensure the school board was aware of the number of students experiencing academic difficulty, even though they may not have a learning disability.

5.2.6 Work Placement for Students

Students would benefit from a work placement. Teachers should encourage the school's cooperative learning program that focuses on work skills and offers a work placement. This would allow students the opportunity to further develop their work skills so that they may adjust easily into the work force.

5.2.7 Personal Development Course for Students

As a cohort, students should take a personal development course that allows them to receive extra support and perspective of their lives. This course is current program already offered at the school; therefore, it is easily accessed. By ensuring students emotional skills are strong, teachers can help students become resilient to the negative forces in their lives.

5.2.8 Meeting the Needs of the Working Student

The cohort team should consider how to meet the needs of the working student. By coming up with a framework for these students to follow, they may be able to work and attend school. This is a need expressed in this study, and the cohort team should consider how they can help working students get their education.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

This section provides suggestions for future research.

5.3.1 Building on Timmon's (2005) Study

Vianne Timmons' (2005) *An Extensive Look at Early School Leavers in Prince Edward Island* indicates that we know who is dropping out of school and why. I suggest a second study following up on specific teaching and learning interventions would benefit the province in ensuring students stay in school and meet their academic potential. The school system needs to ensure that students stay in school and that they are receiving a quality education that prepares them for the work force.

5.3.2 Early Interventions

I recommend a study to investigate the early interventions in Prince Edward Island elementary and junior high schools. By learning how we can identify these students earlier on in their education, these students may gain more attention from government and the department of education as their needs would be more formally recognized. This would also ensure students are formally supported earlier on in their schooling, therefore increasing their chance of success.

5.3.3 Social and Emotional Problems

A quantitative study based on finding out the number of students dealing with social and emotional problems such as alcoholism, addiction, mental health, and family violence would serve us in learning the culture students are growing up in. As a result, programs could be more suitably created and implemented to support these students.

5.3.4 Practical Programming

By investigating the practical programming and accelerated programming available throughout North America, Island leaders in curriculum development would be able to develop a concrete program that meets the needs of these students. This would ultimately give teachers the resources they need to help students be successful

5.3.5 Engaging Parents

It would also be useful to understand how we may engage at-risk students' parents and care givers, and promote a positive relationship. This would allow home and school to work more closely together. By specifically learning how we may engage parents of at-risk youth, we may be able to build connections to home that would help ensure students are successful.

5.4 Conclusions

This section of the thesis will highlight particular areas of practice that allow alternative education programs to be successful. It will also address changes that can help ensure teachers and students are properly supported in their quest for student learning. Many of these points apply to all schools, not just alternative education programs.

5.4.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

By ensuring students' basic needs are met, students are more able to reach their academic potential. This is supported by Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlighted in Prince and Howard (2002). Breakfast and lunch programs are especially helpful with this. School food and clothing banks can help staff ensure students have access to these needs outside of their home.

5.4.2 Literacy

Literacy interventions allow students to improve their reading levels so they may participate independently and productively in society. This is supported in data gathered in this study as well as Island documentation. Skeffington, a literacy teacher on the Island supports this in the CBC article PEI Drop Out Rates Plummet (2010). "She believes that extra push keeps kids in school".

5.4.3 Building Relationships

Building meaningful and positive relationships is a key element in ensuring students have a sense of belonging in school. Beland (2007) argues that students can learn a lot about life and academics by becoming socially involved. Beland also argues that students who feel comfortable in class are more likely to apply effort to their studies and comply with classroom norms (p. 70). Noddings (2006) also concludes that smaller class sizes allow teachers to make relationships with students that "make a difference" (p. 343). Morrissette (2010) among many others, also concluded that the students in his study needed to trust their teachers (p. 19). Finding a way to make these relationships possible is essential. The data gathered from this thesis study also argue that relationships are crucial among teachers and students and help ensure students not only stay in school, but reach their potential.

5.4.4 Outside Agencies

Outside agencies should be used when appropriate so students can overcome problems in their lives. Teachers often do not have the training to deal with issues like addiction, or mental health. Welcoming these services into the school, and partnering with them ensures students can more easily access these services. In terms of social and emotional needs, schools can act as a liaison to outside

services such as mental health and addiction services. This can be done through the school youth worker or guidance counsellor.

5.4.5   Professional Development

Professional development opportunities that focus on differentiated instruction, multiple intelligences, project based learning, as well as building community in the classroom would be beneficial for teachers. Stanley and Plucker (2008) discuss how important it is for lessons to be student centred so that all students may become engaged in the learning process (p. 50). Noddings (2008) argues that all students must be considered in the classroom, not just the ones who are college bound. Ensuring the entire range of the student population are considered in the lessons, teachers can engage students and make learning more meaningful. This can ultimately contribute positively to our society (p. 37).

The cohort program certainly questions the purpose of education. If we continue to think of ourselves as teachers of content, we will never be able to help all students reach their true potential. Finding out why students continue to fail in school needs to be a priority of our education system. Teachers cannot do this all on their own. We need a framework that directs teachers to ensure this happens. There is no doubt in my mind that there are many hardworking teachers in our province doing great things for students. However, we need leadership from our government, and the Department of Education that ensures teachers have the ability and opportunity to make struggling students a priority. The current inclusive system in the province needs to be evaluated to ensure adequate supports are given to students and teachers. It is my belief that all students are entitled to the Cohort Program experience. If all students from grade one onward had small class sizes, meaningful relationships with teachers and were engaged with differentiated instruction and best practices, students would have a

greater level of success. Government and educational leaders need to ensure teachers are set up for success, so they in turn can set students up for success. Ensuring all students get a quality education that supports them in reaching their potential is a crucial element of education.

Programs like the cohort alternative education program allow teachers to investigate students case-by-case, and this helps them understand why the student continues to experience difficulty in school. When teachers are able to understand the "why," we are then able to provide meaningful interventions that can help students become successful in school and in their lives. By taking a holistic approach to education, students learn to trust their teachers and are willing to be vulnerable and show their true weaknesses. It is my hope that this study will remind educators that all students can succeed when given the right conditions to work under. Teachers want to be able to help students reach their potential. We need resources, professional development, and appropriate, relevant curriculum to ensure this is possible. When test scores fall, instead of blaming teachers and parents, we need to work together to understand the root of the problem.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Discussion Guide for Focus Groups: Teacher Group

1   What strengths, if any, does the cohort program set up have over regular general programs?

2   How do you feel about teaching the same students for three years in a row?

     Prompt: positives and negatives

3   As teachers, how do you feel about the availability of supplies and resources you need ?

     Prompt: Out of pocket expenses

4   How do you see parental involvement in theses students' edu plan?

     Prompt: Is parental support a necessity?

5   In your opinion, what strengths does this program have regarding emotional and social

     development?

6   What are the most difficult parts of your job?

     Prompt: What typical behaviors do you see.

7   What would you like to change about the program? What improvements could be made?

8   When selecting teachers for this program, what should be considered as the most important
     factors?

Appendix B
Discussion Guide for Focus Group: Students

1   What positive things, if any, do you see about being with the same students all morning, three years in a row?

2   What negative things if any, do you like about being with the same students all morning, three years in a row?

3   How do you feel about having the same teachers for your core subject, three years in a row?

      Prompt: How well supported do you feel?

4   Up until High School, tell me how you felt about going to school?

5   Now that you are in High School, how do you feel about school now?

6   How do you feel about the learning you do in the program? Hands on activities and out of school experiences etc

7   Teachers in this program tend to be quite up-front about any issues, how does this make you feel?

8   How do you feel about being in regular programs in the afternoon?

Appendix C

Interview Questions: Principal and Youth Worker

1   How do you feel the cohort program affects your job?

2   What, if anything, do you see as positive about the cohort program?

3   What, if anything, do you see as negative about the cohort program?

4   When dealing with at-risk, struggling learners, what are the most important things to address?

5   In your opinion, what type of student is a "cohort" student?

6   If you were advertising for cohort teachers, what qualities would you list as the most important?

7   What are the greatest obstacles for cohort students and teachers?

8   How do you see your role with the cohort students and teachers?