

Building Community With Students at Risk: A Proposed Curriculum Intervention Model

by

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**BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH STUDENTS AT RISK:  
A PROPOSED CURRICULUM INTERVENTION MODEL**

**BY**

**HEATHER ALANA SYME**

**A Thesis/Practicum 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**

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## Abstract

This study suggests, through an integrative review of literature, that building community is an effective intervention for helping to keep students at risk in school and it proposes a curriculum intervention model based on strategies that build community in the senior years classroom context. Using critical pedagogy, social reconstruction, and humanistic education, the model proposes a new paradigm in education with a curriculum as currere focus. The model aims at students feeling a sense of community and having students become empowered through critical pedagogy. This is achieved through establishing relationships and care, belonging and acceptance, a sense of being valued, and through classroom environment and interactions.

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## Dedications

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## Chapter 1: Purpose, Research Questions, and Genesis of Inquiry

Even the Canadian Government admits: “further steps need to be taken to encourage students in Canada to complete high school” (Canadian Ministers of Education Council, 1999, p. 1). According to The Pan Canadian Education Indicators Program (PCEIP) (1999) Canada’s high school completion rates are the second lowest of the G7 nations, with approximately 20% of 19-20 year olds without high school completion. The Government also admits: “Without this credential, they [drop outs] face economic disadvantages...It is evident that people with less than high school education have more trouble finding and keeping jobs than those with higher levels of educational attainment” (Canadian Ministers of Education Council, 1999, p. 1). Studies also show that between 15-30% of American students will drop out of school before completing high school (Dryfoos, 1990; McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, 1998; Nichols & Steffy, 1999). The social and economic implications of these statistics are staggering when we consider the impact dropping out has on the psychological well being of those people. Typically school dropouts go on to have lower self esteem than students who complete high school, have poorer paying jobs than their peers who graduated, often have a lower socioeconomic status and are less likely to be able to afford out of school activities for their children (McWhirter et al, 1998). Furthermore, school dropouts often propagate a cycle of lower expectations for their children (McWhirter et al, 1998). In terms of economic consequences, McWhirter et al (1998) found that school dropouts are

unemployed more often (almost 50% more than graduates), and earn significantly less (\$100 000 to \$250 000 less) over their lifetimes than those who complete high school.

These statistics draw attention to the North American crisis being experienced in Canada and The United States. The profile of this percentage of dropouts usually targets those deemed "students at risk." For the purpose of this study, student at risk is defined as those students who are at risk of general school failure and at risk of dropping out of school (Costello, 1996). More specifically:

Students at risk are those who together with general school failure have a low sense of self worth, are often distrustful of adults and authority, have a disdain for, and are uninterested in school. They are also characterized by a long history of academic failure and non-attendance, feeling alienated from school, accepting failure as a way of life, and learning to hate school (Syme, 2001).

When I began to question what was being done to help these students at risk stay in school I found disappointing answers. Indeed, where alternative schools exist the horizon is relatively bright for students at risk, however, in the typical high school, little was being done to promote success with these students. There also existed a trend in students choosing to stay or drop out because of their relationship with their teachers and school in general. Upon investigation, I realized my general observations were in tune with the research literature. Often, relationships, that are positive ones, are cited as the most significant aspect of a student's experience in school, and as the primary reason a student at risk will choose to remain in school or drop out (Downing & Vette, 1994; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Peart & Campbell, 1999; Rogers & Renard, 1999). My own classroom experiences with students at risk confirm this research. Indeed, I believe my students at risk choose to stay in school in part because of the positive relationship they had with me

and because of the community environment we developed in my classroom. Relying on my own experiences as a guide, I then set out to research if building community was an effective intervention for helping to keep students at risk in school, and what classroom teachers could do build community with students at risk, and to what benefit.

### Research Questions

As a method of addressing this dropout crisis, I am proposing an inquiry into the notion of building community with students at risk. My first purpose then is to investigate if building community is an effective intervention for keeping students at risk in school. Assuming that the answer to the first research purpose is yes, then a second purpose is to create a curriculum intervention model that focuses on building community with students at risk with the explicit aim of helping students to succeed in school. My research questions follow as such: 1. is building community an effective intervention for helping to keep students at risk in school, and 2. what can classroom teachers do to build community in their classrooms to the benefit of students at risk? From these two research questions came the proposed curriculum intervention model. Such a model serves as a response to several initiatives. Firstly, this model serves as a response to my own desire to help students at risk stay in school and be successful there. Secondly, it also serves as a response as the culmination of the reviewed literature in a synthesized form, and finally, in response to the 1999 PCEIP claim that: "Another area of research could explore the benefits of programs designed to help [students] who have dropped out complete high school...Such research might include action-oriented studies and *interventions* [italics added] to promote improvements" (p. 1). I am proposing an intervention aimed at

helping students at risk, whether previous dropouts or not, to remain in school and be successful there.

The response to those two research questions is lengthy. The next five chapters will address the research questions, the related literature to those questions, and the response to that investigation. Chapter one will address the purpose of the inquiry, the two specific research questions as well as the genesis of these questions, the methodology used for this inquiry, namely integrated inquiry, and the assumptions and theoretical background of this inquiry. Chapter Two is a thorough and tailored, yet not exhaustive, review of recent related literature. This review of related literature serves as the research base for this study since my study is an integrated inquiry using research as its data source. Also found in Chapter Two is the definition of curriculum as related to this inquiry and proposed intervention model, definitions of key terms to appear throughout, and a description of the approach to reviewing and synthesizing the literature. Chapter Two explores the five categories for review: namely perspectives on curriculum as they relate to students at risk; belonging and acceptance; relationships and care; classroom environment and interactions influence the extent to which students at risk feel as if they connect, as if they belong, are valued and valuable, and are cared about; and stand alone texts of consequence. Chapter Three presents a brief rationale for this type of curriculum intervention, discusses the model in terms of its interface with other curricula, and outlines some fundamental aspects of empowerment in terms of how it relates to students at risk. It also investigates critical pedagogy in terms of the curriculum orientations used in the proposed model, namely those of curriculum as *currere*, humanistic education,

curriculum as transformation, and finally curriculum as social reconstruction. Chapter Four briefly explores the implications from the research literature and the issues related to implementing this type of curriculum intervention. More specifically, Chapter Four outlines preparing teachers, students, and classrooms for the intervention. As well, this chapter also discusses modes of democracy since the proposed intervention presupposes this element. Chapter Five is the proposed curriculum intervention model where, based on the review of the related literature, a curriculum intervention model is proposed to be used by senior years teachers in their classrooms. The model suggests strategies for building community to the benefit of students at risk. The aim of this curriculum intervention model is to help keep students at risk in school by giving them a sense of belonging and feeling of being connected, and by making them feel valued and valuable. Classroom interactions and environment determine the extent to which students at risk will feel a sense of belonging or value, and accordingly, the curriculum intervention model focuses on environment and interaction strategies designed to promote and build community. The model makes direct connections to the reviewed literature since the model is based on an integrative inquiry method where knowledge is synthesized into a new conceptual framework. As a way to ease this synthesis, a graphic of the literature is included to aid in helping readers see how the literature fits in with the intervention. Finally, Chapter Six summarizes the main aspects of the previous five chapters highlighting essential ideas and premises. It also offers conclusions regarding the review of related literature, the proposed curriculum intervention model, and its potential effect.

### Methodology: Integrative Inquiry

The methodology employed in this study is not traditional in the sense of having research participants and being able to say: “this is a qualitative action research study” etc. What I can say is that yes, it follows an integrative inquiry model in that it sought out knowledge in a specific area, brought together that knowledge into organized categories, analyzed that knowledge and proposed a useful conceptual framework, and repackaged a cogent, consensus friendly model relevant to researchers and teachers (Marsh, 1991, p. 273). Integrative inquiry has “an emphasis on integrating diverse material into a particular conceptual framework so that some new perspectives or relationships are introduced” (Marsh, 1991, p. 272). Where this emphasis fits with the proposed curriculum intervention model is that the model, together with the inquiry, indeed brings together diverse materials for creating a conceptual framework, namely the intervention model. The diverse materials used here include not only the related literature dealing with the key concepts of belonging, acceptance, value, connection, and community, but also include the frameworks of humanistic curricula, ideals of social reconstruction through curricula, and critical pedagogy. The diversity is obvious, while what are new are the perspectives on curricula as related to, and proposed for, students at risk.

Ward (as cited in Marsh, 1991) established four criteria for determining the adequacy of knowledge generated via synthesizing research. These include addressing significant variables and interactions, using terms that avoid equivocal meanings, are usable in practice, and represent a consensus that is acceptable to researchers and practitioners (p. 272). While almost exclusively aimed at quantitative research at the time, thus directing

attention toward variables, integrative inquiry has changed to include research and writings other than studies. The knowledge for this curriculum intervention does meet Ward's criteria in that it addresses significant notions of community and students at risk along with notions of curricula, avoids equivocal meanings by clearly defining terms in Chapter 2, proposes a synthesis of the knowledge that is employable and practical, and which also represents a consensus of the synthesized knowledge.

Further to the integrative inquiry model are Roberts' (as cited in Marsh, 1991, p. 273) common approaches to integrative inquiry. The system of motivation for this inquiry was the notion of building community with students at risk. The formulation of a framework for organizing knowledge came from reading the literature and determining categories for review. Each of these categories emerged through a synthesis of the knowledge and perspective presented in each text. Next follows the analysis and repackaging of information where based on the review of the related literature and from this synthesis of the knowledge I propose the curriculum intervention model.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is first to investigate if building community is an effective intervention for keeping students at risk in school and second to create a curriculum intervention model that focuses on building community with students at risk. The research questions posed are: is building community an effective intervention with

students at risk, and what can classroom teachers do to build community with students at risk, and to what benefit?

Clearly, this inquiry is based on numerous assumptions, perhaps most glaringly that it is the community building and not another intervention that benefits students at risk.

Additionally, this inquiry is built upon the assumptions that teachers can, and want to, build community in their classrooms. The two foundational premises in the intervention model, namely that a) students at risk want to feel connected and part of something and that b) they want to feel valued and valuable are fluid and not easily assessed as being verifiable or verifiably altered, and thus an additional assumption emerges. The entire curriculum intervention model is based on the assumption that students at risk indeed want to feel the above two and that they care about this at all, and that teachers are willing and ready to help keep these students in school. It takes a certain type of teacher personality to implement this curriculum intervention model, someone who is enthusiastic about students, is aware that they will need to bend and be flexible in certain situations, someone who believes in discipline as guidance and not an authoritarian doling out punishment, and finally someone who believes that all students, including those not regularly attending our classes deserve to have a school fit their needs and not vice versa. A further assumption is that classroom interactions and environment affect the way students feel, and, accordingly, how these feelings affect how and what students at risk do in school. There is no doubt that one of the pedagogical biases here is that, as Neill in Summerhill (1960) believed, students should be allowed the freedom to choose and be themselves.

## Genesis of the Study and Intervention: Experiential and Theoretical Geneses

“When we fail to maintain a sense of community within the schools and to foster students’ understanding of the important role they play in society, we are failing our young people” (McWhirter et al, 101).

### Experiential Genesis

We cannot predict our life paths, nor can a new teacher predict whom they will work best with. In becoming a teacher, I thought it would mean teaching great pieces of literature to students who also loved to read and explore fiction. In reality, what is really taught is far more important and far more challenging, in my opinion. I teach students at risk how to care about one another, how to see themselves as valuable and important, and how to recognize their capabilities and experience success in school. How one goes about teaching these fundamentals to students at risk is through building community with them and giving them a sense of belonging and value. In my first few years of teaching, I was given the opportunity to work with struggling students and students at risk. At first, I was terrified: no one had ever “shown” me how to teach these types of students. Only my intuition and sense of what worked and what did not were there to guide me. This sense led both my classes down the community-building path. As the years progressed, a trend emerged: the more my classes became like a community, the more success my students at risk seemed to have. Looking back, I realize that my own autobiography and life history

helped me to know what these students needed, and helped me to empathize with their situations. I too experienced the curriculum as currere, and began to understand that as Pinar (1975) suggests, it is the journey that is of significance.

### Life as a Student at Risk: A Characterization

Imagine from early school days feeling separate and isolated from others. Imagine going into classes detesting your time there, detesting the teachers, detesting the whole school experience. For many students at risk these are not imaginary scenarios but what school for them is like. Too often students at risk demonstrate inappropriate behaviour as a coping mechanism and too many tired and frustrated teachers address and assess these behaviours instead of the student's abilities. The sense of isolation felt by students at risk is deep and pervasive; they are offered little opportunity to feel part of a community of learners, as they perceive themselves often as unable to learn. Students at risk are isolated from the success margins in that they are most often offered negative feedback; based on their behaviour, their academic failure, their sporadic attendance, and their lifestyle choices that often include frequent drug and alcohol use along with risky sexual activity (Brodinsky, 1989). If students at risk feel a part of anything in school, it is that they are isolated from the norm of success and that they are unwelcome "tag alongs" in school culture. It is no surprise, then, that students at risk become school dropouts. When we question the title "student at risk," the definition often ends with "at risk of school failure." It is convenient to label this group as "at risk of school failure," and far

more challenging to help them become “un-at risk” and to help them to experience success at, and to remain in, school.

### Building Community is the Key: My Classroom as Evidence

In working with students at risk, I have come to believe that building community is the key to keeping many of these students in school. Building community, in that they feel a sense of belonging and value, countered the previous sense of isolation felt by many of these students. Once these students realized that they were *accepted* for who they were, that they were perceived as *valuable* and valued, and that they were welcomed to the classroom, many of their behavioural, emotional, social, and academic issues seemed to become manageable contributing to their experiencing success in my English Language Arts class. I believe that success and connections in one class, in this case English, helped these students at risk to feel belonging and value across a wider band: perhaps even school wide. It is with this sense of community or connection that these students choose to remain in school. With the sense of community, school and being in school had more value and feeling.

It is my belief that one of the reasons students at risk drop out of school is because they feel isolated from the larger school community. The students thrive in the community environment we build together. They experience success in a school subject (English), and oftentimes this success carries over to other subject areas leading me to believe that our community building efforts can work in all discipline areas where there are students

at risk. At the end of our course, my students and I notice the “sense” in the room: a sense that tells us our time together is finished and that something will be missed in the future. It is from this sense that I come to know the value and merit of building community with students at risk. I am not naïve enough to think that I and my community building model alone keep students in school. The proposed community building model is one strategy that *helps* to keep students at risk in school. This model *helps* students at risk to experience success. It alone is not the only factor in success or continued failure in school. Family matters, relationship with peer groups, personal life, and interactions with other adults in school also determine whether these students stay in school or leave (Jones & Jones, 2001; McCarty & Siccone, 2001; McWhirter et al, 1998; Page, 2000). But what I know from my experience with students at risk and observing their behaviours within our community is that this intervention gives students at risk a sense of belonging in school, gives them a sense of being valued and valuable, and contributes to their experiencing success in school. I have seen it work numerous times and stand convinced of the benefits building community serves with these students.

### Theoretical Framework Genesis

From reading theorists like Neill (1960), Freire (1970), Noddings (1984), and Kohn (1996, 1998), this intervention model is grounded in the theory of care and caring. One must care in order to successfully build a community and promote change. Neill (1960) cared about students, and in his own way, students at risk, enough to build them a separate school that fit the child. Freire (1970) cared enough to teach Brazilian peasants

to name and dialogue about their world resulting in an educational revolution and his being expelled from Brazil. Noddings (1984), perhaps most noted for her 1984 work Caring, promotes the idea of a curriculum of care and the challenge to care in schools. Finally, Kohn (1996) the most recent of these major theorists, lists creating caring relationships with adults as the first prerequisite to building community (Kohn, 1996). All of these theorists built community in their own way. Although most not framing their theoretical approaches as such, Neill, Freire, Noddings, and Kohn built, promoted, and maintained community to the benefit of students. Warm, caring relationships are often cited as key to effective teaching and learning environments with students at risk (Aronson, 1995; Ciaccio, 2000; Johnson & Lamb, 1994; Peart & Campbell, 1999) further promoting the notion of care and community. Furthermore, in recent years the ideas of community and community building have received enormous attention (English Journal, May 2001; Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2001; National Conference for Youth at Risk, Savannah, GA, 2002). The notion of building community as an effective strategy with students at risk is well documented (Aronson, 1995; Baker, 1999; Ciaccio, 2000; Curwin, 1994; Korinek, Walther-Thomas, McLaughlin & Toler Williams, 1999; Jones & Jones, 2001). While the literature on the theory of the effects of community building is helpful, there seem to be limited publications dealing with *how* teachers might actually go about building community in their classrooms and schools. This curriculum intervention model serves to suggest strategies that teachers can implement in their classrooms in order to promote community building. In implementing the proposed curriculum intervention model, teachers not only promote increased success for students

at risk, but for all students because all students can benefit from building community (Korinek et al, 1999).

### The Curriculum Intervention Model: Three Premises

This study proposes a curriculum intervention model to address the needs of students at risk in a senior years setting. These needs include wanting to feel as if they belong, as if they are connected and part of something, like they are valuable and of value, and that they are cared about. By addressing these needs through building community, it creates a starting point for school and classroom success. Students at risk crave acceptance, attention, and care (Aronson, 1995; Baker, 1999; Ciaccio, 2000; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Friesen, Finney & Krentz, 1999; Johnson & Lamb, 1994). In building community with students at risk, we offer them a sense of place, a sense of value, and a sense of belonging.

**The three primary premises of the curriculum intervention model are:**

- 1. Students at risk want to feel connected and part of something.**
- 2. Students at risk want to feel valued and valuable.**
- 3. Classroom environment and interactions determine the extent to which students at risk feel the above and thereby feel part of a community.**

These three premises come from reading theorists like Kohn (1996, 1998), Maslow (1962, 1976), Neill (1960), McWhirter et al (1998) etc. As Chapter Two will address, each premise stems from extensive literature.

## Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

Since this model proposes a curriculum intervention, we must first define curriculum. It may be best to begin with a definition of what this curriculum is not. It is not outcomes based, intended or planned activities, a transmission model where information is passed on to a learner, or curriculum as subject matter. This is a curriculum of *currere* to experiencing care and community. According to Schubert (1986), "*currere* refers to the running of the race and emphasizes the individual's own capacity to reconceptualize his or her autobiography" (p. 33). Since this curriculum intervention model aims at social reconstruction through helping to end a cycle of drop out etc., reconstruction of one's autobiography fits well with this proposed intervention.

Curriculum is "what we teach", but it is also what and how we experience school and learning. For the purpose of this study, this curriculum is defined as the journey to and the experience of relationships. This curriculum as *currere* is characterized as being marked by an emphasis on the learner, has a purpose to reconstruct society through care and caring, is experiential and existential, focuses on a feeling and experience of an "us", and aims at connections between people. This vision of curriculum as *currere* comes from a synthesis of Pinar's (1975) writing on *currere* (pp. 376-414). Pinar speaks of the journey being the significant part of the educational experience. The proposed curriculum is in line with the above notion of *currere* in that the journey that students at risk experience, significantly that they begin to experience care and a sense of community, is the essential aspect of curriculum. The "journey" is meant to be both individual and mutual at the same time. Regardless of content, intended learning

outcomes, subject matter, or activities, the premier notion of curriculum as defined here is of the journey and of care: care behind all actions, concerns, interactions, behaviours, exchanges, dialogues, and in the set up of the space. The other premier notion is of community and connectedness. Curriculum as currere of care and community has a disparate purpose than curricula as subject matter or intended learning outcomes etc. Its purpose is to have students experience their own journey toward feeling a sense of community. Stemming from this independent and individual journey comes an understanding regarding the journey itself and how this independent journey to community simultaneously characterizes a mutual and shared journey to feeling a sense of community with others. The aims of this curriculum as currere are to connect students with one another, with teachers, with the learning environment; to help them see they are of value, have important contributions, and are worthy of care. Finally, the encompassing purpose is to build community through experiencing individual and shared journeys until a sense of an “us” is established and maintained.

Before proceeding with the review of related literature, we must first be clear on the terms to appear in this and other chapters. Although already defined in Chapter One, the definition of student at risk will also appear here. “Student at risk” is the most difficult to define because the definitions of what an at risk student is, are so diverse. Based on a synthesis of readings and definitions of students at risk, the following definition emerges:

By students at risk, I mean those students who are at risk of general school failure and at risk of dropping out of school. More specifically, students at risk are those who together with general school failure have a low sense of self worth, are often distrustful of adults and authority, have a disdain for, and are uninterested in school. They are also characterized by a long history of academic failure and

non-attendance, feeling alienated from school, accepting failure as a way of life, and learning to hate school (Syme, 2001).

By “building community” and the notion of “community,” Kohn’s definition is closest to the idea promoted here. Kohn states:

In saying that a classroom or school is a ‘community’, then, I mean that it is a place where students feel cared about and are encouraged to care about each other. They experience a sense of being valued and respected; [students] matter to one another and to the teacher. They have come to think in the plural; they feel connected to each other; they are part of an ‘us’. And, as a result of this, they feel safe in their classes, not only physically but also emotionally (1996, 101-102).

This definition of community incorporates three of the premises of the curriculum intervention model in that it speaks to feeling connected, cared about, and valued.

Other key terms include belonging, acceptance, relationships, care, classroom environment, and classroom interactions. Belonging is defined as feeling connected to and part of something, whether that is a group, a class or an individual sense of feeling connected to others in any capacity.

Acceptance means feeling and communicating one’s total approval for another or for oneself. To be accepted is to feel like you belong and will not be rejected for a trivial reason. Acceptance is not blind to problems, and eventually some people come to not be accepted according to their behaviour or attitudes, but as characterized here, acceptance means the experience when others do accept and appreciate one’s behaviours and attitudes.

Relationships are those connections between humans that impact or have influence on our lives. In this study, relationships are almost exclusively used in the positive save a few places where the negative impact a relationship can have is discussed. In order to experience a relationship one must first experience a measure of trust and care, thus affording a connection between people. It is this connection between people that is the relationship.

Care is perhaps the most difficult to define. By care, it means showing concern for, being interested in, feeling amorous like yet friendly emotions toward another human being. We do not have to have a friendship or even an intimate relationship with another in order to show care. Simply stopping on the street to help someone who has fallen is showing care for that person. In the classroom and school setting, care, the way it is employed here, is exclusively friendly like care. It is not being used it as lover like care.

Classroom environment might be informally designated as where class “happens.” The important aspect of this informal designation is that it encompasses more than an actual classroom or specific class space. It also encompasses both the formal and informal spaces that constitute an environment. The environment aspect of this phrase is the sense or feeling that space emits to its participants and visitors. The classroom environment takes into consideration lighting, physical objects in the space, the boarder areas like walls and their coverings, the temperature and humidity of the space, the smells, the sounds and noise levels, and most significantly classroom environment takes into consideration how the people in that space respond to and act toward each other.

Classroom interactions dovetail from the last aspect of the classroom environment definition. How people respond to and act toward each other are the classroom interactions. More than this, though, is also what physical and verbal communications and actions happen in the classroom space. The interactions between all people and objects in the space are what constitute classroom interactions. I am not trying to limit myself here since I believe the interactions to be more than observable occurrences and to include silences and gaps in dialogue etc. Interactions include the absence of interaction as part of this definition. Other unconventional interactions might include displaying student work, or not displaying it, on the walls or ceilings. Finally, classroom interactions are not exclusively limited to the space itself. How teachers and students respond to and act toward each other outside of the space are still part of the classroom interaction in that these too have impact upon the actual space once there again.

### Review of the Literature

Three areas that characterize the notion of community emerged in the literature review: belonging and acceptance, relationships and caring, and environment and interactions. Each of these areas relates to the three premises of the proposed curriculum intervention model. By combining the three areas that characterize community together with the three premises of the proposed intervention model, five categories for reviewing the literature emerged. These are: 1. perspectives on curriculum as they relate to students at risk, 2. belonging and acceptance, 3. relationships and caring, 4. environment and interactions

determine the extent to which students at risk feel and experience the above, and 5. stand alone texts. These five categories are not exclusive and neither is the literature that is placed in each. In fact, much of this literature could be reviewed in each of the five categories. For convenience sake, the category best suited to each reviewed text was selected. This is in no way meant to box that literature in, and in some places texts may need to be discussed in several sections due to its significance.

This categorical approach reveals five areas of review: 1. perspectives on curriculum as they relate to students at risk, 2. belonging and acceptance, 3. relationships and caring, 4. environment and interactions determine the extent to which students at risk feel and experience the above, and finally 5. stand alone texts. The stand alone texts are titled as such because in their entirety they support and promote the notion of building community. The reviewed texts point to the fundamentals of students at risk needing to feel connected and part of something, and valued and valuable in order to be part of a community, and that the current educational paradigm is not meeting these needs. Furthermore, these texts illustrate the point that classroom and school wide interactions and environments determine the extent to which students at risk feel as if part of a community. This review of related literature responds to the purpose of this inquiry in investigating and answering if building community is an effective intervention with students at risk.

#### Perspectives on Curriculum as they Relate to Students at Risk

The research indicates that the conventional, or typical, educational paradigm (schooling and curricula) does not work for students at risk since numbers of dropouts are increasing (Jones & Jones, 2001; McWhirter et al, 1998; Smith, Barr, & Burke, 1976; Wiles, 1999). The fact that students at risk typically comprise between 20–30 % of a school population and that schools often have dropout rates of 15-20% indicates that conventional schooling is not working for that student population (Wiles, 1999). Furthermore, some go as far as stating that: “instructional methods and materials now in use are failing large numbers of students” (Slavin, Karwiet, & Madden, 1989, p. 3). The current paradigm of schools and curricula is failing students at risk because it does not sufficiently address their unique needs.

More specifically, this paradigm is failing students at risk because it ignores the affective domain and focuses intensely on the cognitive (McWhirter et al, 1998). The current educational paradigm is one of limited demonstrations or toleration for care and concern. It is one of mandated content that must get covered at all costs; is one where in the hierarchy of decision making the students have no say; one where academia rules supreme and those students outside the margins of academia are left to crawl the “course” of curriculum. Clearly, with meeting a measure of success with the other 80%, this paradigm does work for other target student populations.

The eight major contemporary “images” or “characterizations” of curriculum as presented by Schubert (1986) include: 1. curriculum as subject matter, 2. curriculum as a program of planned activities, 3. curriculum as intended learning outcomes, 4. curriculum

as cultural reproduction, 5. curriculum as experience, 6. curriculum as discrete tasks and concepts, 7. curriculum as an agenda for social reconstruction, and 8. curriculum as *currere*. Of these, the current educational paradigm where students at risk are not meeting with success consists of only a standard few, namely curriculum as subject matter, curriculum as a program of planned activities, curriculum as intended learning outcomes, and occasionally curriculum as discrete tasks and concepts and curriculum as experience. Left out of the contemporary typical paradigm is curriculum as agenda for social reconstruction, curriculum as *currere*, and, largely, curriculum as experience. The contemporary paradigm is marked by “traditional” views of curriculum and curriculum organization, while the paradigm most suitable to success with students at risk is marked by the characterizations outside the typical paradigm. In other words, the paradigm made up of subject matter, tasks, outcomes to be met, and planned activities currently employed in schools, does not work for the student at risk population. It follows then, that the ones left out of our contemporary educational paradigm, specifically curriculum as social reconstruction (Freire, 1970), curriculum as experience (Schubert, 1986) and curriculum as *currere* (Pinar et al, 1995) might work for students at risk.

All of the characterizations of curriculum in the traditional contemporary paradigm fail students at risk in the same way: they focus on the cognitive and ignore the affective, thus abandoning the student at risk along the way. The level of inflexibility seen in many of these characterizations and in their employment in schools negates success with students at risk who need care and community before they need subject matter and planned

activities. Without care and community, these students cannot interface with the content or curricula.

The current paradigm fails students at risk for the following reasons:

- The students are offered limited choice in content, subject matter, or in planning the activities
- The students are not treated as stakeholders in the school, in the class, or in their own education
- The students are offered limited to nil responsibilities within a school or curricular framework
- Curricula are content instead of experience, currere, or socially reconstruction
- Power is in the hands of the top echelons of the hierarchy, and is employed in authoritarian manners
- Learning is book and lecture driven
- Students are expected to sit quietly and neatly in desks in rows, while delineation from this form is deemed inappropriate and is consequently penalized
- Students are generally all taught in the same way without much serious consideration for their uniqueness or differences
- The purpose of the school and curricula are cognitive development
- There exists a lack of flexibility, and change from the paradigm or tradition is scarce
- Schools and classes are large and impersonal
- Academics are stressed as is post secondary learning
- Success is largely measured through grades instead of through meaningful learning
- Schools and classrooms lack a sense of community (McWhirter et al, 1998; Rogers, 1969; Smith, Barr & Burke, 1976; Wiles, 1999).

The primary aspects missing from the current educational paradigm are care and feeling a sense of community as made up of belonging, acceptance, relationships, demonstrations of care, and beneficial interactions and environments conducive to establishing these.

A curriculum paradigm of care and building a sense of community would help to address the needs of students at risk currently being missed in the contemporary educational paradigm (Noddings, 1984). This curriculum would need to address such key and

influential concepts as feeling as if one belongs and is accepted (McCarty & Siccone, 2001), experiencing care and concern (Aronson, 1995; Noddings, 1984), having positive interpersonal relationships (Page, 2000), and finally feeling as if one belongs to a community (Kohn, 1996).

### Belonging & Acceptance

Building community is an effective intervention with students at risk because it gives them a sense of belonging and acceptance.

McCarty & Siccone (2001) cite Maslow's hierarchy of needs as physical needs, moving through to safety and feeling free from imminent danger, belongingness and love, self esteem, onto self-actualization, curiosity needs, aesthetic needs, and finally transcendent needs. They focus on Maslow's suggestion that a primary need of all humans is belonging and love. This need has enormous and widespread implications in the field of education. Maslow suggests that if a student's first three needs, physical, safety, and belonging, are not met then that student cannot progress beyond having those needs met. Furthermore, Maslow (1962) states: "The more we learn about man's natural tendencies, the easier it will be to tell him how to be good, how to be happy, how to be fruitful, how to respect himself, how to love, how to fulfill his highest potentialities" (p. 4). Note how nearly all of these exist in the affective domain of human existence, thus underscoring the significance of this domain in terms of not only living a meaningful life, but also in terms of how they could relate to success in school. The search then for belonging in a

classroom becomes huge and hugely important. McCarty & Siccone go on to state that students want acceptance with a group and to feel like they belong, are loved, and are worthy of love, affection, friendship and loyalty (p. 19). As evidence of what can happen if students do not have the primary need of belonging met and if students did not feel a sense of acceptance from peer groups etc., McCarty & Siccone cite the tragic example of the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Colorado. By this example, albeit extreme, we see the huge impact belonging and acceptance have on students, particularly with students at risk. If teachers recognize the tenet of students at risk needing to belong and be accepted, and work to create a sense of belonging and acceptance among our students and ourselves, then our students at risk can move beyond needing belonging and love and be better set to succeed in school by staying in school, and succeed later, in life. Being cognizant that sense of belonging and acceptance are only limited factors in staying in school or choosing to leave, teachers must also consider the home life, job life, drug and alcohol use etc. as further factors in drawing students out of school or helping them to remain. Part of feeling accepted is having one's issues outside of school brought into the realm of understanding and consideration of school and schooling. It is from this standpoint of encompassing consideration that true sense of belonging and acceptance can begin to emerge.

Curwin (1994), in an article related to teaching students at risk how to rejuvenate hope and do better in school and in learning, promotes the intervention of making students feel welcome in school and like they belong.

Schoenlein (2001) argues that the only possible explanation for positive changes in a large high school is the change in school climate, which was the result of a directive to make the large high school feel smaller through various interventions. He states that the intervention to reverse the sense of isolation and alienation, the antitheses to belonging and acceptance, was to create a sense of belonging, acceptance, and a connection between students and school. He further suggests that: "Teachers in large schools need to become more familiar with the names, families, interests, problems, accomplishments, and idiosyncrasies of their students" (p. 30) highlighting not only the intervention but also the effect of students then feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Secada (1999) although specifically focusing on lessons from Hispanic dropouts still catches the impact of acceptance as crucial to helping students at risk of dropping out to stay in school. He determines that by teachers and staff having nonjudgmental attitudes towards students, these students are more likely to stay in school because they feel like they are accepted and belong. Interestingly, Secada focuses on the intimate relationships these teachers develop with their students as correlated to the students feeling accepted and like they belong. Secada characterizes these intimate relationships as detailed and continuous and not as romantic. These teachers became intimately familiar with the details of their students' lives and they accepted these students where they were and how they were. He points to this total acceptance as key to helping this specific group to stay in school. From this, we too can extrapolate that through creating positive and meaningful relationships with our students at risk we can help them to stay in school.

Krovetz (1999), while a high school principal, offered an after normal school hours class for grades nine and ten students who were not regularly attending the school. Through this informal case study, Krovetz found that the sense of being connected helped these students stay in school. He tells of how many of these students spoke of feeling connected to the school for the first time and of how they felt accepted by the teachers because these teachers showed they cared and valued the students. Clearly, belonging and acceptance have a huge influence on students at risk.

A Fort Garry School Division No. 5 (2001) survey of Vincent Massey Collegiate high school students found that “while students believe that they ‘belong’ at Vincent Massey Collegiate and have a lot of friends at school, one-quarter feel ‘lost in the crowd’” (Proactive, p. 7). The survey did not supply enough information to be able to connect these senses of belonging or being lost in the crowd with characteristics of students at risk and those not at risk. This type of additional information was not included and it appears as though the survey did not probe into the areas of student characteristics. What this survey does reveal is the essential nature of all students needing to feel like they are connected and belong. I believe that of the one-quarter who felt “lost in the crowd” many of those students would be students at risk who typically feel marginalized and alienated in school. This survey does not list the number of respondents or the number of students at the school; however, I know that the school has nearly 1100 students meaning nearly 300 of them felt like they did not belong. Lack of connection to a school or its student body is cause for students at risk to feel unconnected. In a large school like Vincent Massey Collegiate it is no surprise that almost 25% of the students, a number which also

characterizes the student at risk population (Dryfoos, 1990; McWhirter et al, 1998; Nichols & Steffy, 1999) feel like they do not belong. Big schools have a difficult time “catching” or connecting to all of their students, particularly those students at risk of dropping out. This lack of feeling as if one belongs is noted as reason for student dropping out of school.

McWhirter et al (1998), in discussing the roots of the dropout problem, point to students at risk feeling as if they did not belong as a main source for dropping out. They state that: “Over the last 30 years dropouts have consistently reported that their main reasons for leaving school before graduation were...lack of belonging, a sense that nobody cared” (p. 100). Again, here we see the enormous impact sense of belonging has on students at risk.

Query & Hausafus (1998) link literacy, community, and belonging as connected to academic achievement. In their study concerning academic achievement in at risk youth and protective factors leading to increased success in school, Query & Hausafus found that academic achievement improved, and noted relationships with adults and bonding to community as primary causes for these improvements. The notion of feeling connected and belonging are evident in the included field notes of this study, particularly so in the discussion and results chapter dealing with bonding to community.

Jonsberg (2000) in summarizing her dissertation speaks candidly about the feeling of alienation her at risk subjects felt. Furthermore, her study found that all the female youth

in her cluster group dropped out of school because they felt alienated and like they did not belong. The fact that many of these girls were also pregnant underscores the significance of feeling as if you belong. Jonsberg writes that none of these youth dropped out because they were pregnant, and instead that they left because they felt isolated and alone.

Friesen, Finny & Krentz (1999) in their study regarding understanding the identities of teachers of students at risk note total acceptance of students as a trait of those teachers. They discuss the idea that effective teachers of students at risk accept and respond to students where they are in terms of development and academic skills. The authors suggest that through the narratives they collected, data pointed to the positive attitudes and behaviours related to acceptance of these students as the strongest contributing factor to success (p. 927).

The influence of feeling as if you belong and are accepted is clear: it helps keep students at risk of dropping out *in* school. Students who feel connected to school and school settings also feel like they belong to that environment. Feeling as if you belong is to know that you are accepted. Knowing you are accepted and that you belong create bonds which make you want to stay and continue to be part of that environment. This cycle of belonging and acceptance is what helps to keep students at risk in school. Without belonging and acceptance students at risk have little reason to stay in school. We know that students at risk often feel outside the success margins and that they crave acceptance

and belonging. As evidenced in many of the reviewed texts, students at risk frequently noted feeling as if they belonged as reason for them to remain in school.

Feeling accepted and like you belong must come from both the teacher and from other students. Many of these texts referred to school climate as a method to making students feel like they belong and were accepted. Knowing this, we might consider positive changes to school and classroom climate in order to foster acceptance and belonging in our students at risk so that they will continue to stay in school.

It is unacceptable for students to leave school because they feel like they do not belong. Likewise, it is unacceptable to allow this trend to continue. It is not difficult to ensure students know they belong and are accepted. It takes some care and effort to build relationships, and these capabilities are within every educator concerned with helping those students at risk of school failure. This literature establishes a clear rationale for striving for creating a sense of belonging and acceptance within schools and classrooms. Furthermore, this literature makes the case for all teachers of students at risk to attempt to reach their students in terms of the affective domain where the notions of belonging and feeling accepted exist.

#### Relationships and Care

Building community is an effective intervention with students at risk because it provides essential relationships necessary to human development.

I have defined relationships as those connections between humans that affect or have influence on our lives. In order to experience a relationship one must first experience a measure of trust and care thus affording a connection between people. It is this connection between people that is the relationship. By care, I mean showing concern for, being interested in, feeling amorous like yet friendly emotions toward another human being.

Students feel connected, as if they belong, and part of something when they develop relationships with other students and with adults. Warm, caring relationships are at the heart of feeling connected to school and to other people, particularly for students at risk. People need relationships in order to feel connected, like they belong, and like they are valued and valuable.

Noddings' (1984) work epitomizes the notion of caring and its effects. In Chapter Three of Caring, Noddings discusses the "cared-for" who I in turn associate with students at risk. She states that "the one-caring comes across to the cared for in an attitude" (p. 65) which speaks to the teacher-student relationships in school. Further to these relationships Noddings continues: "This attitude of warm acceptance and trust is important in all caring relationships...When this attitude is missed, the one who is the object of care taking feels like an object. He is being treated, handled by formula" (p. 65). A relationship without care is to be institutionalized, objectified. Students need to feel care and feel cared about, else they become like the desk: cold, hard, and sterile. Noddings promotes the notion of care and caring as the primary aim of education stating that

without knowing how to care from being cared about, we send students off into the world unready to fully and effectively participate. She discusses what she calls the “crisis of caring” in schools, and repeatedly we see the effects of this crisis of caring in the increasing dropout rate. Noddings is an essential promoter of care and caring in schools.

Page (2000) asserts that key to emotional well being are relationships, and says that:

“Relationships with significant others can alleviate loneliness, secure stimulation, establish contact for self-knowledge, and provide means of sharing joys and pains” (p. 29). Clearly, the impact relationships can have on students at risk is vast. Typically marked by low self-esteem and a pervading sense of isolation, for students at risk a significant relationship can mean the difference between succeeding and withdrawing from school since relationships can counter this loneliness and isolation while encouraging positive self-image through positive stimulation and contact with self-knowledge (Page, 2000). Finally, Page concurs with me in that classroom activities can and do help students to establish and develop skills for relationships. Evidence to this effect is in Query & Hausafus’ (1998) qualitative study that found that one on one instructional time with an assistant not only developed a positive relationship, but that as a result of that relationship students learned better social and communication skills and were able to demonstrate these in a classroom setting.

Hansen & Childs (1998) in an article concerning creating schools where students and staff like to be cite Lightfoot’s (1983) study of Orem High School and state that: “It is a place that seeks to provide a safe environment for building student-teacher relationships,

a place that offers a sense of security and belongingness” (p. 15). In helping to create schools where people like to be Hansen & Childs discuss how subtle messages tell students that the environment is anything but sterile and how the environment at Orem High School fosters a sense of belonging through relationships and collaborative efforts. They indicate that people and the relationships among them are the most important element to developing a positive school climate.

Rogers (1969) speaks of a certain attitude that characterizes those who are successful at facilitating learning. In his narration, he describes this as “prizing the learner, prizing his feelings, his opinion. It is a caring for the learner...It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, having worth in his own right” (p. 109). Note how Rogers’ characterization of this successful facilitator of learning takes into consideration acceptance, value, and the relationship of care. It is not a new idea, that of care in the classroom as effective to learning and schooling, and yet it remains largely ignored.

Rogers & Renard (1999) focus on relationship driven teaching and suggest that relationships fulfill the fundamental emotional needs of students and in turn increase motivation to learn. If we return to the Maslow idea of the hierarchy of human needs, the above statement holds true because Maslow (1968) suggests that human motivation is prompted by having our needs met. Furthermore, Maslow (1968) writes: “So far as motivational status is concerned, healthy people have sufficiently gratified their basic needs...so that they are motivated primarily by trends to self-actualization” (as cited in Jones & Jones, 2001, p. 46). Students are apt to be more motivated in school when more

of their needs are met. Beyond motivation through needs, Rogers & Renard suggest that students are more motivated when they believe that their teachers treat them with respect and when teachers care about students personally. Their concept of relationship driven teaching aims at fostering relationships that help students see teachers as caring and concerned instead of as dictators, enemies, or people out to judge them. They suggest a six step framework for building relationships with students, which will be addressed in detail in a later chapter. However, one of the six steps involves caring. In their discussion of caring and its impact on relationships, the authors speak of nearly every premise of the proposed curriculum intervention model. They discuss acceptance, respect, a need for belonging, and that students want to feel valued and want to be part of something. Indeed, care and relationships are at the heart of successful interactions with students at risk, and the proposed curriculum intervention model is grounded in supported theoretical perspectives.

Oakes & Lipton (1999) suggest a Freireian model of teaching to change the world from the community onwards. They offer two traditions of organizing classrooms: the first model marked by management, discipline, and control and the second model characterized by caring and democratic classrooms. In discussing this second tradition, where caring and democratic classrooms exist, the authors summarize the ideas of other theorists/psychologists like Maslow, Rogers, and Kohlberg and state: "If schools treated students humanely and respectfully, these qualities [care & democracy] would prevail in classrooms" (p. 250). They go on to cite A.S. Neill and his Summerhill School approach where children are free to make key decisions about their own schooling, learning, and

behaviours, and cite Noddings and her ethic of care. In referring to these specific theorists, the message is clear: to change the world through teaching we must care about, trust, and create the conditions for students to empower themselves. Oakes & Lipton conclude that the power of relationships between teacher-student and student-student lies in shaping academic learning, interpersonal learning, cultural learning, and learning about institutions.

Stanford & Roark (1974) write candidly about the effects relationships have on students and on education. As principles of teaching, Stanford & Roark focus specifically on providing relationships and environmental conditions and state that the principles of teaching include: facilitative relationships characterized by openness and trust, the teacher be genuine, willing to be human rather than professional, empathetic, and to see and understand things as students do (p. 8). What Stanford & Roark speak to in this text is building relationships with students and teaching from a position of care. To be genuine, open, and show trust with students is to build a relationship with them and to be empathetic is to show some degree of care for students.

Pearl & Campbell (1999), in their inquiry into students' at risk perceptions of teacher effectiveness, conclude that interpersonal skills and creating positive, caring relationships were essential to determining how these teachers were perceived by the students at risk. That students at risk perceive care and positive relationships as "part of a teacher's job" underscores the impact these relationships have in students' lives. As seen here with Pearl & Campbell's inquiry, students at risk identify care and positive relationships as

traits to effective teaching. It is unlikely that other types of students would identify different aspects since all students stand to gain through experiencing care. It is likely that all students would agree that care is essential to “good” teaching.

Downing & Vette (1994), in their study into potential dropouts’ reasons for staying in school, concluded that teachers, administrators, counselors, and peers who demonstrated specific humanistic qualities and behaviours were instrumental in helping potential dropouts stay in school. The specific caring behaviours exhibited included listening, showing respect, being patient, and raising self-esteem. They further state that programs that were successful in keeping students at risk in school provided students with support in both their academic and personal lives.

Ferrera & Bosworth (2001) in their study concerning adolescent perspectives on teachers’ caring found that teachers have an enormous impact on how students perceive the philosophy of the school and stated: “Thus, how students perceive their teachers as caring or non-caring has a direct impact on how students perceive the culture of the school” (p. 25). They go on to discuss teacher behaviours that foster relationships noting treating students as individuals, respecting students, listening, and being like a friend as conducive behaviours to fostering relationships.

Brophy (1998) states that teachers who develop warm, caring relationships with students are more likely to be successful with those students because in developing warm, caring relationships with students the students’ immediate need for belonging is met.

Aronson (1995) notes in her article on effective alternative learning environments for students at risk that: “warm, caring relationships with teachers are a central part of the alternative school culture” (p. 4) highlighting the premise of relationships as central to a sense of belonging and feeling connected.

Hootstein (1996) focuses on motivating students at risk and determines that having the expectation of success may be enough for students at risk to expend effort and thereby experience success. He further states that teachers can raise students’ expectations by communicating their confidence in the student, by giving the students a sense of control over their learning, and by encouraging positive self-talk, all of which come from relationships with the teacher and from the teacher showing care. In his conclusion, Hootstein states: “Teachers must offer genuine care, respect, and encouragement as preconditions for stimulating motivation to learn” (p. 99). Here we see the expectation of care, respect and relationship as influential even on students at risk’s motivation in that they have an expectation of the above, and when met, that expectation translates into increased effort and success in school.

We communicate our beliefs concerning the value students have through how we treat them and through how we interact with them. Relationships are essential to human development. Caring relationships are most often cited as the key to feeling connected, as if you belong, and are valued. Taking direction from these two ideas of showing care and building relationships, schools and teachers, then, need to begin to encourage

increased demonstrations of care in schools. They need to address what Noddings calls the “crisis of care” by creating warm, caring relationships with their students and with their colleagues. As seen in this literature, school and classroom environments that are marked by care and positive, supportive relationships are more effective at keeping students at risk in school and are more effective in improving the academic performance and motivation of students. Presently, this review of related literature has confirmed the ideas that students at risk want to feel connected and like they belong, and confirmed that students at risk want to feel valued and valuable through relationships and care. Next, we will see that classroom interactions and environment determine the extent to which students at risk feel the above.

#### Classroom Environment & Interactions

Classroom environment and interactions determine the extent to which students at risk feel they connect, as if they belong, are valued and valuable, and are cared about.

The English Journal (May, 2001) confirms the push to build community in school and in classrooms. In their May 2001 edition of twelve featured articles in this edition, eight deal specifically with community and its connection, influence, or membership effects on school and learning. One truly feels the pulse and push toward community when one reads the table of contents. In a quick glance, the word community makes its appearance in no less than eight titles, and appears often in the context of building a community.

Sterling (1998) says of building community that, "A sense of community is no longer something we can take for granted. We have to build community; affirm its value and membership; and infuse it with the energy, imagination and commitment of the group" (p. 66) noting the theme of this section: community needs to be *built*, and the extent to which it is successfully built and felt is determined by classroom interactions and environment.

Dale (1972) promoted the idea of building a learning environment thirty years ago. Then, he noted how the learning environment affects learning. He states: "Some learning environments are friendly, supportive, optimistic, and energizing. Others are cold, threatening, pessimistic, and enervating" (p. 24) which gets to the core idea at hand: classroom environment determines the extent to which students at risk feel, or do not feel, connected, like they belong, are valued and valuable, and are cared about. Not that students cannot learn and feel cared about in the second cold, threatening environment described above, but based on the research (Aronson, 1995; Kohn, 1998; Manning, 1993; Slavin, Karweit & Madden, 1989) concerning what is most effective with students at risk it is unlikely they would thrive in that type of learning environment. The first description, however, of a classroom where students felt supported and found things to be friendly and optimistic is more in tune with the current research literature concerning effective learning environments with students at risk.

Paul & Colucci (2000) in their chapter on caring pedagogy discuss the impact of care in the classroom stating that a caring pedagogy can heal students wounded by previous

experiences of humiliation, and that this same caring pedagogy can create and restore self-confidence (p. 45). Further to this idea is the idea of the “transformative qualities” of caring relationships and its implications on school reform and what is important in the classroom. They conclude “What students experience and the emotional memories they take away with them for the rest of their lives affect their attitudes towards themselves and others” (p. 47) highlighting the importance of classroom environments and interactions that are positive, supportive, and grounded in care.

Civikly (1992) describes seating arrangements and their impact on students and says that desks in rows with students facing the teacher sends students a specific message, that of teacher has jurisdiction over the students. Furthermore, the desk in rows seating arrangement negates interaction among students, so asserts Civikly. Civikly does acknowledge that desks in rows are necessary for some isolated activities; however, she suggests alternative seating arrangements as more conducive to engaging students in relationships. These include paired seating, semi-circles, and circles where students can see each other’s faces and expressions, thus promoting the idea of familiarization between students. This increased interaction helps to build relationships between students and accordingly to build community.

Ginsberg & Wlodkowski (2001) raise the cogent ideals of making education work for students and caring for the communities from which students come (p. 31). In addressing the first ideal of making education work for students, the authors write specifically about establishing inclusion and state: “Establishing inclusion means that all students become

part of an environment in which they and their teacher are respected by and connected to one another” (p. 51). Clearly, these ideals of inclusion, respect and community are fostered and developed in the classroom. Ginsberg & Wlodkowski concur with the impact community in the classroom can have: “In other words, the classroom or school possesses agreed-upon norms that create safety, acceptance, and harmony so that students and teachers are able to manifest and learn from the diverse values, perspectives, and ways of interacting” (p. 51). In other words, “making education work for students” means making connections between students and teachers in order to accommodate better learning, safety, and the relationships that are essential to appropriate human socialization, all of which are the result of building community.

Brodinsky (1989) points to the impact the classroom learning environment (CLE) has on students at risk and states that the physical appearance of classrooms affects students’ self-esteem and shapes the minds of students. He lists several ways teachers can alter the appearance of their classrooms to enhance the self-esteem and mind set of students at risk. His list includes the physical arrangement of the room and having students’ desks in a way that no student feels slighted or discriminated against, enlisting student help in creating classroom displays of student work, and making the room colourful, attractive and relaxing (p. 67). Brodinsky also offers six different intervention strategies when working with students at risk, all of which will be discussed in detail in later chapter, one of which has precedence here, that of school climate and the CLE. He says that the evidence points to creating positive climate as the best way to keep students at risk in school.

Scheidecker & Freeman (1999) solidify the idea of the CLE and its impact on the extent to which students at risk feel connected and valued. To them, part of bringing out the best in students is ensuring that students have a CLE that challenges them to learn but that is safe from ridicule and failure. A CLE characterized by relationships and care is surely one that negates ridicule and seeks to exchange failure for success.

Brophy (1998) discusses the concept of creating your classroom as a learning community noting the effect this has on students: "Students will not respond to your motivational attempts if they are fearful, resentful, or otherwise focused on negative emotions. To create conditions that favour your motivational efforts, you will need to establish and maintain your classroom as a learning community" (p. 21). The CLE founded in community negates isolation, fear, and resent, and replaces those with value, sense of belonging, and caring relationships. The stronger sense of community felt in the classroom, the more students feel like they belong and are valued and accepted.

Vacha & McLaughlin (1992) discovered in their research that schools must provide a more positive school climate and more responsive environment if they intend on reducing the drop out rate (p. 16). They cite Fine's (1986) research which said that many students who dropout do so because they are encouraged to leave since they are more likely to question school practices and protest unfair rules as evidence of characteristics of schools who are not meeting the needs of students at risk. They further conclude that school

climate and the CLE are influential factors in pushing students at risk to drop out of school.

Hynds, (1997) an advocate of building community with students at risk, encourages teachers to consider their classrooms and the messages communicated through the environment of that classroom. She describes her participant's struggle and process of making changes to the classroom environment in hopes of better meeting the needs of her students. In her descriptions of Meg's (the teacher participant) experience, Hynds describes Meg's struggle with the desks in rows issue. Meg discovered that desks in rows communicated a message contrary to the one she was striving for: for her classroom to not look like a classroom. Meg's physical space solution was to arrange the desks in clusters conducive to students working collaboratively. When students work together they build relationships and feel connections to their classmates, thus the CLE and its physical arrangement do influence the extent to which students feel connected, as if they belong, and are valued.

Lowe & Lowe (1992) discuss meaningful engagement for at risk readers and determined that the CLE definitely has implications on the level of engagement. They state that in an ideal CLE, students would be clustered at tables or desks in order to create community and maximize interactions. Again, here, interactions amongst students are promoted as key to effective learning environments for students at risk. Lowe & Lowe go on to say that this type of environment, one with ample room to move and one that invites students to interact, is perceived as un-intimidating and gives students a sense of control. This

type of CLE, then, is also one that fosters relationships and a sense of belonging through interactions and dialogue, and sense of being valued through offering students at risk a sense of control. Physical environment influences the silent yet pervasive messages we send students about the CLE and about how they will be treated in school and in our classrooms.

Stockard (1992), in her research about effective learning environments, concurs with previous research noting the significance of the CLE on students when she states: “Schools and classrooms that enhance achievement appear to be characterized by high academic expectations, effective leadership, an orderly atmosphere, and warmth, concern, and respect for others” (p. 19). Without respect and concern, we cannot communicate that we value the students and think they are valuable. More specifically, Stockard notes that students spend the majority of their time in classrooms and that classroom environments influence student attitudes toward school and their academic achievement. The CLE has this influence because students connect what happens in a classroom and how a classroom feels as indicative of the school feeling and how successful they can be there. She concludes that effective learning environments, specifically those of the classroom, maintain a pleasant atmosphere that promotes coherence and positive relationships among school members, and that effective classroom learning environments are those where teachers and students feel positively about their work setting. Clearly then, without using the same jargon, Stockard has the same findings: classroom learning environments determine the extent to which students feel connected and like they belong

through the atmosphere of that environment, and through the relationships developed as a result of perceiving that environment as positive.

Kagan (2001) suggests that recent school shootings like Columbine and Taber are just a symptom of the larger problem of the breakdown of community and mutual caring. He suggests that teachers need to include teaching character and community in order for classrooms to become more caring, respectful and inclusive places. In essence, Kagan promotes the idea that school violence is often the result of students feeling displaced and isolated, and like they do not belong. His solution to this problem is in agreement with what I am promoting: build a sense of community with students and they feel valued, valuable, and like they belong. He states: "The best way to prevent school violence is to replace disparagement with respect, exclusion with inclusion, and lonely isolation with collaborative community" (p. 54). Undoubtedly Kagan's prevention model has implications for the classroom environment. In order to foster inclusion and mutual respect we must first make steps towards a sense of community marked by respectful language, inclusive physical arrangement of space and classroom objects, and develop relationships between students and with the teachers.

McWhirter et al (1998) noted that students at risk often feel like they are less accepted and less acceptable than other students. They further note that students who succeed in school have high expectations of themselves and have a positive sense of belonging to the school (p. 69). Successful students often have a positive sense of self, which is usually confirmed in the classroom. We know that the CLE can affect the self-esteem of students

at risk, and McWhirter et al concur. They state that an environment where students are accepted as who they are and as unique yield positive results. They go on to say that this type of environment produces an acceptance and appreciation of differences and an improvement in the overall self-concept and self-esteem of students at risk. Why is this, then? The answer is that in creating an accepting CLE, students' at risk needs are met. They feel accepted, like they belong, and like they are valuable people contributing to the CLE. McWhirter et al. surmise that effective learning environments for students at risk are characterized by three areas: positive relationships with students and teacher, acceptance of the students as who they are, and a sense of autonomy.

Jones & Jones (2001) articulate the impact classroom interactions have on the community environment and how they influence the CLE when they state: "A considerable body of research indicates...that time spent creating a positive peer group can eliminate much misbehaviour and can provide a classroom climate that enhances students' achievement" (p. 122). The above reviewed body of research confirms this assertion. They go on to say that positive peer relationships, particularly those with students at risk, are an essential factor in creating community in schools (p. 123).

How teachers set up their classrooms, how they interact with students while in those classrooms, the feelings students get from other students, the subtle messages sent through displaying student work on boards and focusing attention on student interests all determine the extent to which a classroom becomes a community. A classroom environment is created by more than physical space. It is created by atmosphere because

of how people perceive the space, the people in that space, and the type of authority found there. If the CLE is set up with the students' success in mind and from a perspective of care, then this CLE will be conducive to building community with students at risk. Feeling valued, valuable, like you belong, and are cared about are essential to effective schooling for all students, but particularly so with students at risk.

All of the above reviewed literature confirms the idea that classroom environment and interactions determine the extent to which students feel like they belong, are accepted, and like they are cared about. In making students feel this way educators meet more of students' needs, and so Maslow says, this better sets students up for success in school that in turn promotes success in life through self-actualization. If we take the perspective that school is in essence designed to prepare students for life, then it is also true that the most fulfilling jobs and neighbourhoods are characterized by safety, care, respect, and encouragement. Making our classrooms into communities sends a message to students. The message is that in real life people care about one another, are concerned about the well being of each other, respect each other, and find value and benefit from feeling like they belong. Regardless of the prescribed aim of school, we cannot do better than to teach students about being human; we cannot do better than attempt to meet all of their needs with kindness and support. Not to resort to analogy as example, but if students are like trees that grow, then when well planted and tended they can weather any storm.

## Building Community: Stand Alone Texts of Consequence

Kohn's (1996) promotion of building community in Beyond Discipline: from Compliance to Community is persuasive and pervasive. In the introduction to this text

Jones states:

Kohn's alternative is to make the classroom a community where students feel valued and respected, where care and trust have taken the place of restrictions and threats. In this environment, students have a major role in making meaningful decisions about their schooling and in designing educational communities in which they feel connected to one another and to adults (p. ix).

Note how Kohn's alternative summarized above speaks to feeling connected which is premise one, feeling valued and respected which is premise two, and about environment conducive to students feeling these two which is premise three of the proposed curriculum intervention model. In every aspect, from environment determining the extent to which students experience and feel community through to the idea of needing to feel valued and valuable, Kohn's ideas are in support of the proposed intervention. It is important to note Kohn's notion of discipline here since his book Beyond Discipline: from Compliance to Community (1996) takes aim at discipline in exchange for community. According to Kohn, discipline would be how teachers deal with "misbehaviour" or actions deemed as "inappropriate." He says that: "The raison d'être of discipline or classroom management is always to secure the children's compliance with adults' demands" (Kohn, 1996, p. xii). In exchange for children complying with adult demands, Kohn proposed two questions that take aim at compliance and work to build community. These are 1. What do children need, and 2. How can we meet these needs (Kohn, 1996, p. xv)?

Kohn shares similarities with Neill in that both believe in the school fitting the child, however, Kohn phrases it as addressing the primary question of “what do students need.” One of Kohn’s central ideas in Beyond Discipline is how to not get control of the classroom, which speaks to the power issue, and thus brings in Freire. Freire (1970) in Pedagogy of the Oppressed also created an intervention, and one that focused on power and oppression. As a way to free the illiterate peasants of Brazil Freire had them begin to name and explore the inequitable power relationships of their world. Kohn takes a similar empowerment approach and involves students in making the educational world and in making the “rules.” Although his vision of discipline negates power over children, it does still assume an authority in dealing with them. Realistically, the classroom will never be altruistically equitable since we still believe that adults make better choices than children and accordingly, that adults should be making decisions for children until they can make “appropriate” choices themselves. What Kohn is suggesting is not a true balance of power, but instead a sharing of that power. In his defense of the need for community Kohn states: “Virtually any meaningful long-term goal we might have for students requires us to attend to the climate of the school, and specifically, the extent to which children feel related, as opposed to isolated” (p. 102). The extent to which students feel connected or related is essential to effective community building, as well as crucial to changes to any classroom or school wide climate.

Kohn (1996) endorses certain prerequisites to building a community, namely that to turn a classroom of virtual strangers into a community they need time, need to be relatively few in number, and they need a teacher who believes in community because they are part

of one (p. 110). Relationships with adults are, says Kohn, the primary strategy to building community. A second strategy suggested by Kohn to build a community is that connections among students followed by class wide and school wide activities in order to strengthen the developing bonds among students and with the teacher. The final strategy Kohn suggests is using academic instruction to promote community and connection.

Kohn (1998), in his candid article on the subject of what to look for in a classroom, argues that we should strive for a classroom and school climate filled with excitement, that promotes deep understanding, and promotes both social and intellectual growth (p. 277). He pauses, however, to add emphasis that in this type of classroom students are involved in the decisions, and that teachers work with students instead of doing things to them (p. 277). Kohn then lists good signs and possible reasons for concern as per numerous discussions with teachers and educators concerning what to look for in a classroom as a gauge of the classroom climate. The list for “good signs” begins with specifying the physical space where chairs and tables are arranged to facilitate interaction, and where the area is perceived as a comfortable place to learn. He also lists the state of the walls noting that walls covered in student projects, exhibits or signs created by students, and mementos and information about those who spend time in the room are all “good signs.” Of the teacher, Kohn says it is a good sign when they are working with the students and are not easy to find upon first entry because they are blended with the students, and that teachers’ voices are respectful, warm, and are genuine (p. 279). In terms of class discussion good signs are when students address each other by name noting their relationship with one another, and that students ask questions as often

as the teacher does noting their relaxed and supported nature around the teacher and with their fellow students. On the other side of Kohn's list, we find "reasons for concern." Before moving on, I want to point out the community nature of all the "good signs" of what to look for in a "good" classroom. The physical arrangement of a "classroom of concern" involves desks in rows all facing the teacher who is the proprietor of knowledge. The walls are bare or house lists of appropriate behaviour or rules for conduct, all of which are created by an adult. Only student work that is nearly flawless or is of top score is displayed. The teacher in a "classroom of concern" is usually up front and center ensuring student attention is focused on them, and their voice conveys control and often seems condescending towards students or their work (p. 280). Students engage in limited discussion and are usually directed for answers or questions from the teacher. The possible "reasons for concern" classroom is the antithesis to a classroom marked by community.

Kohn, (1999) in his rail against rewards, points his attention towards how rewards rupture relationships noting: "At best, rewards do nothing to promote this collaboration [found when working in a group] or a sense of community. More often, they actually interfere with these goals" (p. 55). By rewards, Kohn means the "do this and you'll get that" system often employed in schools (Kohn, 1996, p. 32). He points to intrinsic motivations, meaningful relationships, and student interest in the subjects and materials as key to dropping the rewards and maintaining the community. He states: "Rewards, like punishments, can only manipulate someone's actions. They do nothing to help a child a kind or caring person" (Kohn, 1996, p. 34). Now, having noted this we must ask

the question: Can rewards be totally dropped? It is possible; however, I suspect that in becoming a kind or caring person other types of rewards, albeit mostly intrinsic ones will emerge. Perhaps the point Kohn is making is that it is exactly these types of rewards that have meaning and are lasting as opposed to fleeting action/behaviour oriented rewards which are often disconnected to the learner.

Jones & Jones (2001) in their sixth edition of Comprehensive Classroom Management speak to building community and its impact on classroom environment and management. In the early pages of this encompassing work, Jones & Jones cite Wayson & Pinnell (1982) as tracing discipline problems to “dysfunctional” climate and interpersonal relationships within the school than to individual behaviour. They then conclude that staff must work intentionally and systematically to establish communities of support within classrooms so that students at risk will experience a sense of community and belonging instead of isolation (p. 12). As evidence of the need for these types of community like classrooms, the authors indicate relationships as key, noting previous studies’ (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992) finding that students at risk desperately long for adults to show care. This expressed desperation, so say Jones & Jones, strongly suggest the equally desperate need to develop caring, safe, teacher-student relationships (p. 13).

In support of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Jones & Jones advance the idea that all students learn best when their needs are met, and when they feel accepted, comfortable, and safe. Subsequently, they advance the idea that by examining the classroom and

school environments where students continue to “act out”, we can determine which needs are not being met and go about effectively causing change to the benefit of those students. In the chapter pertaining to students’ psychological needs, beyond Maslow four theorists’ ideas about students needs are presented. These four theorists are more contemporary than Maslow, and thus are noteworthy. Brendtro et al (1990) promotes belonging as the primary human need. Coopersmith (1967) says significance, competence and then power are of primary concern, while Kohn (1993) indicates collaboration, content and choice as essential. Finally, Glasser (1990) advances love and power/freedom as basic needs of students (p. 47). Each of these theorists touches on the idea of community, connection, belonging, or care in their own way. Jones & Jones go as far as saying that: “all four theorists share the belief that for students to have their basic needs met and thereby function effectively in the school environment, they need to experience positive relationships with other (significance, belonging, collaboration, love)” (p. 47). In making specific connections to students at risk, Jones and Jones advocate interventions of care and substantial changes in classrooms and management. They cite Turnbaugh (1986) who at the time was the coordinator of the At Risk Research Project of the National Center for Effective Secondary Schools as saying:

We have to face the fact that the condition of being at risk is partially generated by the school. The problems these kids bring to school are exacerbated by the way they’re treated by the discipline system and the ways teachers interact with them. There is also a substantially detrimental effect caused by the lack of interesting and engaging experiences to which they will be able to respond (p. 58).

The question then becomes “how do we rectify this situation and improve schooling for students at risk”? The answer lies in interventions that counter and seek to destroy the

demeaning and insensitive way students at risk are often treated at school and to replace that with an intervention of care, concern, and positive environments, such as the one I am proposing.

Jones & Jones continue by saying the remainder of their book expands on effectiveness research in order to best respond to the needs of students at risk, and by specifically emphasizing creating school and classroom environments that meet five criteria. These criteria are: 1. create personally supportive and engaging environments (*communities of support*, added emphasis my own), 2. provide diversified instruction that meaningfully and actively engages students, 3. engage students in creating and learning social roles and relationships within the school context, 4. utilize problem solving and conflict management as a central theme in dealing with behaviour problems, and 5. teach students strategies for setting goals and monitoring their own behaviour (p. 60). The proposed curriculum intervention model addresses criteria one in creating personally supportive environments, criteria three in engaging students in creating and learning social roles through relationships, and criteria five in helping students to set goals and monitor their own behaviour. It does not, as it is proposed at least, address are criteria two of providing diversified instruction that meaningfully engages students or criteria four utilizing problem solving and conflict management as a central theme in dealing with behaviour problems. Jones and Jones wrote their book on classroom management while this study focuses on building community. It is in this difference that criteria 2 and 4 are moot in context of the proposed curriculum intervention. This intervention *considers* classroom management but is *not* a classroom management intervention. The aim is not to change

student behaviour in terms of what is appropriate or inappropriate, but instead to alter that behaviour in terms of staying in school or dropping out.

Baker's (1999) study dealing with urban at risk classrooms and teacher-student interactions found that student perceptions of a positive classroom environment and of caring supportive relationships with teachers were related to school satisfaction amongst students at risk, and that these feelings emerged as early as grade three (p. 57). Although Baker's study focuses on elementary school students at risk, it nevertheless has implications for all students at risk. Baker's study touches on nearly every category of this literature review. In speaking about isolation and alienation from school she states that students at risk often report feeling alienated and disenfranchised from the school culture. She goes on to say that the literature on school climate has shown that positive classroom environments are associated with improved academic achievement and that teachers' support, friendliness and cooperative classrooms are linked to improved affective and cognitive changes (p. 58). In her research, she confirms what we know about belonging and relationships noting that students' perceptions of belonging to school culture are associated with academic success and well being. She also concludes that caring relationships with teachers and respectful, cooperative, positive classroom environments positively affect student behaviour, attitudes, and motivation (p. 59). Finally, Baker suggests developing a classroom community as an effective and important intervention for students at risk.

The first research question reads “Is building community an effective intervention for students at risk?” The answer is undoubtedly yes, as evidenced by the surmounting knowledge and insight presented in the texts reviewed. If feeling a sense of community stems from belonging and acceptance, relationships and care, and is influenced by classroom interactions and environment, it is clear, then, that education should aim to achieve these by building a sense of community with students at risk. The literature makes a clear case for the benefit and necessity of building community, thereby providing a positive response to the first research question. Yes, building community is an effective intervention for students at risk because it helps to meet their needs, both affective and cognitive to some degree, and fills the other voids often cited within a school context. In the end, students at risk need to feel a sense of community in order to be best supported to stay in school.

Given the overwhelming evidence presented here regarding the impact building community can have on students at risk the question arises: Can we ignore this large body of research? In my opinion, the answer is we cannot. We must take it upon ourselves to actively build community for the benefit of our students at risk. A second question arises: Can we use this information and new understanding to create an educational setting that is conducive to building community and one that benefits all students at risk? The answer is yes. By developing an intervention that focuses on building community to the benefit of students at risk, we can use the research and information concerning better schooling for students at risk. Another way to phrase this

might be: What can classroom teachers do to help students at risk stay in school? An answer is: apply the proposed curriculum intervention model.

### **Chapter 3: Critical Pedagogy and a New Paradigm: Interface, Currere, Humanistic, Social Reconstruction**

The rationale behind creating a curriculum intervention model that aims to build community with students at risk is to help these students stay in school. This curriculum intervention model (CIM) is an interface model, is curriculum as currere, is humanistic, and is of a critical paradigm in that it aims at social reconstruction through care and community. Each of these aspects will be fully explained throughout this chapter.

#### **Interface Model**

The proposed curriculum intervention model (CIM) is an interface model that can be implemented into any senior years classroom setting. In essence it interfaces with other content or skill based curricula. Although teachers are encouraged to implement the entire curriculum, for some it may not be necessary if key components already exist. For example, if a classroom already has established belonging and acceptance, but students do not yet feel valued and valuable, the teacher would then need to focus specifically on the strategies and approaches that foster feelings of being valued and valuable. For simplicity sake, the entire model should be integrated on the pretense that in the majority of senior years classrooms all of the aspects and premises can be made stronger if they already exist, and if not, then all need to be implemented. The model has been designed specifically so that any senior years classroom teacher can use this model to help build community to the benefit of the students at risk in their classes. Having said this, the

model is based on numerous assumptions, and many of these assumptions then become premises for successful integration.

#### Assumptions of the Proposed Model:

The first premise on which the proposed curriculum intervention model (CIM) is founded is that teachers want to help students at risk stay in school and that they are willing to make accommodations within their classrooms that would foster a community atmosphere. Assuming that the reviewed literature is accurate and that indeed building a sense of community with students at risk helps keep them in school, then the model is dependent on teachers who are not only willing to make accommodations, but who are willing to make those accommodations for the explicit purpose of building a sense of community. Teachers who have a disdain toward or dislike of students at risk will not be successful with this model because it is based in a premise of care in all actions and behaviours towards students. Without the premier notion of care this intervention likely will not work. Students at risk operate from the affective domain most often, and the adage of “you must first reach the heart before you can teach the mind” plays heavily when approaching students at risk.

The second assumption regarding implementation is that teachers continue to use this CIM until they have established a community, and that they maintain that community. To simply implement one or two of these premises and think a community will emerge is foolish, and unrealistic. To build a sense of community is not easy, but to maintain that

sense of community is even more difficult. Communities often have a family like feel to them, and families are complex. The community feel of the classroom will also have its roller coaster ride, with people having falling outs and people needing additional support in times of need. Creating the community is only one aspect of the intervention. Perhaps more important is maintaining that sense of community and fostering growth from that standpoint.

A third assumption is that students at risk want to be cared about and to be part of something. Based on the research literature, most students at risk indeed want this type of approach and attention. In some cases, however, there may be students who are beyond the scope of this intervention and perhaps beyond being cared about. In these cases, it is likely this intervention will not be successful since the CIM is based on the premise of care. All students can benefit from this intervention in that it is not just students at risk who crave feeling as if they belong and are part of a community.

The type of teacher needed for this curriculum intervention model is the fourth assumption for successful implementation. Teachers who are dedicated to having all students succeed, even those deemed at risk, are needed for this model to work. Teachers who are willing to contribute more than their time and who are willing to contribute their energy and emotions are required. A cold and aloof teacher will likely not successfully use this model. I am fully aware that this model hinges upon some key components of personality such as someone who is dedicated to success for students at risk, someone who is willing to make changes to their classroom approaches and practices, and

someone who can care about students at risk. Most teachers do want to help students to experience success, and it is for those teachers that this CIM was designed.

The proposed model is designed to interface with other content areas, and is more accurately an approach to interacting with students. It is a curriculum about making people feel certain ways and certain things based on a foundation of care and the affective domain. It is a curriculum of care and of *currere* in that experiencing care and learning to care for others is the journey of experiencing success in school and hopefully then success in life.

#### Curriculum as *Currere*

The curriculum as *currere* model presented here follows that of Pinar and Grumet (1976) in that they define *currere* as stemming from the Latin “curriculum” meaning to run the course:

Thus, *currere* refers to an existential experience of institutional structures. The method of *currere* is a strategy devised to disclose experience, so that we may see more of it and more clearly. With such seeing can come deep understanding of the running, and with this, can come deepened agency (as cited in Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 519).

Of consequence from Pinar and Grumet’s definition is the existential experience and deepened agency since this CIM is also aimed at social reconstruction, but this aspect will be addressed shortly. The adoption of existential experience is noteworthy not in a traditional existential sense, but rather in a humanistic sense as will be addressed next.

To exist and to contemplate ones' existence in terms of fulfillment and potential fulfillment is to experience the potential of happiness. If we turn again to Maslow and his hierarchy of human needs we can draw the conclusion that to feel like you belong, are loved, respected, and are of worth and esteem is also to feel "self-actualized" or as I would characterize it, cared about and happy. The existential experience of *currere* is to *feel* and to *experience*, and the proposed curriculum intervention model aims at having students at risk do and experience both. To exist and feel unloved, unwanted, and experience continued lack of success is not to run the course, but to crawl it disdainfully. *Currere*, as it fits with Pinar, Grumet, and the Latin origin expresses a curriculum of vibrancy and life. As both Neill (1960) and Maslow (1976) state, the aim of education is to find joy and happiness. Without feeling care and a sense of connection to others this course cannot be fully run and one's potential cannot be fully experienced.

Grumet (1981) went further to sculpt her own definition of *currere* as it related directly to education: "to reveal the ways that histories (both collective and individual) and hopes suffuse our moments, and to study them through telling our stories of educational experience" (as cited in Pinar, Reynolds, Statterly, & Taubman, p. 521). Where I draw connections is in the suffusion of collective and individual histories and hopes as creating moments of definition in the educational experience. One of the premises of the curriculum intervention model is that students at risk want to feel like they belong and are part of something. This premise considers both collective and individual histories as influencing the hopes and experience of care in a classroom setting. If *currere* is as Grumet characterizes it, in that histories and interactions indeed tint our experiences, then

it also follows that a CIM that aimed at positive and caring suffusion of experiences would benefit students. In the end, a curriculum of care and currere is possible, and has high potential to help students at risk to stay in school.

### Humanistic Education Orientation

It is hoped that this CIM is humanistic since it has students and their emotional well being at the core. Other aspects that make this humanistic are its focus on fostering significant relationships among students and staffs of schools and communities. In fact, the aim of the CIM is to develop a community within the classroom and within the school. This aim cannot be achieved without humanistic approaches or without human interactions. To foster human interactions in a positive way is to tap into humanistic qualities.

The Association for Humanistic Education and Development (AHEAD, 1982) developed these tenets for humanistic education. These tenets hold that humanistic education includes:

- a) the development of basic skills needed to function effectively in a complex world;
- is b) a humane approach that 'helps students believe in themselves and their potential, that fosters self respect and respect worthy for the worth and dignity of others, and that promotes skills in conflict resolution;
- is c) an approach that deals with issues of concern to people trying to improve the quality of life – to pursue knowledge, grow, to love, to find meaning for one's existence'; and includes
- d) the establishment of a particular atmosphere for traditional learning – 'a challenging environment, where the learner's needs and goals are considered, and where experiences are planned in light of the unique nature of each child (AHEAD, 1982 as cited in Robinson, 2000, p. 3).

Of these tenets the proposed curriculum intervention model addresses several, namely that it offers a humane approach to education, works to promote growth, care, and love, and certainly takes a particular environment for learning into consideration. The proposed CIM further helps to address the uniqueness of every student in that every student is accepted as who they are. Robinson (2000) describes character education as humanistic education, and in doing so, he gets to the core of humanistic education and its connection to the CIM. He states: "More than any other single principle of character education, the concept of caring for another human being for no other reason than his existence is central to humanistic thought" (p. 2). Although this CIM is not being described as character education, if this study were intended for, an American audience, it would likely fall into a "character education" model as well as humanistic. However, this CIM is intended for a unique Canadian perspective where character education is not apparent as a distinct curriculum.

Further affirmations of this curriculum intervention model being grounded in the philosophies and pedagogic orientation of humanistic education are found in Maslow's "Goals and Implications of Humanistic Education" (as cited in Schlosser, 1976). Maslow, like Neill (1960), believes that the aim of education should be to teach joy and happiness: "One of the goals of education should be to teach that life is precious. If there were no joy in life, it would not be worth living" (p. 136). One of the proponents of the CIM is that by integrating this model into senior years classrooms students at risk will be more apt to stay in school since they will feel connected, as if they belong, and are valued and valuable members to that community. This is achieved by, as Maslow would say, a

different conception of the self. This different conception is further in line with the approaches and philosophies of humanistic education. Maslow (1976) states: "Among the many educational consequences generated by the humanistic philosophy of education is a different conception of the self" (p. 134). Listed as a consequence here, Noddings (1984) would argue that this consequence of a different conception of the self is long overdue and that this particular consequence would help to alleviate the "crisis to care" in schools.

Carl Rogers, together with other premier theorists like Maslow, Kohn (1996), and Noddings (1998), promotes a curriculum based on care and humanism. Of Rogers, Schlosser (1976) says:

Indeed, if there is any one thing most characteristic of humanistic education, as it has developed in the 1960s and 1970s in America, it is the significance attached to interpersonal dimension of learning and teaching. And Carl R. Rogers has perhaps had the most influential voice on this theme in educational theory and practice (p. 261).

As noted in Chapter Two, interpersonal relationships are essential to building a community in a classroom or school. In fact, relationships and their implied care are at the heart of success for this CIM. In his article "The Interpersonal Relationship," Rogers (1976) discusses one glory of teaching, that of facilitating learning. In his discussion he explicitly talks about becoming a community of learners and that it is this becoming wherein lays great teaching and learning:

So now, I turn with some relief to an activity, a purpose, which really warms me – the facilitation of learning. When I have been able to transform a group – and here I mean all the members of a group, myself included – into a community of *learners*, then, the excitement has been almost beyond belief (as cited in Schlosser, 1976, p. 267).

Rogers, then, tends to characterize humanistic education and curricula as that which aims to build community and strives to develop interpersonal relationships. Rogers supports the ideas of care and creating a trusting atmosphere as method to attaining a humanistic classroom where interpersonal relationships are important and where human potential can be released (Schlosser, 1976, p. 262).

In focusing on curriculum design, Ornstein (1998) presents numerous styles of curriculum design including humanistic design. He cites Rogers' work as key to humanistic curriculum design noting that Rogers promotes the idea that "The educators' task is to set the educational environment such that these personal resources can be tapped. Such an environment encourages genuineness of behaviour, empathy, and respect for self and others" (Ornstein, 1998, p. 256). Ornstein's major characterization of humanistic curriculum design is as follows:

This new psychological orientation emphasized that human action was much more than a response to stimulus, that meaning was much more important than methods, that the focus of attention should be on the subjective rather than on the objective nature of human existence, and that there is a relationship between learning and feeling (p. 255).

Of note in this characterization of humanistic curriculum design is the focus of attention on the subjective and the connection between learning and feeling. It has been argued that students at risk will be more likely to remain in school if they feel connected to that school and to the people in that environment. In fact, I have argued that it is the environment itself that largely determines whether these students at risk stay in school or drop out. A humanistic curriculum design orientation serves to foster these essential

connections among students and their school environment, thus leading them to feel connected and part of something and to stay in school.

### Transformative Model

It follows, then, that this curriculum intervention model is also a transformative and not transmissive model. Schlosser (1976) describes the transformative mode of teaching as one that “assumes that significant change can and does take place when both the teacher and the student act as persons rather than merely as role-players toward one another” (p. 260). This CIM seeks to negate the role-playing factor that stands in the way of meaningful engagement and building community.

### Curriculum as Social Reconstruction

As a social reconstruction model, this curriculum aims at having students at risk become empowered through a belief in themselves and through the engagements, supports, and connections needed to stay in school. It also aims at having students at risk become empowered through finding “voice” (McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992; Wink, 2000), “naming” their world (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 1998; Wink, 2000) and thus emerging from the margins of failure (Wink, 2000).

Schools and classrooms likely will never be truly democratic simply because our society is not democratic. Groups continue to be marginalized, disenfranchised, classified, and

conditioned into a system where they are left without power, or at least feeling that way. Shor (1992) notes that: “mass education presents students with undemocratic authority, passive learning, depressant tracking, dull texts and standardized testing, bland curricula, and shabby facilities in many districts” (p. 135). In antithesis to this characterization of mass education, Shor (1992) uses Dewey’s (1966) vision of democracy in school as a touchstone, stating: “Deweyan democracy means more than just free access to public schooling. It means enabling students to stay in school and use it both as a personal development experience and as a force for cultural democracy” (p. 137). The proposed curriculum intervention model, although not stating it explicitly, implicitly implies a democratic model in that it demands student participation via their choice in decision making and in determining for themselves whether to remain in school or drop out. Furthermore, in line with Deweyan democracy this curriculum intervention model enables students at risk to stay in school through building community and feeling a sense of community. It also aims at fostering personal experiences that promote social reconstruction, perhaps in the end serving to promote increased cultural democracy.

One of the premier ways the intervention model proposes a measure of democracy is through critical pedagogy and having students find and use voice. In becoming part of a community, students feel safe, accepted, and have strong enough relationships to begin to question the answers instead of answering the questions (Shor, 1992, p. 137). This resistance to the traditional mode of schooling and classroom reveals voice, naming, and anti-marginalization. McLaren (1998) raises the primacy of voice in teaching and learning, noting voice is essential to critical and affirming pedagogy (p. 220). He further

implies that this voice, that which produces and reconstructs meaning in everyday life, is ominously missing from the “accountability schemes, management pedagogies, and rationalized curricula now flooding the schools” (McLaren, 1992, p. 220). The proposed curriculum intervention model aims at helping students to reclaim that voice by supporting them with caring environments, a sense of value and connection, and safety in ideas and expression through feeling a sense of community. As previously indicated, it is hoped that this curriculum intervention model will have broad success in not only keeping students at risk in school and having them experience success there, but also in having those students then go on to promote broader social change through their success and hopeful promotion of care and community. McLaren (1998) speaks to this broader success via the influence of teacher voice, and since this intervention is dependent on teacher implementation and initiative, McLaren offers added perspective:

The power of teacher voice to shape schooling according to the logic of emancipatory interests is inextricably related not only to a high degree of self-understanding, but also to the possibility for teachers to join together in a collective voice as part of a social movement dedicated to restructuring the ideological material conditions both inside and outside of schooling (p. 222).

If teachers can encourage this voice in students, and students emancipate their own voice, then they can begin naming and move out of marginalization.

Freire (1970) is heavily associated with naming since his work with Brazilian peasants had them dialoguing about and naming their world in order to overcome the oppression of that society. Wink (2000) describes naming as “when we articulate a thought that traditionally has not been discussed by the minority group nor the majority group.

*Naming* takes place when the nondominant group tells the dominant group exactly what

the nondominant group thinks and feels about specific social practices” (p. 65). Note how essential voice is to the naming. If students at risk can begin to name their experiences and to see their marginalization into less valued classrooms and settings, then they can begin to emancipate themselves from those classrooms and settings. Feeling as if part of a community, feeling connected and valued are all part of the supportive surroundings which are indicative of taking the risk to voice, to name, and to overcome marginalization. Having said this, we are aware that history shows that groups can name, voice and overcome marginalization without support as seen in the specific examples of Rigoberta Menchu from Guatemala and Augn San Suu Kyi from Burma. These examples are the exception and not the rule.

To return to critical pedagogy, Wink (2000) says: “Critical pedagogy is a lens that empowers us to see and to know in new ways...Critical pedagogy leads us from silence to voice” (p. 72). The same way the proposed curriculum intervention model helps to promote voice through community, it also aims at reconstructing the social milieu through aiding in curbing drop out of students at risk. Once students at risk become empowered through voice and begin to name their struggle and their obstacles, they can then emerge from marginalization in schools and in classrooms. By remaining in school and completing high school students at risk negate an enormous marginalization. They break a cycle of failure and replace it with one of success. It is this type of critical pedagogy, one where students at risk are included, valued, and offered a chance to “see and know in new ways” and to emerge from silence, that is desperately needed by the at

risk population. Through critical pedagogy students at risk empower themselves and in doing so they reconstruct society.

In support of a curriculum as currere and social reconstruction model is Bell & Schniedewind's (1987) article "Reflective Minds/Intentional Hearts: Joining Humanistic Education and Critical Theory for Liberating Education". They argue the currere idea that "humanistic education assumes people want to learn and can be trusted to pursue their own learning if it is what they perceive they need to know" (Bell & Schniedewind, 1987, p. 56). Pursuing one's own education according to what one perceives as significant follows a curriculum as currere model. Where humanistic education also becomes a model for social reconstruction is in its access of self-understanding and developing interpersonal skills: "Most humanistic educators believe that with greater self-understanding and interpersonal skills, people will change both themselves and society" (Bell & Schniedewind, p. 57). To change oneself and society is to socially reconstruct both.

The prompt for creating change to oneself and to society comes from feelings (Bell & Schniedewind, 1987). They state: "Feelings, when tied to an ability to see social patterns, become purposeful and can motivate a person toward constructive action" (p. 63). A curriculum built on care is a curriculum of feelings: feeling connected, feeling like you belong and are part of something, feeling valuable and of value, feeling like a part of a community, feeling things for other people in your learning world. To add a positive spin to these feelings and generate connections between students and staff is to reconstruct a

key social environment. To keep students at risk in school and have them feeling as if they belong is also to reconstruct a social reality.

When students at risk remain in school and then prosper in life their socio-economic situation improves and therefore, the tax base also improves for society etc. Rumberger (1990, 1991) determined that high school dropouts are unemployed and underemployed more often, earn between \$100 000 - \$250 000 less over their lifetimes (as cited in McWhirter et al., 1998, p. 101). I do not want to focus on economics; however, so much of the literature begins, as did this study, with economic advantages and drawbacks to dropping out of school (Downing, Hunter & Vette, 1994; PCEIP, 1999; Query & Hausafus, 1998; Slavin, Karweit & Madden, 1989). Both the individual student and the community to which that student belongs benefit when students at risk of dropping out successfully complete high school.

Other connections between successfully completing high school and social reconstruction lay in breaking a cycle of failure. Often, students at risk who drop out come from families where other significant members have also dropped out of school or where there were fewer opportunities for out of school learning opportunities (McWhirter et al, 1998). In the U.S., according to Perry (1988), it costs close to \$14 000 to keep a prisoner in jail each year, and 62% of all prisoners in the U.S. are high school dropouts (as cited in McWhirter et al, 1998). To break this cycle is to aid in empowering a community through having the population begin to empower themselves. We know that high school dropouts earn less, are more likely to have problems with poverty and crime, and tend to

have lower academic standards for their own children than those who complete school (McWhirter et al, 1998), and accordingly, to promote high school completion within a cycle of dropouts is to promote increased economic and social advantages for that individual and that community.

People who successfully complete high school have a higher sense of self esteem and self worth, and are likely to hold their own children to higher standards like completing high school (McWhirter et al, 1998; Query & Hausafus, 1998). To reconstruct this social paradigm through simply developing relationships with students at risk and making them feel connected and of value seems almost too simplistic. It is not. In fact, it is getting these students at risk through school that is the hard part, and this curriculum intervention model seeks only to help in this process. As has already been noted, this CIM is not the solution to keeping students at risk in school, and is only one intervention aimed at making those students feel accepted and welcomed into the school environment so that they will attempt to successfully complete high school. This CIM alone will not make students at risk be successful in school. Other supports are needed, such as family support and encouragement, assistance from teachers and other school stakeholders, being alcohol and drug dependent free etc., but this CIM will help to keep them in the school environment thus improving their chances of becoming a high school graduate.

A desired consequence then of the challenge to care in schools and the proposed response of a CIM that aims at building community with students at risk is the reconstruction of some of the esteem and thirst to learn so often lost in the student at risk population. A

further consequence is the success of these students in school. The longer they remain in school and experience success there, the more likely they are at breaking a cycle of dropout. The fewer dropouts we have the greater our larger community becomes, and the more likely it is that we can encourage and support even more students into staying in, and completing, high school. Teachers can feel better about their praxis knowing that they intervened to help keep more students in school, and helped those students to experience success. Students can go on in life knowing they are valued and valuable, care about and worthy of care, and that they can experience success. Additionally, they will know how to care about others and make them feel as if part of a community from having been part of a community. Schools and school boards can state with confidence that they have intervened to help their student at risk population to stay in school and experience success there. Parents can again feel proud of their children, and in turn demonstrate more care towards them. In the end, we all benefit from students at risk remaining in, and completing, high school.

## **Chapter 4: Implications of Research and Issues Related to Implementation of an Intervention**

### Summary of Research and Curriculum Paradigm

The review of related literature revealed that building community is not a simplistic task. Instead, the literature punctuates the multifaceted nature of the notion of community and community building. The fact that a community must be built underscores this multiplicitious nature. As revealed in the literature, relationships and care are at the heart of any community building effort with students at risk (vide Chapter 2, p. 32). This precept is fervently supported by such theorists as Noddings (1984) who calls for an end to the “crisis to care in schools” noting the positive and essential nature of care, and by Page (2000) who purports that relationships are essential to emotional well-being. Peart & Campbell (1999) further concluded through their inquiry that warm, caring relationships were essential traits among teachers who were most effective with students at risk. Relationships and care are essential because the affective domain for students’ at risk is what generally guides them through school in terms of feeling isolated or connected to the environment, and thus in staying in school or dropping out. McCarty & Siccone (2001) point to belonging and love, connection and acceptance as essential to students’ at risk success in school or drop out. McWhirter et al (1998) support the significant affect belonging and acceptance have, noting that consistently drop outs reported feeling lack of belonging and that no one cared as reason for their dropping out.

The literature showed too that classroom environment and interactions determine the extent to which students at risk feel as if part of a community (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2001; Paul & Colucci, 2000; Vacha & McLaughlin, 1992). Brodinsky (1989) states that the classroom learning environment, how it is set up and what type of interactions characterize that environment, affects students' self esteem and their sense of belonging to that environment. Jones & Jones (2001) concur with this premise concluding that time spent on building a community and positive learning environment actually reduces misbehaviour and promotes student achievement.

Finally, theorists like Kohn (1996, 1998) promote the idea that discipline is only a problem when you attempt to control students, and accordingly suggests that by actively including students in the decision making process you eliminate the need for such control and discipline problems tend to be negligible. He further suggests that classroom interactions and environments that are marked by respect and by positive aspects nurture the best characteristics in students, thereby lending themselves to building a community. Jones & Jones (2001) indicate that the environment within a school and classroom and the interactions between people there are essential to fewer issues in schools and to reducing the drop out rate. They also support interventions that focus on care and community since they have determined these to be most effective. McWhirter et al (1998) promote the idea of fostering significant and enduring relationships as well as developing self esteem through care and feeling a sense of community.

Ultimately, it is feeling a sense of community through feeling as if you belong, are connected, of value and valuable, and feeling worthy of care and receiving care that help keep students at risk in school. Accordingly, the proposed curriculum intervention model serves to assist in keeping students at risk in school through proposing a model by which teachers can build community within their classrooms and school environments with the explicit aim of helping to keep students at risk in high school through offering them a sense of community.

The need for a curriculum intervention is clear since the current paradigm of traditional schooling, one characterized by curriculum as subject matter, as planned activities, as intended learning outcomes, is not working for students at risk (vide Chapter 2 Perspectives on Curriculum as They Relate to Students at Risk, p. 20). In fact, the need for a new paradigm, one that better serves the interests and needs of students at risk is needed. This new paradigm might take on the approach of critical pedagogy since critical pedagogy often aims at social reconstruction through a curriculum as currere and experience orientation.

Further to the notion of a new paradigm of critical pedagogy is the notion of having students socially reconstruct their worlds and realities through becoming empowered through discovering voice and naming, thus emerging from marginalization (vide Chapter 3 Curriculum as Social Reconstruction, p. 67).

### Review of Research Questions and Assumptions

To review, the research questions and the model are based on four assumptions. The two research questions are: 1. is building community an effective intervention for students at risk, and 2. what can classroom teachers do to build community with students at risk and to what benefit? The four premier assumptions are that: 1. teachers want to help students at risk stay in school and are willing to make accommodations within their classrooms that would foster a community atmosphere, 2. teachers continue to use the curriculum intervention model until a community is established, and that they maintain that community, 3. students at risk want to be cared about and want to be part of a community, and finally 4. the type of teacher needed to successfully implement this curriculum intervention model is one who is caring, flexible, encourages student success through enthusiasm and support.

Building community is as effective intervention for students at risk because it reaches their affective domain and meets more of their needs not currently being met. Building community does this through giving students at risk a sense of belonging and acceptance, through making them feel cared about, valued, and valuable, and by giving them classroom environments and interactions wherein they feel the above and thus feel a sense of community. Based on the three premises of the CIM, namely that: 1. students at risk want to feel connected and part of something, 2. students at risk want to feel valued and valuable, and 3. classroom environment and interactions greatly influence the extent to which students at risk feel the above, and thereby part if a community, I have designed the following curriculum intervention model.

### Preparing for the Intervention: Teacher, Student, Environment

The first person to prepare is you, the teacher. Building community with students at risk means you take them into your life, and often into your heart. Oftentimes, this can be a roller coaster ride of emotions and frustrations. Prepare yourself for the personal to be political in that not everyone wants students at risk to be successful. In fact, sometimes you may encounter direct opposition to your intervention in that other teachers or administrators might disagree with this flexibility for students at risk. Try to prepare yourself for the responses not to become personal all the time. In other words, recognize that student outburst that at first seems directed at you may in fact not be. In opening yourself up to the challenge of “reaching” students at risk you also open essential lines of communication, and sometimes they may direct an outburst at you unintentionally. Attempt to see this as evidence of your having established a relationship with that student. Preparing yourself to overcome your own distancing towards certain students is perhaps the most difficult aspect of preparation. Much of this will have to come with experience in working with these students, but some of it can happen on your own. Start by thinking about your own classroom and school experiences that were positive and influential. Make a list of the feelings you had, their causes, and any analysis you can do to those connections. Brainstorm ways you can create those feelings and experiences in your classroom.

Know now that generally if students at risk show up to school it means they really do want to be there. Yes, some students are mandated to school by the law or other such

authorities, but this is likely not the norm. See their attendance, sketchy or not, late or not, as a commitment from the student to your class and to school. Recognize this commitment often. In my own classroom I often comment on a late and thank them for coming: "Shamus, I notice that you're forty minutes late, but thank you very much for choosing to come." The aim of this model and its approach is not to alter their tardy behaviour, but instead to help them feel welcome and keep them in school. I am of the mindset that I would rather have the student in my class, late or not, than have them think they are past an arbitrary time and *cannot come* to class.

Prepare yourself for out bursts, sometimes negative ones, from these students. One of the things the literature says about students at risk, especially high risk ones, is that they do not have the same impulse control or level of interpersonal skills that other students have (McWhirter et al, 1998). Your choice to understand this out burst and accept it as part of the student is a step toward making that student feel like she belongs and is accepted. The literature also says that if we build community with these students and meet more of their needs, then these out bursts should diminish (Korinek et al, 1999, p. 3).

Finally, prepare yourself to show care and be flexible. There is no cookbook with step by step recipes for best dealing with students at risk. They are people and not outcomes. Be flexible in how you deal with them and in the things you plan on doing with your students and you will have success at making them feel as if they belong and are valued in your community.

Next, you will need to prepare your students for this intervention. Here, I suggest honesty and open discussion. Try explaining to students that you are trying something new that you hope they will participate. Also try explaining why you are using this, and what it offers them. One might want to be honest here, and try framing things in the positive, saying things like it is your aim to help keep as many of them in school as possible, and that it is important for you to take risks and try to build a community with them. Each teacher will have to “feel out” their class of students to best determine for themselves how to approach preparing their students, but if my experience is guide then honesty seems to be one of those essential bridges to trusting my students and visa versa.

Finally, teachers will need to prepare the environments in which they interact with students. Primarily this will mean the classroom or class space. As the literature revealed, space that is inviting, warm, and respectful is best (Brodinsky, 1989). Desks in rows tend to communicate messages of power and authority as well as messages of status. Those who sit near the teacher are “pets” and smart, while those who sit away are “dumb” or uninterested. For this reason I suggest desks or tables in groups, u shapes, or in a circle. Seeing people’s faces and speaking to them instead of at the back of their heads helps to build a community. The basic premises of setting up an environment should be familiarity, inclusion, and respect. A simple smile from someone you do not know can mean the difference between feeling isolated and feeling included. The aim of this intervention is to help students at risk feel a sense of community.

Beyond seating arrangements, the environment should be respectful and a celebration of success and ability. Post student work, all of it, not just the exemplary pieces. Change the look of the space to reflect the students' ownership of that space. Let them decide where to hang items, where to hand work in, post announcements, what style to give the space. To help them feel of value and capable of meaningfully contributing you must offer them opportunities to take ownership of their choices and space. Point out their ability to shape and influence and environment. Being part of the space secondment process is one of the ways we can prepare students to participate in the building community process and intervention.

#### Modes of Democracy: Façade or Possibility?

This curriculum intervention model depends on a level of democracy being established within a school environment. Now, the issue of democracy and its reality in a school setting has already been briefly addressed (vide Chapter 3, Curriculum as Social Reconstruction, p. 71). If true democracy does not exist in life and society at present, then it is implausible that it should then exist in a classroom environment. What can exist, however, is a modicum of democracy employed through exercising choice over determining the course one will follow, plan, and carry through. A reality of democracy in schools in that if something goes wrong, then students ultimately will look to the teacher as authority figure to fix it. I doubt this will ever change. Even A.S. Neill, founder of Summerhill School where children were free in almost all capacities, acknowledges this truism (Neill, 1960). A modicum of democracy in classrooms and

schools is a beginning point for the process of encouraging further democracy in society and life.

Having established the distinction between ultimate and possible democracy in schools, we can now move on to discuss ways this mode of democracy can find its way into classrooms, particularly as implied through this curriculum intervention model.

Democracy as employed in this intervention arises from student choice: choice in involvement, choice in participation, choice in creating the environment, choice in interactions etc. Democracy is also established through an attempt at a power balance between students and teachers. Instead of being authoritative and issuing decrees of what is appropriate or tolerated, teachers should instead opt to have students involved in decisions, in negotiating how the class will run and appear, and in having power over themselves and their own choices.

What should be clear by now is how essential the teacher is to this intervention. The teacher sets the tone, stage, and mediates the success or failure of implementing the intervention curriculum. Their flexibility, their determination to alter their class and environments in ways needed by their students, their utilization of a foundation of care in every action and behaviour determines the success or failure of this intervention. A “half hearted” approach to this intervention negates success. What students at risk need are flexible, comprehensive interventions that meet both their affective and cognitive needs. The literature has shown (vide Chapter 2) that one way to better meet those needs is through building community.

## **Chapter 5: A Proposed Curriculum Intervention Model (CIM) for Building Community with Students at Risk**

This proposed curriculum intervention model aims at keeping students at risk in school through building community. Since building community has been established as an effective intervention for students at risk (Chapter 2) because of its ability to make them feel connected, part of something, valued, valuable, and cared about through significant relationships, using community building as an intervention serves to benefit students at risk. Classroom teachers, then, can use this intervention and its premises and strategies to build community with their students at risk with the understood benefit of keeping students at risk in school.

### **Aims of the Curriculum Intervention Model (CIM)**

The aim of the CIM is to help keep students at risk in school through giving them a sense of community and connection to a classroom and school culture. Another hope is that through the community, these students at risk will experience success and positive school experiences, also aiding in helping to keep them in school. A further aim is to shape students' lives through reconstructing their school and social paradigms by ending a cycle of drop out, increasing their self esteem and perceived self worth through positive school experiences, and finally through having these students become empowered and emerge from the margins of failure into the girth of future success. It is hoped that these aims are possible through this intervention and through the relationships that will likely emerge because of the model's implementation.

The curriculum orientations on which this model are based are currere, humanistic education, and a curriculum as social reconstruction. The actual curriculum being proposed is curriculum as currere of experiencing care and community. Individual “journeys” are intricate, multifaceted, and dynamic. They often have no set beginning or end, as is the intention with this curriculum as currere of experiencing care and community. The journey of experiencing care and community, indeed in building and maintaining a community, should have no definitive beginning or especially an end. The section concerning the definition of curriculum in Chapter 2 noted the disparate purposes between this curriculum as currere of experiencing care and community and curricula as subject matter or intended learning outcomes etc. A purpose of this curriculum is to connect students with one another, with teachers, with the learning environment; to help them see they are of value, have important contributions, and are worthy of care. When students experience the journey to care and community, that experience also characterizes the mutual understanding of what it means to feel as is part of a community. The autobiographies, both in self and as group, comprise the currere of this curriculum. It aims at building a community with students at risk to keep them in school with the benefit of having them successfully graduate from high or senior years school and experience success in school.

## The Three Premises: The Upward Spiral as a Model

The Upward Spiral Model follows on p. 89.

The proposed curriculum intervention model is based on three premises, also on which are based all the strategies, ideas, and the proposed intervention. These premises are:

1. Students at risk want to feel connected and part of something.
2. Students at risk want to feel valued and valuable.
3. Classroom environment and interactions greatly influence the extent to which students at risk feel the above and thereby feel part of a community.

These premises are integrated into the curriculum through the key concepts revealed in the review of related literature (vide Appendix A). As such, there will not be specific sections on “helping students at risk to feel valued and valuable.” These premises and how teachers would access them are not so isolated and distinct from one another.

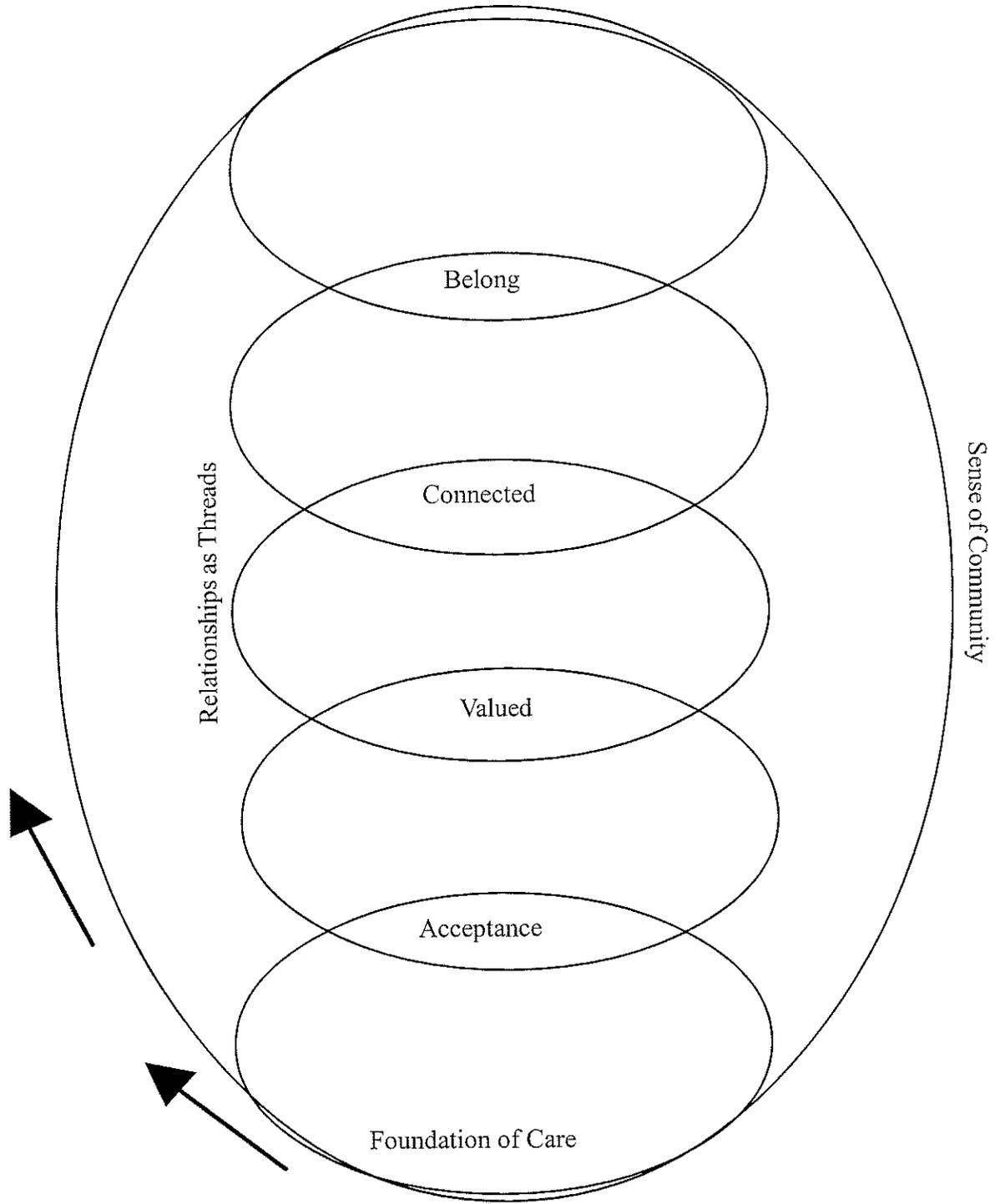
Instead, the premises, as well as the strategies to “access” them are fluid, entwined, and sometimes dependent on other elements for success. Other elements may include aspects like relaxed atmosphere to encourage belonging or developing trust before communicating value etc. One of the implied tenants of this model is that of accepting students at risk where they are in terms of development, kindness, and ability to care. Accepting these stages and those students also means selecting that stage as a beginning point for building community.

The model works through the processes of experiencing care and community through classroom teachers working together with their students to build community. The Upward Spiral (vide p. 89) illustrates the model in action. Like a moebius strip, this model as a curriculum as currere has no definitive beginning or end. Feeling a sense of community likewise should have no definitive beginning or end. Yes, we may be able to characterize a time when we *began* to feel connected or isolated from a group, however usually this is not a definitive moment. Notice that the Upward Spiral does not have downward arrows. This is simply because it does not need them. The spiral continuously moves upward and strives to repeat itself. Once a sense of community is established it is then maintained and hoped to spread. It is possible that the spiral grows in girth instead of by length. I cannot say for certain because like one of the teacher traits needed in this model, it too is flexible. Precisely how this model will be integrated, or precisely what it will look like once in place is not for me to determine. Ultimately, it is the teacher as curriculum implementer who will decide what, and how, this intervention will finally appear. Also, as a model of curriculum as currere the students' experiences will equally shape the visage the model and intervention will take. I propose the guide rope, and not the cookbook step by step recipe to success with students at risk.

The Upward Spiral has a foundation of care. This means that care needs to be behind all motivations, actions, dialogues, interactions, and dynamics with students at risk. Even when we are upset, we can still demonstrate and communicate care. Interlaced with this foundation of care are acceptance, sense of value, connection, and belonging all serving to build a sense of community. The relationships between and among students, staff,

teachers, and space thread together the above elements that make up a sense of community. The relationships too then would all be characterized by care. Finally, all of these actions and this intervention happen in a background of other content or skill based curricula such as Consumer Mathematics or English Technical Communications etc. This intervention can be used in any senior years classroom, and is not limited to the academic subjects.

### The Upward Spiral

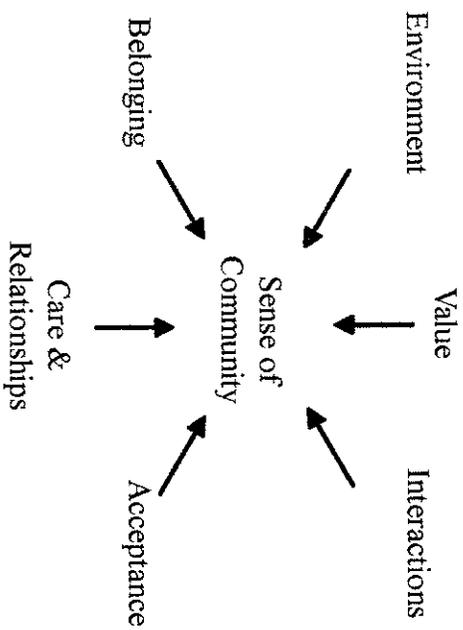


## The Proposed Curriculum Intervention Model

Refer to Appendix A (p. 111) for a visual representation of how the three premises are integrated into the following activities as well as how the literature supports these activities and their aim of building community.

In the interest of convenience and developing a visual conception of the curriculum intervention model, a representation of the model and accompanying explanations precede the model itself. It is hoped that this precession will ease in digesting ways the curriculum intervention model might be used and implemented. Furthermore, it is also hoped that this representation might serve as a reference for teachers employing this curriculum intervention.

**The Curriculum Intervention Model: A Representation**



**Reflecting & Promoting Community**

- \* Create a memory book.
- \* Reflect on community and membership.
- \* Plan for continued contact: Continue the relationships.
- \* Encourage community members to join other communities and to foster a sense of community in their own communities.

**Maintaining a Community**

- \* Continue with what works from building community.
- \* Post student work.
- \* Take pictures of students working, laughing, playing, and together as a group.
- \* Develop nicknames for members of the community.
- \* Include students in the planning of class activities and course of study.
- \* Take your community into the community.
- \* Create opportunities for students to plan something special and become a cohesive group.
- \* Broadcast and broaden your success and community.

**Building a Community**

- \* Greet your students at the door.
- \* Memorize students' names.
- \* Talk to and with students, not at them.
- \* Get to know your students.
- \* Have students get to know each other.
- \* Set a tone of shared power and responsibility.
- \* Be available to your students.
- \* Speak about the community.
- \* Develop relationships: Tell stories, share stories.
- \* Celebrate accomplishments or "big deals".

**Preparing for Building Community**

- \* Reflect on your own experiences in schools & communities
- \* Show care in every action & interaction
- \* Prepare to overcome setbacks and obstacles
- \* Talk to your students about the plan and "aims"
- \* Make the space accessible, student oriented, and positive
- \* Use a setup that encourages interactions among students

**Critical Pedagogy & Social Reconstruction**

- \* Learn about voice, naming & marginalization
- \* Share power, negotiate rules, course, studies etc.
- \* Promote democracy
- \* Include students in meaningful ways

## The Curriculum Intervention Model: Accompanying Explanations

### *The Concept: Steps with in a Surrounding "Premise" Step*

The surrounding premise step takes into account the essentials of building a sense of community; namely those of care and relationships, belonging and acceptance, value, and classroom interactions and environment determining the extent to which students feel a sense of community. Note that each essential is both separate and yet works together to create this sense of community.

The surrounding premise step encompasses the rest of the model. Teachers should consider these six elements as they pursue the journey towards building a sense of community with their students. Having understood these essential elements and how these work to build a sense of community, teachers then might begin the journey of using the internal steps. Beginning by an understanding of critical pedagogy and this model's aim of social reconstruction, teachers might consider their own experiences and journeys in school and within communities. These experiences might help teachers to make choices regarding democracy and including students in meaningful ways within their own classrooms. Teachers then might begin to think about preparing themselves to show care in every action and interaction with students. Finally, teachers should revise or consider the physical setup of their classroom or space, taking into account that this space speaks a language of its own. Teachers might want to think about the message their classroom setup has, and how this might be made more suitable to building a sense of community.

Next, teachers might want to talk with their students about their “aim” of building a sense of community and its potential benefits. Include students in the planning of activities and in the act of building the community. Sample activities have been listed in the representation and these are fully explained in the complete model to follow on pp. 94-100. Having built the community, teachers should then work to maintain that sense of community. Again, complete activities have been included in the complete model to follow. Highlights of this include posting student work as illustration of their success, including students in the planning or class activities and course of study etc.

Finally, although beyond the scope of the proposed intervention, teachers might want to have students reflect on the community. It is hoped that through this reflection students will make the connection with promoting further and/or additional senses of community within their own communities. Other activities that help to bring closure to the “classroom community” include creating a memory book that highlights memories, activities, and people who comprised the community.

This curriculum intervention model has been represented by steps not because each must be completed before the next can be taken, rather instead because steps best communicate the notion of a community being “built.” Indeed, we must take steps towards building community and yes, this likely will happen in stages. Also like steps, one can take them two at a time if necessary, and even skip some. Although this is not recommended, teachers will decide for themselves and with their students where to begin with building community.

The complete curriculum intervention that follows is comprised of adaptable and alterable strategies that suggest and illuminate the types of activities classroom teachers can use to build community in their classrooms and schools. To reiterate, *this is not a recipe to success or a "how to" manual*. It is a guide to be followed and used as each teacher sees fit. Teachers know their students best, and can adapt these ideas and strategies to best fit and benefit their students at risk.

### Building Community: First Week and Everyday

1. Greet your students at the door (Jones & Jones, 2001, p. 93).
  - Give them your full attention. Smile at them, introduce yourself, and invite them into the space and to feel free to be seated or stand anywhere they would like. Be enthusiastic about all interactions with them. Welcome them to *their* class.
  
2. Memorize students' names.
  - Use memory tricks like talking to each person for a minute to gather information about them. Associate the student with a rhyming word or distinguishing feature. Have students fold a piece of paper vertically and then write their name (the one they wish to be called) on it. Go around and say hello to each student and welcome them, tell them each about what is to come and be sure to use their names. Use students' names in a meaningful way immediately.
    - A teacher might explain the significance of having a name and being called by that name in connection to a personal story of their own. Teachers might also explain that it is essential that everyone learn each other's names soon so that you no longer say 'excuse me' to someone when you could say 'Excuse me Rupinder'. Once the teacher has names memorized, they might want to show the students that they have learned their names by placing their name cards in front of the students when they arrive. If a teacher stumbles on a name, it shows the rest of the class that it is acceptable to have flaws. With these actions students notice the genuineness of the teacher's actions in wanting to know them as people, and their names.

### 3. Talk to and with students, not at them.

- The course outline may be set, but first impressions last. Take some time and introduce yourself, in a meaningful way, to your students. Focus on the positive experiences coming up in the class. Share stories of the summer, of trips, of pets etc. Be relaxed. Encourage participation. Have a dialogue with students you already know so that new students can see that you are approachable and safe to speak to.
- Take an interest in what your students are interested in as this is part of talking with students. Teachers might want to consider listening closely to their students' conversations with friends to catch a glimpse of what students perceive as valuable and worthy of discussion.

### 4. Get to know your students (Jones & Jones, 2001; Secada, 1999).

- Create a "Stuff my teacher wants to know about me" information gathering sheet. Points might include birthday, age, favorite activity outside of school, best movie and why, siblings in school, what they like/hate about school, 3 things they do superbly, one life dream unfulfilled to date etc.
- Play "The Silly Question" game where you ask your students "If you could be a fruit or a vegetable, animal, country etc, what would you be and why?" This question can become a 'right of passage' in classes. Answers may vary, but in the end, students may feel a sort of connection having been part of the silliness.
  - Teachers may make a point of asking all new people who come to their community to answer the silly question, including visitors for the day and guest speakers. This action helps to solidify the community feel of the question.
- Stand up and be counted. Have a list of safe and moderately safe questions ready. Explain to students that if the statement applies to them they should stand up. Statements can be things like: I have a pet, I have travelled outside of North America, I have recently lost someone close to me, I play an instrument etc.
  - After each statement talk to students standing. Try to draw details and stories from them. In essence, get to know your students. This also offers students a chance to get to know one another as well as creating bonds between people with similar interests or experiences. The moderately safe questions should be addressed with caution. Some students may choose not to participate, and that is their right. Encourage them, but always have the student decide for him or herself.

5. Have students get to know each other (Jones & Jones, 2001; Page, 2000; Korinek et al, 1999, p. 4).

- Know Your Classmates (Jones & Jones, 2001, p. 133) is a strategy run like a bingo where students have a chart or list or board with statements on it such as “I have a great grand parent in the province” or “A person whose birthday is in the same month as yours” etc. The aim is to collect the names and signatures of people who fit the description.
- Guess Who? (Jones & Jones, 2001, p. 136) works well in senior years classes and it allows students a chance to reacquaint themselves with their peers. Students write a few statements about themselves like “I was born in Ottawa and have moved many times in my life” or “In grade six I won the goofiest hair award” etc. The teacher collects all the autobiography statements and reads them aloud or posts them and students guess who the autobiography belongs to. This activity could also be adapted to be preceded by interviews of classmates over a week or so and then play the guess who part.
- Like/Unlike pair up and talk. Ask students to find someone in class with the same/similar shoes, hair, style, height etc and to talk to that student for a few minutes.
  - Consider repeating this daily for a while and include times where they should find their complete opposite in style, height, social group etc. Have students focus on getting to know each other a little, and perhaps talking directly about the like or unlike quality itself. An aim is to have these students who are alike or unlike discover what they have in common. Not only will students have the opportunity to get to know everyone in the class, they will possibly also realize that bonds through commonalities can exist with someone seemingly their opposite.

6. Set a tone of shared power and responsibility (Kohn, 1996; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000).

- Negotiate a Charter of Rights and Amended Privileges. Have an open and diverse discussion about the differences between rights and privileges. Discuss with students the realities with these rights and privileges in terms of a school context or life context etc. Have students work together or individually to create a list of rights they have. Do the same for privileges. List all the student suggestions on the board, overhead, etc. Leave no right or privilege out. Try to have them create an exhaustive list. Introduce negotiating to them. Have students attempt to determine the basic principles of negotiations, and make the connection between these principles and successful

negotiations. Then, begin negotiating rights and privileges with your students. Be honest about why or why not a privilege can or cannot exist.

- Teachers might consider doing this activity during the first week of school. An approach would be to speak with students at length about their rights as human beings, and ask them to consider their rights as students as well. Have them elect a student to be the official recorder and have that student write down the charter with specific points about what was decided as a right and privilege. Teachers might also consider negotiating the monitoring of the privileges in terms of abuse and consequences for breaking the negotiated guidelines. Type the charter and put it in its own designated folder. Have students sign it thereby agreeing to the privileges since the rights are non negotiable, and place the charter in a designated spot where it can be easily referenced when the need arises.

7. Be available to your students (Peart & Campbell, 1999).

- Give them your schedule and let them know where you can be found and how they should reach you. Advise them that you are there to help and are available for that purpose.

8. Speak about the community (Kohn, 1996).

- Semantics play a role in building community. Refer to the class and group as a “we” and “our” community, class, project etc. All the property in the class also becomes an “ours.” Consider referring to objects and space as “ours” as this lets students know that all classroom property is theirs. If they ask to borrow your scissors, explain that the scissors belong to the community and they are entitled to use them anytime.

9. Develop Relationships; Tell stories, share stories (Page, 2000; Rogers & Renard, 1999).

- Begin, end, or break class to tell stories of your own life and invite students to share in the story telling. Focus on accomplishments, even small ones, and something positive in life. Teachers can use this as an opportunity to really get to know their students, their interests, and about their lives. Likewise, this time can be used to tell them about what you do and what you are interested in.
  - Teachers might consider making a point of sculpting this time as essential to everyday class since it is essential to making students feel like they belong and are valued. Students begin to volunteer stories and they chose the content. Sometimes, though, some tough

issues come out, but this gives the community an opportunity to show their support or opinion.

10. Celebrate accomplishments or “big deals” (Jones & Jones, 2001; Schoenlein, 2001).
  - Senior years students often get drivers licenses, cars, jobs, friends, partners (girl or boyfriends), vacations, awards, babies, quite smoking, curb their drug use etc. Celebrate these accomplishments and share the good feelings. Tell the stories of how these were accomplished, and express your pride in those students.

### Maintaining a Community: Everyday and Special Events

1. Continue with what works from building the community.
  - Continue to tell stories, greet students at the door, use their names in meaningful ways, focus on their accomplishments, talk to them, learn about their lives, be available etc.
2. Post student work (Brodinsky, 1989; Jones & Jones, 2001).
  - Have space in the environment, and outside of the class space, to post student work. Post something from everyone often. Point out this success. Invite students to come and peruse the work as evidence of their capabilities and success together.
3. Take pictures of students working, playing, laughing, and together as a group (Schoenlein, 2001).
  - Teachers can communicate value and importance through not only the action of taking students’ pictures, but also by sharing those photos. Pass them around, talk about your memories of the day/image, post the pictures and invite students to come and look and tell their stories of the image.
4. Develop nicknames for members of the community.
  - Nicknames offer a sense of being special to the community. In a flexible (and casual) environment nicknames often emerge on their own.
5. Include students in the planning of class activities and course of study (Kohn, 1998, p. 252-270; McWhirter et al, 1998, p. 69; Rogers & Renard, 1999, p. 37).
  - Where possible, include students in these processes. Their inclusion in these choices and decisions helps to ensure their participation and eventual success. It also helps to give them a sense of control over their schooling.

6. Take your community into the community (Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2001, p. 8.10).

- Plan out of the school fieldtrips. These fieldtrips build community in offering students a special occasion to bond and to develop relationships. Furthermore, students at risk enjoy these opportunities to be trusted outside of school, to be respected enough to choose a fieldtrip, and enjoy being out of school for a day.

7. Create opportunities for students to plan something special and become a cohesive group (Jones & Jones, 2001, p. 135).

- Celebrate special dates and events with a “party” or luncheon, or perspective trip. For example, if students suggest making popcorn for the class film, then have them organize this. Additionally, if studying a novel, then propose an end of the book “coffee house” talk where students can discuss the text and snack etc. Let the students be responsible for planning and following through.

8. Broadcast and broaden your success and community (Kohn, 1996).

- Invite guests to visit or join your community. Have events or occasions or classes where students bring friends to class etc. Tell the stories of your community and successes.
- Publish your work, pictures, projects etc. Find space to post these so the entire school can be involved in your community building. Create a community bulletin or “zine” where students can profile their accomplishments and write about their memories from the community.
- Plan school wide activities that include your community and promote community on a school wide level (Kohn, 1996, p. 114)

This final section is really beyond the intervention, but is still significant to promoting further community building and social reconstruction. It is recommended that teachers utilize these ideas; however, they are beyond the primary intervention of *building community*. They are, nonetheless, worthy of note here and use in classrooms as promotion of community propagates the Upward Spiral.

### Reflecting on the Community: Promotion of Future Community

1. Create a community memory book.
  - Use the pictures, projects, writing, and narratives to create a book or poster or website of the memories members have of your community.
2. Reflect on community and membership (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000, p. 60).
  - Interpretive community maps (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000, p. 60) can be utilized in many ways. Have students create a map that represents their community, its influences, accomplishment, bumps along the way, key features, factors in its success, how each member fits in, and their future etc.
  - Circle of friends. Have students sit in a circle and go around and say something nice, positive, or thanks to everyone, or three members etc. The teacher too should participate.
  - File folder feedback. Students create a file folder with their name on it and paper inside. This folder is passed around the class in two minute intervals during which students write a private message to the owner thanking them, noting something that person does well, or something else positive about knowing that person. This is done anonymously, unless students choose otherwise, and in the event a student has nothing positive to say they write nothing.
3. Plan for continued contact with community members; Continue the relationships.
  - Create an email, address and phone list and distribute this to community members.
  - Set dates for a reunion of sorts. Plan times to communicate.
4. Encourage community members to join other communities and foster a sense of community within their own community.
  - Introduce students to community service organizations, social activism groups, volunteer opportunities etc.

### Questions Arising from the Curriculum Intervention Model

1. *What is "pushed out" in terms of content or curricula in order to fit this curriculum in?* Ideally, the answer is nothing, however, that response seems unrealistic since the class time and school year is not limitless, and is instead

limited. This model should not interfere with core content or skills. Instead, it interfaces with core content and skills. Indeed, the intervention will use valuable class time, but the benefits of employing this intervention arguably outweigh the losses in content or skills. In fact, one could argue that for students at risk this intervention may make the difference between obtaining content and skills or not because this intervention serves to meet more of their needs. Furthermore, with more of their needs met these students at risk are less likely to have outbursts and exhibit behaviours that often impede with class learning time.

2. *Some of these activities, particularly the reflecting on community ones, seem to have a language arts or discussion focus. How then can this model interface with other core subject areas like science, math, physical education etc?* All subject areas are based in language for their communication and instructional mode. Language, then, and accordingly language arts foci, are essential to all subject areas and curricula. This is not an exclusive language arts curriculum; in fact, it does little more than borrow some strategies and approaches often characterized as “good practice” by language arts specialists. Furthermore, the primary mode of communication between humans is language. Thus, the simplest way to communicate care, belonging, acceptance etc. is to begin with language as communication, both verbal, body, and behaviour.
3. *What is a teacher to do if a student or students choose not to participate in building the community?* The students themselves ultimately determine the extent

to which they feel part of the community, and if a student(s) chooses to be outside the community then that is likely the outcome. They likely will feel some measure of community, perhaps being known as “the one who does not participate” but this in itself implies they have a place within the community and are a member. The best course of action for a teacher in this scenario is to remain positive, supportive, and enthusiastic about the community and its benefits. Perhaps the continued support is exactly what the student(s) needs in order to be convinced that they too want to be members of the community.

4. *Can this model work without a teacher who has a “strong” personality, capable enough to interface dual curricula, include students in meaningful ways and capacities etc?* Yes and no. Yes, any teacher interested in helping students at risk experience more success and wanting them to stay in school can have success with this model. Their desire to help is often enough to drive the model through to success. Furthermore, students at risk need caring adult and teacher personalities, and not necessarily “strong” ones. The notion of having a “strong” personality is nearly irrelevant when paralleled to care. So, in essence, any teacher can use this intervention even though they may or may not have a “strong” personality. Having said this, the answer is also no. Teachers who are not “strong” enough to dedicate themselves to the task of building a community will not have success with this intervention. As has been previously noted in Chapter 4, successful implementation is dependant on the type of teacher and some assumptions regarding their commitment to students at risk. These assumptions

also influence the efficacy of the model. Some theorists, primarily Kohn (1996), argue that a teacher cannot know how to build community unless they themselves are part of one. Presumably, teachers are not solitary in a school, and thus, know somewhat of being part of a community. This is a drastic example. The model assumes that the teachers know something of being part of a community in various contexts and accordingly are capable of then building community in their classes.

## Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study has examined the efficacy of building community as an intervention with students at risk. As an intervention it proposes to help keep students at risk in school, helps to have those students become empowered through critical pedagogy, helps to encourage success in school through feelings of community, and proposes a higher quality of experiences in school via feeling a sense of community. By answering the research question “is building community an effective intervention for helping to keep students at risk in school?”, this study has concluded that indeed, building community is an efficacious intervention since it serves to meet more of students’ at risk needs. As an intervention model, building community meets more of students’ at risk needs because it makes them feel connected and part of something, valued and valuable, and helps to show them care through essential and significant relationships in a classroom and school context. Additionally, this study asked the research question “what can classroom teachers do to build community in their classrooms to the benefit of students at risk?” In response, this study has proposed a curriculum intervention model that aims at building community to the benefit of students at risk. Specifically, it aims at helping to keep students at risk in school through giving them a sense of connection, belonging, acceptance, empowerment, respect, a modicum of democracy and “control” over their own learning, and employs care and caring as integral aspects to achieving the above, and thus, achieving a sense of community.

The data for this study came from the extensive, albeit not exhaustive, review of recent related literature. I read, reviewed, and categorized the literature into five areas. These were: 1. perspectives on curriculum as they related to students at risk, 2. belonging and acceptance, 3. relationships and care, 4. classroom interactions and environment determine the extent to which students at risk feel the above, and therefore, part of a community, and finally 5. stand alone texts of consequence. Since this study proposes a theoretical construct for building community with students at risk, and a construct based on a review of related literature, it cannot be characterized as either qualitative or quantitative research. It can, however, be characterized as integrative inquiry since it has “an emphasis on integrating diverse material into a particular conceptual framework so that some new perspectives or relationships are introduced” (Marsh, 1991, p. 272, as cited in Short). The intervention certainly poses a new conceptual framework and is based on diverse material that offered some new perspectives.

The review of related literature revealed that students at risk continue to drop out of school (vide Chapter 1, p.1) often citing feeling isolated and as if they did not belong as reasons for their dropping out (vide Chapter 2, p. 24). Dovetailing from this notion is the idea that relationships, those that are positive ones, are equally cited as key to helping to keep students at risk in school (vide Chapter 2, p. 30). Classroom environment and interactions have been shown to influence the extent to which students at risk feel as if they belong, are valuable and valued, and thus feel as if part of a community (vide Chapter 2, p. 38). Finally, the current paradigm of education, one marked by a need to cover content instead of develop relationships and show care, is not working for students

at risk. What has been proposed as having more potential benefit to these students is a curriculum as currere model, one that focuses on humanistic and critical pedagogy, and that aims at social reconstruction (Chapter 3, p. 61).

The realities of this type of curriculum and intervention speak to numerous assumptions and preparations for successful implementation (vide Chapter 4, p. 78). The teacher, student, and environment all need preparing. For the teacher, the personal becomes political and teaching can become intensely emotional. For the students, the change in approach might be staggering, and accordingly they might need increased support along the “journey.” The learning environment is essential to the success of this intervention in that it communicates a language of its own. A set up of invitation, democracy, success for all, and student ownership is needed. This model aims at a modicum of democracy in the classroom since it acknowledges that true democracy cannot exist in a contrived environment if it does not yet exist in an everyday one. Finally, the teacher herself is the cornerstone on which this intervention model rests. Without her, her care, enthusiasm, belief in students at risk, and dedication to the arduous task of building community, this intervention, like Venice, sinks slowly.

Based on the research, it was concluded that indeed building community is an effective intervention for students at risk. Furthermore, also based on the research is the curriculum intervention model which takes the premises of students at risk wanting to feel connected and part of something, valued and valuable, and classroom environment and interactions determining the extent to which they feel the above, and integrates these

into the intervention model. The model works through the processes of the Upward Spiral where care and relationships are at the heart of all interactions and actions with students, and also through the curriculum orientation of currere. It is the journey, both as an individual and as a community, which is of significance. Without this journey and its potential long lasting effects, social reconstruction is less attainable. When students at risk can begin to feel competent, cared about, and capable, then they can reflect on their journey and initiate change in their own lives outside of school.

In terms of critical pedagogy, we can no longer ignore the mounting body of research that concludes students at risk benefit from interventions such as building community and establishing warm, caring relationships. At present, we must take action and begin to weave these aspects into our classrooms and schools. To act upon this knowledge is to initiate fundamental and positive change. Students at risk need our dedication and commitment to the task of building community within our classrooms and school. More so, they need our care and for us to help them to see their value, acceptance, that they belong, and are welcomed. We can begin to demonstrate these messages through how we set up our classrooms and how we interact with students. Furthermore, we also communicate these messages when we encourage and support students in their own autobiographies of feeling a sense of community as an individual and as a member of a group. Simple actions like learning students' names early on, like sharing stories, and negotiating class activities make the difference in terms of students at risk choosing to stay in school or dropping out.

Our initiative to build community in classrooms and schools might just be the trigger that causes students at risk to reconsider dropping out. Perhaps they begin to feel as if they belong. Perhaps they begin to feel as if they are of value to the class and school and have important things to contribute. Perhaps then, they begin to try a little more in their relationships with people in school, and maybe this in turn leads them to exert a little more effort in their studies and assignments. You can see where this is leading. The cycle of drop out is replaced with a celebration of success at graduation time. These then adult students go on in their lives and continue to tell the story of school and their sense of community. They reminisce about those special classes that got them through school. If they become parents or Aunts and Uncles, then they know to support that next generation student by being available for her, by accepting her and showing her that she has value. Feeling as if part of a supported community, our "next generation" student goes on to graduate knowing that her family is behind her. In fact, her Uncle volunteers at their school on fieldtrips, because he remembers how important it was for students to have connections to the community.

This might be viewed as a pretty story, even an overly optimistic one, but it certainly is not unrealistic. Having never been tried before on a wide scale, who knows how successful this intervention might be? Even if teachers take away a sense of ability to do something for the benefit of students at risk, namely helping to keep them in school, then much of this study and its proposed ideas have been successful. All students deserve a chance at experiencing success in school and at completing school. For most students the current situation is working. For the remaining students at risk, however, the playing

field is not level since they are being missed and dropping out. We can help to change this by using this curriculum intervention model to build community with our classes, thus helping to alleviate many of the reasons students at risk tend to drop out of school.

Change is possible, and it begins with what teachers initiate in their classrooms. With direct contact everyday, teachers have enormous influence with students, with curricula, and with how those two meet and blend. In a sense this could be considered a “grass roots” intervention in that it begins where most students at risk end: in the classroom. The relationships that teachers can create with their students can cause fundamental change. Likewise, the relationships that students can develop with one another equally can cause fundamental change. By consistently using the strategies suggested in this curriculum intervention model, it is possible that students at risk will choose to remain in school as a result of the relationships they experience there, and as a result of their feeling as if part of a community.

By bringing theory and practice together this curriculum intervention model directly addresses one of the previously stark areas, namely that of having plenty of theory concerning the benefit of building community with students at risk. In an attempt, albeit a brief one, to compensate for that starkness, this model has woven the theory into a practical, exploitable, efficacious model comprised of workable strategies that aim at building community. We know already of the theory that supports this model. What we now stand to discover is how effective this proposed model can be if implemented. This answer is beyond what is proposed presently in terms of the study. What can happen,

though, is another researcher or another study may choose to implement this model and qualitatively and/or quantitatively study its effects and proposed benefits.

An intervention now exists that proposes to help keep students at risk in school by building a sense of community with them. It is now up to teachers, schools, administrators, and school boards to implement this intervention and to observe its effects. If the proposed benefits are true, namely that it helps to keep students at risk from dropping out and helps them to have increased success in school as a result of the community effort, then this also should be documented and studied.

Building community is a starting point for school success. It, alone, is not the only answer to keeping students at risk in school and experiencing success there. Their family situations, peer situations, job situations, drug and alcohol use and abuse etc. all play a part in students at risk deciding to stay in school or drop out. Minimally this model proposes to help students at risk to feel welcome, safe, as if they belong, are cared about, and to let them know they are valuable and contributing human beings. For many, this may be enough for them to choose to stay in school. We all benefit when students at risk complete high school.

**Appendix A**  
**Graphic Representation of Reviewed Literature**

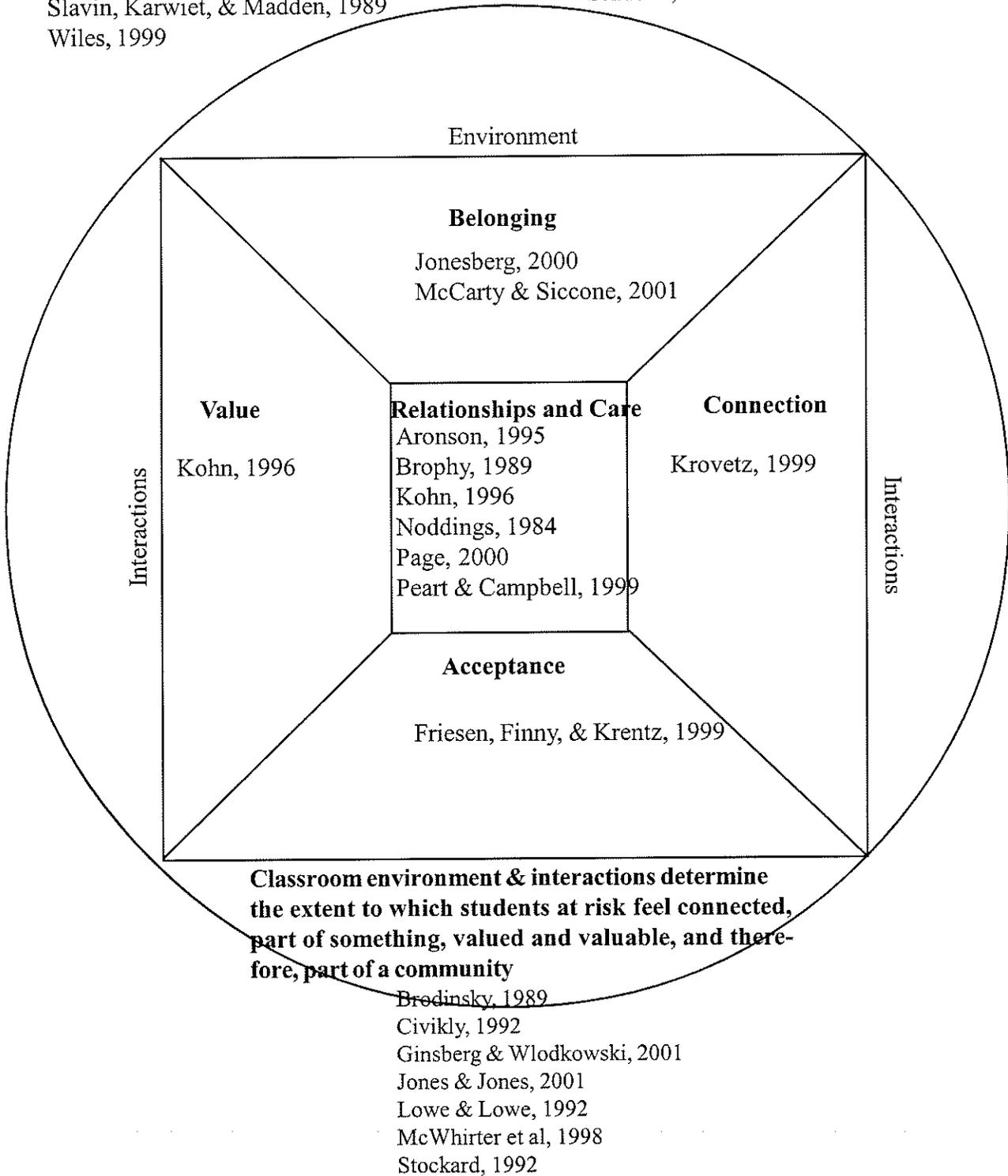
Perspectives on Curriculum as they Relate to Students at Risk:

**Current paradigm is failing students at risk**

**A new paradigm of social reconstruction, experience, and currere might be better**

Jones & Jones, 2001  
McWhirter et al, 1998  
Slavin, Karwiet, & Madden, 1989  
Wiles, 1999

Freire, 1970  
Pinar et al, 1995  
Schubert, 1989



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