Influence of a Classroom Culture on At Risk Learners

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the effects of classroom culture on the success of at risk high school students in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Three teachers were interviewed, and the thematic results were used to create a framework which relates the determinants to theories examined in the literature review. Participants agreed that factors which led to success in their classrooms were building relationships with the students, creating a routine that students could easily follow in a smaller, more intimate setting and using project-based learning activities as opposed to more traditional methods for delivering curriculum goals.

Keywords: at risk, project-based learning, classroom culture

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is my genuine pleasure to be able to express my gratitude to the many people who have helped me to complete this thesis. The first people I want to thank also happen to be the two people I cherish most on this planet, my sons.

I started my Masters program when I thought my children were "old enough for me to go back to school." Little did I know just how much time this process truly takes. My boys have been generous in their sharing of me, with my classes, my homework, my presentations and a lot of studying. That said, I hope I have also been a role model to them. My desire is that through this process I have been able to show them how important life-long learning is, and that hard work is a reward in and of itself. So, to Matthew K. Oberlin and to Thomas G. Oberlin, I want to say thank you. Thank you for always encouraging me to pursue my own dream of graduation. I love you both so very much.

I want to thank Dr. Frank Deer, Dr. Gary Babiuk, and Dr. Lloyd Kornelson. All three of you have guided me on this journey in your own creative and brilliant ways. Dr. Deer, thank you for advising me throughout my Masters programming. Your time and talent has meant a lot to me. Dr. Babiuk, your advice always rings true and your excitement about education is inspiring, so thank you as well. And to Dr. Kornelson, your calm guidance and sharp insights have shaped my perspectives not just on my studies but on the ways I view the world, and that is a gift I will always be grateful to you for.

My colleague, Kevin Lopuck has been a true friend to me throughout this entire process. I am so glad that we met, collaborated and are graduating together! Kevin, having you to read over my papers while I read over yours, team teaching across town with two very different groups of learners and studying together every Wednesday night for at least 3 years has been

challenging and rewarding. Thank you for never giving up on me and for ultimately seeing that what I really needed was someone to support when I was wrong and to celebrate me in those moments when I finally got it right.

Thank you to my three participants for your time. I absolutely believe that your narratives are valuable. They are worth sharing and bear re-telling. Thank you to Shane Leighton, my assistant, who has read and re-read this study so many times for me, looking for spelling errors and helping me with all the computer details. Shane, without you this thesis…well I probably would have deleted it all by accident by now, so thank you so much for all your time and patience. To my mother, Mary Schoen I say thank you for all your love. Gratitude also goes out to my all my students who originally inspired me to ask big questions and to go out and find some interesting answers.

And finally, to my husband, Kenneth Oberlin, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. You said I should go back even when money was tight. You encouraged me to finish even when I had so many set-backs it would have been easier just to give up. You said I could graduate even when that meant you had to drive the kids everywhere and make all the dinners, so I could go to classes. Your faith has sustained me. A simple thank you doesn't quite cover it, but I hope that it's a start.

DEDICATATION

For me this thesis represents an educational journey. To ensure that it's truth is honoured I would like to dedicate it to the three people who have inspired me to regard an education as a symbol not just of knowledge, but also of perseverance, of courage and of love.

I dedicate the intent of this thesis to educate others as well as to guide my own practice to my grandmother, Alma Corinne Boulette, who taught school in a northern Manitoba community. Corinne began teaching in a one-room schoolhouse when she was only 16 years old. When she eventually retired, having also earned her own Master of Education degree, she was not only a teacher but had also become an administrator and the mayor of her small town. From her I gained an ardent respect for the profession of education that I have never lost.

I dedicate the joy of earning this degree to my other grandmother, Anna Schoen. Anna's love for books and art and fashion thoroughly influence my own choices and interests. Her passion for acquiring new knowledge has always been the force behind anything creative I have ever tried, and I think of her often when I learn something new and then see the world in a different light. I grieve that I don't get to share those moments of revelation with her, but I know I was blessed that I had someone who introduced those elements of color into what could have easily been an otherwise grey life.

And finally, I dedicate the bravery to begin this endeavour to my late father, Kenneth Allan Schoen. My father instilled the ideal in me that an authentic education was a gift. To get to go to school wasn't something that everyone got to do. My father valued school and recognized that it was the key to my future. My dad always knew a good grade when he saw one and it's his praise that I worked for. He judged worth based on significant standards of truthful ingenuity. I

have continued to use those principles to guide my way. There are times when I wonder what my dad would think if he were here to see it all, but in completing this degree I know that I’ve made him proud.

Chapter One

Introduction

In the autumn of 2014, it became apparent to me how important the culture of a classroom really was when I began teaching the grade 12 *Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability* curriculum to a new group of students. Creating a classroom culture where students could express themselves in a safe and encouraging environment became my goal. For the purposes of both this research project and thesis, classroom culture is defined as: "Critical features of classroom life that characterize its educational "personality" and reflect both tacit and explicit educational values, beliefs and processes concerning the meaning of learning, teaching, knowledge, technology and teacher roles, powers and responsibilities" (Levin, 2009). This definition, retrieved on-line from *Re-Culturing Beliefs in Technology: Enriched Classrooms*, by Tamar Levin, is a good descriptor of the potential classroom cultures have for both learners and educators. But even after working with at risk youth for almost a decade I had never fully realized the positive power behind creating a classroom culture that encouraged dialogue and inquiry. For the purposes of this research project and this thesis, at risk youth can be seen as:

> These children are finding it difficult to adjust to a particular environment. The problems may, and often include, difficulties within the home: including socioeconomic, demographically, and geographically. At-risk children are often witnesses of, or engaged in, behaviors that are of a high risk nature such as: victims of abuse, neglect, and maltreatment; substance abuse; premarital sex; teen or familial suicide; school dropouts; teenage pregnancies; victims or witnesses of violent crimes; and domestic violence (Brown, 2011).

This definition, written by Asa Don Brown for the *Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association*, depicts at risk youth as learners who typically require more supports in and outside of the classroom. The need then, for a classroom culture that addresses these particular needs, became evident to me as I became more acutely aware of its effects on the learners in my classroom. I wanted to provide students who have significant challenges with a setting created specifically for them, where they could achieve outcomes, both personal and academic. Before I could make things different though, I had to understand what at risk youth routinely experience in school.

I used to be a stay-at-home mom. Until my second child was in pre-school, I was able to remain at home with my children, playing games, reading stories, doing crafts, and going to endless mommy-and-me groups. I loved every second of it. Reality set in hard when my oldest son attended grade one. Kindergarten was easy for me. He went to school in the morning, he came home at lunch and our days went on as they had before. But grade one? Now that was a whole different story. Going to grade one, where he stayed for lunch, meant my oldest was away all day. I painfully missed him and realized (to my instant embarrassment) that I was jealous of his teacher! She was the one who got to read stories, play games and do crafts with him now. The teacher's influence was a prevalent one in my son's life now and I began to view their relationship from a different perspective. At that point I came to realize what Reist (2013), wrote in his book *What Every Parent Should Know About School*. Reist calls schools a child's second home. Reist wrote about examining this occurrence.

> Next to the family, school is by far our most powerful and influential social institution. Almost every person will have intimate contact with school over a long period of time

> and during one's most impressionable years. So much of what we become as individuals and, therefore, as a society, is shaped by our experiences at school." (Reist, p.25).

If this is true, then what do at risk students experience during their time at school? Typically, what is the reality of their "second home"?

My son's experiences in grade one were good ones, for various reasons, but a large factor was that his experiences at school mirrored those that he had at home. This is rarely true for at risk youth.

> When we place children in situations that don't fit their prior experiences, for which their background has not prepared them, or simply don't interest them, they may develop a "reactive stupidity" that's quite different from the way they think and act in their own homes and neighborhoods. Such children are then at risk to fall behind, become truant, and drop out because the school experience appears useless or irrelevant to them (Howard, T., Dresser, S, Dunklee, D, p.21).

In *Teaching With Poverty in Mind* (2009), Jensen points out that children in these situations then "act out", their behaviours become impulsive, and they display less empathy than their peers (p.19). Chronic stress from situations at school or in the home can lead to more at risk behaviours such as increased absenteeism, impaired concentration levels, reduced creativity, as well as diminished motivation (Jensen, 2009). In these instances, when the home and school have such a poor fit, the phenomenon of the school as the child's "second home" can be the potential cause of more problems, instead of the solution. Teachers can become more inclusive by valuing the experiences students have lived and by acknowledging their backgrounds. All student's beliefs, value systems and talents need to become an intrinsic part of the classroom community. Only then will students begin to make better meaning of their time in school.

Children make meaning out of lived experiences. Constructivism is based on the concept that learners make new ideas out of their current and past knowledge. If what students already know is different from what they are experiencing in the classroom then students are constantly forced to re-examine their place in the environment, both in context and culture. Teachers need to recognize this concept if they want students to be engaged in their learning. “They have to understand not only meaning, but also the contexts in which meanings make sense. This involves students in a study of cultures, as students begin to understand that there are many worlds of meaning” (Danforth & Smith, p.43). In considering these differences, students will be in constant renegotiation of their past experiences at home and their new experiences at school.

When faced with students who are experiencing difficulties, schools often group these students together into programs that may further alienate them. As a teacher of alternative programming for over 15 years I see this to be true. From my experience, students who are deemed to be at risk and who have significant gaps in their learning are grouped together into classrooms where their individual needs can be met. While this may assist the students with their academics, it does not help them with their social skills. Students who have previously been marginalized need more social inclusion, not less. “It is widely recognised that social exclusion produces deep and long-term damage to the living conditions, social and economic participation, emotional life, and health status of young people” (Paolini, p.4). Many at risk youth become disengaged with school when traditional settings fail to address their needs. “The reality is that well-behaved students aren’t behaving themselves because of the school discipline program. They’re behaving themselves because they have the skills to handle life’s challenges in an adaptive fashion” (Greene, p.8). In grouping at risk youth together, creating specialized classrooms or alternative settings, schools run the risk of further marginalizing students. “All

students must become involved and engaged in both the social and the academic life of the classroom" (Katz, p.7). In addition, programs for at risk youth may not address the underlying issues:

> Programs to reduce school failure, for instance, are isolated from efforts to prevent juvenile delinquency. Strategies to ameliorate teen pregnancy may ignore problems of substance abuse. In the real world, however, these problems interact, reinforce one another, and cluster together. Not only do problems cluster but so do the young people who have these problems; they tend to live in the same neighborhoods and are exposed to many of the same influences. In addition, the problems reverberate within the community and frequently are intergenerational (McWhirter,J., McWhirter, B., McWhirter, E., McWhirter, R., p.18).

Understanding my students then was just the beginning. To really effect change, I came to understand that I needed to alter their environment while empowering them to make good choices. Inclusivity and respect would be the cornerstones to which I would build my program and I believed that began with creating a classroom culture.

In the past, I had run my *Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability* course largely as an intellectual endeavor, expecting that my students not only knew about the current events we were about to discuss but had previous knowledge on how to effectively dialogue, research and write, as well. Being a part of the *Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability* pilot team, I had started teaching the course in 2011. At that time, I was working at an independent alternative high school. There I was allowed to try out some of what I felt to be true about teaching this demographic, but my teaching partner did not agree with my teaching methods or my educational perspectives. My teaching partner was content to have the class run as modules and

in booklet form. This led to high student turnover, as the class was not engaged and would leave our school for another. I was recruited by the Louis Riel school division in 2013. In the fall of 2014 I was asked to start a new divisional alternative program for high school students called QUEST. In starting QUEST I was asked to bring all my talents to the table. I knew that the class needed to be based on inquiry, student choice and have a hands-on learning approach. My new group did not yet possess the skills to fully engage in the activities I was proposing. I decided that creating a classroom culture where we could not just argue, but effectively listen and respond to each other about the issues that were to be presented in class had to be the priority and I felt that the best way to do this was through teaching *Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability*.

This non-traditional course provided me a way to develop an important classroom culture. As I teach not only *Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability,* but many other subjects to this same group, I felt that focusing on classroom culture would enhance their learning in other areas as well. Students typically join alternative programs such as mine, due to disrupted learning patterns and poor attendance and they tend to need extra supports. In addition, creating a classroom culture where student’s differences are valued and respected became as essential to helping the students learn as making sure the students had enough calculators, or that their pencils were sharpened in time for a test – and much more!

At the same time that I was starting up QUEST, I was approached by Linda Connor, Social Studies Consultant with the Department of Education for the province of Manitoba, to participate in a program designed to encourage *Global Issues* teachers to engage in action research around their own experiences with the course. The Grade Twelve Inquiry Project (GTIP), afforded me the opportunity to really think about how I wanted to design not only

QUEST, but specifically the culture that QUEST students would immerse themselves in. To date, over the course of the three years that I have participated in GTIP, I have been able to conduct research on my own practice that included exploring the following research questions:

- How can I create a classroom culture where at risk youth can embrace global issues?
- Will two demographically different classes of learners share the same dreams for Canada?

I have been able to present both of these projects to my peers at MERN (Manitoba Education Research Network) conferences at the University of Manitoba. The opportunity to explore these topics through GTIP has enhanced my understanding of inquiry and research.

Classroom culture has been defined in many different ways, but the one I like the most comes from blogger and teacher Sue Swift (2006) who writes that the culture of a classroom is “The way things are around here.” Blogger Steve Schertzer (2008) defines classroom culture as “The process of instilling certain universal values and behavioral expectations in your students to promote their well-being, facilitate learning, and to ensure any future success they may have.” Rothstein-Fisch and Trumbull define classroom culture even further:

> Understanding the role of culture does not mean learning endless facts about a great many cultures, but rather coming to see how culture shapes beliefs about learning and education. When teachers understand cultural differences, they begin to re-examine and redesign their classroom organization and management in many fruitful ways (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Greenfield, & Quiroz, p.1-2).

As a result, teaching and learning become easier. Recognizing diversity as a strength and not as a weakness has been the greatest lesson I have learned after teaching at risk youth for almost a decade. As a parent of two sons who currently attend high school, I believe that not only my students, but my own children as well have benefitted greatly from being in a setting that was not homogeneous.

Every classroom has a culture. Is it a culture of academics? Is it a culture that fosters creativity? Is it a culture of bullying? For me, participating in GTIP, creating a divisional program, and working towards earning my Master's degree was like a perfect storm. I want to be specific about the kind of culture I am creating in my classroom. Informed by these three life events I came to understand that the culture in my classroom not only had to be inclusive and inviting, but it needed to centre on inquiry and project- based learning with a hands-on approach to creativity. The more I invested in making the students not just feel, but truly know that their ideas were valued, the more I could focus on the rigour of their academics. My classroom often looks like a bomb went off. There's stuff taped to the walls, and the tables are upside down or pushed out of the way. The students are sitting on couches or on the floor, with laptops and pencil crayons strewn between papers and bottles of glitter. My assistant and I are never sitting. Instead, the two of us ping-pong between students, answering questions about Macbeth essays and roller coaster inertia projects. We also serve a daily breakfast, go on field trips that are suggested by students and participate in discussions that are based on topics the students have proposed. We celebrate holidays, we talk about the Seven Sacred teachings, and we host workshops on diverse topics. That is my classroom culture in action. That is a description of what my classroom culture looks like, but it took a long time to get there.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of a classroom's culture on at risk learners. How does a classroom's culture affect the way an at risk student learns? My overall question will be: How do teachers of at risk youth create a classroom culture where students can become successful learners? Heidi Hayes Jacobs writes in her book *Century 21*: "What makes a successful year of teaching? When the final bell rings on the last day of school, what should the students know and be able to do? How will those students be different from how they were on the first day of school?" (Jacobs, p.153). On that last day of school, what difference did the culture in the classroom make? This is what I want I ultimately want to find out from my research.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used throughout this thesis:

1. At risk youth: This population has been defined as children who have experienced poverty, and are close to dropping out of the educational system. It also refers to youth who are not learning skills to succeed after graduation, and to children whose current educational mastery makes their future school career uncertain. (McWhirter,et al.,2013) At risk youth are unlike most adolescents as they are struggling with situations that cause them to require long-term supports. Adolescents who are deemed at-risk may be regarded as "students who have had, and continue to have, extremely difficult lives" (Danforth and Smith, p.68).
2. Culture: "A culture is a pattern of group behavior exemplified in thought, speech, actions, and artifacts in a form that can be taught and learned" (Brokenleg, p.16).

3. Diversity: In this study, diversity can be defined as appreciating the differences (gender, race, sexual orientation, age or social status) in individuals (Gay, 2013).
4. Constructivism: "Constructivist pedagogy involves students in actively making connections between what they already know and what they are learning" (Danforth & Smith, p.41).

Significance

The significance of this study will assist teachers of at risk youth in the daily implementation of their classroom practice. In addition to helping teachers, students will benefit from the results of the study when teachers reflect on their practice. The study is relevant, in that there are many programs today which aim to assist at risk learners.

Assumptions

Assumptions about findings are made before the study begins. I assume that a classroom culture of care and student voice will support engagement and learning in the classroom. I also assume that teachers of at risk youth are paying particular attention to the social emotional needs of learners, taking care to physically arrange their classroom in a way that is sensitive to the needs of students who may already feel marginalized. I assume that the teachers in these programs are purposeful in their design of their classroom culture based on established relationships with the learners in their room.

Organization of Thesis

The introduction to this thesis outlines my reasons for beginning my research and my interest in the topic of how a classroom culture affects the learning of at risk youth. Chapter Two of this thesis is a review of the literature related to the classroom setting, diversity in the

classroom, better describing who at-risk leaners are and what exactly a classroom culture is. Chapter Three is a description of the methodology of the study. Chapter Four highlights the findings from the research, and Chapter Five delineates final conclusions while making suggestions for further research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

In preparation for this thesis I read an abundance of material related to the topic of creating a culture in the classroom. I also read extensively about teaching students who are diverse learners and also what it means in North America if students are considered “at risk” of not completing high school. I found that much of this material was related, weaving an interesting and intricate picture of what marginalized youth need and expect in order to become successful and engaged learners.

Culture In The Classroom

In reviewing the literature on the subject of culture, I was not looking for culture as one’s background or ethnicity, but instead I was researching culture as an engaging element that enhances the behaviours and beliefs of a group. In defining culture, Salman Khan says simply “Normal is what you’re used to” (Khan, p.61).

In his article *Growing Your Own Kids Today*, Dr. Martin Brokenleg explains how complex culture can be:

> An ongoing complication in working with any culture is that it functions unconsciously. We are not conscious of cultural factors when they are at work in us since culture functions below our level of awareness. Culture is a powerful controlling dynamic even though it works when we are unaware that it is present. Consequently, we must be culture conscious if we are going to understand its power and make use of it in intentional ways (Brokenleg, p.16).

I attended a conference entitled *THIS Conference: Transforming Heart, Instruction and Soul*, where the keynote address was given by Kevin Lamoureaux, a graduate student and instructor at the University of Winnipeg. Lamoureaux supports Brokenleg's theory about culture. In his speech on August 27th, 2015, Lamoureaux said "School can either reinforce and transmit culture or it can transform it" (Lamoureaux, personal communication, 2015). Both Brokenleg and Lamoureaux recognize the importance of creating a positive classroom culture.

Ken Robinson defines a school as "…any community of people that come together to learn with each other" (Robinson, xx). Robinson then explains that schools are a part of the system we all belong to, and that the culture of schools can determine a student's success or their failure.

> The success of those who do well in the system comes at a high price for the many who do not. As the standards movement gathers pace, even more students are paying the price of failure. Too often, those who are succeeding are doing so in spite of the dominant culture of education, not because of it" (Robinson, xxiii).

Changing the culture of a classroom Robinson affirms, is the beginning of reforming education. Creating a place for students where they feel that their presence matters is the first step to creating a culture of success. Building relationships with students, finding out what really matters to them, and making them feel safe are steps that are key to establishing a successful community of people who learn together. Only when we think about what matters to kids will we start to see change. Robinson calls this shift of school culture "a vision of how it should be" (Robinson, xxiv).

In his book *Creating Cultures of Thinking*, Ron Ritchhart sees culture as the kind of models we see, the intellectual life we engross ourselves in, as well as what we promote in our lives on a daily basis. He labels this process "enculturation" (Ritchhart, p.19).

> Enculturation is a process of gradually internalizing the messages and values, the story being told, that we repeatedly experience through interaction with the external, social environment. This internalization takes time as we identify the messages and values that are consistent and recurring in our environment (Ritchhart, p.20).

Transforming and understanding the culture of classrooms means that teachers need to constantly examine the culture being reinforced with students.

Ritchhart proposes that there are eight cultural forces present in every group learning situation that become levels of transformation. These forces are language, time, environment, opportunities, routines, modelling, interactions and expectations. These elements work together to:

> enculturate students into a new story of learning where thinking is valued, visible, and actively promoted as a part of our ongoing, day-to-day experience of all group members. We must become shapers of culture and message managers to realize our vision and transform our schools (Ritchhart, p.34).

When culture is viewed as an important element to learning, educators can shift its message if needed, or reshape it to promote success. Classroom cultures help to realize an educator's vision for their students, defining what it is they are ultimately focusing on.

"What kinds of thinking do you value and want to promote in your classroom?" (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, p.5). This is the question the book *Making Thinking Visible* asks

in order to determine what kinds of culture to promote. When students too are aware of their thinking processes and actions, a culture can develop that enhances both their engagement and independence.

At Risk Youth

There are many misconceptions around what "at risk" means, and who exactly qualifies as "at risk youth". There are many definitions for this term and there are several reasons why youth might fall into this category. For this study, I chose to utilize the terminology and research that focuses on youth in North America as they best describe the students I work with.

Reclaiming Youth At Risk examines the complexities of youth in North America and what has pushed them in some instances to become alienated in their relationships with family, friends and society. Defining youth at risk can be problematic. Most youth who fall into this category generally would not associate themselves with the current terminology and descriptors. In the chapter entitled *The Century of the Child*, this representation of youth is more clearly explained:

> We were uncertain what we should call the young people who are the focus of this book, so we have used different descriptors depending on the focus of discussion. The concept of "at risk", although very broad, avoids blaming the child and points our attention toward the environmental hazards that need to be addressed. We have used terms "alienated" and "troubled" to emphasize what it feels like to be alone and in conflict. Adults often view these youth as "difficult" to work with and "reluctant" to accept help (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, p.3).

We are often reluctant to use labels, but in this instance, we need to have a clear definition of who we are discussing when we talk about youth at risk and their descriptors.

In an article posted by CBC News (September, 2014), Jamil Mahmood of the *Gang Action Interagency Network* addressed the issues of poverty and violence which are so often associated with at risk youth. Mahmood's report through the *Spence Neighborhood Association* acknowledges how difficult it is for at-risk youth to leave gangs and make positive choices for themselves. Mahood's research determined that three conditions were required for youth to transition out of being classified as "at risk":

> 1) A sense of healing and belonging. Really understanding who you are and how you fit into your community. 2) Healing. Looking at how to help kids and families and people who need healing. There's been a lot of trauma – we're talking about the history of colonization and poverty and we're talking about a lot of internal trauma here in Manitoba…. 3) Extended programming. Programming that fits the needs of these kids; programming that is here 24/7; programming that provides the support, mentorship and strong connections that these kids need to make a change in their life (CBC, 2014).

The CBC article highlights the needs of at risk youth and the struggles they face in finding assistance to change their situation.

The book *Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance*, focuses on poverty and literacy issues facing Philadelphia youth. Using the theory of social stratification, where people are divided based on characteristics (such as income levels, level of education, and social standing), the authors give a description of at risk youth that also fits the demographic being studied here in Winnipeg.

> Children at the top of the ladder typically thrive; while those reared at the bottom do not, with patterns of underachievement especially stark for children of diverse cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds. Factors including low-income households, single parentage, limited education, and speaking a language other than English essentially add up to large estimations of risk for school failure (Neuman and Celano, p.22).

While this definition does not capture all the complexities involved with the students in alternative programs, it provides a beginning from which to address their particular needs in schools.

In his book *Lost at School*, Ross Greene addresses the challenges youth experience with a sense of empathy and caring as a means of problem solving and finding compromises in a school setting. Greene describes at risk youth as children who are experiencing difficulties and have lagging skills.

> I interact with hundreds of challenging kids every year. These kids would like nothing better than to be able to handle the social, emotional, and behavioral challenges being placed on them at school and in life, but they can't seem to pull it off. Many have been getting in trouble for so long that they've lost faith that any adult will ever know how to help them (Greene, p.x).

By looking at youth at risk through a skills-based lens, one can appreciate that these children require more time and attention than many of their peers. Greene's book examines youth at risk in a classroom setting and tries to better apply strategies to understanding their unique needs. "Behind the statistics, behind each expulsion, suspension, and detention, are human beings" (Greene, p.x).

Eric Jensen examines at risk youth with a focus on poverty. Jensen posits that poorer families tend to have children who are more at risk of not completing high school due issues with health care, transportation, absenteeism and child care. “Studies of risk and resilience in children have shown that family income correlates significantly with children’s academic success” (Jensen, p.10). Poverty imposes deficits on children that their more affluent peers do not have, placing them at greater risk of eventually dropping out of school. “Many children raised in poverty enter school a step behind their well-off peers…. These deficits have been linked to underdeveloped cognitive, social, and emotional competence in later childhood…” (Jensen, p.38). Poverty and youth at risk have a correlation that cannot be denied in many instances.

Even closer to home, teacher and author Monica Nawrocki describes some of her experiences teaching at risk youth in the Lord Selkirk School Division in Manitoba. In her book she describes at risk youth as kids who “don’t fit”, but she also defines them as “…troublemakers who are gifted, sensitive, potential-packed little souls, often hurting, and always desperate to succeed, regardless of the fact that their actions may suggest exactly the opposite” (Nawrocki, p.8). This relates to my work as from my experience, typically this would describe the students I work with as well.

Jen Marshall Duncan writes about the seven factors she sees contributing to referrals to her alternative high school program. They are having at least one disability (cognitive and/or physical), being held back in a grade at least once, having English as a second language, not living with both parents, living in poverty, having parents who have recently emigrated, and children living in a family where neither parent is employed. These determinants, having one or more of them, leads to students being at risk of dropping out of high school. In Marshall Duncan’s experience, students being placed in alternative settings to complete their education

still have a lot of potential and are valued members of the community (Duncan, 2011). These distinctions are important to note, because many times the students at risk are still academically capable and the supports they need to complete school often have very little to do with the curriculum requirements.

In their book *Engaging Troubling Students*, Danford and Smith define at risk youth as having a spectrum of difficulties resulting from a broad scope of experiences.

> This wide range includes students who resist and oppose school authority and norms in dramatic, loud, and violent ways students who subvert the norms of schooling in humorous, sneaky, and manipulative ways: students who have great difficulty making friends and sustaining relationships; students who have been emotionally traumatized by violence and violation; students who feel deeply alienated and disengaged from the academic and social world of school; and students who are withdrawn and isolated on the fringes of the social web (Danforth & Smith, p.8).

This explanation resonates well with my experiences teaching this demographic. Students who fit this description struggle to find their place in the school system, typically requiring extra supports and understanding.

By using the term “at risk” to discuss this population, I think it is important to mention that the students may not think of themselves in this way. The term is also not meant in any way to down-play their struggles or malign their resiliency. This term is also not a certainty. Risk implies a chance of failure, but it also suggests that improvements can be made.

Diversity

When I first began teaching, I thought that having a homogeneous classroom would be helpful. I assumed it would make transitions smoother and it would create harmony for my students in the subject areas that we discussed. Over the years though, I have come to learn that the opposite is true. A heterogeneous classroom, where diversity is celebrated and then shared has become one of my most valued assets. I have found that I can do more with more – more students, more differences, more contrasts – they make the classroom as a collective, richer and wiser. Common traditions and backgrounds that lead to familiarity can be comfortable, that's true, but a classroom where students can learn from each other due to experiences that are new and unique, can encourage students to grow and think past their own limitations. Diversity can provide fresh perspectives to an otherwise less experienced group.

Diversity is at the heart of Jennifer Katz's *Universal Design for Learning* model. In this model she discusses how including students in the classroom, instead of excluding them based on skill levels, socio-economic factors or behavior challenges, can be both rewarding and achievable.

> It is important that we recognize that *diversity* does not refer only to children with exceptional needs, nor does it refer only to ethnic, racial, or linguistic diversity. Diversity encompasses all children – their diverse personalities, ethnicities, languages, family structures, and learning styles all contribute to the makeup of a diverse classroom (Katz, p.3).

Diversity exists in every classroom as each student is representative of their own backgrounds, successes and challenges. Valuing and recognizing that intrinsic diversity is what will make the

classroom unique. Diversity does not have to be a factor for alienation. Diversity in the classroom can lead to new perspectives, changed minds and positive growth. Lyle Hamm writes about diversity and demographic change in his on-line article for EdCan Network entitled *The Culturally Responsive Classroom*. Hamm describes the qualities needed for teachers to embrace diversity in an environment that may be new to them as well. "Teachers who build their cultural competence increase their ability to form authentic relationships across differences, which supports their growth as educators" (Hamm, 2017). Teachers who have had mostly homogeneous classrooms need supports as much as the students do, in dealing with growing issues of diversity and growth. Teachers need to establish an inclusive learning environment where diversity is valued and perspectives and differences can be fostered and shared.

> Teaching in the diverse classroom and lifelong learning go hand in hand. Creating focused professional development activities on topics related to diversity helps teachers transform their instructional practices and classrooms and enables them to build their capacity to function effectively in highly diverse classrooms and schools (Hamm, 2017).

When teachers know better how to teach in a diverse setting, the classroom can become a responsive environment where all talents are appreciated and respected. For me, this is where GTIP became a strength. Having professional development that actually centered on my practice was invaluable.

In his book, *The Courage To Teach*, Parker J. Palmer discusses the limitations a homogeneous classroom can pose. He sees diversity as a true beginning to a sense of connectedness among learners. Conflicting viewpoints push learners to confront biases and prejudices, while also creating good answers to the hard questions students have every day. "We invite diversity into our community not because we are confused or indecisive but because we

understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things" (Palmer, p.110). And, while researchers look at how students can benefit from the diversity of a heterogeneous classroom, efforts must also be spent on how the teacher works in the setting as well.

While reading the book *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You*, author Bonnie Davis highlights the effect that diversity can have on the teacher as well. Davis reminds teachers that:

> When we interact with our students or colleagues, we bring the baggage of our past experiences, our prejudices, our preferences, as well as those of our families, and other factors that influence the lens through which we view the world. Those we face bring the same (Davis, p.12).

Teaching to diversity can be challenging as there are many factors that influence our world view. Those influences can either hinder progress in the classroom or they can create a framework for cultural proficiency. Much like my participation in GTIP, by critically and purposefully examining our own biases, as a classroom of learners we can use our diverse natures to help each other succeed.

The Classroom Ecosystem

Why study the classroom? What is going on in there that is so important? Walk down the hallway of any school, and looking from one classroom to another, you can see how much they differ. The look of a classroom can be as simple as reflecting the teacher's personal tastes and the subject matter they teach, but then again there might be a lot more to it. Danforth and Smith (2005) describe the fear and anticipation that comes from entering a new classroom: "Teachers

often enter the classroom unaware of the ways in which our beliefs, cultures, training, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and experiences affect how we view and interact with students" (p.271). For many students, that is their daily reality. But can it be different? Examining the effects of the environment on the students is as important as the culture it intends to create. Recognizing too that there is a difference between a classroom setting and a culture is significant as well. The setting effects the culture to be sure, but so do many other factors. The physical space, the classroom set up, the displays, the students themselves and the teacher's approach to education all influence the classroom's culture.

Author Terry Heick says that creating a culture of learning begins with humans understanding their environment and ends when learning becomes alive (Heick, 2014). With the Gradual Release of Responsibility model, there are three levels to creating this setting. The first level requires teachers to model habits and behaviours. The second level has teachers guide students in the desired behaviours, and the last level has students working independently within the structures the teacher has set out. In his on-line article, teacher Doug Buehl describes this level as one that "…emphasizes instruction that mentors students into becoming capable thinkers and learners when handling the tasks with which they have not yet developed expertise" (Buehl, 2005).

Creating a setting in a classroom where students feel welcome and cared for, enough to share their ideas and personal truths, can be difficult and overwhelming. Understanding the learners is the key to constructing an environment for students to learn and grow in understanding and processing. A classroom can also be an important environment for individuals who have experienced difficulties, as many of my students have:

> What maltreated and traumatized children need most is a healthy community to buffer the pain, distress and loss caused by their earlier trauma. What works to heal them is anything that increases the number and quality of a child's relationships. What helps is consistent, patient, repetitive loving care (Perry and Szalavitz, p.232).

Fulfilling human needs of belonging and being cared for are important for all students, not just the ones who have experienced trauma. The classroom can become a community where one-on-one relationships are important because of the trust that is established.

> Diversity is neurological. Diversity is societal. Diversity is human. Teaching to diversity requires that teachers create a learning climate in the classroom and devise activities that allow all children to feel safe, respected, and valued for what they have to contribute. Poet Carl Sandburg, when asked what he thought was the ugliest word in the English language, answered exclude, adding "Everyone wants to belong" (Katz, p.3).

Katz also describes the classroom in ecological terms, framing the classroom as not only a place to learn, but as an ecosystem for learning, a home for students over the next 10 months of their lives. "Spaces for learning should invite and support both the students and the activities planned. The arrangement of the resources and features sends a message to your students" (Katz, p.121). Katz theorizes that the classroom itself has a climate, based on the relationships and interactions of the people using the space, but also because of the purposeful way the teacher has designed the way it will be used.

> Teachers must not only plan their approach to the curriculum – the goals, the learning outcomes, and the lessons – with an underlying pedagogical philosophy in mind, they

> must also plan the classroom and decide what kind of interactions, activities, and power structure will work best to implement that philosophy (Katz, p.121).

In the book entitled *Student Diversity Addressing the needs of all learners in inclusive classroom communities,* authors Brownlie and Feniak look at the importance of creating a classroom setting that sets the tone for the year.

> One of the few "rules of the classroom" that we officially share with the students is that the classroom must be a safe place for everyone. Students will not take risks in sharing ideas and fully participating in activities if they perceive that others will criticize their opinions. They also will not want to engage in group activities if they feel that they are not welcome to join a particular group. It is critical that our classroom becomes a community where all students belong (Brownlie and Feniak, p.15).

The classroom atmosphere can be seen as a critical element in the development of effective communication between the students, the teacher and their peers.

Palmer also looks at the physical aspects of the classroom and the atmosphere it can create. He suggests that that the actual room and how it is set up should be a conscious design process which requires that the teacher understands and follows a conceptual framework of pedagogical design. His principles include an open space, a space that is inviting and safe, a space that can be seen as a forum for discussion, a space that values diversity, a space that supports students and a space that is a place of comfort and solace.

> By *space* I mean a complex of factors: the physical arrangement and feeling of the room, the conceptual framework that I build around the topic my students and I are exploring,

> the emotional ethos I hope to facilitate, and the ground rules that will guide our inquiry (Palmer, p.76).

Palmer concludes that this type of classroom design can be the basis for deeper learning and creative expression for both students and teachers alike.

Author Tristan de Frondeville sees the classroom space as an open invitation to learn. By intentionally creating environments where effort and awareness are fostered, the classroom itself can make the difference for students who might otherwise anticipate a demeaning classroom environment filled with hostility and insensitivity. He describes this in the article *Ten Steps to Better Student Engagement* :

> Students who have been shamed or belittled by the teacher or another student will not effectively engage in challenging tasks. Consider having a rule such as "We do not put others downs, tell others to shut up, or laugh at people." Apply it to yourself as well as your students. This is the foundation of a supportive, collaborative learning environment. To learn and grow, one must take risks, but most people will not take risks in an emotionally unsafe environment (de Frondevill, 2009).

This idea of a welcoming environment is echoed in the on-line article *The 7 E's of Classroom Design* by Terri Eichholz, who writes that teachers need to make conscious choices about the way they design their classrooms

> One message that 21st century classroom design definitely sends is that educators have recognized that students don't all learn the same way. With versatile seating options and mobile furniture, classroom environments can be differentiated for diverse needs. More and more teachers are experimenting with offering their students non-traditional choices

for seating or options to change the actual blueprint of the room with mobile furniture that allows for independent, partner, group, and whole-class learning. (Eichholz, 2006).

Designing classroom spaces by acknowledging the needs of students is both empathetic and equitable.

This message of invitation from the teacher is both verbal and non-verbal and extends to all students and all areas of the room itself. In a study entitled *How Classroom Design Affects Student Engagement*, published by Steelcase Education, the research team found that: "The results of the beta study and the following term's aggregated data revealed that classrooms intentionally designed to support active learning increased student engagement on multiple measures as compared to traditional (i.e., row-by-column seating) classrooms" (Steelcase Education, p.1). These efforts create a sense of belonging which will ultimately create a community of learners. Benedicta Egbo maintains in her book *Teaching for Diversity in Canadian Schools* (2009), that certain social milieux can influence our behaviors, even change them. Creating an inviting classroom environment is important and that classroom contexts where student's identities will contribute to higher self-esteem. Therefore, creating a space for students to be their authentic selves while learning is necessary and important work.

Chapter Three

Methodology

In performing this research, I am wanting to know, how do teachers create a culture where at risk youth can become successful learners? When conducting research, there are two major research traditions to follow: qualitative and quantitative. This study will employ qualitative mixed methods. Mays and Pope (2006) define qualitative research as "qualitative research asks fundamental and searching questions about the nature of social phenomena" (p.8). Because qualitative research looks at experiences that take place in uncontrolled and ordinary contexts, it better lends itself to studying the characteristics of a classroom. Qualitative research also allows the participants to share their struggles, perspectives and understandings with the researcher, who can gain insight and information by asking open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview. This method provides authentic, descriptive data to the researcher about the complexities of the subject and their environment.

Since Edmund Hussel proposed the idea of phenomenology in 1901 (Moran, 2000), it has become a useful approach for researchers when examining an event by using first-hand accounts. Phenomenological researchers find the capacity for greater understanding in that "Phenomenology is an encounter" (Vagle, p.xii) and these encounters with the world around us brings us better understanding and a way of knowing. A researcher applying phenomenology is concerned with the living experiences of people:

> In the human sphere this normally translates into gathering "deep" information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions, and participant observations, and representing it from the perspective of the research

participant(s) (Lester, p.1). The sharing of lived experiences will result in the analysis of narrative data, where detailed comments can be made about individual situations.

Theoretical Background

Teaching is an intellectual activity, which requires the educator to be an active co-participant, regardless of the curriculum they are expected to deliver on a daily basis. Working with at risk youth sometimes requires a frame of reference to help students with the bigger issues they often struggle with outside the classroom doors. Reading the works of Nel Noddings, Zoe Weil, Lev Vygotsky, and Patricia Greenfield have given me both perspective and inspiration. The on-line dictionary defines a framework as “A basic conceptual structure (as of ideas)” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Combining the theories of Noddings, Vygotsky, Weil and Greenfield provide the support for my research. They underpin my own approaches to the study and guide my own assumptions and theories.

Individualism Versus Collectivism

Traditionally, schools foster independence, viewing the student as an individual who has specific personal outcomes and goals. Even when placed in a collaborative classroom setting, student’s goals are often characterized by the singular achievements they can produce and the unitary objectives they can accomplish (Greenfield, 1994). When using Individualism as a framework for teaching, students become concerned with acquisition of knowledge and facts, disengaged from the culture in which they are learning them (Hofstede, 1980). In contrast, Collectivism is a cluster of interrelated values that emphasize the interdependence of the members of the group. Within this value system, children are taught to be helpful to others and to contribute to the success of any group they belong to, being very aware of the social context in

which the learning occurs (Hofstede, 1980). This theory regards a classroom as a group of learners who can help each other and is based on the principles of helpfulness, sharing group successes and respecting diversity. Although the framework of individualism-collectivism is only one tool for understanding cultural differences, it does lead to new ways of thinking and acting for teachers. Rothstein-Fisch and Trumull (2008) write:

> Research suggests that two broad cultural value systems, individualism and collectivism, shape people's thoughts and actions in virtually all aspects of life. The fundamental distinction between these two systems is the relative emphasis placed on individual versus group well-being. It is not a matter of valuing one over the other – individual or group – but rather the degree of emphasis accorded to each (p.8-9).

Rothstein-Fisch and Trumbull also stress Collectivity rather than Individualism as a valuable tool for motivating groups of diverse learners: "A group orientation is the hallmark of a collectivist culture. Thus, understanding the depth and meaning of a group orientation is at the heart of teacher's strategies to make classrooms more culturally responsive." (p. 21). Cooperation fosters not only student achievement, but creates a learning environment that is encouraging, strength-based and positive.

Constructivism

Constructivism is a theory which looks at how people learn. This theory contends that people make meaning through a basic understanding of the world around them, combined with experiences and reflection. Lev Vygotsky, an early social constructivist theorist, believed that learning is not only made up of combined experiences but its also a collaborative endeavour. In *Interaction Between Learning and Development* (1978), Vygotsky proposes that:

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals (Vygotsky, p.57).

In constructivist theory the learner is considered a problem-solver who uses social interactions to further their own experiences. Constructivist learning environments inspire students to gather information, assess it and combine it with their own experiences to make their educational experiences relevant.

In a constructivist classroom, learners are encouraged to develop meaning out of activities and lessons that are relevant to them and then compare them with their experiences outside of the classroom to enhance their learning. Teachers act as guides who provide support and instruction, as well as exposing them to project analysis techniques, collaborations with peers, and group discussions. In the on-line article entitled *Constructivisn in Piaget and Vygotsky*, Ozgur Ozer writes: "In a Vygotskian classroom, dynamic support and considerate guidance are provided based on the learner's needs, but no will or force is dictated" (Ozer, 2004). Learning is an active process which does not involve the memorization of facts or rote repetition. Constructivists would not consider these practices as valid demonstrations of learning, because the process has not actively engaged the student to make connections between their previous knowledge and what they are learning.

Teachers then, must be respectful of the experiences their students bring to school if they are adhering to a constructivist learning theory. "If teachers don't think it is important to understand the meaning students bring to school, which may well mean learning about the

contexts in which their meanings make sense, then the possibility of conversational learning is reduced" (Danforth & Smith, p.41). In a social constructivist classroom, conversations and dialogue are vital to the learning process where questions can be answered and opposing ideas can be processed.

> Teachers are not experts in all contexts, and there is no assumption that there is only a "real world". Diverse meaning, cultures, perspectives, and ways of representing learning are extremely valued in a social constructivist classroom, because this is what makes learning interesting and dimensional (Danforth & Smith, p.41).

Educators who follow this theory engage in the negotiation of making meaning and value their students' input and lived experiences. The goal for students is for them to be active learners who work together to help each other in the process of acquiring knowledge. The class becomes a community where diversity is valued and it becomes a rich opportunity for everyone.

Care Ethics

A guiding principle for this research will also be Noddings' work on Care Ethics. Noddings' explanation of the ethics of care and their relationship to learning and social welfare are complimentary to my work with at risk youth. Noddings argues in *Excellence as a Guide to Education* (1992), that caring should be a foundation for decision making, and that it relates to the very basics of education. "How children feel – whether they are happy, engaged, realistically confident, eager for experience – matters" (Noddings, p.5). Marginalized youth often don't have supports in place for them that typically might occur for others and caring for them and their situation is the first step in planning for them both academically and beyond. Caring though, isn't

just an ideal. Caring is a specific and tangible commitment to the well-being of others. Noddings points out in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984) that:

> Caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's. When we care, we consider the other's point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us. Our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves. Our reasons for acting, then, have to do both with the other's wants and desires and with the objective elements of his problematic situation (Noddings, p.24).

In *The Challenge to Care in Schools An Alternative Approach to Education* (2005), Noddings posits that care does not make judgements, comes naturally and is the basis for relationships. Noddings affirms that teachers need to be care-givers:

> In schools, all kids want to be cared for in this sense. They do not want to be treated "like numbers" by recipe – no matter how sweet the recipe may be for some consumers. When we understand that everyone wants to be cared for and that there is no recipe for caring, we see how important engrossment (or attention) is (p.32).

This model is particularly important for the demographic that I teach. When students know that they are cared for and that they can care for others it becomes an important element in establishing the culture of my classroom.

In *Happiness and Caring* (2003), Noddings studies the aims for schools and ultimately education's connection to a person's overall happiness. If we equate going to school with economic success only, then we undervalue the aims of many classrooms and our focus becomes narrow:

> Education, by its very nature, should help people to develop their best selves- to become people with pleasing talents, useful and satisfying occupations, self-understanding, sound character, a host of appreciations, and a commitment to continuous learning. A large part of our obligation as educators is to help students understand the wonders and complexities of happiness, to raise questions about it, and to explore promising possibilities responsibly" (Noddings, p.23).

Noddings questions what happens when students finish their education, but still live in poverty. Care ethics focuses on education in broader terms, looking at what schools can teach students to encourage happiness when it may be obvious that it cannot be dependent solely on economics. The aims of education – the whys – are important. If we are to help students see that happiness can be found outside of one's occupation, then we need to emphasize that idea in our classrooms as well.

Noddings, in *Philosophy of Education* (2012), continually acknowledges that the basis for the care ethics theory is strongly rooted in the work of John Dewey. His description of learners as individuals who purposely seek out experiences to better define their educational needs, supports Nodding's idea that a caring environment can help students achieve individual goals and happiness. While Dewey also wrote of democracy and rich community experiences that engaged learners, Noddings acknowledges that her idea of what schools can achieve is similar "Dewey wanted education to be fitted to each individual child. Further, Dewey rejected hierarchal categories of educational programs" (Noddings, p.8). In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey refers to both the old and the new when discussing educational theory. And while he does not fully endorse one or the other, he highlights the points that both streams of thought provide different experiences for the leaner. Noddings (2012) reflects that Dewey constantly

looked at student growth in terms of "opening doors or developing connections "(Noddings, p.26). Experiences, for Dewey, had to have personal meaning for them to be worthwhile. In this way, Noddings connects Dewey's thoughts to care ethics. Valuing personal growth versus curricular goals create a classroom culture that encourages individual perspectives and values diversity.

In the on-line article entitled *Caring in Education* (2005), Noddings describes how caring about students engages them in the classroom:

> I do not mean to suggest that the establishment of caring relations will accomplish everything that must be done in education, but these relations provide the foundation for successful pedagogical activity. First, as we listen to our students, we gain their trust and, in an on-going relation of care and trust, it is more likely that students will accept what we try to teach. They will not see our efforts as "interference" but, rather, as cooperative work proceeding from the integrity of the relation. Second, as we engage our students in dialogue, we learn about their needs, working habits, interests, and talents. We gain important ideas from them about how to build our lessons and plan for their individual progress. Finally, as we acquire knowledge about our students' needs and realize how much more than the standard curriculum is needed, we are inspired to increase our own competence (Noddings, 2005).

In the same article, Noddings describes how the theory of care ethics can be used as a classroom framework: "Caring relations also provide the best foundation for moral education. Teachers show students how to care, engage them in dialogue about moral life, supervise their practice in caring, and confirm them in developing their best selves" (Noddings, 2005). Engaging marginalized youth from this perspective allows them to be heard and empowered.

> Noddings tells us that when we operate from an ethic of care, we can't make decisions about how to respond based on principles alone. Rather, we must enter dialogue with others to find out what they need. We need to provide children opportunities to care for others as well as be cared for themselves. In a care perspective, fostering caring classroom relationships is imperative for moral development (Danforth & Smith, p.65).

Teachers need to establish relationships with their students, finding out what is important to them, making learning and school relevant. Dialogue and care together can foster a culture where students feel valued and respected and where their presence in the classroom matters.

Humane Education

Humane education is defined as the teaching of compassion and respect related to animal welfare, environmental, and social justice issues (Selby, 1995). Humane Education theory promotes the idea that by providing students with relevant knowledge and skills, empathy and compassion can be developed as well. Humane education examines the condition of all living creatures and their significant interactions. Educator and theorist, Zoe Weil, is a proponent of the comprehensive humane education movement. Weil's theory of humane education includes the following four elements: (1) Providing accurate information; (2) Fostering the 3C's: curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking; (3) Instilling the 3R's: reverence, respect, and responsibility; and (4) Offering positive choices and tools for problem solving (Weil, 2003). These principles provide a basis from which to motivate students to meet challenges with knowledge and integrity. Marginalized youth often need this kind of structure and support. The humane education theory seeks to instill the passion and skills to solve challenging problems, through work, citizenship and good choices.

In his book, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, Eric Jensen points out that students who feel "less than", as most at risk students do, tend to not only struggle academically, but with secondary issues as well, such as bullying and depression (Jensen, p.40-41). When interacting with marginalized youth, the approach cannot be a deficit based one, but rather, like Weil's, it needs to be strength-based. Weil describes the humane child:

> will meet the world with integrity. Humane children are nourished by deeply held values that help them resist peer pressure and cultural messages that are shallow or dangerous. They believe in themselves and their ability to make a positive contribution with their lives. Such children are successful in the deepest meaning of the word because they are empowered to follow their dreams without harming others in the process (Weil, p.3).

For me, combining the theories of Individualism Versus Collectivism, Constructivism, Care Ethics, Humane Education together, is a base from which to work with students and conduct research.

Research Design

I interviewed three teachers separately and then analyzed their stories to look for common themes and ideas. All of the data is qualitative in nature. Data was analyzed thematically (both collective and individual), using a constant comparative method (Glaser and Straus, 1967). By examining the similarities and differences in the transcriptions and field notes, as the researcher I identified themes and grouped them into categories, signaled by the participant's use of repetitions, metaphors, transitions and linguistic connectors (Casagrande and Hale, 1967). The recruitment strategy I used will be in the form of sampling, as I require a

specific group of participants. In the book entitled *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide* (2005), quota sampling is defined as:

> A process for selecting research participants in which the criteria and number of people to be included in the study are predetermined. A target number of participants is set, and people who meet the desired criteria are recruited until the target number is reached" (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, Namey, p.117).

Teachers who do not teach at risk youth do not have the same insights or information required to answer the research questions.

Grounded theory will also be used in the research design. "Grounded theory studies are conducted to generate or discover a theory or schema that relates to a particular environment" (McMillan, p.14-15). This way of correlating data helped me to systemically find themes within the participant's narratives. In his book, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, author Clark Moustakas explains that though an examination of how the elements of experience react, the researcher can then develop theories: "In grounded research the theory is generated during the research process through the data being collected. The hypotheses and concepts are worked out in the course of conducting the study and from an analysis of the data" (p.4). By using this method of data analysis, I was able to create my framework (Appendix C) which explains my findings.

Narrative Inquiry

I wanted to hear the stories my participants were willing to share. In her book, *Option B,* Sheryl Sandberg talks to people who have suffered losses and have built resilience. She found that: "Even people who have endured the worst suffering often want to talk about it" (Sandberg,

p.32). Telling stories is one of the best ways we have to communicate our understanding of an event or situation. By fusing the participant's stories together, I was able to see layers of meaning in the data I received. This quote from *Doing Narrative Research* (2013) sums up for me, the experience of having used this method for my study:

> Narrative research which is based on conversations between people is invariably a process of ongoing negotiation of meaning. People answer the questions which they think are being asked of them, and we respond to the answers with which we think they have provided us. Our understanding of their words is always contingent upon our ability to imagine the worlds they are trying to convey. This capacity to see other than what we know changes in time, appearing both to diminish and grow: sometimes we can no longer find the feelings and dreams which once were ours, and at other times, having seen more of our own life appears to give us greater access to understanding parts of the lives of other which had once evaded us (Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou, p.36-37).

This quote, after having done the research, resonated with me because it is what happened to me after I talked to my participants. I went into the research thinking I might get answers to my questions, but in reality I found much more. Hearing the stories of what has made classroom cultures help at risk youth to learn better is what interests me most. Weaving those stories together to make meaning, provided me with important information. McMillan (2012) asserts that when conducting qualitative research, "nothing is trivial or unimportant. Every detail that is recorded is thought to contribute to a better understanding of behavior" (p.274). In hearing the stories of the teachers I interviewed, the narrative approach provided the rich descriptions I needed for my research.

Using this research method also fits well with my theoretical approach of constructivism. The teachers are making meaning of their work by creating their classroom culture, and then by telling me their stories, teachers have the opportunity to reflect back on what has shaped their narratives, better informing their own practices as well as my own. In *Constuctivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice* (2005), Catherine Twomey Fosnot links experience and conversations together: “It is one thing to assert that, as far as one’s experience goes, the meaning others attribute to a word seems to be compatible with one’s own, but quite another to assume that it has to be the same” (p. 5). Emphasizing their experiences and retelling them revealed multilayered ways to understand and interpret the data, the participants, and their situations.

Methods of Data Collection

An invitation letter to participate was sent to Assistant Superintendents in the following school divisions: Seven Oaks, Lord Selkirk, Pembina Trails and River East Transcona. As protocols for conducting research varies from division to division, I also included letters addressed to school principals and a call for participants letter. Principals were asked to forward the call for participants letter to members of their staff who work with at risk youth in alternative high school settings. Interested participants could then contact the researcher directly, at which point a letter of consent was sent to them if they qualified to participate in the study. In my letter to Assistant Superintendents, I encouraged them to follow their own divisional protocols for approving/distributing my request to conduct research. As a result, I also had to complete applications for outside research for both the Seven Oaks School Division and the River East Transcona School Division. Participation was voluntary, and no remuneration was provided. My target population was teachers who work with at risk youth in alternative high school settings. I transcribed the meetings and sent back the transcriptions to the participants to validate that their

ideas had been represented correctly. In the data analysis I looked for narratives and themes. There were no risks involved in participating in this study. There were no benefits to participating in the study other than being able to clarify and reflect on one's views on the topic in a collaborative interview.

Confidentiality and Ethics

Pseudonyms were used to protect the participant's confidentiality and consent letters were sent out to the e-mail addresses teacher participants provided to me. This form of purposive sampling is not fixed so snowball sampling did in fact occur. As I am a colleague, and not an administrator, I was in no way in a position of power vis-à-vis the potential research study participants. I also did not conduct research in my own school division, so there can be no perception of a power over. The data is stored on a password protected computer and the printed data is stored in a locked cabinet in my home.

After consent letters were signed, I arranged times and dates to conduct interviews. The interview process involved asking individual participants a series of open ended questions, created to understand their specific classroom situations. Please see Appendix A. I took notes by hand in a notebook and recorded the interviews using my MP3 recorder. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and participants verified the data transcriptions before they were analyzed.

Researcher Relationship

I am often told that the best and the brightest students take the *Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability* course. Just as often, I am asked why I am teaching *Global Issues* to at risk youth. I would argue, that my students need this course just as much or perhaps even more than

“the best and the brightest”. Who better, for example, to discuss topics about First Nations perspectives than First Nations students? Who better to discuss marginalized youth than youth who are indeed, marginalized? An outline of course (2017) is described as::

> *Grade 12 Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability* provides learners with opportunities to reflect upon diverse world views and perspectives as they conduct inquiry into issues that are crucial to living in a contemporary, connected, interdependent world. The course is intended not only to enrich learners’ awareness of significant global issues, but to develop an ethos of concern as they come to understand their own capacities as contributing members of their local, national, and global communities. As they develop and practise the competencies of citizenship, students become able to envision and work toward a better future for all. They develop an ethos of engaged citizenship founded on the recognition of the importance of ecological principles as they address issues of social justice, economic sustainability, and quality of life on Earth (Manitoba Education, p.11).

Students of all levels – academic, socio-economic – should have the opportunity to study these principles to the best of their ability. At risk youth know intimately, the challenges associated with many of the issues facing Canadians today, such as food insecurity, addictions, welfare, mental health issues, and poverty. Finding a way for my students to discuss these issues became the reason for creating a setting where their opinions on these topics and many others, could be shared, discussed and respected. This had to begin with dialogue.

Transformational leadership skills involve creating great environments for teams to work together successfully. In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge discusses how a team, like a classroom, can become more engaged. “The discipline of team learning starts with “dialogue”,

the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together" (Senge, p.8). Senge explains further why dialogue is important to creating a culture of success:

> The discipline of dialogue also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interaction in teams that undermine learning. The patterns of defensiveness are often deeply ingrained in how a team operates. If unrecognized, they undermine learning. If recognized and surfaced creatively, they can accelerate learning (Senge, p.8).

Therefore, modeling appropriate dialogue techniques became the primary shift in my teaching of *Global Issues*, in order to create a classroom culture where students could fully dialogue and embrace the issues at hand.

It was difficult at first to get students to participate in conversations. One student told me: "Ms. Schoen, no one wants my opinion." My students needed to see their diversity as a strength, instead of a weakness and that the issues we were talking about affected them. Focusing on dialogue became a way for students to embrace the issues that were important to them. Topics that interested them included the welfare system, underemployment, racism in our city, and ISIS recruitment practices, among others.

At first, I introduced specific topics, providing students with individual articles which we read out loud together. I would then ask questions which would engage them into conversation and debate. Gradually I let them choose from a variety of articles, asking students to analyze them from different perspectives on their own, before sharing them with the group.

As a visual artifact of our discussions, I created a bulletin board labeled "Our Global Issues". At first, I began writing down the topics we discussed such as "racism" and "welfare", and putting them up on the board, but when the students began analyzing topics on their own, I

let them decide if the topic was worth putting up and also deciding what it was we were really discussing. When we discussed the *Islamic State* in *Iraq and Syria*'s recruitment practices, the students at first weren't sure what the real topic was. Had we discussed terrorism or human trafficking? Was the article about ISIS or about those girls who had run away to Syria to join them? In the end, it didn't matter what the students wrote down, it mattered that they decided together.

Quite often though, the issues just hit too close to home for them to engage. After planning a field trip to volunteer at Winnipeg Harvest, a student confided that it would be difficult for him to participate because, as clients of Harvest, that was his family's primary source of food. Whereas an adult in the same situation might see this as an opportunity to give back to the community, for a child it was an embarrassing situation. Discussions about abuse and racism were tenuous topics as well, having students who have experienced traumatizing incidents in both those areas. For that reason, it was important to begin slowly.

We started small. In place of saying "I disagree", (or the student's more crass, swear-filled versions), we discussed a list of terms we could use instead. Using the student's own language was important. Sayings such as "Tell me more about that" or, "Can you explain that to me?" were used as substitutes. We discussed how in a dialogue, we might shut people down and therefore miss out on an interesting idea if we weren't more open and inviting with the language we used. Our goal was ultimately to have them talk to each other more and less to me.

My hope was that eventually students would find topics to discuss on their own, bringing them to the attention of the other students in the classroom. I believed that this would eventually happen with time, persistence, patience and kindness. I have endeavoured to create a classroom culture where students and staff alike, feel safe and supported enough to express an opinion, and

that those opinions are seen as respected and valuable. Every day I was aware that my actions, my choice of words, and my attitude communicate the type of classroom culture that together with my students, we tried to create.

Teaching not only for meaning and purpose, but for compassion and integrity became a personal goal, although it's not an easy one to achieve. "There's a saying among teachers: Everybody likes to teach critical thinking, but nobody wants a school full of critical thinkers" (Westheimer, p.28). This became more and more apparent in my classroom as my students worked harder and harder at becoming a cohesive group of learners, who were still able to hold on to their individuality.

After these experiences with my students, I realized that their attitude towards school was not limited to *Global Issues*. Their feelings of inadequacy and their struggles with marginalization crept into every subject I taught, from Math to English. My personal struggle came in trying to figure out how to make their positive experiences in *Global Issues* extend into all our other endeavors. I met Dr. Joel Westheimer at a book launch in October, 2015. His book *What Kind of Citizen?* had a profound effect on the way I viewed education and gave me insight and inspiration. In his book he writes

> Education has always provoked my deepest passions, not because of the debates about passing fads and strategies (phonics versus whole language, new math versus old math, small classes versus big classes), but rather because choices about how we teach children are choices about the kind of society we believe in and the kind of people we hope will emerge from our schoolhouse doors (Westheimer, p.2). This is what creating a classroom culture is ultimately about. In shaping that culture, we are practicing the character traits that we all hope to see in the world around us.

This relationship that I have, with the students and with the curriculum, is what connects me to my interviewees. My participants are also working in similar settings and with similar demographics, trying each day to make good choices for and with students who feel that they might have fallen through the cracks and live on the fringes of school life. I have used *Global Issues* as my delivery system to demonstrate caring, to engage students through project -based learning and to establish routines and goals. My connection to the participants is my interest in what the participants have used as their delivery system to create their own specific and unique classroom culture. Ultimately, involves caring, citizenship and cooperation, all traits that broaden understanding while encouraging diversity in thought and creativity.

Limitations of the Study

My personal biases must be taken into account as a limitation of this study. When I interpret the data after I transcribe the interviews and analyse my field notes, my biases may influence the way I evaluate and categorize the themes. Like the participants, I also teach at risk youth so I have a personal investment in this topic of study. Therefore, this attachment to the topic may affect the way I code the data as well as the way I interpret the findings. The participants will be able to verify their data before the paper is written, lending to the validity of the research. Due to the small sample size of this study it cannot be generalized to the broader community. This research study is limited to those school divisions which allow me to conduct research. This study is also limited to the experiences that those specific teachers have had.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methods and theoretical backgrounds that I used in this research study. As the research is qualitative in nature, the participants were encouraged to share their

first-hand experiences in answering questions associated with creating a culture in their classrooms, where they work with at risk youth. Analysis of the gathered data was done in a constant comparative method where individual and collective themes were generated. Chapter four focuses on the findings of the research and chapter five reports on how my findings and my observations will inform and influence my own teaching practice.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

After interviewing three participants, the data that emerged was equally as interesting as the teachers who ultimately answered my call for volunteers. The three teachers were from different divisions and had varied experiences teaching at risk youth. Two of the teachers had over ten years of experience each, and one of the teachers had less than five. All three though brought unique ideas and perspectives to share. All three interviews took place at times and in public places that the participants themselves had chosen. I interviewed three teachers, all with varying levels of experience. One teacher is close to retirement, having spent the bulk of her career working with at risk youth in various programs her school division in suburban Winnipeg has created over the past 25 years. Many of the at risk students she has worked with have had modified programming as well, due to cognitive disabilities. Another teacher I interviewed is mid-career, again having worked primarily with at risk youth for her entire career, although in her experience many of her students are Indigenous youth from Northern Manitoba and have been incarcerated. And finally, the last teacher I interviewed has less than 5 years of experience and has taught primarily in a rural school in Southern Manitoba. Their differences aside, because of their work with at risk youth, their narratives have similar themes.

Even before I could sit down with the data and begin to code, I could see three prominent themes beginning to emerge, which ultimately answered my research question which was how do teachers of at risk youth create a classroom culture where students can become successful learners?

The stories the participants shared with me about their classrooms were familiar in that they described youth who required a strength-based approach to learning, in settings that were

not the same as their age-equivalent peers. Their students all experienced disrupted learning for various reasons, and as educators all three participants have had to embrace and create strategies that weren't necessarily taught to them in their University courses. Participants shared stories of heartbreak and success, gathered through their interactions with at risk youth from all parts of Manitoba. The similarities in their approaches with their students further establish what it takes to create a classroom culture where at risk youth can be successful.

I asked each participant 14 open-ended questions which allowed them to tell me the story of their classroom, hoping that by using the constant comparative method I could find connections which linked their narratives together. At the end of each interview I had a clear picture of what their days as a teacher were like in the classroom they had designed for at risk youth, and the first emerging theme that was interwoven through these narratives was that of relationships. For the purposes of this research study and to protect the anonymity of the participants the following pseudonyms will be used going forward: Participant One will be named Janet, Participant Two will be called Jack, and Participant Three will be named Chrissy.

Relationships

Each of the teachers I spoke to reflected on how important their relationships were with their students in creating a positive classroom culture where their students could be successful. Building meaningful relationships with students, especially those who are at risk, is instrumental in creating a classroom culture of success. The participant's comments echoed those of the research of Perry and Szalavitz (2006). They write that positive relationships with at risk youth are critical and helps to restore them in many ways, which impacts their ability to participate in a classroom and learn.

> What maltreated and traumatized children need most is a healthy community to buffer the pain, distress and loss caused by their earlier trauma. What works to heal them is anything that increases the number and quality of a child's relationships. What helps is consistent, patient, repetitive loving care (Perry and Szalavitz, p. 232).

The first teacher I interviewed said that some students "emotional needs sometimes take up the whole day" and that goal setting and conferencing with them each day then set a positive tone for time in the classroom. "Goal setting is very important, and I have a twenty-five-year-old student who remembers that" (Janet). Without those strong relationships, the participants did not feel that their classroom culture would have been as successful. Janet talked about how important it was that individual connections were made. Janet emphasized "I like to work with them" and "I want to make a connection with him" (referring to a student experiencing difficulties). Janet also expressed frustration when viewing teachers who did not make those connections with students saying that it then results in a student not being a successful learner

> Because if I leave him with someone else, I know exactly what's gonna happen. Even if he goes into another room, he's not gonna get his work done, he's gonna be on the computer, with his headphones. And it's not just the teachers, its him, it's his choice. Like you're not my teacher, why should I listen to you?

Janet said that her day is "almost a fifty-fifty split, and sometimes it's almost seventy-five. Depends on the day." when it comes to teaching versus helping students with their problems. But Janet also said that is what will make the teaching come easier, because of the established relationship.

Jack expressed the same viewpoint, saying that the relationships built between teachers and at risk youth make all the difference.

Jack reflected back on a teaching experience that did not go well, attributing it to the lack of good relationship with the student. “It wasn’t a knockout assignment, but it wasn’t a horrible assignment either. But it went terribly wrong, because I didn’t realize one of the girls in the class had an eating disorder, and it threw her for a loop and she had a major meltdown from it.” For whatever reason the connection with the student wasn’t as strong as the teacher had assumed it was and the teacher had failed to view the assignment from the student’s “Particular angle”. The participant reflected further. “I kind of lost her a bit in that sense.” And for the teacher in this instance he felt that saying “Sorry, I didn’t realize” just wasn’t enough. “It wasn’t quite as open as you wanted to be as a student.”

Jack also experienced significant losses associated with his teaching, telling me that he has attended the funerals for three of his students. The relationships he built with each of those individuals before their deaths was profound enough to affect the way he has continued to build relationships with all new students:

> And it’s easy to forget to be kind to each other. So to start, especially in high school when they’re going to a class, one of the things I make a point of doing is when they’re leaving I say “Have a good day, take care of each other.” And when they show up, when I’m ready to start class, I always tell them “Alright, I’m ready to start. Thank you for being here, I’m glad to see you again.” It really took the first student to pass away early in my career that, I often forget, forget to take the time to tell the students I appreciate them, right? That’s one of the habits I’ve cultivated over the years, to say I’m glad you’re here,

> thank you for being here today. Even if they're late, you know? Like, thank you. Thank you for showing up anyways, right?

Relationship building corresponding to the concept of care is important, as Jack made clear. The care he shows for his students is purposeful and is designed to create an environment where students can be successful. Adult modeling, like the kind Jack demonstrates to his classes each day, establishes a classroom with a culture of caring, which of course echoes Nel Noddings works. Jack said: "Regardless of how they've behaved in the past, or that day, I always like to let them know I'm glad they're there, right?" This was very similar to a comment made by Chrissy:

> I had a Staples button in my office, and sometimes I would hit the "That was easy" and I would say "we're resetting our button and I'll see you tomorrow." And I always knew that we could have a really bad period one, or period two, but they knew they had me again in period three and four, so no grudges were being held.

The purposeful ways Jack and Chrissy showed their classes kindness, led to the successes their students have experienced and are the result of the good relationships they purposefully constructed with their classes.

This is similar to the sentiments expressed by Chrissy as well. She said that her students, after being submersed into her classroom culture:

> realized they didn't have to fight or flight to survive. They were accepted, and so we gave them back that feeling of "I can do this". And so that's where we really tried to focus on building self-esteem, and building up their character as a learner so that they felt more successful.

This expression of compassion and concern which can lead to academic success in Chrissy's classroom is reminiscent of Weil's theories in regards to Human Education. Chrissy's students were able to demonstrate their learning while also developing their own empathetic abilities. These skills are particularly important for marginalized youth who often need this additional support.

Jack shared another story about the importance of relationships with me, where he had students engaged in a project for over a week, planning and presenting their findings. Jack told me that he thought the success of the project was largely due to the fact that he had given students a chance to voice their own opinions, but in chatting together more he came to an epiphany. I said: "So that to me speaks to the culture you had in that classroom. So again, what do you think you did to make it that safe space? Again, I don't think this was something you could have done a week in, right?" After thinking about it, Jack realized that it was about the relationships he had built in the classroom, not only between him and his students but between the students themselves. Jack highlighted the student's "comfort with each other" and "the time it takes to build it" as the ultimate indicators for how a project's success might be determined.

Chrissy echoed the feelings of the previous two participants but also stressed how important dialogue was:

> Well we spoke respectfully to each other. There were times where they were angry, and I let them be angry, they had a reason. I was never one to force someone to do, you have to go apologize. Because I'm telling you to go apologize, but you may not be ready to apologize, but I would have a conversation when they cooled down, and I would say "Your behavior or words were hurtful and when you're ready, I think you should have a conversation with her about the words you used. Perhaps you can explain why you used

> them, and what you would do differently." And so, we did a lot of talking like that with kids.

Chrissy's description of the role dialogue played in her classroom culture supports the work of Senge:

> The discipline of dialogue also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interaction in teams that undermine learning. The patterns of defensiveness are often deeply ingrained in how a team operates. If unrecognized, they undermine learning. If recognized and surfaced creatively, they can accelerate learning (Senge, p.12).

Both Senge and Chrissy establish the necessity good dialogue plays in not only establishing a successful classroom culture, but they also show how important it is for at risk youth in particular. At risk youth need a "healthy community to buffer the pain, distress and loss caused by earlier trauma" (Perry and Szalavitz, p.232).

So, while creating good relationships with students may be considered best practice when teaching all students, it is a necessity when teaching youth who are considered at risk to not graduate high school. At risk youth crave what they are missing in their lives outside of the classroom. Greene (2008) establishes that many at risk youth have lost faith in the adults around them, so if the teachers in their lives can create and maintain positive relationships with them, then at risk youth have a better chance of achieving success in school.

Setting / Routine

The physical setting of where the programming for at risk youth takes place emerged as an important theme early on in the interviews I conducted. Chrissy said that to get things started positively each day she needed to create "a home base, a soft-landing space". Chrissy also said that serving breakfast each day, although she did not have an official breakfast program, created

an inviting setting, where individualized learning could happen. Her program was in a large high school, but ran separately from the main courses, offering a close sense of community that the larger setting could not provide. Chrissy's description of her setting contributed to boosting the self-esteem of her students, leading to their successes.

Jack stressed the importance of the physical aspects of the classroom itself, attributing creating a good classroom culture for at risk youth to routines and cleanliness. Jack saw the classroom itself as a reflection of the respect he had for his students:

> I always like to keep it clean, you know? I hate wrappers on the floor and shavings and stuff like that, so I keep it clean. Tried to find that balance between having stuff on the walls, and have it be sparse, but not too crowded as well, right? I always like to keep it orderly and let the kids know where everything is and where they can find their materials. It's all part of the initiative of the space. And putting up their work and stuff, and knowing where they can go for stuff, and find it helps a lot to make it feel like their space, rather than where just they're supposed to show up for six hours a day.

This idea corresponds with the work of Jennifer Katz who describes the importance of the classroom: By caring about the setting of his room through the management of routine, the placement of visuals and the cleanliness of their shared space, Jack creates an environment where success for all learners has a better chance to occur. Janet did this as well by "moving tables, chairs, moved seats" all in efforts to settle students into their environment." Knowing what your students need but not being able to properly deliver it was a frustration Chrissy shared in this area.

Chrissy struggled with setting and routine but acknowledged how important these elements were for her classroom culture to be successful. Most of Chrissy's struggles came from budgetary restraints: "Over the years it did change, and we were able to change it bit by bit, but we were always restricted by the budget of the division and the school." Chrissy shared that she knew what her students needed to be more successful, but that year after year, the money just wasn't there, and that's a sentiment most teachers can empathize with as well.

All three participants saw the importance that setting and routine played in their successful classroom cultures. Again, while these elements of a classroom culture may be important to all teachers, teachers of at risk youth in particular, are mindful that classroom structure is important for students who typically require more supports and understanding. At risk youth are "students who feel deeply alienated and disengaged from the academic and social world of school; and students who are withdrawn and isolated on the fringes of the social web" (Danforth & Smith, p.8). So, for them structure and routine are important to their success in the classroom.

Project Based Learning

Each participant became visibly more interested in sharing when the discussion of how they taught their students came up. Questions 12 and 13 in Appendix A asked participants to describe situations where lessons went well or poorly in their classrooms. When responding, all three participants discussed how important project-based learning was for creating a successful classroom culture. For me, this is representative of the constructivist classroom. Combined with experiences and reflection, students are better able to make meaning of the world around them. I almost feel like making a list here, of all the ideas the participants shared, because they are just so good, but I'll start with the ideas from Janet.

The students in Janet's classroom, mostly First Nations youth from communities in Northern Manitoba, expressed an interest in creating moccasins. Janet stressed that although she knew that attention needed to be paid to improving the numeracy and literacy skills of her students, she also knew that traditional teaching methods would not work for her students: "I prefer to do projects, like we make moccasins. They did a lot of bead work." Janet said that through these projects she was able to teach the skills the students needed to earn their credits and achieve skills. Janet shared that with her students they participate in pipe ceremonies, they built bird houses together, there's an art club as well as a bike repair workshop. Janet helped her students to create a drumming club, and she organizes work placements where students can learn employability skills. When answering the question about what didn't work, Janet was quick to point out that traditional methods are not as successful with her learners:

> I have these little math booklets, but the kids don't care, and they've just never been in school. So this one kid, he goes "This is really hard for me." and I go "Why is this really hard? The answers are right there on the page." And I showed him, and I said "All you have to do is keep thinking about it, and it's repeated adding.", which is multiplication, and he's starting to get it, but he's not at school enough, like he's gone again, y'know?

The basics, the gaps in learning and self-esteem all hinder the student's ability to learn successfully from traditional methods. Janet's example of a situation when things did not work out as she had hoped was during a math class. I asked: "Is there a situation that you've set up that you're just like, I would never do that again?" Janet responded: "Um, trying to teach math at the board, yeah! And I like to let them use their hands, or fingers, or calculator, but I always need to put it into real terms." When I asked about her use of textbooks, Janet responded: "No, they work against me. I think the wording, especially with my kids, is too high and too big." Janet said that

when presented with traditional teaching methods her students typically respond with "I don't know how to do this, I don't know how to do this." Like right away, doesn't even look at the page. That's what my kids do." Janet shared with me though that when she presented her students with project-based learning opportunities, not only were the students able to learn the curriculum requirements, but they also learned valuable lessons about working together, communication and their community. These experiences also support a constructivist approach, as constructivists would not consider rote learning or memorization of facts as valuable learning experiences. The process of actively engaging the student to make connections to what they're learning to their own lives are what help the students to make meaning that is lasting and worth-while.

Janet also shared that connecting her student's previous experiences to learning projects in the classroom helped them to connect to larger ideas and concepts. Janet said: "Go with your strength, and your strength is Aboriginal teachings. Teach these kids the Seven Teachings" and when he did his Seven Teachings he was in his glory. It was beautiful." Strength based teaching that connects students to their previous experiences also adheres to a constructivist learning theory. Connecting what the students are learning in the classroom to the real world that they are experiencing, not only respects and honors where the student has been, it also assists them in learning the content in a way that is useful and structured around their needs.

Jack also shared that his classroom revolved around projects as well. From researching where our clothes come from, to running a mock-Parliament, to creating new holidays, his classroom culture began to thrive when he introduced project-based learning to his at risk learners. Jack, reflecting on his student's circumstances at home, gave students the chance while doing projects to become leaders, which boosted their self-esteem: "They have those leadership

qualities, and there have been a couple of times where I have seen them, you know, be the referee between two kids and try to be the intermediate, right?" This method of learning also supports the work surrounding Individualism versus Collectivism (Hofstede, 1980) because when children work together and then eventually become leaders it is reflective of the gradual release model. Also, Vygotsky (1978) contends that learning is also a combined goal, something that is to be achieved together. So, this activity then is also representative of a constructivist view as well. Jack felt that project-based learned was preferable for his student's success in his classroom because it was less about him being a taskmaster and more about keeping the room calm, where learning could then happen organically: "I try to be open in the sense of if there's something that works better for us, let me know. So. I try to be open, I guess in that way. Try to keep everyone calm as we go." Jack said of his classroom culture: "I'm more reminding them "Okay, this is how we do it in this class." So I had one student tell me I was the most chill teacher they had ever had." This approach supports a constructivist theory as well. For Jack, running a project-based learning classroom created an environment of calm which his learners used to fuel their success.

Chrissy was quick to answer question 12, eager to tell me about the unit she did that "went awesome" in her classroom. Again, without prompting, another participant shared with me how valuable project-based learning was in her classroom:

> An archeology unit! I had bought these little sandbox units, I went to the Dollar Store and got these little dishes, and bones, like atom molecules, like dinosaurs, but they had to grid the tape, they had to grid the sandbox. So, I brought in these, and we had like dirt and different layers of the earth. And then they had to grid it, and then they had to, they had little toy brushes and pans, and they had to slowly, carefully, because of the different

> levels, where the different archived objects, they had to grid it and record where they found it.

Lessons like this one, especially where the projects lent themselves to success for the students involved because of their continued involvement and interest in the material. Chrissy added: “Any hands-on activity that we did with the kids was just phenomenal!” This was a stark contrast to the way she answered question 13, which asked her to describe a lesson where things did not go well:

> I would say there were times where I didn’t bring reality into the lesson, and I would say that’s usually when it tanked, if I didn’t roll in something from real life. It was almost like I was speaking a foreign language. If I kept it very abstract, algebra actually tends to be very hard, but until I started talking positive or negative, until they started talking about weather and football analogies, and you know, bank accounts and deposits. I had to make it concrete, if I didn’t because usually, especially if I’m marking an assignment, everyone will do really poorly. Why did that happen? And it was a reflection that I didn’t bring something back to it, like how could you do this in the real world?

Connecting lessons to real life experiences and bringing elements of reality into the classroom again are markers of a constructivist approach.

Project-based learning was a cornerstone for all three teachers achieving a successful classroom culture for at risk learners. All three participants reflected that when they used projects with their at risk learners, their classroom culture was transformed. Bolstering the self-esteem of their learners was high on the participant’s lists and when they used more traditional methods with their students such as direct teaching and/or text books, the participants found that their

students not only performed poorly academically, but they expressed how badly they felt about themselves. The dynamics in the classroom, the feeling that the students could master tasks was important to all three participants but all three shared with me that this was only achieved when a project-based method was employed.

Summary

This chapter describes the three prominent themes which emerged from the interviews I did with the participants who agreed to be in my research study. The themes which emerged were building relationships, establishing a routine and the importance of a smaller setting, and using project-based learning activities to deliver curricular outcomes. The most important of these was building good relationships, not only because it was relevant to the classroom setting, but because it also informed all the other decisions the participants made in their classrooms.

First and foremost, participants stressed that building good relationships with their students was an important factor to creating their classroom culture. If they didn't know the students, and not just academically, then the participants felt the could not program for them adequately. Participants provided concrete examples which demonstrated how they built relationships with their students on a daily basis. Participants also discussed how having good relationships with their students meant that they could not only help students solve problems, but the relationship building also fostered a sense of trust, which teachers were then able to transform into a working relationship in the classroom.

Establishing routines in a smaller classroom setting was also a theme which emerged after interviewing the three participants. Physically creating a space for at risk youth to be successful took on different forms for each participant, based on the needs of their students.

Moving chairs, cleanliness, setting up routines and schedules, were all examples of actions my participants took to create a classroom environment that they believed would assist learners. And although this is obviously a completely different theme, it is completely informed by the first theme. Without initiating relationship building, the participants would not have known how to better assist their student population in the spaces they created.

The final theme to emerge was the use of projects to deliver curriculum outcomes. All three participants stressed the importance and relevance that project-based learning has in the classroom, particularly for children with disrupted learning. By using a constructivist approach, students participate in hands-on experiences where they can then apply what they've learned to their previous knowledge base to make new meaning. All three participants emphasized that traditional means of teaching, such as textbooks and taking notes, did not equate with successful learning in their classrooms. Stories of success for their learners were shared with me when we talked about the participants experiences with project-based learning.

The three prominent themes that emerged were supported by the research theories I presented in this study. As I coded the data, I could see easily how these theories not only fit together, but shaped participant's work in the classroom as well.

Care Ethics and Human Education are the foundation for relationship building. On-line writer Maureen Sander-Staudt uses this definition:

> care ethics seeks to maintain relationships by contextualizing and promoting the well-being of care-givers and care-receivers in a network of social relations. Most often defined as a practice or virtue rather than a theory as such, "care" involves maintaining the world of, and meeting the needs of, ourself and others. It builds on the motivation to

> care for those who are dependent and vulnerable, and it is inspired by both memories of being cared for and the idealizations of self (Sander-Staudt, n.d.).

This definition accurately describes the way the participants actively cared-for their students. The participants provided concrete examples of building relationships in their classrooms which centered around the act of caring.

Zoe Weil, co-founder of the Institute for Human Education, discusses the need for "solutionaries" in an interview written in 2012. In the interview, Weil says: "Evidence is growing that education that addresses pressing global issues and which fosters compassion, responsibility, and integrity results in graduates who know more, care more, and become more involved in creating positive change" (Tobias, 2012). "Solutionaries" are, in Weil's opinion, students who can solve complex problems using critical and creative thinking. In doing so, students need to exist in an environment that fosters making: "connections between our choices and their effects on others; which models messages they hoped to convey in the world; and the chance to pursue joy in life by being of service, and to take responsibility for their actions (Tobias, 2012).

These two theories reinforced the work the participants did in their own classrooms in regards to building relationships, even though it may not have intentionally informed them.

Jennifer Katz's work in *Universal Design for Learning* echoes throughout the conversations I had with all three participants. The teachers in my study all said that having a classroom that physically met the needs of their leaners was an important element in creating a classroom culture where at risk youth could be successful. Katz writes:

> The characteristics of the classrooms, the tasks of teaching, and the needs of the students all influence those living in the environment. So does the climate, which is based primarily on the relationships and interactions that take place in the room (Katz, p.121).

By employing concrete instructions and actions in their classrooms, the participants fully connected to this theory.

And finally, the theme of project-based learning and its connections to both theories of Individualism vs. Collectivism (Hofstede) and Constructivism (Vygotsky). All three participants voiced that they wanted their students to become independent learners instead of passive thinkers, and they used project-based learning as a way to foster this student autonomy. Having students connect new ideas to previous ones, using members of their learning community as resources, but ultimately making their own meaning out of the experiential learning students participated in was a goal for all three teachers in the study. "Research (Reeve, 2006) shows that traditional schools and classrooms actually create dependent children, passive learners, and obedient children incapable of critical thinking or passionate engagement" (Katz, p.122). All three participants eschewed the grasp of traditional learning tools and norms for unconventional teaching styles which created communities of successful learners.

All three participant's narratives echoed the theorists presented in this research study, through both their actions and thoughts. Regardless of the levels or curriculum taught, the teachers in the study all placed great importance in inspiring independent learners who knew they were respected and cared for by creating a classroom culture that supported their needs and interests.

Chapter 5

Summary of Findings

By the time I had finished my interviews, transcribed the conversations, and coded it all to find themes in the data, I can honestly say that I was overwhelmed with the responses my participants gave me. Their honest stories and genuine interest in the craft and artistry of teaching was inspiring.

The answer to my research question is that strong relationships, a stable routine and teaching through a project-based model create classroom cultures where at risk learners can be successful. Please refer to Appendix B for the framework I have created which illustrates my findings. I feel that the framework I created best captures my findings for those wanting to do further research on this topic.

Framework - Theme A: Relationships

Participants shared concrete examples of experiences in their classrooms which enhanced the relationships between them and their students. Examples such as goal setting, dialoguing about experiences, expressing gratitude, and sharing a meal together all helped the teachers in my study form bonds that enhanced the culture of their classroom and ultimately led to their students experiencing success in a variety of ways. This type of relationship building corresponded to the research I did on the theories of Nel Nodding (Care Ethics) and Zoe Weil (Human Education).

Framework – Theme B: Setting/ Routine

All three participants firmly stated by providing multiple examples, that establishing a routine in the classroom and by having a smaller, more intimate classroom setting that it assisted their at risk students to gain success in areas where they previously had not. Examples of routines included a hand in bucket for work and knowing where all the supplies in the classroom where located ahead of time. Examples of how their classroom setting enhanced learning for their students included keeping the classroom clean as well as arranging furniture to better suit individual learning needs. The work the participants did in their classroom was supported by the research provided by Jennifer Katz (Universal Design for Learning).

Framework – Theme C: Project-Based Learning

When it came time to tell me about the wonderful projects the participants had worked on with their students I heard, from each of them, how involved they were with the projects their students had worked on, and how these projects assisted their students in multiple ways. These activities transformed their students, allowing them to learn not only curricular outcomes but also about working together, using multiple intelligences and finding their strengths as learners. Examples included drumming groups, community-based work experience, creating their own holidays, and making moccasins. These projects built upon the students own prior experiences to make new meanings. This approach is consistent with the works of both Vygotsky (Constructivism) and Hofstede (Individualism vs. Collectivism). I do feel that the framework is possibly the biggest product of my study for future researchers and I hope that it summarizes the conclusions in a meaningful way.

Conclusions

My research has focused on the "how's" of creating a successful classroom culture, but the "who" and the "why do they do it?" would be fascinating. I approached this research, looking for the magic of an alternative high school program's success through a lens of attainable actions. But what if the magic of the program isn't created through a vehicle, like *Global Issues* or *Math*, but instead through the person who is delivering it? Janet talked about the difficulty of finding a substitute teacher for her classroom, which I've struggled with as well: "I don't think the subs care and yeah, they (the kids) sense the negativity or whatever's there." All three of my participants served their classrooms with compassion and wisdom. This experience of hearing their stories strengthened my own resolve to continue to approach my class of at risk learners with the same resolve and sense of purpose – I'm there for them.

When it came to answering questions about the role the classroom culture played in their student's successes or failures (appendix A, questions 1-4), I was surprised that all three participants could not quite identify what their classroom culture really was. After experiencing this during the first interview, I decided to give examples during the following two when both teachers struggled to articulate the culture they had created. When asked about their classroom culture, all three responded with examples of demographics – the number of boys versus girls, the amount of children in foster care or in group homes, – but participants didn't identify if they thought their classrooms inspired fear, or chaos, etc. even when they, to me, through previous responses had told me they had created classrooms where care and generosity were obviously the culture that prevailed. These teachers had created a powerful culture in their classrooms, but they were unaware of it as a controlling dynamic.

The culture of a classroom is an element of student learning that goes on “in the background”, and by that, I mean that it’s influence is constant and intentional though not always overtly expressed. A classroom culture can be built on purpose although sometimes it is assembled unintentionally. A classroom culture is created through our daily actions and interactions, both positive and negative. The examples I gave two of my participants came from my own experiences as a student. I had a math teacher who would throw chalk at students if they answered a question wrong. He would also walk around during his lesson and smack the end of a meter stick down on pupil’s desks for effect. For me, a transient student with interrupted learning and few mathematical skills, my teacher had created a culture of fear. Each day I concentrated on not having chalk thrown at me instead of learning algebraic formulas. The other example I gave participants was a culture of chaos. I once had a teacher who sat at her desk and read the paper while students shouted and laughed, and very few actual lessons were taught. With no direction from the adult in charge and peers yelling all around me I associated that room with turmoil and disorder. Needless to say, neither of those classroom cultures resulted in successful grades for me. Through action, inaction and interactions the classroom culture is created. Each experience builds on the next for at risk youth to be successful in the classroom those incidents need to be positive ones.

During the course of my research a new and predominant question arose. What defines success for at risk youth? For me as well as for my participants, we agreed that success for at risk youth does not necessarily mean that they graduated with a high school diploma. Improved attendance, seeking help for mental health issues, and leaving abusive relationships, were all examples that were given as definitions of success. All participants agreed as well that their

definitions weren't necessarily reflective of their administration and/or student's guardians. This question of defining success could be a topic for further research.

Interestingly, none of the participants discussed academics at any great length. Although all three participants discussed teaching in high school settings, none of them mentioned marks, curriculum goals or the importance of reporting such as Provincial exams. Participants responded to questions about the work their students were doing with enthusiasm and shared stories with me about great projects their students were involved in, but none of the participants discussed these projects in relation to curriculum goals or outcomes. All participants, when discussing academics segued the conversation into how the learning their students were engaged in was really about making meaning out of the world around them, and less about final marks. This topic could also be one for further inquiry as all participants engaged in the same phenomena, but it was not examined at length.

So often, teachers of at risk youth can feel isolated, as their job is different from that of their peers. Teachers of at risk youth are often called upon to do more than just teach a curriculum. Before these teachers can even get to the academic part of their day sometimes they must serve breakfasts and counsel students about their home lives. All three teachers shared with me that in working with at risk youth they found that it was probably not a job for everyone, and that they felt that teaching at risk youth was a calling and not just their employment. Chrissy said "Teachers of at risk youth have a special knack for it, and that goes for EA's too in that some kids will challenge you to no ends, but we'll say bring it on. I'm there for them." Teachers of at risk youth who achieve success with their students have more in common than not and would also be an exceptional area of future study. This idea, that no just anyone can do this job was echoed by all three participants and brings my study full-circle.

I began this study by sharing the story of my experiences as a mom and the impact that had on me. I see now that I can also reflect on my experiences of teaching at risk youth through a similar lens. The three participants I spoke with all shared that they felt that teachers of at risk youth were different from other classroom teachers. The participants shared that the risk of burn-out was higher and that they felt it was not a job they could do for an extended period of time. When I heard the participants discuss this phenomenon, I was relieved, because I thought I was the only one who felt that way. I have expressed many times to colleagues and family that I feel I have an "expiration date" written on me somewhere, and that when it's time to move on, I'll "just know". I believe, as my participants do, that teachers of at risk youth need to be creative, flexible, understanding and non-judgemental, but it all takes its toll. This idea of crating a classroom culture where at risk youth can be successful is rewarding, but make no mistake, it's also hard work.

For me as a teacher, this research answered my question "So what?" in a really satisfying way. Often, as I also found in this study, teachers of at risk youth work alone. Their programs not only isolate children, the programs isolate the teachers as well. I work in a large school, but in a setting that is separate from my peers. The setting works well for the students, helping those students who battle with depression and anxiety, but it doesn't support me when I need to collaborate or when I require some assistance. Hearing from three peers, whose experiences were so similar to mine, gave me the validation that I didn't even know I needed in creating the spaces I have for my students. A classroom culture is so important, and I think about it all the time. What am I choosing to put on the walls? What am I choosing not to showcase today? All of those choices, small though they might seem, create such an immense impact on the learners in our community.

We as educators, need to be more cognizant of the role the classroom culture plays for our students. Walk into a typical grade one class versus a typical grade twelve class. What looks different and why? What kind of a culture is the teacher creating? Educators need to ask themselves these questions because it impacts the determinant of the student's success on a daily basis.

In conclusion, I was not surprized but thrilled nonetheless to learn that the answers to my research question are the same principles which guide my own practice in the classroom each day. The driving factor to creating a successful classroom culture for at risk youth was that of relationships. Building good relationships with students was instrumental for the successes of the at risk youth in my participant's classrooms. Finding out student's needs through conferencing and goal setting, dialoging on a daily basis, and taking the time to find out who they are as learners was important to each participant and their roles in their classrooms. Participants also reported that having a welcoming setting, where students felt safe to be themselves and to share their own stories was an important factor in their work. These settings were created through purposeful and thoughtful planning, involving breakfast programs, visual artwork, routines and respect. And finally, participants reported that creating project-based learning experiences for their learners made all the difference in how their classroom culture was built for success. Leaving behind more traditional ways of teaching such as lectures, notes and textbooks for makers labs and inquiry projects led to a learning environment where strengths of all kinds could be viewed as successes. All three participants created these classroom cultures purposefully and with the intent on students being as successful as possible. I learned a lot from each participant and this study as a whole. It has shaped the way I look at my classroom the way I get to tell my story from now on, and I am thankful for the experience.

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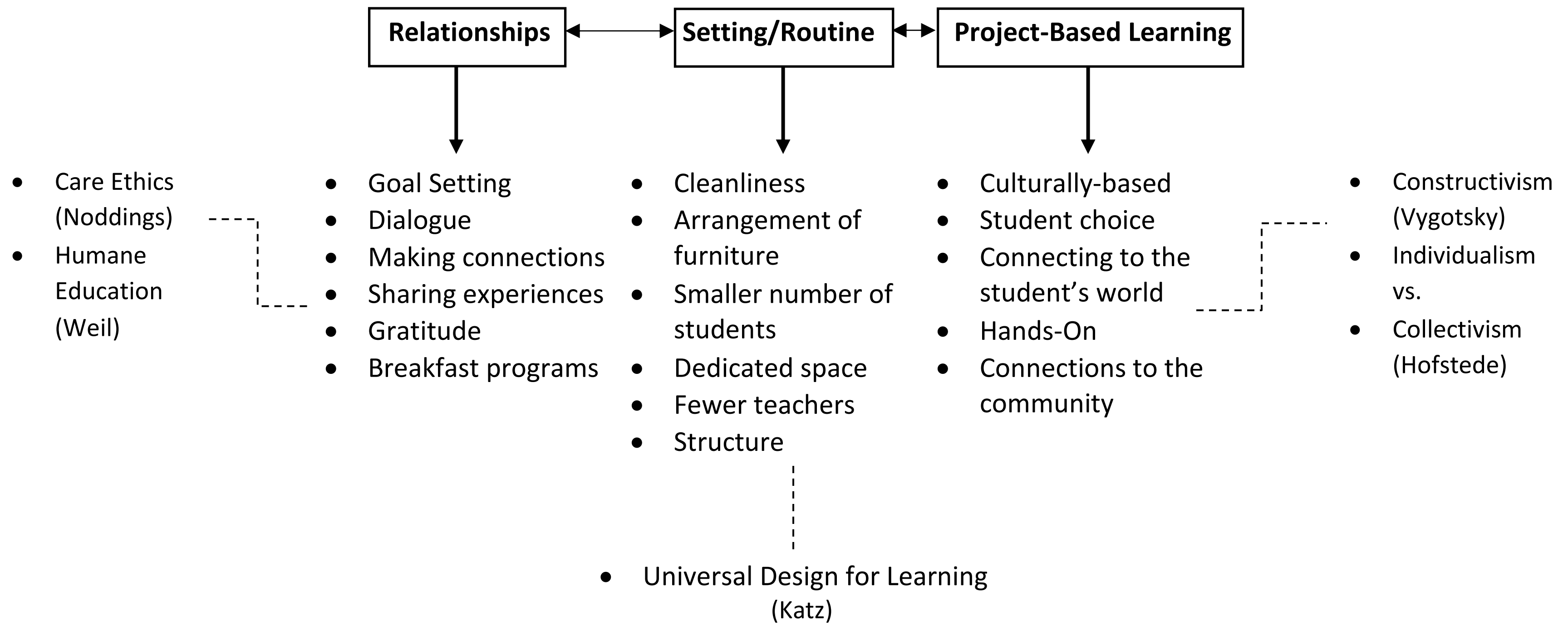
Appendix A

Guiding Interview Questions

The following questions will be the basis for each participant that is interviewed:

1. How would you describe the culture of your classroom?
2. What forces do you think are at work in your classroom that created that culture?
3. Are there aspects of your classroom culture that you would like to change? Can you please explain?
4. Can you please explain how diversity plays a role in your classroom culture?
5. What sort of routines have you established in your classroom that have affected its culture?
6. Can you elaborate on the guiding principles or theories you follow which enhance or create the culture in your classroom?
7. How do conversations/ student talk affect the culture in your classroom?
8. Can you explain how the physical aspects of your classroom affect its culture?
9. How do you create a culture where at risk youth can become successful learners?
10. How does the culture in your classroom promote student engagement?
11. What professional development supports your efforts?
12. Can you tell me about a situation that went well in your classroom? Why do you think this happened?
13. Can you share with me about a time when a situation went poorly in your classroom? What do you think was the cause?

Appendix B
Thematic Research Results
Successful Classroom Culture Determinants for At Risk Learners



Appendix C

PROTOCOL APPROVAL

TO:	**Pamela Schoen** Principal Investigator	**(Advisor: Frank Deer)**
FROM:	**Zana Lutfiyya, Chair** Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)	
Re:	**Protocol #E2017:077 (HS21044)** **"Influence of Classroom Culture on At Risk Learners"**	

Effective: February 6, 2018 **Expiry:** February 6, 2019

Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB) has reviewed and approved the above research. ENREB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.*

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
2. Any modification to the research must be submitted to ENREB for approval before implementation.
3. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be submitted to ENREB as soon as possible.
4. This approval is valid for one year only and a Renewal Request must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date.
5. A Study Closure form must be submitted to ENREB when the research is complete or terminated.
6. The University of Manitoba may request to review research documentation from this project to demonstrate compliance with this approved protocol and the University of Manitoba *Ethics of Research Involving Humans.*

Funded Protocols:
- **Please mail/e-mail a copy of this Approval, identifying the related UM Project Number, to the Research Grants Officer in ORS.**

Research Ethics and Compliance is a part of the Office of the Vice-President (Research and International)
umanitoba.ca/research