“It’s better to be bad than stupid”: An exploratory study on resistance and denial of special education discourses in the narratives of street youth

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of the Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto

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Doctor of Philosophy

Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
2010

Abstract

This dissertation study examined and gave voice to the experiences of a group of street involved youth, those who had received special education support and services during their school years. They are not spoken about in the literature. Special education is complex, diverse, and encompasses many exceptional pupils for whom services and supports are provided in the school system. Many street youth belong to this group with exceptionalities such as learning disability, mild intellectual disability or behaviour. Using narrative analysis and structuration theory frameworks, the life history narratives of fifteen street youth who were in special education classes were reconstructed and analysed. In addition, a survey question gathered how many new in-takes at a drop-in for street youth self-identify as youth who were in special education. Furthermore, data was gathered from service providers in education and social services through semi-structured interviews and two focus groups.

Youth participants considered citizenship in special education as exclusionary and actively resisted it because of the social connotations such as ‘being stupid’ which were attached to it. Youth emphasized that teachers and support staff seemed unaware of the complex environmental factors that impacted on their ability to be successful in school. They reported that once they were formally identified and placed in special education,
they were put in a holding pattern that often did not lead to graduation. Special education was focused on classifications according to deficit discourses rather than engaging these students in learning or in having their identified learning needs met. Although study participants dropped out of school a number of times, they kept returning either to complete secondary school or enroll in college, mostly without special education designation and supports. Service providers, educators and special services staff should mentor such youth, provide opportunities for addressing learning problems, and deliver quality instruction for students with identified learning difficulties and needs. There is a dearth of alternative and transitional post-secondary programs to meet the specific needs of these students.
Acknowledgements

The past five years have been both growth enhancing and challenging for me and those around me. My thesis supervisor, David Hulchanski, played an enormous role in patiently encouraging, supporting and guiding me throughout the process of conducting the study and writing and editing this thesis. I also commend his openness and willingness to include a community member on the dissertation committee.

I would like to thank my dissertation committee, Aron Shlonsky, Michele Peterson-Badali and Derek Parenteau. I was fortunate to be supported and challenged by their insights, thoughtful feedback and attention to detail.

I would like to thank the staff at The Evergreen Centre for Street Youth for supporting and encouraging me throughout this research process right from the very suggestion of what was not known about their clients, to providing an opportunity to conduct the study. Some staff also participated as study participants in service provider and focus group interviews. Educators at the alternative school at Covenant House were also very supportive and I would like to thank them.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the street youth who came forward, rather boldly, and spent a lot of their time patiently working to generate their narratives. They were reflective, insightful, intelligent, and creative. I also thank the other youth who provided insights individually and as a group during my field research at Evergreen. I cannot forget
to thank the many service providers working at front-line agencies and the educators and support staff in schools and alternative programs who participated in this study.

Finally, there have been a group of very encouraging persons who have supported and assisted me in a number of ways during my dissertation that are too numerous to enlist here. They will be happy to see this project brought to fruition. I thank all of them, particularly my dear mother.
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Foreword

Scientific methods are good at exposing the nature of things, but less good at exposing the culture of things – the human meanings of which so much of our consciousness consists (Egan, 2002). When scientific methods such as observation, experiment, and inference have been applied in trying to understand the processes involved in education, they seem less impressive still. Discovering the nature of learning, or “the natural psychological reality in terms of which we must understand the development of knowledge” (Piaget, 1964, p. 9) has been assumed to be the way forward to make education more effective. Its implications are varied: teach “cognitive” tools; attend to the child’s modes of learning and stages of development and customize educational practices accordingly. But will the nature of the child ever be accessible to us? Even under optimal conditions, can we ever arrive at a numeric set of values that will decide placement in an educational program? Can we put a name or a label or a classification on unique conditions in human nature? Education, in particular the system of special education, as set up in schools, aims to be able to do some of the above. Special education claims that in order to serve children effectively, it must develop and introduce its own set of practices, rhetoric, assessments, processes and programs; it must divide instruction into different levels, divisions and subdivisions; it must develop tools and strategies that vary by groups of pupils; and it must build in accommodations and modifications to level the playing field when it comes to evaluation. Yet, when it comes to the “mundane”, the daily life of a student in a given environment, it’s the social connotations, individual meanings and perceptions of what happens both within the classroom and the corridors of the school that have far greater influence over these
cognitive and other related educational tools or their intended purposes and outcomes.

We need to come to know about individuals such as those who are street involved, unique as they are, yet products of systems and processes, one of which is the education system, more so, for many of them, special education. By gathering and analyzing the educational trajectories of these individuals and by tracing their attempts to acquire an array of cultural tools, we might be able through our own learning (and maybe for them through retrospection) to acquire additional cognitive tools, while at the same time being able to critically expose the meanings and outcomes, both intended and unintended in our efforts to educate groups, such as those highlighted in this dissertation – street youth who were in special education.
CHAPTER 1 Introduction

Personal life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material.

Thomas and Znaniecki, “The Polish Peasant”

After graduating from Teachers College, I began my career in teaching in the Fall of the next academic year. Like other new graduates I was willing to take any available assignment. I found a substitute teaching position in a large high school in southern Mississauga for the first semester. That semester, as a new teacher, my teaching schedule was altered five times. Except for one class that was with students in the International Baccalaureate program, a very enthusiastic group, the remainder of the classes were often with students in courses that were at “low” educational tracts such as locally developed, essential and applied level courses. Students in most of these classes were often rather difficult to manage and certainly resented any changes of teachers, classes, or even room allocations mid-way through the semester. Although I was offered a permanent position in another high school the following semester, I had to decline the offer and instead I took most of the semester off, because I was burned out. I returned to teaching the following year in another school in the GTA, and continued to teach a variety of subjects and levels. I also took additional courses to obtain qualifications in special education and guidance. I then worked both as a teacher and as a guidance counsellor. However, it is that very first semester as a teacher which has remained a sort of marker in my teaching career. It was in those classes that I came face to face with a whole group of students who had special education designations such as learning disability, behaviour, Aspergers, and many of whom also had Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). I came to know firsthand their own learning styles, reluctance at being placed in these classes, and
their reactions to having to deal with changes mid-semester. I was also introduced to how the special education system, a subset of the larger education system, functions.

A few years later I changed pathways from teaching/guidance to social work, but continued to encounter similar youth; this time it was not directly through the regular school system, but through organizations serving street youth. As a volunteer at a shelter, and then through a student placement and subsequently volunteer work for a few years at a drop-in for street youth, I came to encounter a lot of street youth who should have been in school but had dropped out, disengaged from the formal education system, and were now street involved. Although street youth who came to this drop-in were far from a homogenous group, anecdotal evidence from staff indicated that a number of them could not read and write, had learning disabilities, and other special education designations. What surprised me the most, was that these youth connected really well with the staff here, very different from what I had experienced both in that first semester of teaching and in other classrooms with similar students. While the great rapport staff built up with these youth helped them focus on many aspects that were related to their street life careers and trajectories including how they got there, I also noticed very little focus on education within the framework of other options and services including assistance in the socio-affective domain. Education, in terms of their past experiences or if they had graduated, seemed a thorny issue that youth did not talk about very much. At the same time, they did express an interest in formal schooling and talked of plans to go to college or university some day. I wondered, was there something missing in their educational years that might not have been identified and consequently supported and served appropriately? Would multidisciplinary interventions, from both education and social
work have been beneficial to them? Furthermore, a number of the youth were interested in formal education, but there weren’t programs where staff could direct them and be sure they would be engaged. My interest was to find out more about this group. It led me to the literature where I didn’t find much about street youth who were in special education. This led me to embark on this dissertation project.

Besides having been introduced to these students as a teacher in that first semester, and then as a volunteer at the drop-in, both of which formed the emerging context for understanding and encountering this group, I was introduced to this group in yet another way. I am presently employed part-time, as a school social worker, and, as part of my work, I have been introduced to the IPRC (Identification, Placement and Review Committee) process, a process within the school system whereby a committee reviews the results of psycho-educational tests and recommends a ‘label’ and initial placement of a student in special education. Understanding the institutional construction of the identities of students by way of the discourses and practices of special education was beneficial. Most of the youth I would meet through the study, when placed in special education, would have gone through this process; alternately, a few of them may have gone through a similar mini-process in the school itself where their classroom teacher and a special education teacher would have come up with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to support these students’ individual learning needs apart from regular program delivery. On reviewing the literature, I was unable to locate anything specifically on street youth who had been in special education. Therefore, I decided to explore this group further, and go directly to the source, these youth themselves and find out about their experiences. I decided to gather their stories and their experiences related to being a street youth and in
special education and analyze them. My goal was to better understand them; their unique needs and experiences, their educational trajectories.

**Purpose and objectives of the research**

This research is an exploratory study aimed at finding and giving voice to the experiences of a group of street involved youth, those who had received special education support and services. They are not spoken about in the literature. The purpose of the study is to explore and better understand this group, particularly their unique needs and aspirations through reconstruction of their educational trajectories, and to give voice to the exclusion experienced by them in special education.

Special education services include the process of identifying, labelling and providing supports and services to students deemed as “exceptional” in school settings. The Education Act defines an exceptional student as “a pupil whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that she or he is considered to need placement in a special education program...” (Bill 82, 1980, Ontario Ministry of Education). In order to receive special education support or placement students are identified according to the categories and definitions of exceptionalities provided by the Ministry of Education. Some of the familiar identifications of students who are placed in special education are communication such as autism, deaf and hard of hearing, language impairment, speech impairment, learning disability; intellectual such as giftedness, mild intellectual disability, developmental disability; behaviour; physical that includes any physical condition related to mobility or blind and low vision; and, multiple exceptionalities which are a combination of learning and/or other disorders (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001).
The aim of this dissertation is not to focus on how students with exceptionalities (henceforward referred to as students in special education or special ed as most educators, youth and service providers referred to them) have access to programs and resources to meet their special needs, how individual schools and school boards are set up to deliver special education services and supports, or how the Ministry provides ideal professional practices and resources to develop and monitor special education, but to focus on street youth who have formerly received special education supports and services, and how their learning needs have or have not been supported.

Although there are significant numbers of persons with learning difficulties in the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Talbot & Riley, 2007) and a rather well-developed literature on street youth in Canada (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Janus, Archambault, Brown, & Welsh, 1995; Karabanow, 2004a; O’Grady & Gaetz, 2004; Tyler, Cauce, & Whitbeck, 2004; Weber, 1991), the U.S. and internationally, there is little mention of the group of street youth with special education background (Barwick & Siegel, 1996). Thus, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to highlighting this particular group of street involved youth. By studying this group and gathering their life histories (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Riessman & Quinney, 2005), I hope to give voice to their experiences and call for more appropriate educational support and programming for them.

Based on this literature and my own personal rationale and experiences with these youth, initially in the classroom and more recently at an agency providing services to street youth, the primary research question that guided this study emerged: Who are these street involved youth and what were their school and special education experiences? The more specific research questions that originally guided the study were:
a) What are the specific school experiences of street youth that lead them to drop out of school and end up on the street?

b) What are the special education experiences of this group and in what ways do they perceive these experiences are related to their pathways to homelessness?

c) To what extent and in which ways do the youth consider their special education placement helpful and not helpful to them?

d) In what ways have these youth attempted to take control of their own lives?

e) How many youth using the services of an employment resource centre at a drop-in for street youth identify as having some special education support while in school?

Organization of the study

The following is a brief overview of the content contained in the next eight chapters of the study.

Chapter two includes a review of relevant literature related to street youth, special education reform and debates, and the analytical considerations of structuration theory that inform this study.

Chapter three contains the design and methodology of the study including some of the decisions around how the sample and data were gathered, and the analysis was conducted and reviewed.

Chapter four presents a snapshot of the youth who took part in the study and the steps involved in getting them to activate their narratives. It also includes a brief summary of the profiles not just of the youth generating their narratives, but in general from new intakes that self-identified as youth with special education exceptionalities.
Chapter five highlights the experiences of the youth in special education programs that emerged in their narratives. It talks about feelings related to labelling, stigma and being made to feel their programming would lead to limited educational outcomes. In this chapter, data that emerged from service providers in education and social services, from individual and focus group interviews, is also analyzed.

Chapter six looks at what these youth and service providers found beneficial in terms of receiving special education support. This chapter also looks at what kinds of learners these youth are and their own resilience and efforts made to seek out other educational programs that interested them.

Chapter seven summarizes and discusses what emerged in the previous three chapters and sets the stage for the conclusion of the dissertation. It includes a section on limitations as well.

Chapter eight highlights the relevance of the study for understanding this group of youth and offers suggestions for the advancement of research, social work and education interventions.
CHAPTER 2 Literature informing the study

Any idea that can present itself as: Bold!! Visionary!! Revolutionary!! – that is, as different from what we now have – can get taken seriously. … When that happens, all the bright shiny ideas can actually become ways to avoid thinking about the hard questions of instruction, of human and social capital, of school culture.

- Charles M. Payne

The presence of exceptional profiles in street youth and resistance to being classified as “special education students” warrants our attention. In this chapter I first examine the social phenomenon of homeless youth, and then the extant literature on special education for insights relevant to this study. This will help to situate this study within these distinct bodies of literature, and later to re-examine findings that emerge from the data in the context of this literature. In the third and final section the framework of structuration theory (Giddens, 1979, 1981, 1984) is proposed as a perspective to integrate the complexities of the educational system, social problems of youth at risk and the individual experiences of the youth in this study.

While there exist studies on the phenomenon of street youth as interrelated to homelessness, employment, crime, identity, substance abuse, child welfare, and trauma, the commonality among these studies is often centered around pragmatic details of definitions and characteristics of this population, how to arrive at definite numbers, and the reasons for the existence of large numbers of street youth even in developed countries. Despite the inclusion of abuse, family situations, and child welfare involvement being strong predictors and descriptors of circumstances leading to street involvement, the contributions the educational experiences and learning profiles of these children together with specific interventions and evidence to support them as leading up and beyond their present situation are largely unexplored. At the same time though, there
is mention of special education and the impacts particularly of learning disabilities on youth in juvenile and adult prisons; the literature is incomplete when it comes to talking about the presence and impact of the same when it comes to street youth.

The next sections will include literature on homelessness, street youth, labelling, special education, alternative programming and structuration theory, with a view to highlight the gap the present study attempts to bridge by including the voices of street youth and their own educational experiences that are conspicuously absent from the combined literature on street youth and special education. These voices highlight connections between labelling and placement in special education leading to variations in the rhetoric around special education for different purposes from students and educators, limited educational outcomes as a result of special education placement and greater street involvement.

**The overall phenomenon of homelessness**

The unexpected and dramatic growth in the numbers of homeless people since the 1980s, coupled with the increasing visibility of those living homeless as they have spilled over into the spatial preserves of other citizens, has caused homelessness to become in many countries both developed and developing, among the most pressing of their domestic problems (Karabanow, 2004a; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). In fact, in the U.S., few other social problems have generated as much public concern and discussion, ranging from intense media coverage to congressional hearings to volumes of social scientific research (Burns, 1998). In spite of the widespread discussion and voluminous research, the voices of homeless people have been relatively mute compared to the voices of journalists and social scientists (Burns, 1998). Because of this imbalance
in perspective, we often tend to know a good bit about the causes of homelessness and the characteristics of the homeless population, but relatively little about the experience of homelessness from the vantage point of those who are homeless. There is need for a corrective to this asymmetry by focusing on the actual experiences and voices that provide a firsthand, intimately personal account, about what it means to be homeless, particularly for the subset that are the focus of this study.

In Canada, the problem of street youth has emerged as a social challenge, and the body of research on homeless youth has grown considerably over the past two decades (Karabanow, 2004a; O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004). Most available research focuses on the reasons youth run away from home, the preponderance of youth raised in the foster care system and the consequences of running away.

Running away is linked with physical, emotional and sexual abuse (Gaetz, O'Grady, & Vaillancourt, 1999; Hyde, 2005; Janus, et al., 1995; Weber, 1991). Adverse family and parental circumstances have been identified in families of runaways, including family violence, parental rejection and poor parental monitoring (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997). Abuse, neglect, and family mental health problems are significantly associated with higher levels of dissociative symptoms among homeless and runaway youth (Tyler, et al., 2004).

A large number of street-involved youth come directly from foster care or group homes (Gaetz, et al., 1999), and the numerous changes of residences and caretakers contribute to adolescent deviant behaviour (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 2003).

Studies that focus on the consequences of these youth living on the streets highlight their involvement with drugs (Kates, 2004), crime (Hagan, 1994; Hagan &
McCarthy, 1997) and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (DeMatteo et al., 1999; Kiragu, 2001).

**Studying homelessness and defining street involved youth**

Although youth make up over 25% of the homeless population (Cauce et al., 2000; Moncrieff, 2001), estimating the number of homeless youth is challenging because there is no universally accepted definition of the term ‘street youth’. A common umbrella definition for this population is persons between twelve and twenty-four years of age without shelter or with inadequate or insecure shelter (Peressini & McDonald, 2000). Even so, this seems more related to developed countries, as there are much younger homeless youth/children in other countries.

Recent figures indicate that there are a hundred million street youth across the globe (CIDA, 2001). Among other contributing factors, they are products of poverty, war, urbanization, political instability, family breakdown, and HIV/AIDS. Many are not absolutely homeless, but primary income earners for their extended families due to limited income generation alternatives.

The vast majority of homeless youth congregate in urban areas in the poorer developing countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe (Hagan & McCarthy, 2005), yet there are also many homeless youth in the wealthier countries of Western Europe, Australia, and North America (Shane, 1996). The United Nations (UNICEF, 1998) defines “youth on the street” as those who engage in street-based activities such as begging or peddling but have a home base to return to, whereas “youth of the street” are those who have weaker ties to their families and live largely on the streets. An estimated two-fifths of the world’s street youth live in Latin America, with a
majority of these living “of the streets” of Brazil (Campos, Raffaelli, & Ude, 1994). In the United States, recent figures suggest that there could be up to two million runaways each year – many of whom will become “of the streets” – and about a half a million abandoned youth (Karabanow, 2004a; Shane, 1996).

The number of homeless youth rose since the 1990s in most countries. The rise was greatest among females who now represent one-third to one-half of the urban street youth population (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Novac, Serge, Eberle, & Brown, 2002), cultural and racial minorities, and younger adolescents (van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). Aboriginal youth, especially Aboriginal women, are over-represented (Beavis, Klos, Carter, & Douchant, 1997; Kraus, Eberle, & Serge, 2001; Novac, et al., 2002) as are also gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) youth (Gaetz, 2004; Kraus, et al., 2001; Kreiss & Patterson, 1997).

In the 1990s, several researchers in the United States and Canada surveyed moderately large samples of homeless youth (DeMatteo, et al., 1999; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Walters, 1999; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). McCarthy and Hagan (1992) surveyed 482 youth aged sixteen to twenty-four in Toronto and Vancouver. Another key study conducted by Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) interviewed 602 runaway and homeless adolescents aged twelve to twenty-two from five Midwestern U.S. cities. More recently, 208 street youth were surveyed in downtown Toronto by street youth themselves with conclusions related to changing patterns of homeless youth in the downtown core (Yonge Street Mission, 2009). This study done for the parent organization of Evergreen where most of this dissertation is located, found more youth (21%) end up on the street at 16 than at any other age and they come mostly from outside Toronto, as only 23% were
from the GTA. Other modestly sized surveys of homeless youth in the U.S. and Canada include studies from Hollywood, California (Kipke, Simon, Montgomery, Unger, & Iverson, 1997), Edmonton (Baron & Hartnagel, 1997), Winnipeg (Wingert, Higgitt, & Ristock, 2005), and Toronto (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Yonge Street Mission, 2009). While confusion does exist about the numbers of homeless youth in Canada, the number is alarming: 30,000 in Montreal; 35,000 in Toronto (Caputo, Weiler, & Anderson, 1997; Karabanow, 2004a).

While there is a complexity around numbers, there is also a complexity when it comes to defining the problem for researchers, service providers and policy makers. Some researchers use distinctions based on the quality and length of time spent on the street, such as “in andouters,” “runners,” and “hard-core” street youth (Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). Others classify them based on their status such as “group home kids,” “child welfare kids,” “system youth,” or “refugees or immigrants” (Karabanow, 2004a). Yet others emphasize both real and apparent practices of street youth, using such monikers as “squeegee kids,” “prostitutes,” “druggies,” and “gang-bangers” (Karabanow, 2000; Shane, 1996). But while labels do ostensibly facilitate the work of researchers, service providers and policy makers, they are partial, describe only some aspects of street youth culture, and frequently limit our understanding of the diversified complex group street youth are. How the term is defined is generally rooted in ideology (Ensign, 1998). For example, recently, “homeless” has become a key descriptor for children who live and work on the streets, replacing the stigmatizing label “street children” (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003) and some have begun even to avoid calling them youth but ‘young adults’ (Barber, Fonagy, Fultz, Simulinas, & Yates, 2005;
Pollio, 2010) who have aged out of systems including child welfare and education and are homeless but present with more adult than youth characteristics.

For the purposes of this study, and more specifically when I interviewed homeless youth or service providers about these youth, I defined them as any young person (generally between the ages of sixteen to twenty-four) continuously moving between temporary housing arrangements, who does not have a permanent place to call home, and who instead spends a significant amount of time on the street, which is to say, in alleyways, parks, storefronts, all night internet cafes and dumpsters, among many other places; in squats (located usually in abandoned buildings); at youth shelters and drop-in centers; and/or with friends (typically referred to as “couch surfers”). However, notwithstanding this definition and my deliberate attempts in the study to interview youth who are presently homeless and not those who sometimes in this economy use the services of drop-in centers for perhaps food, health and other resources but may have some sort of a stable or semi-stable housing arrangement, I use throughout this dissertation the terms homeless, street-involved, and youth living on the streets interchangeably.

The transition to adulthood for homeless youth

Homeless youth challenge common ideas of the transition to adulthood. Indicators of the end of adolescence typically include completing high school, enrolling in college or university, entering full-time employment, living independently from one’s family, and involvement in lifestyle activities that are typically prohibited for young teenagers but common among adults (e.g., nonepisodic sex). Many homeless youth begin these transitions before they acquire the skills, credentials, experiences, psychological
resources, connections, social support, and other assets that would increase the likelihood of success (Barber, et al., 2005). Moreover, many of these youth skip transitions associated with emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) embarking upon others that typically occur much later, or they initiate new transitions without completing those that typically precede them. Thus, compared to other youth, a greater proportion of the homeless experience “extended” and “fractured” transitions (Coles & Craig, 1999).

Although graduating from high school is an acceptable aspect of the transition to adulthood, research gathered suggests many homeless youth do not graduate from high school (Barber, et al., 2005; Barwick & Siegel, 1996; Kraus, et al., 2001; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Yonge Street Mission, 2009). While many North American youth do not leave home until eighteen, most street youth report they had stayed on the street or at a hostel before they turned eighteen (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Yonge Street Mission, 2009). Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) reported that 80 percent of the youth they surveyed left home before they were sixteen. Leaving home is related to dropping out and not graduating from high school. In the McCarthy and Hagan study (1992), 85 percent of the homeless youth aged eighteen or older did not graduate from high school; 30 percent had not completed their first year of high school (i.e., grade nine). Although difficulties with school material and other requirements, as well as family disruptions and residential moves contributed to their school failures, 80 percent of the respondents reported that they first left school because they were expelled (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992). Their alienation from conventional educational institutions is further reflected in the small number who enrolled in an educational program after leaving home. Although the youth interviewed by Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) are younger, 72 percent of
these young people had been suspended from school, and 36 percent had dropped out. Among street youth surveyed recently in downtown Toronto, only 15% of them had completed high school, 60% were drop-outs; of these, only 13% had chosen to leave school (Yonge Street Mission, 2009, pp. 7-8). A similar study put the numbers of street youth who had not completed high school in Ottawa and Toronto between 60% and 90% (Kraus, et al., 2001). These figures suggest that many street youth will not graduate from high school, an essential aspect of the transition to adulthood. Although studies do talk about youth leaving school early (Barber, et al., 2005; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Yonge Street Mission, 2009), most, however, seem to imply personal failure as the reason without looking beyond into structures, placement, and labelling.

In regard to schooling, most research on street youth only highlights they dropped out. There were only two other mentions in the literature directly related to the topic of this dissertation. In a gap analysis of issues related to street involved youth (CS/RESORS, 2001), among the 15 gaps identified in the literature on street youth, there was specific mention of the need for an in-depth study of street involved youth with disabilities – incidence, types, impacts on life on the street, potential programming to assist these youth. Another study by Barwick and Siegel (1996), examined the prevalence of arithmetic and reading difficulties in 123 youths in a shelter. Fifty-two percent of them had reading disabilities, and twenty-eight percent had arithmetic/written work disability. It was only nineteen percent that were of normal ability. The findings once again point to the high prevalence of youth with special education background in this population, but there is a dearth of literature on incidence and experiences of these youth.
Receiving social assistance represents another transition that often marks the end of adolescence. Although many youth live in families that receive social assistance, few domiciled youth directly receive government support. Yet, in the case of street youth, more than 75 percent of the homeless youth surveyed by McCarthy & Hagan (1992) had received such support. Figures suggest that almost 20 percent of these youth may have begun a transition into chronic or long term welfare (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992).

Data on the transition from virginity to nonvirginity and nonepisodic sex suggest that about 55 percent of students have had sexual intercourse before leaving high school (Centers for Disease Control, 1996), but 84 percent of street youth (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Homeless youth differ further from nonhomeless youth in that a far greater proportion are molested as their first sexual experience (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Russell, 1998; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999), and many homeless youth are involved in “survival sex” whereby sexual activity is traded for money, drugs, shelter, security and the sex trade (Pennbridge, Freese, & Mackenzie, 1992; Rew, Chambers, & Kulkarni, 2002; Russell, 1998).

Three broad sets of factors further complicate the transition to adulthood for homeless youth: their family backgrounds, their current living situation and lifestyle, and involvement with the justice system. Almost one-third of the youth have never lived with both their biological parents and the majority has lived in several family situations (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992). Most homeless youth are estranged from their parents, sometimes even victimized by them. As a result, few of these youth are able to draw on their parents’ or relatives’ financial, emotional, or psychological support or their parents’ social capital in their search for work, school, and housing.
While most young people are taking their first steps toward adulthood and investing a large part of their daily energies in benign settings, homeless youth spend most of their time less profitably and more dangerously on the street and in parks, social assistance offices, shelters, and abandoned buildings. Together with friends acquired on the street, they spend a large part of their time looking for food, shelter, and money. Most remain unemployed, spending their time hanging out, panhandling, partying, and foraging in the shadow of the street and with some substance abuse activities.

Homeless adolescents’ transition to adulthood is further compromised by the risk of escalating contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Hagan & McCarthy, 2005). The likelihood of police contact is greatest for homeless youth who are involved in crime. But they also face elevated risks because their homelessness increases the time they spend in public settings (e.g., parks, street corners), the very settings that are the focus of police patrols where they are arrested for an array of illegal but noncriminal activities (e.g., sleeping in a public setting, loitering). Interactions with police can have a self-perpetuating quality: they may lead to formal sanctions that include imprisonment and they can perpetuate feelings of shame, embarrassment, and other emotions that often amplify identification and involvement with street subcultures of crime, in turn preventing or delaying a successful transition to adulthood in terms of leaving the street for the more conventional world of legal work (Hagan & McCarthy, 2005).

Although street youth demonstrate resilient tendencies in the strategies employed daily to survive, a significant leap is noticed when they are able to reverse the course of their lives by pursuing employment opportunities that lead away from adult criminals and peers connected to high-risk lives on the street and meet with success in the legal labour
market. Often the jobs are low-skill service work. They work in fast food restaurants, retail work, telemarketing, labour, landscaping, sales, courier services and the like. Some find work in skilled jobs and are welders, meat-cutters, carpenters, mechanics, and in other trades; some find work in entertainment as disc jockeys, musicians, models and dancers.

Staying away from, resisting, and leaving the street behind is especially crucial to understanding both risk and resilience factors in the transition of homeless youth. This is especially captured in the lives of youth who are employed and have made the transition (Karabanow, 2008), even if through temporary entry-level employment circumstances, in spite of the ridicule, stigma, shame, and perceived connections to their student years in terms of graduation from high school and the transition from special education services as students (Newman, 2002; Thomson et al., 2002; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989; Webster et al., 2004).

**Lack of comprehensive interventions**

There has been a shift in understanding street youth by way of their personal pathologies, a matter of individual choice. Attention was placed in early literature upon individual factors, like the need for independence, the refusal to abide by rules, the quest for fun and excitement, involvement with drugs and alcohol, the desire for sexual freedom, and family pathologies (Karabanow, 2004a). However, more recent studies have offered a greater understanding of the structural elements which place youth at risk. With the issues of despair, systemic poverty, abuse, and alienation now at the forefront, a newer perception of homelessness has surfaced, one that focuses on the circumstances that lead youth to street life – internal family dysfunction, physical, sexual and/or
emotional abuse and poverty (Hyde, 2005; Karabanow, 2003). Research has also highlighted how youth in their late teens or early twenties often fall through the gap between systems meant for children and those for adults because they are too old for the former and too young for the latter (CS/RESORS, 2001; Novac, et al., 2002). There is need during the years of transition to develop for homeless youth a comprehensive, coordinated system of services to assist them. A continuum of services from housing assistance to developing social networks to employment skills to continuing education are needed over an extended period of time. The cumulative effect of individual propensity (for example, conduct disorder) together with the effects of other structural factors (for example, systems that exclude and marginalize rather than integrate and support youth) must be taken into account (Martin, 1998). However, a review of the literature finds that this is seldom taken into consideration. While there are interventions for street youth by not-for-profit agencies, for special education students by educational institutions, and for children and youth in care by child protection services, somehow there seems to be a dearth of literature about joint interventions by these three service providing institutions (Osgood, et al., 2005). It would seem that there is an overlap of vulnerable groups of youth using these services or moving from one service to the next. Would it not follow then to have a one-stop shop for them, to share information across systems, to try to use a multi-intervention strategy to reach out to them? The process of becoming homeless is increasingly the result of being alienated from the very systems (child welfare, family and education) designed to support young people. Interventions that strengthen the connection between youth and one or more of these systems may have the potential to preclude street involvement.
An analysis of special education provides similar evidence of the overlaps and troubling disparities which vulnerable populations in general experience during their formative years, and yet these systems continue to marginalize these groups by deficit constructions of identity and practices that are inconsistent between what they propose to do and what they end up doing. The next section on special education is an attempt to deconstruct the literature and practices as they concern this group of street youth.

**Special Education**

This section first summarizes the literature on the history of special education and how inclusive education evolved. It then focuses on issues that continue to plague special education: resource allocation, individualization, labelling and stigmatization, the medical versus the social model of offering support, relation between disability studies and special education. After this, some available research highlighting the voices of students who were in special education and educational reforms aimed at supporting students at risk is included. Finally the section comes back to where things are presently in special education, viz., the new ‘Success for All’ initiative.

The importance of special education as a way to assist (some) students to participate in a dynamic learning process through minimizing problems related to learning and maximizing outcomes related to learning is the basis on which much of the organization of special education, services offered, and the literature available should be weighted.

The purpose of special education is to identify educational problems and maximize the outcomes of students (Gordon, Lewandowski, & Keiser, 1999). To deconstruct its effectiveness both of these objectives must be considered as we must
examine whether special education, in its present form of delivery, assists or confines students. In the case of this study, that discussion must be extended to students even after they are no longer active in the school system (presently grade 12 in Ontario). But to understand it comprehensively, we must look at the history of special education, continuing issues, and relation to other fields of study such as disability studies.

**History of special education**

The history of serving students with exceptional needs, whose needs were obvious or less obvious, can largely be traced from segregation to streaming to inclusive education with similar progressive steps in the U.S. and Canada that came largely as a result of legislation. In Ontario, December 12, 1980, was a landmark day in the history of education when Bill 82, the Education Amendment Act, came into law (Bennett, Dworet, & Weber, 2008; Bill 82, 1980). School boards would now be required to provide education to all students in the regular system no matter what disability they had. Within a short time, Bill 82 made special education an integral part of Ontario’s education system; but the journey to full implementation to arrive at special education as it exists today was anything but smooth. In the United States, in response to the civil rights movements of the 1960s those concerned with people with special needs argued successfully that those persons with special needs that were physical, emotional or cognitive should be treated equally in the education system. As a result, in 1975, the Congress of the United States passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, Public Law 94-142, a law that mandated that all students be provided a publicly supported education in the “least restrictive environment” (Winzer, 2008).
With the legislative changes proposed above (Bill 82 in Ontario), most school boards moved to place students with special needs in self-contained classes.\textsuperscript{1} Enrolling students with special needs in their neighbourhood schools was generally known as \textit{mainstreaming} or \textit{integration} in a regular school (Education for All, 2005a, p. 2). The philosophy driving the choice of self-contained classroom placement was called \textit{least restrictive environment} and called for students with special needs to be placed in an environment as close as possible to a regular classroom, in a regular school. But soon with pressure from parents, professionals and advocates, exceptional students were placed into \textit{regular} classes, full time. This was because mainstreaming often gave rise to schools hosting two parallel groups, a regular one, and one with students with special needs alongside it looking/hoping to get in. Thus there was a shift from “the subtle parallelism of mainstreaming toward a fuller, more natural integration of students with special needs into the school system” (Bennett, et al., 2008, p. 15).

The next step brought about by advocacy, was in favour of \textit{inclusion} or \textit{inclusionary schooling} which is based on the principle of automatically placing students with exceptionalities in the classrooms they would normally attend if they did not have a special need. Inclusionary schooling is now the predominant model of service delivery in Ontario (Education for All, 2005a), with the expectation that all students with special needs are accepted into, and can benefit from, regular placement. But questions regarding whether this is just a shift in vocabulary (Bennett, et al., 2008), a result of the pressure cast by legal concerns related to violation of a student’s equality rights under the \textit{Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms}, or some other considerations remain as the

\textsuperscript{1} Earlier both special educators and advocates used “segregated class” for the special, separated classes created for students with exceptionalities. After Bill 82 the term soon euphemized to “self-contained,” the term used in ministry documents.
practice does not always follow the principle of inclusion with absolute success and more important, research on the merits of inclusion and its results in the classroom are ambivalent (Bennett, et al., 2008; Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 1993; Fox & Stinnett, 1996). Nevertheless full inclusion remains the fundamental goal of special education, the norm encouraged by school boards. In 2006, the Ontario Ministry of Education issued a report entitled *Special Education Transformation* outlining that while the first consideration regarding placement continues to be the regular classroom, a range of options would continue to be available for students whose needs could not be met within the regular classroom. These placements would be duration-specific, intervention-focused and subject to regular reviews (Bennett & Wynne, 2006). But many issues in special education that have continued to plague it, often rendering it in a state of crisis. Some of them are outlined below.

**Issues in special education**

*The numbers, the allocation of resources, the purse, but what about accompanying benefits?*

The relationship between the acquisition of a label and the receipt of extra resources in special education is clear (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). However, the connection as to how the extra resources are targeted by way of interventions and support to address the child’s difficulty are not clear. What is certain is there is a huge increase in the numbers of students in special education, and consequently a lot of resources directed in that direction.

Students receiving special education support has increased dramatically. In Canada, 1.43% of the total elementary and secondary school population was receiving
special education in 1953-1954 (Karagiannis, 2000). In 2006, students with special education needs represented 14% of the student population (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006), an increase of 1,300%. Similarly, in the United States, “In 1932 only 0.62% of the total school population was enrolled in special programs for the disabled” (Karagiannis, 2000). In the 2003-2004 school year, the eligibility determination process in the U.S. resulted in 12 percent of children and youth ages three to twenty-one receiving special education services (Source: Office of Special Education Programs, 2003; as cited in Osgood, et al., 2005). These are large increases in numbers with corresponding allocation of resources. Most students with special education needs are students with learning disabilities. Figures for 1997 from the Ministry of Education and Training indicated that 43% of all students identified as exceptional had learning disabilities, and the second highest category of students with exceptionalities were those with mild intellectual disability (MID) comprising 13% of the special education students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). Most of students identified are disadvantaged students that come from minority populations - having behavioural problems or depressive symptoms, dropping or potentially dropping out of school, coming from poor or single parent homes, living in divorced or remarried families, and being pregnant or a single parent in adolescence (Campbell, 1996; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007). Even both as the numbers of students in special education increase, and the rhetoric shifts from segregation to streaming to inclusive, to the present focus on “Success for All” it seems the same students are caught in the net, but not much is changed of what becomes of their exceptionalities and learning needs after they become a part of the statistic (Reynolds & Heistad, 1997). For example, the latest draft
report “Learning for All K-12” acknowledges gaps in achievement based on gender, special education needs, if students’ first language is not English, and Aboriginal and native students (Ontario Ministry of Education, June 2009, p. 11). But how the extra resources that come with more students being identified as deserving of special education are targeted by way of interventions and support to address the child’s difficulty are not clear (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007).

**Individualization, a myriad of contradictory approaches**

Individually designed specialized instruction is often upheld as the cornerstone of special education practice. Indeed, individualization is commonly described in professional literature as the very characteristic that makes special education “special” (Kliwer & Landis, 1999). But besides individualization as a theoretical construct in the literature appearing central to special education, does individualization really alter the individual child and its context?

Often students are identified with the idea that they need to be individualized and served differently than from the regular classroom. Because the (supposedly) one-size-fits-all approach of the regular classroom ² cannot be used for them if they are to make progress in their learning, identification, support from special education, or withdrawal is sought. If supported and withdrawn, either partially or when are placed together in special education programs (for example, class for language impaired), curricular individualization is forgotten as groups of children are fitted into a singular, invariant pattern of extensive training in skills thought to necessarily precede reading and writing.

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² Clearly an overgeneralization of the classroom. But while teachers are expected and do attempt to use differentiated instruction, they still teach more in general education classes to a mythological child-of-the-median leaving those above and below to find their way around curriculum too high/low for them. They attempt to correct this through differentiated ‘evaluation.’
Moreover, labels lead to generalization of children’s difficulties, neglecting specific individualized issues. When we classify persons with labels we tend to treat them all the same and we fail to notice and take into account personal strengths and particular difficulties (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). Hence one must ask, are the categories in special education unambiguous? When using these labels, are professionals actually talking about the same set of behaviours or learning difficulties? For example, learning difficulties, can mean any number of things for a variety of conditions of individual students. Yet the reality is that when these students are grouped together in special schools/classrooms, they are often experiencing the same curriculum and method of intervention, despite awareness that their needs are varied. Also being in a regular classroom, with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or label, could be viewed as stigmatizing because “inclusion creates homogeneity through acknowledging surface emblems of difference, but rejects their structural processes” (Brown, 2009, p. 97). So there exists a mismatch between need and provision (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007).

It can also be the case that labels are attached to children incorrectly, that is, there can be misclassifications. For example, when IQ tests are used to determine whether certain labels be attached to children, the result is many pupils are placed inappropriately in special education (Hessels, 1997). While there may be an expectation from parents, children, and perhaps teachers, that professionals will provide unquestionable ‘truths’ and scientific ‘facts’ about aspects of the problem presented and be able to provide an unequivocal ‘diagnosis’, in reality this is not the case (Gillman, Heyman, & Swain, 2000). There are limits to the tools professionals use. Furthermore the potential for
subjectivity in the labelling process may lead to abuse since it enables professionals to ‘import our own prejudices and values into terminology’ (J. Wilson, 2000, p. 818).

If teachers hold different definitions about the nature of exceptionalities the result often is confusion, diverse practice, and a lack of clarity: exactly the opposite of the positive reason for having labels (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). Since many problems are often with regard to acquiring and demonstrating literacy skills in school settings, perhaps it might be better to focus on the task of identifying the nature of each child’s specific difficulties with literacy, the range of individual and environmental factors contributing to or ameliorating them and ways in which they can successfully be addressed.

While a label may be helpful sometimes for parents and children themselves since it brings personal comfort, and is a device to explain a child’s difficulties to a disapproving public or group of peers who may misunderstand a child, it can also be argued that labelling in this way results in a focus on the within-child deficit model (i.e., the assumption that the fault lies with the child), at the expense of exploring environmental factors that may have generated or aggravated the difficulty (Portelli, et al., 2007). So we might neglect to consider the child’s teacher, his/her parents, and their influence on his/her difficulties, as well as whole school issues, and specific classroom factors. Labelling is often based on the notion of impairment, that is, impairment regarding the individual himself/herself, rather than on the social or structural context (Gillman, et al., 2000; Portelli, et al., 2007).

Since individualization is a myriad of often contradictory approaches to the child originating from underlying disparate and conflicting visions of a child’s competencies,
capacities, and potentials, and the teacher’s responsibility in seeking and supporting them, we must eliminate the sense that individualization is closely aligned with traditional special education practice including one-on-one instruction (Kliwer & Landis, 1999). Instead individualization should be viewed as multiple practices in immediate instructional contexts. If they foster the student’s increasingly valued participation both in the classroom and the wider community as opposed to just placement in a program (special education), then they could be a step in the right direction (Kliwer & Landis, 1999; Portelli, et al., 2007).

**Debates related to labelling**

One of the most divisive issues in special education has long been the question, “to label or not to label?” (Bennett, et al., 2008). The use of demeaning labels for students is a continuing cause for criticism of special education, especially when children of minority families receive the labels at disproportionately high rates (Reynolds & Heistad, 1997). There always seems to be a debate between those who argue that categorical labelling is an expensive and time-consuming exercise that lacks instructional validity and is stigmatizing to children (Kliwer & Biklen, 1996; Skrtic, 1991; Ysseldyke, 1992), and others have contended that such classification is an essential step in accessing appropriate services (Adelman, 1996; Singer, Palfrey, Butler, & Walker, 1989).

There are positive and negative outcomes of labelling. Gallagher (1976) provides a useful summary of the possible positive and negative outcomes. He describes positives as diagnosis and appropriate treatment and alteration to the environment; enabling further research which may lead to better understanding, prevention and treatment; acting as a positive way to call attention to a particular difficulty; and, obtaining better resources
through funding and legislation. The negatives were professionals labelling for its own sake, without suggesting any form of treatment or support; as a way of maintaining the status quo by keeping minority groups at the bottom of the social hierarchy; and to maintain focus on within child problems and not address the environmental factors which have produced or exacerbated the problem. In a qualitative study of nine students who were in higher education with learning disabilities Barga (1996) found that students experienced labelling as positive when it helped them to make sense of the academic difficulties they were encountering and enabled them to get the help that they needed. Labelling was seen as negative when it set students apart from their peers and meant that they received different provisions from other students. However, it can be argued that responses may differ depending on the particular label or category, and hence the debate on labelling needs further critical analysis and study.

**Can a label lead to stigmatization?**

From some of the earlier literature on inclusion, it is clear that the use of labels leads to more awareness among the general public and certainly among special and general education teachers about particular difficulties and knowledge of conditions that can bring individuals personal comfort, but conversely that there can also be misclassifications, confusion, and diverse practice among educators. But, do labels lead to stigmatization?

Some authors argue that a label can stay with individuals throughout their lives and that labelling can also lead to stigmatization (Haywood, 1997). While labels provide people with a social identity, a sense of belonging to a group, labelling can also lead to teasing, bullying and low self-esteem. The reason why people with learning difficulties,
for example, often deny that a label has been attached to them, or do not make reference to it is because they generally experience a negative social identity, since it is expected somehow that they are less likely to fulfill socially acceptable goals in life, such as being successful at school, living independently, and progressing with a career (Finlay & Lyons, 1998). However, there is no simple link between group identity and self-concept (Finlay & Lyons, 1998; Muskat, 2008).

Riddick (2000) argued that stigmatization can occur in the absence of labelling, or in fact, stigmatization can precede labelling. Speaking of the link between identity and self-concept in children, she noted the significant effort that some children exert in order to cover up their difficulties. Nevertheless, Riddick (2000) argued that it is not the label that leads to stigma, but that once a label is attached it can ‘encapsulate or distil the stigmatization that already exists’ (p. 655). Riddick (2000) summarised the issue succinctly: “You still have the same problems whether you are labelled or not, the key question is whether the label enhances or detracts from the way you perceive yourself and are perceived by others” (p. 661). Her study was specific to persons labelled dyslexic; some argue that potentially more stigmatizing labels, such as general learning difficulties and autism, may be different, influencing self-identity and perception by others.

The assumption that labelling leads to stigmatization or, indeed, that the two are virtually interchangeable terms draws heavily on the writings of Becker (1963), Goffman (1968) and others as related to notions of secondary deviance. Goffman’s work in particular still raises relevant points. For example, Goffman distinguished between the experience of having a visible disability such as a withered hand and a hidden disability such as illiteracy. He proposed that in terms of stigmatization that the former were
already discredited, whereas the latter were discreditable in that the potential was there for their disability to be found out. He also pointed out that those with a hidden disability may have already been discredited in certain circumstances, and may therefore have to face difficult issues of when or when not to disclose their disabilities. A disability identity is stigmatizing, even in an inclusive class (Brown, 2009).

Labelling bias and teacher judgments particularly in inclusive classrooms

The impact of labels on teachers is especially important because of the pivotal role these educators play in dealing with children with exceptionalities. Not only might they be directly influenced by institutional procedures and diagnostic labels, but their attitudes and actions might also influence others. But research into the effects of labels continues to be complicated because studies use analogue methodology (supplying a vignette for discussion, using teacher candidates for research) that limits labelling bias research (Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 1993; Fox & Stinnett, 1996; Stinnett, Bull, Koonce, & Aldridge, 1999). However, because certain effects have been shown to have practical significance, the topic does warrant continued investigation. Hence those who work with children with behavioural and emotional labels need to become familiar with variables (label itself, race, gender, minority status, placement) that can inadvertently have negative impact on their judgments to prevent unintentional discrimination against those children.

Teacher attitudes regarding mainstreaming and manageability of special needs children improve depending on teacher education about disabilities, and their close contact to special education students (Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 1993). In a study on teacher and student perceptions of students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
(ADHD), there was little effect from a label, but more from the behavioural characteristics of ADHD (Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 1993). This may be because the label ADHD presently invokes a lot of understanding of the conditions, causes and treatments for persons with these conditions that tend to bring acceptance. Secondly, the three schools in which the study was conducted had ADHD children mainstreamed into the regular classroom, resulting in direct contact (and hence acceptance) of ADHD children. But it was the part of the experiment in which teachers and peers were asked to rate an essay of students with ADHD that brings forth an insightful conclusion. Peers gave these students a poorer scoring on the essay if the child was not labelled with ADHD, indicating the presence of a label created lower expectations, and the essay more closely met those expectations. Rather than being biased with a label, this study suggests the actual behaviour of the child has a more potent influence on subsequent judgments (Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 1993; See also Riddick, 2000).

Similarly, studies on teacher candidates (n=365) using a common vignette but different labels, race, gender, educational placement, and knowledge of the diagnostic criteria on prognostic judgments for children with behaviour and behaviour plus emotional problems were conducted (Stinnett, et al., 1999). The conclusions were that children with labels being served in a regular classroom were judged as worse than children in self-contained settings. This means the prevailing perception of the students-in-training to be teachers is that inclusion is not the best option for meeting the needs of these students. It could also mean that they do not feel prepared to deal with these children in the regular classroom and would prefer they went elsewhere, to an alternative placement.
In related studies with school psychologists, regular education and special education teachers, and introductory psychology students, there were significant effects on the overall judgment and expectations of poorer outcomes for children with emotional and behaviour labels (Fox & Stinnett, 1996). In conclusion, professionals should be aware of labelling bias effects that follow the use of some diagnostic labels (e.g., behaviour, severe emotional disorder) and consider its impact in school contexts and on children.

**The medical or social model of disability?**

There are two opposing camps in special needs education. The orthodoxy in special education is identified within a positivistic and functional paradigmatic frame where a medical model of disability is the platform for classification systems used in special education. This might have arisen because special needs education has traditionally been understood as dominated by the habilitation field and in its practice has tried to imitate medicine, psychology and related fields, using labels and categories used in these fields.

In recent years, the social model of disability (Brown, 2009; Shakespeare & Watson, 1997) has challenged the orthodoxy in special education, leading to a crisis in special education. The social model focuses on diversity as part of the wide spectrum of human variation and points to general education’s inability to accommodate and include the full diversity of learners in the school setting. It argues that the social, cultural and environmental aspects in the formation of the phenomenon of disability are completely left out by the bio-medical individual model. Opponents criticise the social model of over-socialising the phenomenon of disability. And so the challenges for special needs
education seem to be the following: Are impairments and disability social constructs and, hence, is the enterprise of special education part of the problem, since the understanding of difference is an important background for provision and special arrangements? Skrtic (1995a, 1995b) and other postmodern critics argue that a deconstruction of special needs education is necessary. Furthermore, some radical proponents of inclusive education have suggested the issue at stake here is not just deconstruction, but rather abolition, because special education is “a necessary evil” because of general education’s inability to accommodate and include the full diversity of learners (Lindsay, 2007; Norwich, 2002; Reindal, 2008).

Alternatively, is there a common ground that can serve as a platform both for the radical proponents of inclusive education and special education (Reindal, 2008)? On the one hand, inclusive education denies rather than abolishes the need for differentiation (Brown, 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education, June 2009). On the other hand, however aware we may be of the negative and problematic effects of classification, categorisation, and labelling in educative settings, there can be no public policy without classification (Florian et al., 2006). Even more so today, special needs education has a perception of disability that functions as a platform for identifying difficulties and differences that do not disempower disabled people, as the individual medical approach has been accused of doing in the past (Sim, Milner, & Lishman, 1998). So, can a common ground and not opposing camps be one way of moving forward?

And so, while in education today, inclusion is the preference but not the only option, the tension between the two approaches gives rise to various models for how an inclusive school should be realised, with reference to pedagogical practices, structures
and systems. No matter how disability issues in education are dissolved into a wider amorphous inclusive education, the term “inclusive education,” just like special education, can come to mean a separatist term relative to mainstream education (Norwich, 2002). However, there is an opportunity to implement and evaluate a variegated system of inclusive education appropriate to the complex societies and patterns of schooling in the twenty-first century where inclusion, in its widest sense, is impartial, addressing religion, ethnicity, social class and other social dimensions as well as special needs education and disability (Lindsay, 2007). And so Reindal (2008) proposes a social relational model of disability as a common platform to understand the phenomenon of disability that connects individual and social aspects, both for the explanatory purposes and for designing provisions, facilitating interaction between the inclusivity of the system as well as responding to specific individual needs.

The social relational model builds on the social model, adding the relational aspect, meaning that one’s condition (be it an impairment, disablement, or any other condition) differs according to time and changing circumstance (Reindal, 1998, 2008). This reduced function is a necessary condition that has both personal and social implications for the individual. However, whether the reduced function and its effects become a disability is dependent on restrictions within various macro levels in society that are imposed on top of the social effect that the reduced function implies for that individual. To summarize, according to this model it is possible to distinguish between personal experiences of social restrictions due to the reduced function in a social setting, on the one hand, versus imposed social restrictions in social settings, on the other hand (Reindal, 2008). By holding on to both of these dialectics, the personal and the social
effects of a reduced function, it is possible to talk about “additionality” that is needed in order to adjust to the experience of disability on an individual level. “At the same time, it is possible to expose what is imposed on top of the social restriction due to the reduced function, and in this way, to see in/exclusive mechanisms within the social setting and at various macro levels” (Reindal, 2008, p. 144). It is this facet of the model that makes it possible to give weight to the personal experience of living with reduced function, both socially and individually, without embracing the individual approach (P. C. Higgins, 1992). This enables the narrative element to emerge. It provides the opportunity to tell the story of how reduced functions both enrich and restrict one’s experiences (Frank, 2009a), one of the purposes of this study which is to give this experience of the youth a voice, which is also aligned with structuration theory.

**Insights from disability theory**

The debates and struggles and crises in special education are to some extent similar to disability studies. The following interpretation of disability theory offers a simple, common reference for understanding the study although it is not to canonize any particular elements of this dense body of literature. Three foundational ideas form a rudimentary core of disability theory. They view disability as socially constructed, part of normal human variation, and requiring voice to deconstruct it.

First disability theory asserts that disability cannot be understood outside of the context where it arises because it is a *product of social interaction* (McDermott & Varenne, 1999). For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 gives federal protection to those not actually disabled according to societal norms but who are only regarded as such. Thus, one can be free of impairment and still be disabled. Higgins,
Raskind, Goldberg, and Herman (2002) illustrated the social construction of disability in master status (P. C. Higgins, 1992) where the label of disability spreads from a single-task incompetence across one’s totality, obliterating other quite sound abilities. For example, in societies where reading ability is considered a measure of intelligence, master status makes it inconceivable for a person who cannot read or write well to be regarded as an intellectual.

Second, disability studies scholars argue impairments are a natural and productive a part of normal human variation known to all at some point in the lifespan (Scotch & Schriner, 1997). Disability is present in our everyday interactions, present in how we make meaning of the world and through the bodies in which we live (Brown, 2009).

Another foundational idea of disability is the necessity of deconstruction. Disability scholars posit that voice is necessary to deconstruct disability and to authentically understand it in research (P. C. Higgins, 1992).

Insights from disability theory are useful and included because issues in special education are similar in many ways, but also different. While disability theory has presently solidified itself into a distinct and well-developing body of inquiry, special education is moving in a similar direction, but more slowly with calls for amendments aimed at reform to how it is to be delivered in the educational context. In this context the emphasis on voice from the insights from disability studies is beneficial in that voices from those in special education must be included, even more so in the discourses.

Amendments and reform: Promise or pitfall for special education?

In the last few decades, both in Canada and the U.S. there has been continuous reform to special education delivery aimed at promoting a new generation of practice and
research. The IDEA Amendments of 1997 (U.S. Congress, 1997) introduced some of the most sweeping changes in the federal law since enactment of P.L. 94-142 in 1975. It conceptualized special education reform as an approach to practice that promotes instructionally valid assessments, provides service without the necessity for labelling, concentrates on the assets of children and families, fosters service coordination, and assists students with disabilities achieve quality outcomes through the use of empirically validated interventions. The literature identifies the presence of frequent discrepancies between current practice and the requirements outlined in IDEA Amendments of 1997 (Telzrow, 1999). For example, although changes in disability labels may facilitate access to special education services for populations that traditionally have been underserved, the change may result in some students being classified as disabled even though their needs could be addressed appropriately in general education (Telzrow, 1999).

There are calls from within the profession of school psychology and the larger educational community to rely on assessment practices that not only have technical adequacy but instructional validity as well. In Ysseldyke’s words, “if assessment does not lead to improved instruction, the assessment is virtually useless” (1992, p. 179). There are calls to look at student outcomes. For example, even though there is greater access to educational services for all students including those with special education needs, and although “systems are in place to level the playing field, the game score often remains a losing one for students with disabilities” (Telzrow, 1999, p. 10). High dropout rates, low percentages of students with disabilities receiving regular diplomas, and high rates of post-secondary unemployment are exemplars of the unsatisfactory outcomes for students with disabilities. Some have attributed these inadequate results directly to substandard
instruction in special education programs. For example, Reschly (1996) contends that, “an absence of high quality interventions coupled with poor evaluation of individual progress may alone account for the undocumented benefits of special education” (p. 119).

Even if there could be a good match achieved between what the Individual Education Plan (IEP) document outlines and what actually transpires for students, at least some research has indicated that the nature of this instruction does not have the kind of treatment validity necessary to achieve enhanced outcomes for students (Kavale and Dobbins, 1993; Stage and Quiroz, 1997 as cited in Telzrow, 1999). What is needed is a good fit between students and instruction. Reform continues to call for focus on the central purpose of special education: getting the conditions right so that students can achieve successfully, rather than reducing expectations for their performance so that adults can relax (Telzrow, 1999). Special education should help those students supported by it to participate in the dynamic learning process.

Another important amendment is in the direction of greater parental involvement. Parents are an important part of the education process and the idea to have parents actively involved as members of the evaluation team called for in special education reform is positive except that they may be on opposite ends of the spectrum of how their children are being perceived. The professional’s world view is one shaped by a medical model approach to training and practice that fosters an emphasis on individual pathology and a desire to maintain or restore normal functioning (Darling, 1991). On the other hand, family-school collaboration (especially where there is a hierarchical structure in schools) may perceive these kinds of communication for information sharing around
special education as initiated by the schools to be viewed as having a coercive purpose. This can change only if schools acknowledge parents as co-equal decision-makers.

The 1997 Amendments speak to the AES (Alternative Education Setting). It must enable the student to participate in the general education curriculum, albeit in a different setting; it must provide services and modifications designed to allow the student to achieve goals on the Individual Education Plan (IEP); and it must address the student behaviours of concern (U.S. Congress, 1997). These provisions make it clear that the interim AES is intended to be educative, not punitive. So it should not be made a stopgap “holding place” but instead school boards should develop creative alternative schools, arrangements for site-based social services, adult mentoring programs, or other potentially effective educational interventions for students whose lack of success in school results in a violation of school conduct (Telzrow, 1999). Furthermore, when students are suspended or expelled, there is need to look at the relationship between the behaviour of concern and the disability, and whether the IEP and placement were appropriate in relation to the behaviour in question in the first place.

In Canada, there has been much demand in education today for teachers to use “evidence-based” research approaches to working with students with special needs. In 2005 the Ontario Ministry of Education awarded the Council of Directors of Education 25 million dollars to finance school-based research studies to develop approaches to inclusion that will lead to effective academic, social, and emotional growth in students with special needs. Research on special education is challenging particularly because there are important components to be evaluated, and two difficult variables to control, a reality reflected in studies of inclusion (Bennett, et al., 2008). The personality, the
commitment, and the training of classroom professionals have a profound impact on outcomes in their classes and so the results comparing outcomes in two classrooms where all conditions are matched except the element of inclusion will be inherently flawed to the extent that it cannot account for the ever-so-crucial spirit and atmosphere that different professionals impart to a teaching environment. Secondly, we can never find two classrooms where the collective personality generated by the students is the same. One can see why generalizing a study such as this or any other for that matter will be difficult; at best, broad directions can be indicated. But educators are always looking for “proven” approaches that will help them teach students with special needs in both their regular and special classes. With this in mind, the Education for All (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a) document, was a major project and the end result was a compilation of effective approaches recommended to teachers to improve literacy and numeracy ability for students with special needs in grades kindergarten to grade 6.

The Expert Panel has taken an inclusive, non-categorical approach – rather than exceptionality-based – to address programming for students with special education needs. Its view is to help all students achieve grade-level expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 3). Its beliefs briefly stated are: all students can succeed; to meet their learning and productivity universal design and differentiated instruction are effective and interconnected; successful instructional practices are founded on evidence-based research, tempered by experience; classroom teachers are key educators for student’s literacy and numeracy development; each child has unique patterns of learning; classroom teachers need support from the larger community to

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3 ‘Success for All’ is now accepted as the way to move ahead. Several initiatives including a new ‘Success for All’ teacher position is created in high schools in Ontario with the specific mandate to help more students succeed.
support students with special education needs; and, fairness is not sameness in that some
students require more or different support than others in order to work at a level
appropriate to their abilities and needs.

Despite all controversy, standardized norm-referenced procedures are still widely
used to determine eligibility for special education services. Even after reform it is still a
mixed-model that is used in special education as it defines the need for special services
based on developmental delays (a labelling and deficit-focused approach), while
simultaneously stressing the importance of functional assessment information for
educational programming within the natural environment (which is intervention and
needs-driven). Both of these methods are still error prone and not meaningful to
determine eligibility (Barnett et al., 1999). Perhaps rather than just rhetoric such as for
example using new names to discourses for similar ways of doing things to the way they
were done before, but now with minor alterations (e.g., inclusive education to ‘Success
for All’ to presently ‘Learning for All’), we need to make some useful distinctions and
understand we have a diversity of learners, learning styles, contributing environmental
factors, that cannot be addressed all together but even so must be addressed in the least
stigmatizing way with the goal of helping special education students participate in the
dynamic learning process and successfully graduate. Some of these distinctions are
included below and are followed by three examples of relevant studies highlighting
voices of participants and a discussion that is very much part of education today, youth at
risk, which links to the literature on street youth.
Perspectives regarding disability/identification

Economic considerations related to tighter school budgets and soaring costs of proving special education services are now leading us to question the methods being used to classify students and the large numbers itself in certain categories such as learning disabilities (Gordon, et al., 1999; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, 2006). Also, disability advocates question whether these individuals identified using these methods can qualify as persons with a “substantial impairment in a major life activity” especially since it is being noticed they use these labels to justify the provision of accommodations to students in higher education, for example, to petition for special test accommodations on various entrance exams (e.g., the SAT, MCAT, and GRE), or even on tests required for professional licensure (e.g., the medical or law boards) (Gordon, et al., 1999). Even other physical and psychiatric disorders require “clinically significant impairment” before a diagnosis is deemed appropriate, so why not special education? There are calls to rethink the classification and delivery of special education.

Special education in school has a certain institutional construction of disability that is often not talked about openly. It often constructs soft disability, meaning no overt or physical manifestations as disability. Soft disability includes the categories of specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, emotional and behavioural disorders, and mild intellectual retardation. Karagiannis (2000) in an ideological paper, but based on practices in Quebec in the public education system, argues that the labels of soft disability reflect yet another process of suspending the educational and citizenship participation of disadvantaged students. This is because there are many inconsistencies when it comes to identification of students, particularly with soft disability categories, for
special education. For example, although special educators disagree about identifiable biological causes of soft disability, there is general agreement that social and familial factors have significant bearing and this is often the primary consideration that leads to identifying them as students in need of special education (Karagiannis, 2000). Besides inconsistencies, there is an overidentification of certain soft disability categories such as learning disabilities (Bennett & Wynne, 2006; Karagiannis, 2000; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, 2006). Furthermore, some school jurisdictions (for example, Quebec) apply short cuts in the identification of soft disability without formal diagnostic assessments (Karagiannis, 2000). Sometimes teachers face pressure right at the beginning of the school year, before they have had a chance to become familiar with their students to cooperate in coding students “because they know that the limited [resource] help they do receive is dependent on these coding numbers” (Karagiannis, 2000, para 22).

Ironically, once these students are labelled, the school board provides little or no assistance to the same students because the “resources are lacking” (Karagiannis, 2000). From a systemic point of view, which undermines the humanitarian intentions of educators, the significance of soft disability lies more in catching rather than assisting students.

Similarly, Skrtic’s (1995b) critical-pragmatic perspective of disability and special education underscores that the dismal rehabilitation results of special education are a consequence of treating soft disability as an outcome of biological, genetic, or familial circumstances.

Special education, in its practice, research and literature mostly avoids applying this distinction of soft/hard disability even though it would enlighten and clear some of
the murkiness in the water. Soft disability is a fact of life. Its dubious acceptance (Karagiannis, 2000) permits labelling of students without much thought about consequences. It partly emanates from the organizational pathology (need for testing, identification to receive support) in schools (Thomas. M Skrtic, 1995b), and gradually becomes embedded in the self-image of students by a process of self-fulfilling prophecy. However, hard disabilities need different funding and supports which should remain intact and distinct from the rest of special education. We know what environmental adjustments and training most people with hard disabilities require to become independent and that these adjustments and training work reasonably well. But we cannot equate these hard disabilities with soft disabilities as special education often tends to do. We must distinguish between the two.

We see students not wanting the labels and accompanying stigma and effects that come from some of the hard disability categories, most often attaching to it some perception of ‘stupidism’ and ‘not normal’(Muskat, 2008). And so perhaps we should not generalize special education but make the distinction between hard and soft disabilities. We should split programs, not once again with the view of segregating those with more severe disabilities but with a view that schooling is better off adapting to student variability by eclectic as opposed to one-size-fits-all practices (Karagiannis, 2000). To reiterate that note of caution, variation is not about turning back the clock from inclusion to streaming and segregation. Rather, variation is about flexible schooling that recognizes and validates difference in student interests and stages of development in miscellaneous areas of learning.
Voices of former students who were labelled and/or in special education programs

Educators and researchers in education need to be critical of pedagogical and research methods. There is need to examine the inter-connectedness of voice, community and the curriculum in the school context (Vibert, Portelli, Shields, & Larocque, 2002). Schools and programs wherein students play an active part and their voices are heard and reflected in the curriculum are successful educational settings (Portelli, et al., 2007). The conception of voice consistent with critical and democratic pedagogies, refers to voice as representation and influence; one has voice in the sense that one`s concerns, experience, and analysis of the world are heard, taken seriously, and accounted for within a given context (Lewis, 1993).

When individual stories about the experiences within special education are gathered, it is often about barriers. When told, it is mainly by adults when against all odds they make it into higher education. They speak to being silenced, misunderstood and misrepresented by others (Gerber & Reiff, 1991; P. C. Higgins, 1992). The issue of being silenced is apparent in policy and practice where the voices of those labelled have gone missing (Denhart, 2008). Often, even today, it continues to be exclusively nonlabelled researchers, policy makers, and practitioners debating the issues and setting agendas regarding services and accommodations for those who are labelled. Informants also mention early school experiences of being bullied, teased, ridiculed, and hounded to a degree far exceeding the severity of their challenges that resulted in depression later (E. L. Higgins, et al., 2002). The identification process itself is found to be invasive, as Ferri et al. (2005) noted “although largely unquestioned by professionals, the process of
Individuals with exceptionalities have to work doubly hard to prove themselves. For example, as a student labelled with learning disabilities (LD), Denhart (2008) lived in relative illiteracy with little promise of an adequate education. He was misunderstood and called “slow” yet today he holds a doctorate in educational policy. As a researcher he wanted to know what changed, and found it was not the neurophysiology of his brain, as he is still dyslexic and struggles for the meaning of printed words, but the social environment around him (Denhart, 2008). Prior to that, education was oppressive, silencing, and marginalizing. Even the finest accommodations based on the most sophisticated science can have no value if intolerance denies their use. An important change called for in research on special education by Denhart (2008) is “to grant [persons in special education] the agency to speak of the disabbling force of discrimination” (p. 495).

Fairbanks (1992) highlights the narrative she generated with a freshman student admitted as learning disabled at the University of Michigan whom she came to meet when she was appointed to tutor through a program at the University’s Reading and Learning Skills Center. It illustrates the overwhelming need to reevaluate educational practices for special education students who are labelled and kept from participating in a dynamic learning process. In spite of all that is said in defence of special education to help these students, “they have endured years in our schools, been exposed to the same instruction as their peers, but have yet to acquire that set of reading, writing, or arithmetic skills used as evidence of learning” (p. 476). He was labelled in the third grade, and as he
got older he got further behind his peers. Unlike traditional students who come to accept the effects of labelling on their self-esteem and gradually conform to the characteristics of a label including its behaviour patterns (Fairbanks, 1992), he resisted an educational system that restricted his personal ambitions. He did this not in the typical way by avoiding school, but by actively pursuing entry into the mainstream classes. His terror centered on the realization that the special education system excluded him from the credentialing and legitimating powers that high school confers on its students.

As he worked with the tutor in University, she never heard him say he should not have been labelled. He was more concerned with and angered by what happened to him after he was labelled, when he was sent into a holding pattern. Hence they decided to focus on his voice, so silent even in the literature they read together (Fairbanks, 1992). His advocacy is not for the abolition of special education programs, but he insists that such programs take their clients into greater consideration. He called for the inclusion of a more challenging curriculum that would introduce students to complex activities and would enable them to pursue academic goals beyond high school.

Another study I highlight is aptly named, ‘Badder than “just a bunch of SPEDs”’ (S. Becker, 2010). Conducted in a public alternative high school in the northeastern U.S., it examines the salience of two discourses – one focused on students who have problems, the other on students who are problems – in the alternative schooling process. Alternative schools are designed mainly to help youth with academic, social, legal, economic or mental problems (Mintz, 2000), and although only a small percentage of students in alternative schools are supposed to be special education students with individual education plans, teachers and administrators of these programs reconstruct these settings
as schools for youth with special education needs (S. Becker, 2010). This is unsurprising, given budgetary pressures, federal funding for special education, educators’ professionalization trends, and sympathetic constructions of special needs students. In addition, it comes from the school wanting to shed its image as a dumping ground for discipline cases.

Micro-level factors such as schools, classrooms, curricular themes, and discourses play important roles in promoting or limiting student academic success. In the daily workings of this alternative school (with 25-30 youth throughout the academic year) staff regularly distinguished between students who had problems (special needs) and students who were problems (trouble) and didn’t belong. Students, on the other hand, resisted being SPEDs (a slang term for special education students), preferring to be bad instead. However, acquiescing to teacher conceptions of them as “special needs” carried obvious benefits. So, some learned to manipulate the dual status so as to reap these benefits critically as they wanted to succeed in school, including gaining some of the work-reducing benefits that accompanied a disability label, but also to achieve social status amongst their peers by proving how “bad” they were. Although students saw their alternative school as a place for troublemakers and special needs students, they preferred to see themselves more as troublemakers than as SPEDS. Nevertheless all the students’ self-conceptions revealed how powerfully they felt the stigma of being considered “SPED kids”(S. Becker, 2010, p. 73). Even if some of them actively rejected it, others were forced into accepting it; only some managed to creatively manipulate it. Race and gender (white/female) identities were assets for those who had them, and also affected
how successfully youth could negotiate the SPED and bad tension in certain situations, mostly with educators (S. Becker, 2010, p. 76).

As mentioned earlier, outcomes are important. In the estimation of the researcher, this school failed a set of “chronically bad” students for whom it might have been the last stop on their educational trajectories. Those who adamantly resisted SPED labels were marginalized within or kicked out of the school. For those who didn’t leave the program, academic success potentially came at the cost of losing social status, self-determination or self-esteem. “Only a handful of students at the school successfully manipulated the land between special education and bad, retaining teacher sympathy, self-image, and peer respect (S. Becker, 2010, p. 79).

The results of this study certainly speak to much of what I gathered from the youth in my own dissertation. Our methods are similar but the context and setting differ in that this was based on the student body in a single alternative school, whereas my study focused on a street youth drop-in but made visits to the alternative school for street youth at Covenant House. Being at one setting, the researcher was able to conduct thirty single-session interviews with youth, and seven service provider interviews in the same school. I was able to complete 45 interviews with 16 youth over multiple sessions, more than twice the number of service provider interviews and two focus groups with service providers. Consistency in a school set-up certainly has its advantages as most of the youth are there for a prolonged period of time and hence can be studied even more in-depth. The conclusions and focus of both our studies have many similarities emerging in participants’ response to special education.
Directions in Ontario: ‘Success for All’ and ‘Learning to 18’ with a focus on students at risk

The history of special education seems similar and yet different across countries, provinces/states, and even individual educational jurisdictions. To summarize all of these would not be possible and so I focus on what’s presently happening in the province of Ontario where this study is located.

Most recently with the Success for All (SS/L18) focus there is an overall shift from an implied or presumed focus to an explicit and intentional focus on the learner as the focal point for the work of schools. Changes highlighted include improved communication among different system actors, increased flexibility in meeting diploma requirements, increased focus on a caring school culture, increased focus on tracking and monitoring individual students especially with respect to the transition period between elementary and secondary school, and expanded program choices and flexibility for students. Correspondingly it is believed there are already improvements in graduation rates and decreases in drop-out rates with the beginnings of its implementation (Ungerleider, 2008). Ministry reports graduation rates have increased steadily from 68% in 2003-04 to 75% in 2006-07.

In particular the following programs/strategies are implemented: expanded cooperative education, apprenticeships, Student Success teachers, credit recovery, School-College-Work initiatives, dual credit programs, and specialist high skills majors. In addition, the government has provided additional resources – both financial and human – to support the change process and facilitate change in educators themselves. These include some of the programs above as also further changes to graduation requirements introducing flexibility, and the specific creation of ‘Success for All’ teachers in each high
school in the province. Change is accompanied by lots of support for professional training. But when it comes down to the students, and the daily running of things students are still unaware of these programs and their scope (Ungerleider, 2008). Other barriers include staff perceptions and student dispositions to special education; the needs of specific student subpopulations (especially students with persistent or marked behavioural difficulties); and inadequate or underdeveloped pedagogy in specific areas of practice.

Mostly, there is still a predominant “deficit” thinking and a trend to classify and label students and programs and devote many resources still to classification of students and programs as opposed to quality instruction that helps students work to gain skills and participate in learning. The construction of these students and the outcomes for them under the “taken for granted” discourses and practices in education need to be examined in order to raise questions about the social and political implications of often unexamined daily practices and language. To design programs and practices around students at risk as they are called, marginalizes them even further and warrants attention. When left unexamined and intact, many of these practices conceal or reify societal inequities in education (Portelli, et al., 2007).

**Students at risk alongside what we’ve learned about special education and inclusive education**

“Equitable education,” “inclusive education” and “students at risk” are popular catch-phrases in current educational discourse. But catch-phrases run the risk of becoming slogans, in other words, rhetorical positions automatically endorsed without due critical attention to the purpose and consequences of our actions or the possible inconsistencies between our beliefs and values, on the one hand, and our practices, on the
other (Portelli, et al., 2007, p. i). No one argues against an inclusive education (or equitable education) for students at risk. If however, they serve the narrow notions of accountability, excellence, and success, and in the interests of increasing standardization, it is time to inquire further into their meanings in use.

The term *at risk* is used to denote students who do not fare well in schools. It is a much contested and debated term within the literature (Portelli, et al., 2007), too often implying that students’ struggles are located in their own shortcomings and/or their family backgrounds. Several decades of educational research have clearly established that ‘students at risk’ is a term that obscures the way in which forms of social difference are treated inequitably in schools (Portelli, et al., 2007). And, indeed, disability studies have established that organic sources of educational risk (autism, developmental delays, physical limitations) are interwoven with social difference: poor children of colour, for instance, are hugely over-represented in learning disability categories, and the effects of organic and physical disabilities on educational performance are greatly deflected by dominant race and class identities (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). Fine (1995) argues at-risk is fundamentally a political construct which is applied with “promiscuity” to youth who exhibit “high absenteeism, have been retained for a grade, become pregnant, perform poorly in class, have a learning disability, live in a single parent household, or simply come from Puerto Rico” (p. 88). All conceptions have underlying assumptions and perceptions that shape the process of identifying students at risk itself.

I now include some tenets of Structuration theory of Anthony Giddens. This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the inequalities perceived by street youth when they were placed in special education within the general framework of
structuration theory. The purpose of using structuration theory is to lend a useful analytic perspective to this dissertation.

**Structuration theory and the structure-agency debate**

Social inequality through social and geographical divisions materially affects the life chances of individuals who have been unjustly marginalized. A key premise of structuration is “the social construction of inequality is intimately bound up with processes that divide, exclude, and subordinate people and places based on socially defined differences in race, place, gender and class” (D. Wilson & Huff, 1994, pp. xiii-xiv). This theory is useful to investigate how social, spatial and other processes interact to create marginalized spaces, places and populations. Structuration theory and methodology offers a means of examining the social (and geographic, political, educational, etc.) causes and consequences of subordination, isolation, and marginalization.

Structuration theory, briefly stated, is an emergent and evolving body of theory originally expounded by Anthony Giddens (1979, 1981, 1984) that seeks to confront the relation between agency and structure in the social sciences. The theory of structuration (Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1981, 1982b, 1984) is an attempt to overcome a serious problem in social theory by transcending, without dispensing with, two social analytic perspectives. The first perspective concerns itself with objective structural relationships that exist in society in social theories as diverse as functionalism, Marxism and structuralism. The common ground in these explanations is a disavowal of the importance of individuals, concentrating instead on the conditions that determine social outcomes. The second perspective concerns itself with individuals and pays primary attention to
subjective societal interpretations. This type of analysis reflects the work of phenomenologist and existentialist authors who accord primacy to how individuals attach meaning to the life world; explanations that tend to lack a theoretical understanding of institutions and societal totalities. Giddens overcomes this dualism by developing a position where “the notions of action and structure presuppose one another; [the] recognition of this dependence, which is a dialectical relation, necessitates a reworking both of a series of concepts linked to each of these terms, and of these terms themselves” (1979, p. 53).

This dissertation does not attempt to review this theory for its theoretical coherence and consistency, but less critically presents structuration theory as a framework to guide the analysis of the cumulative marginalizations experienced by this group of street youth in relation to education, child welfare and social welfare. It aims to help the reader keep in mind that while spatial analytics and overall categories and forces that affect this subgroup are important mechanisms that generate inequality, it is how the members of this group individually participate in everyday life notwithstanding the impact of intersecting marginalizations; it is their everyday actions and processes that tend to gather them in certain places and spaces. Using the focus social work has on practice, it moves towards using the general framework of structuration theory in the direction of a comprehensive explanation that considers how agency and structure come together in the production, reproduction, and transformation of society for a group of youth such as those highlighted in this research study. While there is a deliberate eclecticism that is part of structuration theory, such as using several theoretical interfaces (most notably, Marxian and Weberian sociology), which I find useful to draw upon
particularly in the disciplinary coming together of social work, education, psychology and sociology in this dissertation, I am aware of Giddens’ explicit plea for a disciplinary “coming together” as opposed to a haphazard use of structuration theory as the “magical key that unlocks the mysteries of empirical research” (Giddens, 1984, p. 286). I use structuration theory within this dissertation as a means of sensitizing social analysis by paying careful attention to three analytic themes: the hermeneutic nature of social investigation, stressing the importance of ‘mutual knowledge’; the need to treat the individual as knowledgeable in the reproduction of social practices; and understanding the major role of unintended outcomes that result from intentional human activity.

Two more conceptual distinctions, structure-system and agency help us understand structuration and how it informs this dissertation.

**Structure, system and structuration**

The theory of structuration differs from other structurally inclusive theories of society in that it separates the concepts of system and structure (Giddens, 1982a, pp. 32-36). In this separation, a *system* embodies the reproduced relations between actors or collectivities that are organized as regular social practices. These social practices reflect everyday social norms and are situated in particular time-space contexts. *Structures* exist as recursively organized rules and resources that individuals draw on and reconstitute in their day-to-day activities. Structures, unlike systems, do not exist in time-space, but have only a virtual existence in being drawn on and ceaselessly reconstituted. Thus, structures are both the medium and the outcome of situated practices that make up the system. They embody three influences – signification (become manifest in interaction through communication and meaning), domination (use of power interaction) and legitimation
(moral constitution of interaction through the application of norms; Giddens, 1976, p. 123). In all three cases, structures enable interactions to occur (the medium of interaction), while interactions act to reconstitute those structures (the outcome of interaction). While system in this dissertation refers to micro-level factors such as schools, special education, labelling and programming of students, structure is the broader realm of social processes and inequalities and how these are reproduced through social hierarchies that are prevalent in society through mechanisms including political, economic, educational, social, symbolic, etc. Structures can be the requirements for school boards for example, to predominantly use deficit classifications to have proportional resources allocated to them.  

4 The condition governing the reproduction or transformation of structures – the sustaining or rearrangement of systems – is structuration. The connection between structure, system, and structuration is that “social systems are not structures; they have structure or, more accurately, exhibit structural properties. Structures are, in a logical sense, properties of the social systems or collectivities, not of the situated activities of subjects. Social systems only exist in and through structuration, as the outcome of the contingent acts of a multiplicity of human beings” (Giddens, 1982b, p. 35). This quotation brings out why the separation of structure and system is fundamental. The distinction allows one to understand the interplay of individuals and social systems. Structure is the medium whereby the social system affects individual action and the medium whereby individual action affects the social system. The outcome of these

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4 Society often reproduces structures that fail to redress social problems, yet will continue to praise them as effective solutions and multiply them. So, for example, we build bigger prisons with the stated purpose of reducing crime which only tends to increase, as more prisons are built: delinquents keep coming back, first time offenders are plugged into a schooling network of crime, and criminals are alienated from society (Karagiannis, 2000).
individual-system interactions always (in varying degrees) affects the structural rules governing the next interaction.\(^5\) Thus, the theoretical separation of structure and system enables Giddens to capture both agency and structure in the production and reproduction of social life without according primacy to either. The system, structure, and structuration tripartite produce a view of society where structures both enable and constrain human action.\(^6\)

**Agency**

The individual in structuration theory is seen to be active, knowledgeable, and reasoning. The social system consists of conditions that bound the action of the agent; yet do not determine the agent’s activities. The individual reflexively monitors her or his own actions. This may be the rationalization for an action, or the intentions or purposes the agent employs for their actions.

The reflexive monitoring of action occurs at three levels of consciousness: unconscious, practical consciousness, and discursive consciousness. Unconscious motives for action operate outside the range of the agent’s self-understanding. Practical consciousness refers to knowledge that the individual uses but cannot verbalize. Discursive consciousness refers to that which the agent can verbalize. In the giving of reasons or intentions the actor may supply accounts, yet these are themselves incomplete explanations because areas of practical knowledge may enter into the act.

All social action is bounded by the unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences of action. Much activity escapes the intention of the agent and is bounded

\(^5\) Can be understood in the light of earlier discussion of the history of special education from segregation to streaming to inclusive education.\(^6\) The call for change created by individual experiences and grassroots movements in disability (and special education), has little value until reform is legislated and then the change becomes binding.
on one side as an unacknowledged condition of action and on the other as an unintended outcome.7

The duality of structure and social reproduction

Structuration theory elucidates theoretical connections between social systems and individuals. The treatment of each – without relegating the social system to becoming a mere backdrop upon which human action occurs and without relegating the individual to becoming the mere carrier of structural logic – is achieved via the duality of structure which Giddens defines as connecting “the production of social interaction, as always and everywhere a contingent accomplishment of knowledgeable social actors, to the reproduction of social systems across time-space” (1981, p. 27). This can be illustrated through the dialectic of control. Individuals engaging in power relations draw on structures of domination that characterize the relationship of autonomy and dependence in interaction and, in doing so, reconstitute these rules. The structural rules become the medium where the power relation is generated, and in the production of the interaction the agents contribute to the reproduction of the system.

The dialectic of control is important, for it enters into every area of social interaction via structures of domination. Power relations are always relations of autonomy and dependence and are necessarily reciprocal. The distribution of power in a relationship may be asymmetrical, but an agent always maintains some control in the relationship and may avoid complete subjugation. As Giddens (1979) notes, “in a social system, the most seemingly ‘powerless’ individuals are able to mobilize resources

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7 Students in special education who choose in high school not to receive service and support from special education may end up having to drop out because they cannot make it in the regular classroom with no support, or are unprepared for its demands.
whereby they carve out ‘spaces of control’ in respect of their day-to-day lives and in respect of the activities of the more powerful” (p. 149). The youth in the study certainly carved out these ‘spaces of control’ in terms of street-involvement, but also within their educational trajectories, and their individual family circumstances through independence, rebellion, assertiveness and resilience.

Giddens’s view of societal reproduction, transformation and determination stresses the non-functionalist nature of societal change. According to Giddens, “all social reproduction occurs in the context of ‘mixes’ of intended and unintended consequences of action; every feature of whatever continuity a society has over time derives from such ‘mixes,’ against a backdrop of bounded conditions of rationalization of conduct” (1979, p. 112). The choice of support to all students who may need help other than that offered in a regular classroom, through diagnosing, identifying and placement in special education can be viewed in terms of these mixes of consequences of action referred to in structuration theory.

This reasoning by Giddens can also be applied to the analysis of institutions. He rejects a functionalist line of reasoning to understand institutions, stating that “not even the most deeply sedimented institutional features of societies come about because societies need them to do so. They come about historically, as a result of concrete conditions that have in every case to be directly analyzed; the same holds for their persistence” (1979, p. 113) even after the conditions that created them often change. As we have passed through the era of segregation by closing down institutions for individuals with disabilities and other special needs, segregation continues to occur in more subtle forms when there are separate schools, separate classes, separate schedules –
any form of marginalization within our school or community. Enrollment in special education classes and sending more students to these classes has increased in recent years even though institutions and programs claim to be more inclusive.

So how does one utilize structuration theory? Of what use is it in studying this group of youth? In this dissertation it provides a critical theoretical perspective to look at agents, systems and structures – in particular special education – when exploring the experiences of these youth as exceptional students. It guides the researcher to recognize both societal structures and active human agents as joint producers of everyday life (D. Wilson & Huff, 1994). The difference between these two (structure-agency) is both blurred and dynamically conjoined. The main premise of structuration theory is an important starting point that helps us both understand agents - these individual youth, their narratives - and the broader special education and other discourses that have influenced and continue to influence them. Structure (or material existence) does not exist independently of an agent. Structure (experience of homelessness) does not also exist independently of agency (identity and choices of these youth). To get to understand homelessness and the experiences of special education of these individuals, we have to let their voices speak. The influence of systems also refers to the sense of being a part of special education, child welfare, and social welfare. The identity of these youth during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) does not exist independent of the impact and identity given to them by these systems. The marginalized identity of these youth emerges from their individual propensities, and the cumulative effects of being placed in a special education program and being street-involved and homeless. It is this that this dissertation aims to capture and where structuration theory lends a useful analytic perspective.
CHAPTER 3 Research Methods

For narratives to flourish, there must be a community to hear. . . . For communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics. The one – community – feeds upon and into the other story

K. Plummer

While research is a form of systematic enquiry in the pursuit of knowledge, social work research tends to employ a range and diversity of methodologies and methods. Within it the researcher plays a significant role in the process of knowledge creation. Hence an exclusive focus on seeing research as a technicized process, limited to matters of technique and application of methods, gives way instead to reflexivity and an understanding of research as a process within which the researcher is located (Powell & Ramos, 2010). How my own practice alerted me to this dissertation, including how its design to gather the voices of street youth themselves was shaped, is included in the introduction.

Theoretical perspective

The approach taken to this research is sociological. That is, it is concerned with the dimensions of special education, disability, and feelings of being marginalized that are rooted in social relations based on citizenship in special education, including the features and social structures and processes associated with this membership. Thus, for example, a sociological perspective of special education is concerned with the outcomes and perceived outcomes of those students placed in the program (in this case street youth looking back at their education trajectories), of others who know them and about them (service providers, teachers, support staff in schools), and still others who in one way or another are involved with the rhetoric and processes of special education itself. All of
these micro level actors and their actions are no doubt located in the larger social, educational and political context in which public education is set up.

Within a sociological frame of reference, a further characterization of the research is that it is based on ‘structuration theory’ where human action is understood as embodying broader socio-cultural and institutional structures and processes, but nevertheless individuals also have power and agency that they in turn exercise (Giddens, 1979, 1981, 1984). This orientation directs us to understand the daily rhetoric and discourses of special education as not just individual, but more socially bounded and constructed phenomena. Hence, the dissertation attempts to understand the meanings of special education from the point of view of those engaged in it, and to explore how their experience is shaped both by the social connotations of being exceptional and the larger language and practices of special education in which their individual experience is embedded.

**Research design**

The research design was qualitative. “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The different perspectives of objective reality can never be fully captured and hence qualitative research is inherently multi-method in focus. Hence this research design called for the use of ethnography, narrative analysis, interviewing, and survey research. Theoretically, one cannot easily move between specific qualitative approaches or paradigms since their
overarching philosophical systems are related to particular ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), and hence I sought to adopt what I feel are the overlapping perspectives of ethnography (Creswell, 1998) and the narrative approach (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 1993, 1994). Narrative inquiry is an “amalgam of interdisciplinary lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 641). Narrative ethnography, a more recent term used in the diverse approaches to narrative inquiry, is a transformation of both the ethnographic and life history methods. Like traditional ethnography, this approach involves a long-term involvement with a culture or community; like life history, it focuses heavily on one individual or on a small number of individuals (Chase, 2005, p. 659).

Perhaps in a sense this research falls closer to the constructivist tradition. This is because constructivist ontology is based on the principle that what exists is what individuals perceive to exist; its epistemological framework conceives knowledge to be obtained by participating subjectively in the world of meanings (not verifiable facts) created by individuals (Poland, 2009). But there are aspects of the critical paradigm that are also embraced within the design of this research in that the critical paradigm attempts to link structures and systems with empirical lived experience; it deconstructs these broader systems with the hope that its conclusions will be a catalyst for change. All these considerations helped formulate the study design.
**Field work at the research site**

After receiving approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto, I began field research at the Evergreen Centre for Street Youth (Evergreen) in downtown Toronto from November 2008 to January 2010. Evergreen is a drop-in for street youth aged 16-24. It welcomes youth, Monday to Friday, from 12 noon to 5 pm, and for an additional hour during the winter months for a dinner program. Besides being a place to hang out and eat a fresh meal during the day when most shelters are closed, here youth can also avail of a number of other services including recreational, social, medical, housing, employment and personal assistance. Space is limited, and services and facilities offered are divided informally into three sections: the drop-in and food bar, the health centre, and the employment resource centre (ERC). Most of my time at Evergreen was spent at the ERC.

The ERC is approximately the size of a medium classroom. It has about 9 computer terminals and a couple of tables and chairs where youth can come to work independently or seek assistance with regards to housing, employment, training programs, life skills and education. I hung out here two afternoons a week for the entire afternoon schedule, which is set in a way that permits youth to access services at the ERC from noon to 4 pm. They come in at noon, voluntarily attend a life skills/training session from 12.20 – 1.00 pm, and then can come and go as they wish, and access various services. For example, they can use the computers for personal, employment, housing or educational purposes; browse through binders and notice board flyers displaying information of job postings, training programs, housing and apartment rental information; and can receive specific feedback from staff and volunteers on building their resumé,
accessing the job and housing market, applying for social assistance, etc. When youth come to the ERC, different from the rest of the drop-in, they generally come motivated to some extent to work on their goals, particularly short-term ones related to employment, housing, education and social assistance. However, a few computer terminals are also available for access to email and other social communication sites. Another important service is the provision of a limited number of transit tokens to youth to attend housing and employment appointments. In addition, there are a few in-house training programs offered such as the Connecting Youth to Work (CYTW), and ‘Next Step’ a job readiness program recently introduced for youth receiving social assistance.

I spent a total of 430 hours doing field research. I was present two afternoons a week mainly at the Employment Resource Centre at Evergreen. Knowing how transitory youth are, I tried to be consistently present on the same two days of the week during this period. In addition, I volunteered to help out at a pre-employment program, Connecting Youth to Work (CYTW). This is a semi-annual pre-employment program for street youth that prepares them for an intensive work placement. I participated in two different cohorts of the first phase of the program, which lasted for two weeks. I also participated in a few other activities through the drop-in such as a weekly Arts Group for youth (5 weeks) and a two-day white water rafting excursion trip. Youth are free to attend life skills sessions offered each afternoon at the ERC; besides attending most of these sessions during the times I was present, I facilitated 9 of them at the ERC, and one at a neighbouring youth shelter, Covenant House. I also made a few visits to Covenant House, particularly to the alternative Section 23 school that is located there. I made these visits both to gain a different perspective and recruit some youth for the study. Youth seemed comfortable
with me being in the ERC as they are used to other volunteers and student placements that assist there. Hence they were used to my volunteer/researcher status. Sometimes they also asked about my student status, both because other students completed their placements there, and because they are familiar with the University of Toronto. Initially I conversed with youth more directly about school and the study. However as I came to realize their perceptions of education and special education, I tended not to hold these conversations unless youth initiated them. I noticed that if youth were enrolled in a training program or had concrete plans to go back to school in the near future, they found it easier to talk about school. I used these conversational opportunities and the facilitation or participation in life skills sessions to recruit youth for individual interviews.

Data sources

Since I wanted to know about the experiences and perceptions of street youth with regard to special education, the data sources I utilized were youths’ stories as told by them, but also the stories told about them by service providers and others related to special education and alternative education.

My original sampling strategy called for having at least 8 youth who would complete their life history narratives (in addition to ethnographic fieldwork). This meant some more would have to be recruited to allow for attrition. Furthermore, I wanted to make sure all participants were active street youth, meaning they were not ‘other’ youth who came to use some of the resources of the drop-in either because of its location, for their individual needs including health services or training programs, or because some of their peers hang around this corner of the city. Inclusion criteria also targeted youth who were 18 or older as they would most likely not be active high school students presently. I
also tried to recruit for a sample with a general mix representative in terms of gender, race and other outwardly visible characteristics. Most important, they would have to self-identify as having received some special education support in school and be willing to commit to more than a single interview.

From February 2009 I began conducting life history interviews with youth. *Life history* is the term generally used to describe an extensive autobiographical narrative, in either oral or written form, that covers most of a life (Chase, 2005). Youth were invited to meet individually at a time that was convenient to them when we could go over their school history and special education involvement through in-depth multiple unstructured interviews. At each of these interviews I would be the computer scribe and they would dictate their self-narratives; I typed as they talked and watched the screen. ‘Direct scribing’ (Martin, 1998) permits youth to amend the text and produces eloquent narrative material. Many of the participants found writing a challenge. In retrospect, this method proved beneficial to elicit their stories; at the same time they had agency over the authorship. There was a certain implicit confirmation in this method that they were being heard (Martin, 1998) and their struggles with regard to education validated. We met over multiple times. At each successive session, I would show the youth the story draft that had emerged from the previous session. In most cases they preferred me reading these back to them. While they were being read, they were permitted to add and delete details and to assume full authorship. Going back to the youth to go over these drafts helped with the process of data collection (on my part), and preliminary data analysis (preliminary, but by them nevertheless) by them. Each youth worked differently at these sessions. Some would come up with titles; some would be surprised at how they
themselves sounded when they listened to their words being read back to them. Some would be upset to recall certain school events that had taken place. Sometimes they would just add further details and descriptions to previous incidents. Only one youth took an almost final draft of his story and came back a week later after looking over it with his comments and suggested edits to be incorporated in the final draft. Others chose mainly to leave the drafts with me till they were complete. At the end they were offered a copy of the completed story. While most seemed happy to be able to receive these, not everyone considered it important to take them. While having access to a printer was a challenge at times on my part, I suspect that the challenge of taking a copy of their narrative with them was met with apprehension as it could either fall into the wrong hands, or they had no place to store it. I noticed the youth in this study were very reflective, and capable of processing and analyzing their experiences and narratives. I helped with the process of interpreting them. A researcher interprets narratives by being attentive to the complexity and multiplicity within narrators’ voices (Chase, 2005, p. 663). In this study, it called for attending to complexity and multiplicity also across the narratives of other youths as well.

In all, 16 youth consented to take part in individual interviews where they would generate their life history narratives. Most were from Evergreen but I did recruit at Covenant House as well; only one youth from this agency volunteered to directly participate in this part of the study. Eight of these participants were present for 3 or more sessions based on their schedules; the rest participated for two sessions. A sample of 8 seemed meaningful both in terms of the depth of their stories, and data management. Counting multiple sessions, in all there were 45 individual interviews that were recorded.
and transcribed. Fifteen narratives were generated from these interviews as one youth chose to drop out after the first session. All 15 youth were present for a minimum of two sessions. *Figure 1* below depicts the individual youth and the breakup of individual sessions spent with the researcher generating narratives.

**Figure 1: Youth and number of individual sessions generating narratives**

![Bar graph showing interviews completed](image)

The total time youth spent by youth on their interviews ranged from one hour to five hours, most at the median of two to three hours. This was time actually spent generating narratives and does not include scheduling, activating narratives or preliminary or final conversations before and/or after each narrative-generating session. A bar graph (*Fig 2*) is a graphical description of the same.
At the end of each session youth were given a single movie pass. At the final session all of them received a movie night out pass where they could also take a friend out to the movies and treat them to soft drinks and popcorn. There are a number of researchers who come to Evergreen to recruit youth as study participants. I noticed youth sometimes consent to be interviewed as a $15 - $25 offered as compensation seems attractive. Having been involved for a longer period of time at Evergreen, after consulting with staff, it was decided not to offer any money as compensation, but movie passes.

While I did not generally find much difficulty relating to the youth in the ERC setup, when it came to talking about special education and consenting to participate in the study, most youth found it hard to disclose the same. Hence as time went by, I began to work things in a sort of different order. I would first just interact with youth, and when a conversation was initiated by them about school or with regard to the study I was doing,
then I would mention my interest in street youth who were in special education. Even so, I left it entirely up to them if they wanted to volunteer to participate in the study. Sometimes youth were willing to go through a single interview but I indicated my preference for multiple interviews. At other times, they would say they would come back another day or time, and even though I saw them on other occasions, I would leave it up to them to come back and express their interest in the study or schedule a time to be interviewed. In this regard it must also be noted that conducting interviews was also contingent on immediately finding a space – rather difficult in a busy place like Evergreen. This too may have impacted recruitment, given that participants are reluctant to talk about special education and not many therefore would want other youth to know they were taking part in a study for youth who were in special ed. However, when I did conduct an interview, I made sure it was in a fairly quiet, but private room which often meant having to wait till the end of the day for such a space to become available. This can also be a challenge given that ‘immediacy’ with street youth is important, and hence it is best to conduct an interview with street youth at the very time the youth are available rather than inviting them or scheduling something later.

Participation in the study wasn’t just contingent on the impact of youth having to recall special education (the ‘why’ of the study) but also ‘how’ the study was conducted. On one level, this refers to the availability of space and their participation in a study wherein their identity would be disclosed in the presence of peers. On another level, it was related to my own presence. I had spent time in this agency both before and now during the study. I was known both to youth and staff. I had built up a rapport with some youth here and they came to accept and trust me. Why then did they still not want to take
part in the study? I noticed other studies going on in which it seemed youth would willingly take part. Even in front of their peers they would consent to participate and come out showing the $15 or the $25 cash or coupons to McDonalds or Tim Hortons that they had received. Participating in these other studies often meant just answering some questions and then receiving compensation. Street youth are skilled interviewees and sometimes would joke about the answers they’d given in terms of either telling the researcher a shocking story, a lie, or even the plain truth to get it over and done with. In this study however, I think their reservation was also because the researcher was around a fair bit and known to them, they had to come multiple times, they would be interacting with their own story and there would be no long questionnaire with multiple questions where they could choose a yes, no, or an answer from a multiple set of answers as was in the case of many of the studies that were going on there.

**Other data sources**

Besides interviewing individual youth, I conducted semi-structured, informal interviews with 12 service providers. Six of them were staff (front-line and supervisory) from Evergreen itself and worked in the drop-in, the ERC, and Connecting Youth to Work (CYTW) program. Most of them have worked for five or more years with street youth, some of them in other settings as well, such as prison or transitional housing. The other six service providers in the sample of 12 were all educators from the school system. Two were teachers at an alternative school for street youth, one a child and youth worker (CYW) at an alternative school, one a psychological associate, one the head of the special education department in a large inner city high school, and one the lead teacher at an alternative program for youth who are working in the community but not attending
regular school. The perspectives of all of these service providers (both front-line and educators) were valuable, in that I found most of them were aware of the existence of street youth who have been in special education, the need for programming that is specific to this group, and the dearth of formal educational programs that could meet the specific needs of this group.

Two focus groups of service providers each lasting 75 minutes were also used to gather data. A total of 18 persons took part in them. Focus group participants were similar to those who took part in the individual service provider interviews such as those who work in agencies serving street youth and in the alternative school for street youth. In addition, the following also participated: a social worker who worked in the Behaviour program for students, a social worker who worked with students who were expelled, a principal, a retired vice principal, an assessment & programming teacher, a student success teacher (from the new ‘Success for All’ program), a welfare worker, and a researcher in the children’s mental health field. The perspectives of these professionals as a group was immensely useful, in that they spoke to how these youth while in school and now on the streets prefer to be labelled ‘bad’ rather than ‘stupid.’ They also spoke generally about awareness that the school system doesn’t do a good job in terms of welcoming and making programs available for this group but tends to focus more on labelling them and thus casting the dice in that the educational future of these youth is determined by placement or non-placement in special education.

Besides field work research and the three sets of interviews (16 youth, 12 service providers, two focus groups), one other method was used to gather data related to these youth. For ten months a brief questionnaire was appended to the in-take forms at the
ERC asking new youth whether they had been in special education or had received any related special education services and supports. While staff generally asked the question as they completed in-take procedures, youth were told that this question was voluntary and that if they agreed to take part, their answers would be anonymized and passed on to the researcher. In addition, at the end of the life skills sessions I facilitated during my field study I handed out the same questionnaires and tabulated the results as well. Responses were then summarized to ascertain how many youth who come to the ERC had been in special education before. Through this method, I was able to gather data from 113 new intakes and 44 life skills participants.

Thus the methods used in this study were field research, multiple interviews with individual youth, semi-structured service provider interviews, focus groups with service providers and a count questionnaire. Data collection involved recording written field notes immediately after observation. Youth interviews, service provider interviews and focus group interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

**Data analysis**

The unit of analysis in this study was the experiences of these youth in special education. More specifically, I analyzed the current and recollected feelings and perceptions of individual youths with regard to their citizenship in special education.

Data analysis occurred in three steps. The first step involved working mainly through the process of gathering and completing stories and narratives of the fifteen youth and reflecting on the stories that emerged. This was an iterative process and involved meeting with the participants and engaging them in constructing narratives of their educational trajectories.
Presently there are emerging a variety of approaches to the use and analysis of narrative in social sciences research (Frank, 2009a; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993, 1994). Amia Lieblich et al. (1998) distinguish three uses of narrative texts in social research. One is for exploratory purposes. A second use is for research on stories themselves, which deals more with the organization of stories than with the subject matter. A third use of narratives is philosophical and methodological. Inquiry in this case centers on what narrativity can contribute to a deeper knowledge of individual and group experience, which is juxtaposed with contributions from typically positivistic methods. In the analysis of this study, I modified and used the first method, namely using texts for exploratory purposes.

Narrative texts are used for exploratory purposes when not much is known about a particular topic (Lieblich, et al., 1998). Small or strategic samples of stories from focal populations might be collected as a prelude to the identification of variables that can later be operationalised for further study. For example, narratives can provide a preliminary in-depth view of the lifestyle of an unfamiliar group such as a gang or a social movement. My gathering and analysis of the narratives of street youth in special education was to provide a preliminary in-depth view of their experiences, perceptions, and general disassociation with special education.

I use youths’ “narrative resources” to typify what forces (e.g., special education in this dissertation), or in this case the multiple forces over which they have little control and scant awareness, affect them. These are other sources than just their individual experiences such as reports about them, a school assignment one of the youth shared, or the discourses about special education that youth and service providers heard when they
were being spoken about. But I am as far as possible to avoid typifying the forces that impact them. “The stages of the journey can be typified without typifying the journeyer” (Frank, 2009b).

I would have preferred to begin and end with their stories/narratives, letting them breathe. However because of multiple data sources in the stages of analysis and interpretation I have not focused solely on “narrative work” which is the content or the process of gathering their narratives or the very method itself. Instead within this dissertation I use youth narratives to represent them and typify their journeys (not them). Hence at times the quotes seem long but serve the purpose of representing what they decided to include in their stories. I do try to include a bit of the process (‘activation’) that goes into narrative work when I speak of a typical example of how a story was activated (for example, the context in which Y1’s story is elicited) that but given the volume of data and the challenges of finding youth to disclose they were special education students, most of my efforts were directed to participation and less towards tracking their pre-participation.

The second step in data analysis comprised reading field notes and narratives, listening to audio recordings, reading interview transcriptions, and reflecting on what was contained in them. The basic approach was iterative and comparative in that it used the multiple perspectives that emerged from youth narratives, service provider interviews, and fieldwork to guide the dissertation. It is here I began to use ATLAS-TI, a qualitative software program, to code and interpret transcriptions and field notes. I loaded all the primary documents into a hermeneutic unit. I reflected on the 79 codes and quotations that emerged from the primary unit and started to group them into families that would be
relevant to the research question. The analysis chapters are organized around these key themes.

During the third stage of analysing the data, individual chapters of the analysis were read and commented on by two persons. One was a staff person at Evergreen who promotes and supports the goals of youth related to education, and the other was a psychological associate in the Psychology Department of a large school board in the city. Given the many complexities of the youth and of special education programming, the feedback on these drafts from these two persons was valuable assistance in crafting the next three chapters of this dissertation.
CHAPTER 4 The background of the group and the context of their narratives

*Teachers and guidance counselors started to attack me with cookies, legos, and learning strategies*  
– Y15, study participant

This chapter begins with how stories are activated and put together in practice. It highlights the circumstances that mediate what is assembled. It shows that the personal and social purposes and consequences of storytelling shape their accounts. The activation of the narrative of a single youth forms the foreground that introduces the larger landscape, hidden no doubt, of this subgroup. Who they are, how many of them receive services at an employment resource centre, what their exceptionalities are, and relevant details of their family and educational background will also be explored in this chapter from the data gathered.

The long road to participation

Narrative reality takes work; there is an activity that goes into storytelling (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Stories aren’t simply conveyed, but they are given shape in the course of social interaction. Activation is the interactional context in which oral narratives are elicited (Chase, 2005). How things are put or unfold is as important as what is said, in what circumstances, and to what purposes.

Y15, was well aware of his membership in special education and how it came to mean different things over time since Grade 3. While occasions such as participating in a research study or writing an assignment called it forth, he chooses not to recall everything about it at the will of others. His account in different contexts is distinguished. He is an active, purposeful storyteller, not just a purveyor of information. The agency of
storytelling is certainly an integral part of narrative reality; ethnographic fieldwork should be oriented to circumstances and interactional mechanisms that shape narratives (Chase, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The pathway to inviting Y15 to share his story in the study is a strong beginning for this section.

Y15 frequents the drop-in and enjoys playing pool; that is where I met him one day. He struggled to assert his own - to get his turn to play as another youth pulled out every protocol he said he’d heard staff mention about who plays next, and how youth were permitted to play successive games if someone else but not themselves had them signed up or if someone didn’t show up. Needless to say the latter youth was aggressive, wanting to have things his way; I succeeded in interrupting the sequence of three simultaneous games this youth wanted to play to let Y15 take his turn at enjoying a game of pool. I would move on after the hour as the schedule goes for staff, volunteers and student placements who are assigned rotations at the food bar, foyer, main door, pool table, ict (intensive conversation time), kitchen, and so on. Among other reasons, a rotating schedule is an attempt to distribute workload and give opportunities to staff and volunteers not to be in the same high activity or stressful area all through the schedule. The need for this is obvious as this incident that occurred at a place as easy to supervise as the pool table, to other situations that can get tense in the foyer, or at the main door, with all these different groupings of youth present who might carry what goes on personally in their lives or outside on the streets or at another shelter with them into this drop-in. Mostly the place is peaceful due to the way staff and protocol are well laid out, relationships are built, and the continuity of youth who come there make for a general awareness of rules and expectations.
As I was moving to the next place I was expected to be as per the schedule, Y15 softly and politely acknowledged my efforts at helping him get his turn over the other youth. A conversation ensued and I casually asked about how much school he’d completed; he would be one of the first ones I’d tell about the study. Immediately he told me that he didn’t think he belonged to the group I was looking for, because, although he is from Northern Ontario, he’d been in two very different systems of education, a student in a number of schools both in Canada and South America. Based on the snippets of details he would share about his school completion, which was a few Grade 9 credits only, I thought further explorations might reveal him to be a potential participant. That conversation was in the beginning of January 2009. I would continue to meet him a few times at the Employment Resource Centre (ERC) where he would come to use the computers, and once even at a life skills workshop facilitated by me. We talked about a number of things, sometimes about education - mostly when he was alone and not in the company of a now expanded circle of friends, of rather quiet but well-read and intelligent disposition who are a reserved subgroup to their own. The closest I came to doing an interview, was him one day asking if I was coming ‘next week’ and once even setting a time; but never more than this sort of pre-contemplation/generic interest about the study.

I had also distantly followed his present attempts to get back to school; a lot of searching for the right program and going forwards and backwards most recently on the interview process for an alternative college program. This could be rather easy to get into given that he had mostly a few Grade 9 credits and perhaps give or take a year or so of high school, a history of mental illness in the family, and was a homeless youth. The final criterion for admission to these sorts of bridging or transitional programs for mature
students is often a good essay containing a story replete with barriers to completing education, followed by an interview. There was some going back and forth for Y15 with asking for support from staff in the ERC by way of transit tokens and other assistance, and re-scheduling or re-negotiating submission and interview deadlines with the College. Just when we thought he might not yet be ready, he began this September as a student in a College Program\textsuperscript{8}. Similarly just when I had given up on him being a potential interviewee, and had made more or less similar efforts with many of the sample of 16 youth to include them, I stopped one day to chat with him and ask how things were going for him at College. He was now about two months into the program. I received a long list of things that were difficult for him. These were mostly his evaluation about the program being inflexible, a heavy work-load unlike what his peers had said about a college work-load being light, his instructors were monitoring his attendance as if he was in high school, and he was now on academic probation; he even had extra make-up classes scheduled. During our conversation, he casually tells me that he has written his education summary that he thinks I should read. He just says, “You’ll be interested in it for your study.” It was for an assignment at a kind of semi-weekly life skills class offered in the program that he calls the ‘Starbucks class’ because he says, “they use that kind of philosophy to explain life.” The official course title is “Personal Management.” He likes neither the B+ grade he got, nor the comments that were made by his teachers and peers in response to his school story. He said that they told him what he should have done to make things different; in his words they were “very judgmental.” I would only be told a summary of the story and would be promised a copy the following week, similar to my

\textsuperscript{8}This is an 8 month alternative education program in a nearby College. All names of towns, countries, schools and colleges have been changed in Y15’s story.
attempts to complete a formal interview as it always was ‘next week.’ But this time, for the first time actually, he was clear he could be a research participant because in Grade 3, in Northern Ontario, he mentioned that he was placed in a special education class. He mentioned how he initially liked the “candy, cookies and legos to play with” but when he heard from his peers about “the social connotation which means you are in the class with idiots” he did not want to be there. He was also clear that I was to take into account in the study that he definitely wanted to be in school, as school is a very social experience, but not in these classrooms (special education) which he said carried on till Grade 8, although in between because of his parents’ divorce he would spend some school years or parts of the academic year in a few countries in South America with his father.

The next time I met him (interestingly the same week and not the ‘next week’) I was given a copy of the story and told to include it as his narrative in the study. I would never know if the story was with him the previous time, and if even then he might still have debated whether to share it. But I do know, within the 3 page single-spaced essay, is no explicit mention of any special education involvement which he shared with me only the previous time. It however, contains the following:

Socializing and cultivating relationships had become a tedious process. Teachers and guidance counselors started to attack me with cookies, legos, and learning strategies. And so I stopped doing my homework. Eventually as a consequence, I stopped going out, and started going away. I effectively learned to hate everything that North Bay was, or the life that I had there.

A paragraph later he writes,

This resentment I held for North Bay manifested itself when I was in Grade 5 of elementary School. ... In grade five I also began to draw, and vandalize, and was told time and again, that I was “unstable” (I was actually quite stable; I was simply anhedonic, and generally pissed off). Apparently, my mother had to fight to keep me from being medicated (thanks mom). ADD was their
prerogative and Ritalin was their intended solution. This was disproved in South America by a [real] psychiatrist, so upon my return to Canada (and the same damn school), the guidance counsellor seemed to feel challenged, so they contacted my psychiatrist (to their apparent disappointment) and in less than the span of time needed to hang up on a passionately angered Chilean academic, I was appointed the ‘diagnosis’ ‘Antisocial Conduct Disorder.’"

In addition, it should be stated he really enjoyed school in South America where he mentions “the schools look like concert halls in contrast to Canadian classrooms” referring to the number of students and perhaps no streaming at all. His own narrative (not the assignment) says that when he went to high school in North Bay, he found all the Grade 9 curriculum (in the classes he was allowed to attend) was way below what he learned in South America. He did not accumulate many credits in Grade 9 though (in Ontario), and would attend one more year of school (in South America) before dropping out of high school altogether but still go back to College this fall.

In many ways Y15’s narrative leading up to participation is representative of most of the efforts of this study to find and give voice to the stories of these youth. They were a group mostly hidden, a (sub)group not wanting to disclose their special education involvement - if any while in school - and when they did participate in the study, it was after prolonged efforts that were at their own time, but mostly after they had learned to trust me, and know what the research was about. And, it had to be very discreet, which was often a challenge given the constraints of space in the agency and the transitory patterns of the street youth population.

Nevertheless my attempts to invite youth to participate, to tell their stories and generate their school narratives, was the primary method of exploring the lives and

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9 All punctuation and other mechanics is from the original assignment of Y15.
meanings attached to special education for these youth. Other methods included a ‘Count Question’ that was administered to all new youth in-takes at the ERC over a 9 month period. Data gathered appears in the Table below, along with the same question being asked at a few of the life skills sessions I facilitated for these youth during the time of fieldwork at this agency.

**The number of youth of special education background**

In this section we look at how many new youth in-takes using the services of the ERC self-identify as having had some special education support while they were in school.
### Table 1: SPECIAL EDUCATION CHARACTERISTICS OF STREET YOUTH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>New intakes&lt;sup&gt;10&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Life Skills Groups&lt;sup&gt;11&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n = 113$</td>
<td>$n = 44$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status of the total sample</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Sp Ed</td>
<td>63 (55.7%)</td>
<td>31 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Sp Ed</td>
<td>43 (38.1%)</td>
<td>11 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>7 (6.2%)</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender characteristics of sample</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>80 (71.0%)</td>
<td>28 (63.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30 (26.5%)</td>
<td>15 (34.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not disclosed</td>
<td>3 (2.7%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sp Ed by Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Sp Ed</td>
<td>47 (58.8%)</td>
<td>21 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Sp Ed</td>
<td>27 (33.7%)</td>
<td>5 (17.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>6 (7.5%)</td>
<td>2 (7.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Sp Ed</td>
<td>15 (50.0%)*</td>
<td>9 (60%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Sp Ed</td>
<td>14 (46.7%)</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1 (3.3%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender not disclosed</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Sp Ed</td>
<td>2 (66.7%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Sp Ed</td>
<td>1 (33.3%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exceptionalities disclosed</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disability</td>
<td>21 (37.5%)</td>
<td>14 (51.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>15 (26.8%)</td>
<td>11 (40.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted</td>
<td>5 (8.9%)</td>
<td>9 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADHD/ADD&lt;sup&gt;12&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11 (19.6%)</td>
<td>4 (14.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 (7.1%)</td>
<td>2 (7.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>10</sup> Gathered Dec ’09 to Aug ’09  
<sup>11</sup> Gathered at the end of five life skills sessions  
<sup>12</sup> Although not a Ministry designation, youth often mentioned it as one of their diagnoses
Table 1 summarizes the data gathered from the anonymous count question that was asked over a period of nine months of all new in-takes (Group 1) and from participants at five of the nine life skills sessions that were animated by the researcher (Group 2).

As the status of the total sample reveals, only 38% and 25% in the two groups respectively mentioned that they did not have any special education background. Most of those surveyed (55% and 70%), mentioned special education involvement. Street youth are generally not open to mentioning that they were connected to special education instruction. However, during the workshops I always spoke about learning styles, emphasized we all have unique learning styles, and tried to promote self-advocacy and their own role in advocating for what is helpful and not so helpful for youth with exceptionalities especially within formal learning situations. This may be one of the reasons why many more youth (70%) may have been open to mention their special education involvement in Group 2. In addition, they came to know more about me and my interest in the study during these sessions and probably were able to trust me enough to disclose this information after knowing what its purpose was. In fact, sometimes at the end of a session when the forms were filled out, youth would come up and seek clarifications about exceptionalities and what could be considered special education support with a view to being more accurate in completing the survey.

In looking at special education by gender, it is not surprising that there is a higher percentage of males with special education background in both groups. In the first group, 58.8% of the males (n= 80) identified as special education students and 75% in the latter (n= 28). This is in keeping with literature that points to a disproportionately higher
number of male students in special education classrooms in Ontario (Bennett, et al., 2008) and elsewhere. What might seem interesting and surprising, is the high number of females among these two groups disclosing special education involvement. Although they are less than half the number of youth surveyed in both groups, more than half of them were special education students – 50% and 60% respectively. By observation, some of their profiles can be highlighted relating to at risk characteristics such as drop-outs, pregnancy and behaviour exceptionalities. This is the deficit discourse description (Mintz, 2000; Portelli, et al., 2007) and does not speak to some of the other characteristics that will be discussed later from the narratives, such as interest expressed by female youth in post-secondary education. However, a further study on street youth who are females and were in special education might certainly be revealing.

When it came to those with special education disclosing exceptionalities, close to 89% in the first group and 87% in the latter group knew what these were. Having moved around much and not having strong advocates in their caregivers, often youth may not be able to even remember whether they were identified and why they are being placed in a special education program. When analyzing these exceptionalities, which fit into more than one category, learning disability (LD) was identified most often - 37.5% in the first group and 51.8% in the second. The behaviour exceptionality came next, with 26.8% and 40.7% of the participants mentioning they were given this designation or placed in a program for this exceptionality. The other group that stands out is those youth with the gifted designation. Initially staff at the agency asked if this question was perhaps misplaced and not sensitive to street youth. However, 41% of the youth in the second group, namely those attending life skills sessions, mentioned this exceptionality. While
some of the narratives also speak to placement in the gifted program while at school, this placement may not have lasted very long because of the attitude and constant movements of these youth. There were a number of these youth present for life skills workshops; they are avid readers and interested in workshops and hence attend them. Youth are free to attend workshops in the ERC and when they see the topic is education, not all youth may choose to participate. It is no surprise then that among those who were interested in staying back for a workshop on education, there would be a significant number of youth who were gifted. I observed them not just devouring rather sophisticated books, but very creative, gifted in arts including music and visual arts. One of the participants at a life skills workshop had also taken a couple of commercial flying lessons and shared his fascination and vast knowledge about aircrafts and war museums even though one might not generally relate street youth with such pursuits.

Among service providers connected directly to the education system, particularly special education, there was awareness that a number of gifted students could be underachievers and could land up on the street. It was interesting though to hear from their perspective that this could also be both because the mainstream curriculum may be too boring for them, they may want to go ahead independent of the rest of the class and not be allowed to and hence be frustrated, and often because of family conflict which given their sensitivity, tends to affect them even more.

(I am) not surprised at all. …because we are talking all along about LD, right? The other side of it, is the gifted population. I think sometimes in a lot of cases… Well I think it’s something like one-third are underachievers. And I think that, you’ll have to check that statistic, but it is a large proportion of them that are underachievers, or a fairly large percentage. And, it’s partly because the curriculum is mainstream curriculum. Although I think it’s pretty rich curriculum, but for some students it is not meeting
their needs because their intellect is on the other side, and they are just way ahead of everybody else, they have a… Now, not all of them are like that though. Part of their personality is, “well I don’t want to wait for everybody else or I’m going to go off to this,” and maybe there is a component of a bit of inattention as well, so they can’t really focus on jumping through hoops x, y, and z to get to their final destination, right?

Also, if you are talking of giftedness and then a certain family conflict, there’s probably like highly, (they are) highly sensitive to the things that are happening and very perceptive to things that other people might not be aware of with their parents or whatever it is. … and gifted kids are really really sensitive sometimes, and I can see that they would be terribly affected if they had family conflict. Yeah, because they overanalyze things. Some kids don’t have tolerance for things [such as family conflict].

SP; Head of special education in a high school

Although psycho educational assessments are based on normed, standardized assessment tools, it is never an exact science when it comes to the process of how unique individuals fit the spectrum differently (Rose, 1999). In addition, it is not a choice between one exceptionality or the other; they often coexist. Furthermore, the process of identification set up under the rules of the Ministry of Education has different criteria related to diagnosis and labels in the special education context.13 The exchange between two focus group participants (one an Assessment & Programming teacher and the other a Social Worker in an Alternative Program) talks about the complexity and the comorbidity of issues relating to this group, and also gives a sense of numbers from practitioners’ points of view:

APT: I mean the kids with Learning Disabilities are far more complex. …and I don’t know if he [researcher from a children’s hospital] talked about the comorbidity, you know with ADHD. Chances are 50% of them [with ADHD], minimum 50% of them, have co-existing issues. Either anxiety, depression, learning difficulties… //Several...

13 For example, the Ontario Ministry of Education does not recognize ADHD as an identification for special education support while in the province of Alberta it is recognized.
Even our ‘Behaviour kids’ most of them are LD, ADHD, or whatever; I’d say 95% or whatever.

Special education is a loaded word both for the street youth and for anyone who tries to track them. While no other statistics about this subgroup were found (Except for Barwick & Siegel, 1996), interviews from service providers in alternative programs corroborate the numbers gathered through the count/survey question:

This year, this is a rough estimate, I am going to say that we already had, maybe 40 kids this year. Maybe even more... We might have had maybe 50; and I have had 5 MID kids that have come through. … I’m thinking of all of the IEPs that I wrote this year. So we write IEPs or education plans for someone who doesn’t have an identification to get in. I would say that 60% had a formal identification of the ones that I wrote; there is another maybe 20% that are newcomers to Canada and those students are generally very strong students, highly motivated. Their situation is different.  

(Social sciences teacher, Sec 23 school for street youth)

A lot of them, I would say about 80% of them will talk about the fact that they’ve been in some kind of special ed class, or they’ve been… A lot of them will give you things that they have been identified with. “Oh I have ADHD, I have ADD. I have this, that and the other thing.” They are quite quick to tell you what they have got. And then they’ll talk in their writing about how they just did not fit in. They weren’t engaged in schools that they were attending. I think they end up just sort of sliding into that fringe group that hangs out.  

(Language teacher, Sec 23 school who gets youth to write autobiographies)

SALEP14 last year processed 49 students; only 25 were accepted by the Committee - about 75% of the 25, were special ed kids. 

(Alt Program teacher)

14 SALEP is “Supervised Alternative Learning for Excused Pupils” that do not attend school but are employed in the community. After being admitted to the program, by a committee, they may gather up to 4 credits from their work placement that count towards graduation. This program currently admits students aged 14-16 only.
One can see even from the SALEP program which is an alternative program, and where any student can be registered, that there are a very high number of special education students that tend to end up in these alternative programs (S. Becker, 2010).

Finally, a fieldwork note at the end of a life skills session sums up the discrepancy between the special education involvement youth might be hesitant to disclose explicitly during a session because of the presence of their peers, and how it might differ from what they fill out anonymously on a questionnaire at the end of the session:

After this [speaking about special education], the discussion was kind of flat as they were not able to relate to what was helpful and not helpful to them in school. I was surprised in a number of ways about this. On the one hand, 6 out of the 7 were in special ed as per the forms they filled out later. However, when they spoke (earlier during the session) none was comfortable to talk about school at all.

Secondly, there emerged a discussion related to the experience of one of the girls who said she was in a Learning Styles class. I first thought the title of the class, ‘Learning Styles’ was interesting. However, she did clarify for me that it was the same Grade 9 Learning Strategies class. She said this was not special ed and she and another youth discussed for a moment whether this was special ed or not.

I could immediately spot, even from the silence of these youth, that special ed was a ‘loaded’ word, they didn’t like to talk about and they assumed it was for those who were really low functioning, but not them.

Of course a lot of the kids may miss being tested and/or identified due to constant movements and so the numbers of street youth with special education will possibly be higher than these numbers. An exchange between two focus group participants, one a teacher at a school for street youth 16-21 and the other a social worker in a program for suspended and expelled students speaks to this:

T: Or, the other scenario, is the kid has been to like 17 schools. But they are in Grade 11 and every year basically they switched schools because their parents moved, or something is
wrong in school so parents moved them to another school, or they’ve been in foster care, suspension. So, everything is really distorted and they have been missed. So, they should have been identified but they haven’t been - and now no one is going to send them for testing because they are 17 or 18 - maybe even 15. So they are not getting what they need.

SW: I found that [the school system has missed identifying them] really interesting. We see that too. A majority of the kids who come to our program are identified. But then there are a whole other number of kids who aren’t identified. And we just see the pace that they work at and we can tell you know something’s happened along the way here. This kid should have been identified - major academic gaps.

So this subgroup who forms the focus of this study is a fairly distinct group. Even though not much information is available about them, and/or no one tracks them once they are out of the regular educational system, it would seem not just from anecdotal information offered earlier by service providers, but from this count question and also from what educators who work in alternative programs mention, that there is a high percentage of street youth, both male and female, who are former special education students.

The nature of the exceptionalities of youth in the study

The youth interviewed for the study often did not accept the labels for the exceptionalities that they received. This was based on the fact that these labels changed, sometimes did not represent them, and often there was medication and a social connotation – both of which they disliked - attached to an exceptionality. Table 2 is an attempt to summarize the exceptionalities and programming which were divulged during the series of interviews to generate their narratives. This is included even though sometimes youth left them out from their narratives because they felt it did not represent them accurately. At other times, there were attempts made to hide, deny or not disclose
exceptionalities. However, some of what youth mentioned about their programming revealed either that they received special education support even though they might have been missed being formally identified. It must also be remembered that not just testing and diagnosis/identification, but also the process of labeling during an IPRC meeting\textsuperscript{15} is far from an exact science or method and certainly not indisputable. For example, in the education system, a parent at IPRC meetings can request strongly that a label or a placement not be given to their child even after a year or two in special education. The latter often happens when students reach high school, even though they might have been in a partially withdrawn special education program in elementary school. Furthermore, the labels that these youth find acceptable and willing to share most often are ADHD/ADD and sometimes, LD. As mentioned earlier, these are known to be comorbid with other special education exceptionalities. On the other hand, when these youth mentioned acronyms (such as the following: IEP, LD, ADHD, OCD, ASD, ME, MID), they knew exactly what the acronyms stood for and would even elaborate the long form of them during their interviews.

Y1: Like I was labelled a whole bunch of things before I was diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome. I had a whole other bunch of symptoms and behaviours which were typical back then. Impulsive…. I was ADD, ADHD, borderline personality disorder - those were the major ones.

Y2: At the end of Grade 9 they started finding out that I had this stuff. And that’s when they got me talk to the psychiatrist. And the psychiatrist started realizing that I had these underlying problems that people hadn’t seen before you know… So…they said bipolar, depression, ADHD, RAD, anxiety. I think that’s it you know.

\textsuperscript{15}The Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) is composed of at least three persons, one of whom must be a principal or supervisory officer at the Board. Its purpose is to identify the student’s exceptionality according to categories and definitions provided by the Ministry of Education. Following this identification, the committee recommends program placement and development/modification of the Individual Education Plan (IEP).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary exceptionality</th>
<th>Related exceptionalities mentioned</th>
<th>What youth disclosed as difficult</th>
<th>Educational programming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y1: Aspergers</td>
<td>- depression - ADHD/ADD, borderline personality disorder</td>
<td>- good writer but needs assistive technology or cannot write</td>
<td>- Had an IEP - ME class with half time integration for credit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y2: IEP in Grades 2-3 because she could read well but had problems with Math and with writing. - Diagnosed with ADHD in Grade 9.</td>
<td>- Bipolar, depression, ADHD, RAD, anxiety. - Meds for depression, bipolar</td>
<td>- Both writing and Math are a challenge</td>
<td>- Some special ed in elementary - Alternative classes in high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y3: Learning disability. Even his Mum calls it so but he disputes that. - Accepts ADHD and a focus problem; was tested and had an IEP since age 7.</td>
<td>- Has an aggressive anger problem - Stubborn - Struggles with organization skills - *tested for Gifted in Grade 2 or 3</td>
<td>- struggles with writing</td>
<td>- Was in sp ed classes - Learning strategies (GLE) in HS - * Graduated HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y4: Behaviour exceptionality. Also diagnosed ADHD but my Mum wouldn’t buy it.</td>
<td>- depression</td>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioural Class for Grades 5-7. - *Graduated HS Enrolled in Undergrad program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y6: Focus problem - Did not want to be tested. - When asked at school if he had problems with his work he said “No” because he didn’t want to sound ‘stupid’</td>
<td>- Has problems with reading because eyes skip a lot. - Cannot write straight but must place paper sideways - Felt different from everyone else because of looks, teeth, acne, etc. - Talks non-stop and not be able to work around others. But at recess time was all alone by himself</td>
<td>- Cannot do math at all</td>
<td>- Smaller classes in the regular school - Placed in alternative school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (Y)</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Y7:** Learning Disability.  
- Diagnosed in grade 4 with ADHD but never knew about it till age 16 when family doc tells him about a report in his medical file. | - has speech problems  
- major attention and focus problems  
- called gay since Gr 4.  
- writing  
- was put into ‘that’ class – the smaller class in Elem.  
- GLE in high school |
| **Y8:** Mentions being tested, many times, by a psychologist for LD & ADHD. | - bullied and teased in school  
- problems doing homework  
- Special ed in elementary  
- GLE in high school |
| **Y9:** Has problems paying attention  
- Not sure if she was ever tested but feels she needs to be tested for LD | - some Behaviour exceptionalities  
- could not do homework  
- Alternative school in HS |
| **Y10:** Had high fever at 18 months that then leads to being hearing impaired. Not sure but thinks he might have LD. | - Had surgery for a crooked spinal cord.  
- Was hyper and in the *gifted class at Grade 2  
- ADHD, Bipolar, Borderline personality disorder, multiple personality disorder  
- Takes meds for ADHD, Bipolar  
- Anger problems  
- Speaking difficulties  
- Math was very hard  
- good reader but spelling and grammar way off and can’t write a paragraph  
- Was in special ed |
| **Y11:** Executive functioning  
- some behavioural incidents in school | - depression  
- could not do homework and never did it at all  
- changed levels from academic to applied to the next  
- Has some college; enrolled in Bridging program for Univ. |
| **Y12:** LD & ADHD hyperactive  
- Remembers being tested | - assaulted teachers in Elem  
- assaulted an older student in HS but says he was provoked  
- can never sit still  
- has trouble reading social cues but tries extremely hard to please  
- takes Ritalin  
- very slow writer  
- Alternative Program in Primary  
*Graduated HS |
Table 2 includes a summary of the youth participants, highlighting their exceptionality and the programming they received. It includes details of the youth (10 Males; 6 females – one dropped out) in the study. While only three graduated from high school with their Diplomas (Y3, Y4, Y12), four youth (Y4, Y9, Y11 & Y15), have attended some post-secondary. Y9 was briefly in College for a couple of weeks during summer, but Y4 and Y11 have completed some bits of University as well. Y15 is now in a Transitional Program at Niagara College. Three out of the four youth with post-secondary are females; only one of them graduated from high school. One more female youth, Y16 has plans to go to College soon.

Being tested to be identified with a special education designation (in order to receive support in the school system) for these youth has certain connotations attached to it. Besides not remembering if they were tested, the many movements of schools can lead to youth missing (not) being identified and being offered supports and/or a
placement. For example, after being involved with a group of similar youth in a two-week pre-employment program (CYTW – Part 1), and conversing with one participant a couple of times about her plans to return to school, the following entry from my fieldwork journal highlighting her remark shows the meaning ‘testing’ implies:

She still mentioned that her goal was to get back to school and then become a Probation Officer. I recommended she get her feet wet during the second semester by doing some Night School Courses. We then spoke about how she gets stressed when a number of things come across her path. A moment later in our conversation I asked, “Were you ever tested in school?” To this she immediately replied, “What! Do you think I’m crazy?” I had to say No, and then told her how people as learners are wired differently. She accepted this and then said she is kind of a kinesthetic and visual learner. (*I thought it was interesting how she mentioned “crazy” as soon as I mentioned testing*).

It seems that rather than asking these youth about whether they were tested and/or what is the nature of their exceptionality, or if they were in special education, for these youth it is better to initiate conversations about the kinds of classes and programs they attended in school. They seemed more willing to talk then and certainly know more about these programs.

Some of the other exceptional characteristics of these youth that cannot specifically be gathered from Table 2, but that were mentioned by service providers included: right-brain thinkers, exceptionally creative artists, MID, emotional problems, FASD (fetal alcohol syndrome), high functioning Autism and PTSD. The following five quotes, all from service providers, speak about this:

A lot of street youth were clearly special ed students as well. What I discovered was they were compromised in only one realm of learning and yet I found them, and in jail as well - not so much my SALEP program - but from my jail youth and my street youth to be highly creative, right brain sort of thinkers and learners. So their productivity was often higher in the fine arts, literature, story-
telling. Not so much in math, science assignments. But they were still very bright and capable kids that had a desire to learn in spite of road blocks that had been placed up all along.

(Alternative Program teacher)

“Focus issues” is a big part of what I see in general, from many of the youth I work with. They have difficulty focusing. Whether it be focusing on sitting still during workshops, or focus even to listen to other people, able to sit still without tapping, fidgeting, whatever. That is definitely a big issue among this population. And focusing in on like sticking with something and working through a problem without having lot of support. One of the biggest things we do in the program is work on fixing a problem - like problem-solving, thinking through something, instead of walking away from that, or thinking no I don’t want to put up with that person in authority, I am just going to quit. So we work a lot on how to think through problems, and how to problem solve.

(CYTW Supervisor)

So, again, I say this year we have had a number of students that have come with IPRC designations like mild intellectual disability. I think we have 4 or 5 students that fit into that category this year. A number of students have Learning disabilities or may have been diagnosed with ADHD at some point in time. Their credits - we always get transcripts first - we either have students who have 5 credits, or the other extreme someone may have 20 credits. But either way, they have been out of school for a period of time and now returning. And some of them have been to multiple high schools. I’d say a majority of them have been to multiple high schools before coming to us.

(Teacher, Sec 23 school for street youth)

Some struggle their whole life in school and maybe have been in special ed, have learning disabilities; slow; some of our kids have fetal alcohol syndrome, post traumatic stress disorder in their life. Some of our kids are second generation street kids, that is to say that their parents have been involved in the shelter system and homelessness itself. A great number of our kids have been in care with CAS, CCAS - the Catholic Children’s Aid. So, have been wards of the province. And it has been lots of changes in their young lives, whether it’s moving around.…

(ERC Program Director)

We are noticing that maybe verbally they are able to give the answer, but what they are writing down is not reflective of their
knowledge. So, see, could be learning disabilities there. They have never been assessed through the system maybe because they have moved so many times. Some of them have missed their identification - others have been identified. And a number of them have problems with social skills, or reading social situations, which makes life difficult in the shelter system. So they end up being bullied in the shelter system or not being able to find suitable housing because they are overwhelmed by the sort of the life skills end of things. This isn’t necessarily kids with learning disabilities, but people who might have a special education profile. For somebody who falls more under the MID sort of side of things, that is what we notice, that piece missing for them. Or they have been sort of bounced from place to place because they haven’t been able to find a goodness of fit, even in like group homes or if they’ve come through the care system.

(Teacher Sec 23 school for street youth)

Finally, to conclude this section, we need to both understand and include the role of parents and caregiver involvement in the process of recognizing the exceptionality and the process of labelling the kids, and the provision of supports around their educational needs. Parents/guardians often don’t understand the process. They find it intimidating. They look on labelling as something that makes them look incompetent. Hence, at times, they might decide to withdraw the child from the support or even the special education class itself because they think their child will not go anywhere if they are labelled. Or, it might even be reflective of what they went through during their own school years and hence do not want the same to happen for their own child/ward.

And, if we are going to label them, or they are labelled, parents don’t understand what these labels are about. Because I deal with a lot of parents who are from a different culture, and when you say my kid is MID or LD or whatever, they tend to just pull the kids out and say, “Go to work.” And they don’t understand what this is about. So, we have to be sensitive to that too.

CYW, Focus Group

And do it in a way that is not like, I’m mailing this letter home, because some of them don’t understand what an IPRC is. It’s really an intimidating process and parents don’t actually understand that
they drive that process. It’s not like they don’t have any power in it. You know if you weren’t successful in school, then you have to come with your child to that kind of meeting, it’s really intimidating. It’s really formal. There is nothing that the person can really relate to. It needs to be a more informal, informative process for letting parents know and connecting them with resources in the community that are available. Or, even at [School] Board level, having certain engaging presentations about what it means to have a Learning Disability or be MID and see the opportunities that you have and how to focus on the strengths and things like that. Because I think people hear it and then they think, “Oh, my kid’s a failure.” Or, they think this school is crap, or that sort of situation. So, that’s one…, I would agree with you that that information piece is very necessary.

Teacher, Focus Group

P1: The other piece is in, and I don’t know how successful this is… In the mental health field, parents were considered equal partners - not just collaborators, but equal partners in the planning process around a child with mental health needs. I think there is has to be a need also in the educational system to think of the parents as equal partners in the planning process.
P2: Legally, they are, but they are not treated that way.

(Two Focus Group participants)

On conducting the literature review, amendment to special education protocols has been in the direction of greater parental involvement (Darling, 1991; U.S. Congress, 1997). Sometimes parents view the school soliciting their involvement as coercive to the labeling process. This can change only if schools acknowledge parents as co-equal decision-makers. Silverstein, Springer, and Russo (1992) concluded that one of the most important ingredients in facilitating co-equal participation in special education is time (i.e., time for parents to grieve and become accepting of diagnoses and time to learn to function as a team member). Ironically, this is an element that educators and school psychologists may be least able to deliver given the hierarchical school culture, hierarchy in Educational Teams and IPRC teams, and general time constraints as so much is
demanded in so little time of educators involved in providing special education services and supports.

All in all, just disclosing that these youth were in special education was the hardest term (identity) for youth to accept even in the context of the study. When it comes down to why they might not be able to disclose that they were in special education, as opposed to being able to disclose a lot of the other characteristics, that would put them right alongside the rest of youth who have come to accept the at-risk label even if this label might stigmatize them to some level, perhaps it is the connotation of what’s attached to ‘special ed’ that is hard for them to accept. The following conversation among participants of the second focus group illustrates this. The following comments are made in response to a participant, a retired Vice Principal (VP), mentioning how these students are often sent down to the VP’s office and then students find it easier to talk about some of the at-risk stuff, rather than the special education stuff. The exchange is between a welfare worker who does workshops for street youth, a social worker in a Behavioural program, and a supervisor at a drop-in for street youth:

W: I think you made a really interesting point around, you know working in that class. It’s like, people have, there’s more in disclosing ‘that’ [special ed] than in disclosing being abused like. That’s, that’s you know like, pretty significant right, like because it’s obviously hard to disclose those things for kids. And, that’s easier to say that out loud than saying I’m…./

SW: //…it’s better to be bad than stupid.

W: Beautifully. Right. Glad you phrased that. How do we get around that so that people don’t feel stupid, right? And then you are able to get it before they are in your office kind of thing.

O: …(X) and I have had a conversation a few times about the whole fact of labelling the population (group) we work with.
Sometimes we term them ‘at-risk’, ‘at-risk youth.’ Is that the right terminology to use? That labelling factor that special education had didn’t help. Do the youth want to identify themselves with mental health, or with mental health issues - like identifying themselves ‘at-risk’? So I think maybe the terminology and the way we term it is not, “I’m stupid because I am in special ed” but “I have different learning styles.” So, changing how it’s worded, how it’s put together, so it becomes ….

Little support and stability at home does not help them have a positive school experience

Similar to the literature on street youth that highlights a chaotic and dysfunctional home environment (Hyde, 2005; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Tyler, et al., 2004; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Whitbeck, et al., 1997), all youth narratives mention the parents and the situation at home as being difficult and traumatic. Their stories mentioned separation, divorce, and strained relationships between parents. Not surprisingly it was also strained between parents and the youth, and sometimes the youth and other siblings too. Most important to note, all descriptions of the family situation in the following quotes are not just about the family; they are also connected to school.

According to Y1, “Since I was very young I’d lived with my mother. Her and my father separated a while ago when I was 2 or 3. I saw my father occasionally, till about the age of 12-13. And then we didn’t talk anymore after that for some reason or the other. Still don’t know why, don’t really care.” Later on when speaking about the difficult time in school around his situation and what would make things different he adds, “Having a father-figure around would probably have helped.” In Y1’s case it appears that his exceptionality is genetically transferred from generation to generation; but his father never seemed to have accepted his son for who he was: “According to him, I never had Aspergers Syndrome even though he obviously has it. Unlike him, I’m very much like
my mom in some respects, but I don’t approach things from the same way, that is the Y chromosome too…” Y1 now has a son and he notices his son at 2 years seems to have similar behaviours to what Y1 was like when he was young. Even though Y1 lived at a shelter during the interviews, he wants things to be different for his son, particularly at school. “When I was growing up my dad was never there. Still I’m hoping that me being there would be beneficial to my son’s experience, as in school.”

Y2 weaves her home and school situation together although they are both complicated. Her home placements change because of abuse, being looked after by some kind of an adopted father who later dies, then being looked after by grandparents till she turns twelve. She enters a group home at 14, but CAS involvement continues till 16 and beyond, as do the school placements. She moved 4 high schools before dropping out with mostly Grade 10 credits. She remains very angry at CAS for the movements and the adults for not seeing through what was happening. She lands up in hospital, in Grade 9, after a suicidal attempt.

Who is my real Mum? Truthfully speaking I don’t care. She gave me up when I was 17 months to my father who abused me. So truthfully speaking I don’t care. The only time I might seek them out is to take them to court to sue them.

Things weren’t necessarily stable. When I was 12, my dad passed away from cancer. Actually it was my adopted dad. He passed away from cancer. My grandmother raised me for two more years and then she couldn’t take the stress of it and then she put me into a group home.

But my family thinks of me as the black sheep because I signed myself into CAS at 16. I couldn’t take the family drama so I signed myself to CAS. My great grandma was always starting to kill herself. My mother (my grandmother is my Mum) was sick as well; she has cancer. There are all these different things. I can’t do this. I’m 16; I’m concentrating on school, on this, on that, etc. I am not coming back.

Truthfully, I was angry through the entire thing … I wasn’t angry at the fact of where I was [the hospital], I was angry at the adults in
my life. I was angry at people not seeing through my disguise and [not] seeing what was going on in my life, you know. And, that’s what I was angry about you know.

Although Y3 is a rarity among the youth in the study for having completed high school, he too does mention a divorced family, numerous movements of residences, and a constant power struggle with his mother.

Q: Is there any particular reason why you kept moving back and forth?
Y3: Because my parents got divorced and she then married a new man, and as money got better they moved to a new house.

It was Grade 11, right at the beginning, the first three months, and then I moved back to my mum’s. It was during an argument with my mum and she goes, “Yeah right, fine! You go live with your father.” Packed up my stuff and left near the end of the summer [means a new school again].

No, it’s just me and my mum have a power struggle. She tries to control who I am, and I’m trying to keep my own control.

Y4 is a youth who not only graduated from high school but is now enrolled in University. Her narrative speaks to the fact that what was happening to her in school was because she was acting out the home situation, which means the home situation was dysfunctional.

All of the schools were related to changes of parental residence. My mum moved around a lot. … So while I would have to say now that I did have behavioural problems, I think that was as a result of living in a violent home. So, I guess there was abuse for children in the household; there was abuse between the parents. So there is … family violence. So therefore, I lived with violence at the home and I’d go outside and beat up other kids at school and be suspended or put into detention or whatever. When they put me into a Behavioural Class I just used to fight pretty much. Until Grade 6, when I grew up.

Later her narrative will speak about what this change was in Grade 6. It had nothing to do with the home but with the school – meaning, someone who understood her in school.
Y6 speaks not only about the constant movements after his parents divorced when he was young, but how, often within the same school year, he would move between the parents, from Hamilton to a Reserve in Manitoulin. But there was not very much consideration given to him and how hard he found it to be accepted in school because he was also half Asian and half Native. In addition, there was abuse at home.

They’ve been split up since I was a baby. My dad left her because he was abusive to her too.

Yeah. It was after Grade 4, I started moving back and forth. I was always having family problems so it was just… that’s what ruined my school. My school means like moving to Grade 1 in Hamilton, to move back to my Mum’s to Grade 8. Got into another fight. Moved back to my dad’s. And, back to my Mum’s to get to high school. It was just like….

[Even going to a new school at the beginning of the school year sometimes lasts only a day] September came and I went to school for a day. And that didn’t work out too well because I went home. My dad got mad at me. Started yelling at me. Kicked me out.

All abuse, like my dad started beating me every day. All of my brothers, we have all been abused our whole lives with him. And we were really, really poor. So, he just wanted money. He drank a lot and smoked a lot. He would hide behind a door if we came home late, with a stick, and then he would beat us. It would just be the same thing every day. He ended up stopping once we all got older because he was more afraid of what we would do because we could protect ourselves now.

Y7 along with his older brother was adopted by a family out West when he was 22 months. His was a story of movements too, along with struggling to fit in and be accepted for his exceptionality and his sexual identity. “I moved 6 times from KG to Grade 10. … I would start making friends and I would be yanked out and have to move. I always had trouble making new friends. So it was just hard.”

Y8 will speak about family movements but also to being frustrated at not being able to do homework and getting no help with school assignments at home. In addition, he mentions the harsh discipline and faulty messages he received from his parents. He
admits he later came to regret acting on the faulty suggestions of a parent on how to cope with stress in school.

I was in regular class too for a little bit. I guess I never got anything done there too. My family always moved a lot. No excuses. But if I could, if my family raised me to make me go to school and stay there, I would. I would have done it. But I guess it is not the way it was. I blame my family for that. … They are not reliable.

Frustration. Yeah. Mum and Dad wouldn’t help me out (to) do that [homework]. I remember I used to take my stuff … home take it home, to go and do it.

[And here are parental suggestions on how to cope at school] He’d be like, “The biggest guy there you beat up. The biggest guy there you see, you beat up. You’d have no problems any more there.” I didn’t understand what that meant. I’d done it. I was so badly disciplined that I always cried in my room. I cried in my room like if that person was here right now, I would deal with it. If that person was here right now I would deal with it. Now when I go back to school, the next day, I tried to be like it’s cool. I’d try to show how I feel, but it didn’t work out. I don’t know how to. And, I just stuck to myself.

I remember one time I got suspended at school. I was on that school bus and I was wondering what my mum and dad were going to say. I knew they got the phone call. I knew that Principal, it was a regular thing. That’s what he does. He has to contact the parents. I was so used to how his job is. I was wondering what it was going to be like. I get back on the bus. I go home. My mum and my dad were fighting. They were already fighting about things that I didn’t know about - money that’s what it was. I get my mum, my dad sort of… the table broke. My mum and dad started to fight, punch. Then dad comes to me, “What happened there? Why did that happen?” Then I remember my dad put my head through the dry wall. Lucky it didn’t hit the beam. If I hit the beam I’d [not] be fine. I didn’t hit it. My head went through it. I was on the ground. I was hurt. I was hurting. My dad started to hit me. My mum started to hit me too. She was yelling, “Oh, you want to do that?” She started to hit me too. Then they stopped. That’s what happened. I remember that time. I remember it. Yes I did.

Y9 is brought up by her single mother who is not interested in knowing anything about school or homework. Sometimes she doesn’t even know Y9 is not at home.

16 Y8’s style is to repeat sentences; it helps him process.
However, she uses extreme forms of discipline and one day a teacher makes a report to CAS. Because of child welfare involvement, the family is broken up. Y9 is happy thinking that CAS will be the magic wand to make her dreams come true. However, she never completes school.

I don’t blame my mum but my mum didn’t encourage me to show my homework or ask what I was doing in school. She just signed my permission form. “Oh, you are on the track team. Do you have to pay? No you don’t have to pay, so just sign it. So no home work but just permission forms? So just go.” I pretty much did my own thing.

[And then there was extreme discipline] There was this plant and a mirror in front of the door with a wire. She was going to whip me with it. She beat me every single day with a belt. That is going to hurt more than it needs to, but so unnecessary. I’m not getting beaten today. She was on the phone. So, if she kept talking, she wouldn’t come into the room. I never ran away from home. I never swore at my mum. Everything I was supposed to do, I just did it. I am not getting beaten. I won’t. I packed my bag and then I left. These were very smart things: 2 pairs of versatile pants, a reversible shirt. I didn’t have money. I could not leave my school stuff because I need it. I took my school stuff. I don’t think my brother and sister told her I was (back) in the house.

[She runs away but then chickens out and comes back. Even so, her mum is unaware] My first time running away was that day, a Friday afternoon. I had that panic feeling, that gut-feeling. I went back Saturday morning and she was still talking to her friend. No outburst, nothing. She just didn’t care that I was not home for a whole day. Saturday morning she didn’t care. Sunday morning I listened to the door again. I listened to the door for 20 minutes. She didn’t call the police, didn’t take the necessary steps that I would have taken.

So I went to school. School was everything for me… “Oh, she is going to beat me.” He [the teacher] was so good. It wasn’t obvious that he is going to call CAS. Go home. It was a Catholic school. I only went to one Public school. I just felt the courage to go home. My mum shunned me. And then she, I guess they [CAS] must have called her. They probably did. She just didn’t say anything. Dinner time came around; she made dinner for everybody else except me. I swear she is bipolar, extremely depressed because of her life. She
did not get what she wanted. A little bit of OCD. And, she has anger-management problems. She served my dinner but just left it on the counter, didn’t serve me. “Oh why did you do that?” She is mad. Before the CAS lady came, “Oh where is your diary?” It was so unjust so I had to justify it in the diary.

She went into the living room and started reading it just before CAS showed up. I was making vows. I couldn’t look at her in the face. I am going with these CAS people. She says, “You think I’m a bi-— eh?” … “Yes, yes, yes.” “Oh what has your mum done to you?” I’m trying to think of all the beatings. She will go to jail for that. I try to find the lightest kind of thing she did. My mum had to do weekends for two years which I later found out. I was so naïve. I thought they were going to take me. They ended up taking all of us. My brother and sister were so mad. It’s not good. My sister was crying. My brother was like, “Oh I don’t want to go.” He was turning 16 that year. My mum said, ‘I love you’ and bid them farewell. Me, she ignored me. I’m going to get my dreams. I did my research on CAS; all the perks and benefits [referring to stability around shelter and educational opportunities].

Y10 lived with both his parents but because of their different styles of parenting, switched loyalties several times. Finally he comes to hate his dad, but love his mum. The parents themselves besides trying to sort their own differences are trying to understand his exceptionalities including a hearing complication and several other diagnoses. Finally they cannot handle him and send him to a group home. It is just about the same time they both split as well.

It would switch a lot. First it was dad, and then I did go more sympathetic to mum.

My mum is very… she wanted to set rules. She wanted rules and guidelines for me. My dad was just whatever the hell happens, happens. But at the time I liked that because I liked getting away with it, but now I look back and I realize that my mum was just…you know … She is great. Someday I’m going to give her everything I could. And she does her job [as a teacher] because she loves it. And I see very few teachers doing that.

My dad was an alcoholic. He was never around. He was always drinking. He’s a mechanic so he would sit outside, and work on his cars and drink all day. Mum had to do everything. Mum had to do education. Mum had to buy me … Mum, mum, mum.
‘Bipolar Ned. That’s what they called me.’ … Oh, it was my parents. Well, they wanted to learn what the doctors had to say. And all it would take was one doctor saying that [diagnosis], and then that was what they would think. So, poor judgement on one person’s side just reverberated to everybody. It was like a ripple effect. Just as I thought they were the authority and I wanted to trust that they were using their judgement, my parents thought that the doctors were (experts) and they were using their judgement. So, if he said it’s bipolar, they said it’s bipolar. Teachers said it’s bipolar. Everybody tells me it’s bipolar, and then they start treating me like you’re bipolar. And, whether it’s bipolar, whether it’s (inaudible), soon as there’s a difference, there’s a sympathetic voice that everybody has. I hated that. I didn’t want sympathy. I wanted to be treated just the same. I just wanted to be taught and respected. That’s it.

[Later after an incident with kids who were teasing him related to his exceptionality he has an outburst. It was the same time his family was in turmoil] My mum and dad split up. That was right around the time they put me into group homes. They divorced.

But parents also did some good things. Y10’s mother used techniques that made him a good reader. She also got him into the gifted program in elementary school.

Yeah, she would, she’d leave the chapter ending out - the best part, and insist that I get like to bed. I would, no, no. I have got to read the rest of that chapter man! So I would go ahead and I’d read it. So it was very frustrating. And I would understand four or five words in a sentence. And there would be three or four that I didn’t. But I’d piece together what it meant by reading what was around it. And, in fact that was [similar] in school with textbooks. But at the time I didn’t know that. That’s just what I did automatically. And then I’m reading ahead of them.

Y11 speaks initially of all the attention that she got from her mother and step-father. Later things change when new siblings are born. She is sent from one biological parent to the other, and for some time, actually switches between both parents.

So, go back to Grade 8. When my first sister was born, one thing, and I think like, it was the time I was realizing that I really was alone. I’m a kind of person that craves kind of attention. So, I used to get it from my mum and my step-dad. You know, I would kind of come home and entertain them, you know. And it wasn’t like
that anymore. No one really had time for me. And there was no focus on me, so there was no need to do school work and anything. No one asked me if I was doing it. So my grades started slipping. I was like failing English I think. And History. I don’t know. I was failing a lot. And they bumped me up to a 50 for those courses. I remember that.

… On Halloween night I’m home from school, and my mum sits me down and turns out she read my journal. And I mean that’s like … it is really personal. I was just torn up inside. …But my mum looked at my journal and used what I said against her - about her, against me. And called me a two faced bi---. And, she just went off on me, and said how horrible I was, and to pack my stuff. So she told me and my brother to pack our stuff. I didn’t know what was going on but I did it. And she called the taxi and she said that we are going to our dad’s house, to live, forever. And it was a big shock for me and I was like crying and stuff, because I was also trying to defend myself, because I was really trying at the new school. I was doing good in my classes. And she didn’t wait for my mid-terms to see …

… We stayed for the weekend I think. And my dad was trying to get in contact with my mother but she wasn’t answering. So my dad decided to drive us back to Mississauga … I remember in the car I just had so much attitude because I felt like if my mum doesn’t want me and my dad doesn’t want me, so I was just saying all these things. I was like, “I don’t care. We’ll just go to Child Protection Services or something. We will just go to Children’s Aid. Who cares?” Like you know I was saying all these things. And eh, so we get back to the building. And we are trying to contact my mother. And the landlord informs us that she has moved away. So, obviously that was a shock for me. Like I’ve lived there since I was like 4. How can someone just pick up and move in a weekend? We had no idea like. It was just so absurd and stuff. But she finally contacted us and told us that she was in Scarborough. And she came to Brampton to set us up in school and stuff. So I went to a school, Central Peel, I think it was called. And yeah, I decided really quick that I didn’t like Brampton because the kids were just … They don’t care at all. If you are new, they won’t even look at you in class. Like no one would talk to me. It was like the weirdest feeling in the world. At lunch I just sat in the hallways and eh … …

… I didn’t have a relationship with my dad. I never did. We didn’t really talk that much. My grandmother was just a crazy neat freak. And so every time I went home, it was about cleaning something. I would practically cry every night. I was pretty miserable. So, I would call my mum from school and I would cry to her and say, “Oh please let me come back, please know?”
Her mum takes her back. Mum’s involvement in her daughter’s life and school is still the same - minimal. I wasn’t that interested in school. The only thing I was interested in was in drama. And so when I got a leading role in my school play, it was the happiest moment in my life. … But, I had like the most, the second most lines in it. I don’t know. I was very proud of myself. My mum didn’t come to the play so it was very depressing for me. And, I remember the opening night she had dropped me off. And, I was like, “Are you going to come?” And she’s like, “No, I can’t come. You know the kids are at home.” I was like, “Well, Harry [step-dad] could watch them.” And, she said, “No.” I was practically crying right before I went to get ready for my play because I was just so depressed. Everyone had so much family there for them. The audience is just family, right? But luckily I had begged some people from McDonalds to show up. So I had a couple of supporters.

…And pretty much so after that play I felt like I hit rock bottom. There was nothing left for me in the world. I was just really sad and miserable all the time. At home I would just go to my room and close the door. Or, I would just walk outside and listen to music. And I was really … and by that time I was really behind in my school work in English and Math. And I already knew if I didn’t do a couple of assignments for English I wouldn’t pass it. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it even though they were like the simplest assignments ever.

…Well, pretty much I didn’t really show my mum my report card and stuff like that. It was kind of like hidden. She didn’t really ask for much. I stopped coming home (laughs). I would just hang out all night, for the weekend, or I just… Yeah, I stopped caring. So one day my mum was like, “Take your stuff and get out of here.” Hmm? So I did.

After this incident in Grade 11, Y11 drops out. All summer she lives with a friend in an apartment paid for by her boyfriend. Even though kicked out of this apartment too, by the end of summer, she will still attempt to go back to school. She’s fascinated with wearing a uniform, so enrols she says in a Catholic school. This returning back to school doesn’t last long. Her street involvement, which had begun over the summer, increases and success in school decreases.

Y12’s trajectory is similar to some of the other youth in terms of different
parenting styles and the constant movements between one parent and the next. But it also includes bits that differ in that it speaks to one of his parents forcing him to take medication - which he hated - and non-acceptance of his teenage rebellious lifestyle. It will also speak to his own desperation of having to live with one parent, but willing to do anything to get the other parent to be a part of his life.

My mum couldn’t figure out why I would think and act the way I did. She wouldn’t blame herself. She had too much pride for that. It had to always be my dad’s fault - the man that walked out on her and never looked back. He disappeared from my life at the age of 2 and returned into my life at the age of 5. My mum told me stories and lies about what my father was, where he was, how he was, that he just left me. When my dad came back into my life, that’s when the school problems started. So I continued at York Centre being medicated on Ritalin suggested by a doctor.

They [problems at school] were because my family, mainly because at 2 years old, I wasn’t in school, right? Everything was fine. I behaved fine. I was raised strictly of my mum’s upbringing and my grandparents. My dad was out of my life. It was as if I forgot him somewhat. But I was told that he did this, he was that. Whatever. He disappeared. And at 5, when I was at Minischool, my dad came back into my life, bringing me gifts. Taught me that my mum was lying about what happened. This is what really happened. And, all of a sudden my world was shattered because, where I’m a new young person in this world and I believe in truth and honesty, and mum always brought that upon me, then all of a sudden, ‘She lied to me?’ ‘She told me fairy tales?’ ‘Why would she lie to me? What would be the purpose of it?’ Doesn’t she realize it hurts me inside because you can’t be a hypocrite of what you promote in your kids? And this is stuff that she never took into account that was hurtful.

I still never fit in at school. I got beat up a lot. I would cry and I would want death to come for me. I tried to kill myself. When my mum was home, we had a fight one night, about how I should be on medication, and that it helps me. I said that it never did. My mum would blame my father. It was always his fault. I took two knitting needles and had them pressed into the skin at my jugulars in my neck. That day I could have felt vast pain or pleasure I would ever feel in my life. But life had bigger plans for me.
Ah, OK. My dad never had a problem with my choices. My dad gave me space and freedom to make mistakes and learn from them, where my mum was confining and restrictive. She kept me unaware as best she could about the ways of the world. But I was far too curious. I didn’t have boundaries when it came to ideas or thoughts. I didn’t believe there were negatives. Everything could be looked at as a sense of beauty or a positive.

I finally was fed up with my mother and I was sick of my step-father. So I ran away. I biked 5 hours from Huntsville south to Barrie. I was trying to bike all the way to my real father’s. I wanted him to be a part of my life and I wanted to be a part of his. I got to live with my father for some of Grade 8 and it was a whole new experience for me, for my dad changed. He was not the man I believed he was, but something slightly less. I became a slave to the chores of the house and I became angry once again. I passed and graduated elementary school. But I was soon going to find out what high school was like and the troubles I was soon to face.

[He’s in high school now] Even the Goth thing - all of them would call me morbid. My mum would just insult my intelligence, my presence of being. My dad, he would just say – “Cool, as long as you are happy with what you are wearing.” I respected that because he respected me, because he wasn’t bashing, making me conform and stuff. My mum is always expecting me to conform. They are all you know, cops and hospital workers. And my sister is now following right in with them.

[Although back to mum’s things are definitely not working out] Then problems occurred over the summer and my step-father put a shot gun barrel in my face. I removed the weapon and hit him as hard as I could. I left the house to call Children’s Aid and there they took me to P* just north of Q*. [Even the CAS placement doesn’t work out. He moves back to mum’s and somehow completes school]

It wasn’t just the youth, but the service providers who work with these youth that were aware of the turbulent home environment and the lack of stable adult support at home. According to them, this affects the youth’s success in school significantly because overall there is a lack of support for what happens to them while in school.

After-school recreational programs have been proven. They are very effective. A lot of these young men are great athletes. They
are really really good athletes. Some of them did not have marks to play for any athletic teams. So, their home situation, they never really got a lot of support at home. I could take stuff home, and if I don’t understand something I could take it home, ask my father, my brother. They did not have that - so the home environment plays a big role in some of the kids.

(Service Provider; Runs a martial arts program for street youth)

Characteristics? Youth who come here usually don’t have adult support in any way. They don’t have stable family life. Many have come from the foster support care system. They may come from single parent impoverished homes. Some come from parents that are addicts and unstable. And there’s a lot of youth that come from out of province, from small town, out of province. Lot of youth that are immigrants that have come here on their own, leaving horrendous situations. And we have a lot of youth that have a lot of disabilities in different ways, whether learning disability or emotional problems. A lot of them have been classified as ADHD, things like that. Substance abuse usually starts at an early age. Lot of kids are in the shelter system. Lot of them are out in the streets. Some of them are in rooming houses. A lot of people are unstable - they’re going back and forth. May have a place, but only have it for a short period of time. Then out in street. Then shelter. Then get another place. This kind of cycle goes on for a few years. A lot of youth as well have been out of prison. A lot of them have started institutionalized life at young ages - group homes, mental health facilities, you know young offender facilities. But I may say, one of the main things: unstable adult support. Very few of them have adults around them that are healthy around them to be role models and help them. And most of them aren’t in school and don’t have education.

(ERC Program Director)

The narrative of Y13, in terms of a dysfunctional family is similar to the rest of the youth mentioned in this section. When his mother leaves the home, and not just the home but the country, he finds his siblings being distributed among relatives. He lands with his father; but the step-mother doesn’t want him. He takes to the streets and it’s this street culture which does not run parallel to school but the criminal justice system.

And, after that in Grade 10, I stopped going to class. Like completely, basically. So, I went to an alternative school. I got a few credits there and after that, like the summer, my mum ran
away to San Lucia. So she kind of left my family and we had to figure out what to do. My little brother went to my grandma’s house. My sister went to my aunt’s house. And I had to live with my step-mum. She didn’t like me because you know I am my mother’s child. (Corrects me here “my” mother’s child which indicates he is following his narrative as it appears on the screen) She convinced my dad that I was a bad kid and he kicked me out. And so that is when my street life pretty much began.

At that point I was stealing stuff, that type of stuff, just trying to make ends meet so I could eat the next day. I eventually got arrested and my dad had to come and bail me out. And when I was living with him again, I got kicked out again because of my step-mum. So I was back to what I was doing before. I got arrested. When winter time came around, I went to a shelter. It was an adult shelter because all the youth shelters were full. So, I just picked a random three people and decided to get an apartment with them. This was a mistake because I didn’t know them, and a lot of them were into drugs and I didn’t know till I moved in with them. So after about three months I got sick of that and I moved out. It was spring at this point, so I could just go back to the streets again.

The narrative of Y15 that began this section spoke to the general reluctance of youth to speak about their involvement in special education and hence in the study. In this section I’ve highlighted the characteristics of this subgroup as obtained from the count question, and types of family and home situations that these youth came from with constant movements no doubt. While this study was not about parents/home, I report this because youth spoke a lot about their home situation in relation to school and special education. They also spoke about it in relation to their own children (in future and some of them even have kids now) and how they will choose to be more involved in the education of their children. But the circumstances disclosed lead one to ask if the school personnel involved with these youth - who no doubt are numerous given the many schools they moved around - were aware of the circumstances around the home environment of these youth. The narrative of Y14 is representative of how aware school
personnel were of the environmental and other dysfunctional family or child welfare experiences of these youth.

Y14 was born in Buffalo, U.S., but brought to Canada when he was a baby to be looked after by kin. Things do not work out and he is in the custody of Children’s Aid since he is 6 or 7 years old. He talks of the many movements of schools; but it’s the first time in Grade 10 when someone within the school system finds out where he comes from and at that very moment establishes a connection with him. What a change that made for him. In fact referring to this incident, he called his narrative, ‘And that triggered everything.’ The same person he connected with, knowing he didn’t have much of a chance because of his reputation at that school and his family situation, introduced him both to a family that welcomed him and supported him, and a school where he could get a supportive and genuine fresh start.

I have changed so many schools, foster parents and group homes. I remember so many things. I know for a fact I’m going to make a life-story about my life, a movie about it. I moved around so much but it was the second last high school, Pinegrove Collegiate where everything changed. At those times I really used to be in the Principal’s office all the time because my first form teacher was, like my first class, you have to go see her every day. She’s my Business Technology teacher, Computer class. I still remember her name. Me and her we were always at it. Just like two bulls.

My homeroom teacher and I went head to head all the time. So if she ever thought I had to do this or do that, I would always kind of say, “No, I don’t want to do it.” Or, “Why are you always trying to pick on me?” And if I felt that, I never really like just sat back. I was more a person to speak up for it. And so, obviously, you know teachers feel, that’s kind of, that’s wrong for students (to) do that. So I got sent to the Principal’s office every day. It’s kind of funny but whatever.

The Secretary there, one day she decided to ask me like, “Why are you so bad?” I was like, “I don’t know.”

“We are you so late?” I was like, “I don’t know.”
She was like, “Don’t you just live down the street?” I was like, “Yeah.”

“Where do you live?” “I live just down the street. I live in the group home.”

She goes, “Group home???” Like that, right there, that triggered everything. My whole life changed right from there. Once I told her I lived in a group home she looked at me. She said, she’s surprised.

She goes like, I’m a good kid. “Why? What’s going on?” I said, “Well you know, not everybody is kind of blessed that way. Certain people have to go through certain situations, and right now I’m going through this.”

She’s like, where do you live? Who is down here? How do you, whatever, whatever?

I was like, “Listen, my aunt bring me down here and I live with my aunt and I ran away from there. And now I live with Children’s Aid. I have been with them since I was 6 or 7 years old. And I’m 16 and…Yeah, this is where I live right now.”

And she’s like, “Well don’t group homes, you are not allowed to stay there and this and this and this?”

And I was like, “Yeah. Well, as a matter of fact right now they are having a meeting to determine where I’m supposed to be in the next few months.” And it was the same day. It was so funny because me and her we both, you know what I mean? Like, we both found a connection.

She was like, how do you feel about coming to my daughters house for dinner and what not? She has a son and then you can have dinner and who knows from there, from there. So I decided, OK, whatever. I went there one day. Had dinner with them. From school we met. Her daughter, I look at her like an angel. Because without her, she came into my life and she finally changed it.

… So this Secretary, she changed everything. Her friend used to work at Gerrard Tech. She had good credibility out there so she got me out there. And I got into that school and that is where I started playing football. I played football. I played basketball. I injured my knee. I never seen the Principal’s office in that school. And that’s when I actually started working and stuff. And I was actually getting smarter.

Y14’s narrative reveals how most educators not only did not understand him, but often sent him down to the Principal’s office. When one of them actually understands
him, she realizes that he needs a fresh start, a supportive school climate, if he has to be successful. His own final comment, “I was actually getting smarter” seems to follow in the same direction. It is because when the school climate is positive, he is engaged in school both for extracurricular and for curricular stuff; as well he feels like he’s learning, progressing and going further in education, and ‘even getting smarter’ as he puts it.

What emerges from this section is the extremely difficult family situation these youth were faced with. Whether living with a single parent, shuffling between different parents, placed with a grandparent, or in a foster or group home, their home situation was chaotic. At home, they received very little support related to their education, their exceptionality and other supports needed to help them be successful. Most of them moved residences and schools several times. It is known that stability and continuity of programs and accommodations is often a pre-requisite condition for successful learning outcomes for youth with special education exceptionalities. For these youth, their dysfunctional home situation as outlined in this section can lead to placing them among the general at-risk category of youth that has now gained a lot of prominence in the literature and much talked of in the context of the city where this study is done (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rumens, 2005; Portelli, et al., 2007; Ungerleider, 2008). While being at-risk is true of almost all street-involved youth, the subgroup which is the focus of this study are not just part of the general at-risk group based on their home situation. In addition, they also may have other exceptionalities and learning needs. How these are supported or not supported in the school environment is specifically highlighted in the next chapter. In the context of several residential transitions, as indicated in this section, on-going academic support can become a challenge, as well, not just for a
student who transfers schools, but for a student with exceptional needs who moves schools. How will the programming and other supports found beneficial be known about and made available to them at the next school? Will educators be aware of their Individual Education Plans, identifications, and other learning challenges? No doubt, student records generally do follow student transfers. In the case of these youth however, there have been numerous transfers even within the same school year. If their records are incomplete or do not get transferred immediately, and if their parents and caregivers are unable to communicate and advocate with the school administration and educators at the new school what support is required to have optimal learning take place for their child/ward, this can pose several challenges for the provision of adequate supports and continuity for such students.
CHAPTER 5 Progressing through school and special education

*It should not be a pit stop (Y8)*

In this chapter I highlight from the youth’s point of view what it meant to be in special education. Although special education is envisioned as a system designed with the purpose of helping all exceptional students, these youth never liked being labelled, the placement in special education, and the accompanying stigma or stereotypes that came with being a special education student. Their special education support in school and the placement in classes/programs made them feel disconnected from the main group. The outcomes of a placement in special education seemed according to them boring programs, little/no instruction, courses not leading to graduation and no future if they continued with the status quo. This chapter also includes details on the number of schools these youth transitioned through. A section on agency from the youth’s perspective and their constant attempts to keep trying to go to different schools, different programs including alternative programs/schools, and even seeking direct entry into College or University is also included. It serves to dispel the common myth about street youth that they are individuals who likely just don’t want to be in school and hence choose to drop out. It seems more likely that the youth in this study were searching for programs where they felt they would have an opportunity to meet with success, connect with the material and the teachers, and take them somewhere further than where they were – not without challenges though, as some of the basic building blocks of literacy, numeracy and study skills needed to be developed.
What was helpful?

Special education is run differently in elementary and high schools. In the elementary panel it is available to students for partial withdrawal, or sometimes as a specific program in a closed class for those with LI (Language Impairment) or gifted designations, or just a class where students receive instruction for English or Math for which they are partially withdrawn from the regular program during the school day. Among other special education programs that students are referred to in elementary grades are early intervention programs (for example, Kindergarten Language Program [KLP], Kindergarten Intervention and Needs Development [KIND]) in the very early grades, often pre-primary or primary, and the Behavioural Program. The Behavioural Program is run as a separate class at only a few designated locations within each school board. These classes are mainly in the primary and junior grades and hence a challenge for schools/teachers/students when students in these programs have to transition to high school.

In high school, youth distinguished once again between the Special Education Room where the students with severe physical and developmental needs generally congregate or the Resource Room\(^\text{17}\). While some street involved youth\(^\text{18}\) may have been placed in these rooms for instruction, or to meet with or be monitored by a Special Ed/Resource teacher, others were in specific classes such as the General Learning Strategies (GLE) class, Essential and Locally developed Courses, or sometimes in

\(^{17}\) Different names may be used for the Resource Room; sometimes also called The Learning Center

\(^{18}\) This study is not focused on students with severe physical or developmental needs
alternative programs/classes either held in separate classrooms but within the same high school or elsewhere at a separate alternative school itself (For example, Section 23 schools, OASIS, CONTACT)

Most of the youth seemed to have enjoyed smaller classes. According to Y7, “…just the one-on-one. If I needed help, I didn’t have to wait forever. The teacher wasn’t rushing through to like help somebody else. They were there to help me if I needed the help.” The other accommodations such as open book tests (Y2), a quieter place to work without pressure or a time limit (Y12), and scribes such as for the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (Y12) were also mentioned as beneficial. It was also a place, away from the general classroom, where special education students could go either to finish their work (Y8) or if they felt emotionally stressed (Y12).

But there were nuances in the perceptions to receiving help. Youth felt conscious of what their peers might be thinking if they sought extra assistance. Y8 mentions the dilemma he felt, because, in a sense, he knew there were others who had more severe exceptionalities than him and hence needed more assistance and belonged in special education more than him and consequently, what people would think if he sought assistance as outwardly he did not look like a student who had any severe physical or developmental challenges. He is torn between needing help, taking up time/resources that he thinks are meant for those with more severe needs, and simultaneously what his peers think of him seeking special education assistance:

“Right. You don’t belong there. They [group of bullies] do not belong there, but I do. There’s a line that’s different there. They [students with severe needs] want help…I want help; but I didn’t want help because people would be there when I was getting the help that I needed.”
It could also get droning according to Y10 to have to constantly seek and ask for help before you actually received assistance. “In high school, I needed to take 2 credits instead of 4. Special ed was a little bit more helpful. But teachers only get paid so much, and if they don’t love their job they lose their enthusiasm. So it can get very droning trying to get help all the time. It can get very exhausting.” He too, similar to Y8 and most of the other youth, considered themselves not really special education kids. According to him, “And you know there were always more than just me. There were special needs kids. So it’s just frustrating for them. And you know we are all grappling with the concept and the teacher is just … you know ten minutes, ten minutes, ten minutes, ten minutes.”

Descriptions of these classes always seemed to mention portables or constant changes of rooms signifying the priority that the school system accorded to these programs. “Yes, because it also had like my general learning excellence class. I was in GLE. We kept going from this class to that class to that class. We kept getting launched around the school. We never really knew where to find it. Not knowing where to find it, we always missed bits and pieces of the class (Y3).”

Youth also mentioned how they would manipulate and take advantage of special education in terms of using it as an excuse to get out of the regular class for breaks, or asking even without reason for extra time and accommodations. However, as they grew older, there seems to be a progression in terms of them coming to distinguish between what was helpful and not so helpful to them with regard to special education support.

I still didn’t fit in and I was starting to use the Special Education Department for more productive manners. At times I would manipulate the situation in order to do what I wanted and hand in (stuff) even though it wasn’t part of the curriculum. I got very
bored with the mainstream way of thinking. Conforming to a curriculum is like making a homemade computer - not every piece fits. (Y12)

By and large the subgroup didn’t feel that they entirely belonged in special education. They considered it a space and a program for students with more severe physical and developmental needs. It was a sort of a ‘some not everything’ kind of involvement. This will be better understood from the next section that deals with the social connotations attached to the labelling and the accompanying stigma and other feelings.

**Labelling**

Telling youth that this study was about street youth who were in special education was one of the challenging parts when it came to recruiting potential interviewees for the study. The label – be it special ed, SPED, SpecEd, learning disabilities, behavioural, having an IEP - and all other descriptions and labels, including those related to mental health that come with special education for these kids was what they were trying very hard to shake off. Every youth (particularly during the teenage years, but even after that) wants to fit in and not be made to feel left out or different from the main group. Special education seemed to have made them feel different. In addition, similar to the literature (S. Becker, 2010), labels attached to the program be it a special education program in a particular school, or in general the label attached to an alternative school, or to a school with a lot of special education was also frowned upon by youth and even service providers and focus group participants. This will be highlighted in the following section and will conclude with some remarks about the IPRC system and its relation to parents, the school, and the Ministry.
In addition to all the negative outcomes of labelling mentioned in the literature (Barga, 1996; Gallagher, 1976; Riddick, 2006), the youth in this subset spoke to how labelling made them feel different. According to Y8, “I don’t want to be special ed. I never want to be different from anybody but that’s the way it was.” While LD was an exceptionality disclosed anonymously in the context of the individuals filling out the count question (Table 1: 37.5% and 51.8%), it was still an unacceptable designation. It could mean a lot of things that the youth never liked such as, feeling different, placement in special education, medication, and a future where a student will never be able to get rid of the label.

Y3: …even my mum called it that.
Q: Would you call it that?
Y3: No. I wouldn’t call it a learning difficulty [does not even say ‘disability’] at all because I still learn as well as everybody else. I have trouble applying what I learned.

Y8: Taking meds make me feel different. You feel like you have to take things for other people. When you get upset, or when something happens and you are taking medication, you already feel different than everybody else. You shouldn’t feel that way. I don’t take medication anymore. I feel fine without it. Now I want to learn things. I used to take medication. I feel I used to take it for other people’s problems. I used to be bullied in school, remember? I used to be bullied in school. People used to call me the name everybody remembers. I ain’t going to say it though, but I remember it.

Y10: If I ever wanted to go somewhere with my life, a lot of companies wouldn’t even let me work for them unless they see the files [documents with ‘labels’]. What’s to say that I used poor judgement with those???? Nothing!

Y3: Because you learned differently you were labelled as different whereas everyone else was labelled as ‘normal’, because they all learned relatively the same way.

Y10: It’s personal.
Q: Yeah, what is this personal? Why is it so personal? Why are you so upset with labels?
Y10: Because I don’t like being labelled myself.
Q: Oh!
Y10: I’ve learned that, that’s all. That’s all it is. It’s a label. That’s how people work. Judgements!
Q: Then, they put you into a label or into a box and you are kind of…/
Y10: //Even if I am not that, they will never see it.

Labels attached to programs based on what these programs were called also invited a lot of unacceptance from youth and adults interviewed. This is because sometimes the students in the program are equated with the name of the program and that can be demeaning. The name of the program can also lead to singling out students. There is a certain stereotype that is assumed about students who participate in a program based on the name of the program. They feel that they do not stand a chance alongside other students in the regular classes, where they still have to go for the rest of the day/semester, once other students know they also go to this ‘other, special ed program’.

Y6: I’m just thinking that they should have changed the name instead of STAR program, because STAR program does sound kind of childish. Like they should have named it like, eh, credit class or something along the terms of that so then we all don’t look so dumb. Because it seems like we are all going to pre-school when you say STAR program.
…There were about 3 portables. And, other people, they kind of think that STAR is for retards. (They think) we are all dumb people that are there in the program that is why they called us STAR. The real reason, I guess they never really understood that most of us had problems, and that most of us had moved around and needed to catch up. But they don’t see it that way.

Y4: Putting them in a class and giving them GLE is supposed to help them. But yet you find then you know whom to point at and say that this person is different, this person is weird. …you know this person is …. 
And it was not only the youth but also caregivers sometimes that did not accept labels or understand them or the entire process that goes into an IPRC wherein a designation (label) is given to a child by a Committee based on recommended reports and results of tests and assessments. Besides not understanding special education or the IPRC process, parents also perceive that to receive a label is a reflection of failure on their part.

CYW: And if we are going to label them, or they are labelled, parents don’t understand what these labels are about. Because I deal with a lot of parents who are from a different culture. And, when you say my kid is MID or LD or whatever, they tend to just pull the kids out and say, “Go to work.” And they don’t understand what this is about. So, we have to be sensitive to that too.

(CYW, Focus Group 1)

Teacher: And do it in a way that is not like, I’m mailing this letter home because some of them don’t understand what an IPRC is. It’s a really an intimidating process and parents don’t actually understand that they drive that process. It’s not like they don’t have any power in it. You know if you weren’t successful in school, then you have to come with your child to that kind of meeting. It’s really intimidating, it’s really formal. There is nothing that the person can really relate to. It needs to be a more informal, informative process for letting parents know and connecting them with resources in the community that are available. Or, even at board level having certain engaging presentations about what it means to have a learning disability or be MID and see the opportunities that you have and how to focus on the strengths and things like that. Because I think people hear it and then they think, “Oh, my kids a failure.” Or, they think this school is crap, or that sort of situation. So, that’s one. … I would agree with you that that information piece is very necessary.

(Teacher, Focus Group 1)

Focus Group 2, Participant 1: But the whole fact of labelling the population group we work with. Sometimes we term them ‘at-risk’, ‘at-risk youth.’ Is that the right terminology to use? That labelling factor that special ed had didn’t help. Do the youth want to identify themselves with mental health, or with mental health issues? Like identifying themselves ‘at-risk’? So I think maybe the terminology and the way we term it is not, “I’m
stupid because I am in special ed” but, “I have different learning styles.” So, changing how it’s worded, how it’s put together, so it becomes …. 

Focus Group 2, Participant 2: Well and that is the thing I struggle with all the time is the fact that we label our kids, “Behaviour.” I mean is there not a better term that we can use? These kids aren’t stupid. They know they are coming into a school to be placed in an alternative program; they know it is because of their behaviour, it is called a ‘Behaviour Class’. Each of the teachers know they are coming from the Behaviour Class [back to the regular class] so they are automatically labelled as you said. Exactly like that. And, half the battle is teaching these teachers that they need to give these kids a break like everybody else in their class. That, honest at times, really disengages the kids. They realize they are up against it everywhere they go.

On the whole for this group, most labels except for ADHD seemed to have had a negative connotation attached to them. The very word disability, or special ed seems to be looked at as deficit and hence negative. This is not just among the youth and their peers but also among educators, parents, caregivers, and society in general (Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 1993; Stinnett, et al., 1999). They react to different labels differently. Except for ADHD which seems to be equivalent to ‘active’ (Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 1993) and looked upon positively, all other labels automatically evoke a deficit discourse.

I think ADHD, the term is still used in kind of a joking way. Oh I know adults will say, “Oh, I’m ADHD.” These people that are very like flamboyant, vivacious, and so there is like a positive connection that is made in that term and a certain personality, right? A lot of people who have that condition as adults they are just really active and can’t sit still, and in some ways it benefits them as adults. So in the adult world I think ADHD is a little bit more acceptable.

LD has as its second word ‘disability’ and I think that’s, that also sort of like gives a negative connotation unconsciously. And I also think that sometimes although for some people is they have a child that has LD, they think it is somehow a reflection of themselves. Whereas a child with ADHD, “Well, they are just an active child.” Right? When it comes to learning though, somehow,
we feel that it’s kind of though, that we’ve, like I said, it’s kind of like a negative reflection on yourself: We’ve either done something wrong, or well I can’t possibly have a child that’s having difficulty in school because I [the parent] didn’t. Or my family – nobody in my family has it or whatever. And then there are also people for whom school was a struggle. And they also do not want that same thing for their children. So they can’t accept it because they remember what school was like for them and they don’t want that same thing for their child. They want something better.

SP; Head of special ed in a high school

The comment from one of the focus group participants summarizes how much further we still have to go: “We still call them ‘special ed’ kids as opposed to special ed programs, ha, ha, ha…” And then this quote would perhaps explain how kids are marginalized not just by an individual label or placement in a special education program in school, but sometimes by the very school or alternate program placement because when they are enrolled as students with identifications and have to be transferred, either because of a change of residence or specifically when going from elementary to high school, many schools are reluctant to register such pupils:

If you take the norm and all of a sudden they are going to a school and very often the home school isn’t the one they go to because certainly in our system, we don’t direct them. We don’t require that every home school take these students; they often go past 3 home schools to go to schools which have already been labeled as the school that looks after the special ed. So you’ve double-whammed them. You know they’ve identified themselves. Now you are going to send them to a school that has an identification and you are going to throw them into a structured environment which is driven completely ….

(VP, Focus Group)

Stigma, teasing, bullying and stereo-types of special education

Youth participants spoke about the negative stereotypical connotations and accompanying looks, names they were teased, and bullying incidents that accompanied
being in a special education program. Distorted views and interpretations come mostly from other students and society in general, but sometimes also from parents and even teachers. The most oft repeated interpretation was that ‘to be in special education means you are *stupid* and a *retard.*’ Being labelled and connected to special education made these youth easily identifiable targets for their peers. Youth would do anything to disprove this; on the one hand hiding it, to not showing up or skipping the special education class and/or accepting help all together, to even fighting back those who called them names.

Y1: Because like in the mind of high school students, in special ed you have, pardon the French, but there was essentially “*retarded kids*” and everybody else who was also there like if they didn’t seemingly have difficulty in things then they were …. Like, I speak well, sometimes, but as not being a socially very competent person (it was) probably more difficult for me than some of the other kids [to fight off these names/taunts].

Y1 clearly identifies the stigma for youth such as himself who speaks (and I should add composes music too) well. Youth like him do not want to be considered ‘*retarded*’ or ‘*stupid*’ or have any of the other stigmas attached to them.

Y3 spoke to the rumours and looks these youth got: “What are you going in there for? And then the rumours would all begin. The whispers I never heard, but then there were the looks at certain students.” In one of the successive interviews I managed to look up his school on the web and brought in a picture to show him. His immediate first words were very telling, “Speak of the devil.” He then went on to describe different sections of the school to say how all these classes (special education classes including the learning strategies course) were placed in the same section of the school and all this did was single out students who were required to go there. Some kids from these classes did do other
things such as join the football team and in the case of Y3, the music program; but it was still hard to shake away the stigma that came with having to go into this section for classes. And yet, small simple changes such as location, could have made a significant difference if someone listened to the voices of these students (Martin, 1998).

All classes were in different sections of the school and going to the section on the second floor, far right side easily identified who were the students in the Learning Strategies, the Special Ed class. Usually we called it GLE just between the students, but the staff would call it special ed, because there was more than just GLE there. It was also the section for kids skipping class and we also had the COOP program in there. I know/don’t know why they did that. …

The football teams would know which kids were in that class. The school teams would get to see who walked down the corridor. The top was English, History, Arts Department. Next hallway would be Math, Science and the Learning strategies. Some people would say, how could something be wrong with them. Or, they are trying to get somewhere in life but then they enjoy the sport and they are trying to find some way to help themselves. Some on the team would make fun of them [Sp ed/GLE students] but the rest of the team would tell them to shut up. It would bring confidence, … someone was accepting of who you were. …

We all knew we all had something in common. We still had a common difference about us. We all learned different from the common “average people” just because how society always bases that.

If you had to go to special ed, you were always different from others. Some of them even thought, “Oh there must be something mentally wrong with you.” There were a couple of students who would always say it to others.

Youth did different things to avoid such situations. Y3 mentioned that he made friends with the jocks on the football team just so that no one would tease him. Another youth mentioned that these students generally hung around as a group in the cafeteria and elsewhere for the security that comes with numbers. There were also stories similar to Y2 who sometimes took matters into her own hand. “I had anger problems. Somebody said I
was retarded because I had an IEP and I kind of punched them. I wouldn’t get off. It took 6 teachers to pull me off.” Or, there arose situations like Y10, who lived at home at the time when he was in Elementary school with both his parents, but one day couldn’t take it no more. Y10, “We had the big outbreak. I went nuts! I was a kid. I had had enough of the kids teasing me.”

Over the period of my fieldwork involvement at Evergreen, I became attuned to coming to know that youth do not reject all labels. They accept and disclose to different degrees some of the other things that are to a certain extent part of the sort of accepted ‘at-risk’ or ‘street culture’ descriptions including physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect and being abandoned by the family, sexual orientation, racial and ethnic characteristics, refugee and immigrant status, juvenile justice involvement, criminal involvement, street culture involvement including illegal activities such as pushing drugs or pimping. It seemed to be better to disclose being ‘bad’ in terms of these activities than to disclose being ‘stupid’ in terms of special education. Below is part of the discussion that emerged in terms of what youth are comfortable to disclose and what they might not be willing to disclose:

FG2, P1: I think you made a really interesting point around, you know working in that class. It’s like, people have, there’s more in disclosing that [special ed], than in disclosing being abused like. That’s, that’s you know like, pretty significant right, like because it’s obviously hard to disclose those things for kids. And that’s easier to say that out loud, than saying, “I’m….

FG2, P2: …it’s better to be bad than stupid.

FG2, P1: Beautifully! Right? Glad you phrased that. How do we get around that so that people don’t feel stupid, right? And then you are able to get it before they are in your office [VP’s office] kind of thing.
This is an important distinction to highlight how youth prefer any label to the special education label. The study of Becker (2010), “Badder than a bunch of SPEDS,” in an alternative school points to students not wanting the label ‘SPED’ attached to them, but feeling OK to be known as “bad” students. In that study, in an alternative school setting, influenced also by teacher perceptions, some students manipulated the special education label to their advantage when it came to their teachers. Others rejected it altogether. Some were too timid in the company of their peers to be able to reject it and just had to accept it including all the negative stereotypes that accompanied the label.

While this study (S. Becker, 2010) seems to imply dual and manipulated membership in special education and the ‘bad’ group, with some choosing to say they were ‘badder’ than ‘special education students’ in general. On the other hand in this research study participants seemed to think that ‘bad’ and ‘stupid’ were two different groups. The youth claimed they did not want membership at all in one of them – the ‘stupid’ or ‘special education’ group. It seemed that for them to be ‘bad’ means you cannot be ‘stupid’ at the same time. Hence they preferred to be ‘bad’ rather than ‘stupid.’

In my dissertation, street youth rejected any association with special education completely. Even in individual interviews, it would take a long time before they used the word ‘special education’ or ‘learning disability’ or ‘behaviour’ as we worked on narratives. In the quote below, when Y8 finds he can’t shake off the label ‘sped’ he acquiesces to self-blame and internalization to cope with his situation.

Y8: Once I was on medicine I guess I was…I already had a name for myself. Once I already….Once I take my medication and they knew it. They just taught I was a ‘sped’ or whatever they called it. I guess I blame myself for not doing the work when I was supposed to. But, if you can put me in a regular class and make me
do that work and don’t tell me about that other stuff, I would do it. I would do the regular work. I would do all that.

But it never seemed easy to get to these kids in time to help them accept, understand and work through their exceptionalities as strengths, as unique to them in terms of how they learned best and what they needed to do to meet with success in a classroom setting. The general consensus seemed to be that receiving services and support from these classes, and sometimes from within these classes themselves, was accompanied with a lot of teasing and bullying that took place. It was hard not to be affected and not internalize what went on over here.

Y10: They were brutal man, they were brutal. I tried to pretend I was above that and I could just let it go, and everybody thinks they can be strong enough to do that. The reality of it is it affects you. You know I can be a strong person and let it go and let it go, but it gets to you eventually. And I don’t care if you are Arnold Schwarzenegger; you can only brush things off for so long. If all your influence is negative, you are going to start thinking you are negative especially in those forming years. When you are so young you are looking for answers. You want support. And if all you get is “You’re shit. Go to hell,” then eventually you start thinking that’s what you are.

…I’m just trying to remember back it was… it was a lot of…because of my speech impediment, there was the general idea that I was ‘dumb’, ‘retarded’.

Y8: The people I don’t like are the people that made fun of me. The people that were better than other people. They should be on medication. The ones that bullied people. The ones that made fun of me when I was in the special ed class, I remember it. …I forget what they call it too. It starts with a G [GLE], eh. ... I forget it now. I remember I used to know it.

Y8: A bad day? Bullied! Someone would come up and say or do something to me no matter what. I remember it too. ... A lot older. Yeah they bully me. They would hit me, punch me, spit in my face. They would spit in my face, they would punch me, they would hit me. Well I would be in special ed class. That’s where it came ….that’s where it became a problem. special ed class they looked at me differently. “Well, you don’t get
nothing done anyways. So…, why are you here? We blame
you.”
Y8: … There’s good feelings there too.
Q: Yeah. What were some of the good feelings? We never talked
about that.
Y8: Yeah I know. There was hardly none there. There was not that
many good feelings there. Especially when you are being
bullied. Every day, everybody knows you. It’s tough there. It’s
a tough place to be.

Y4: Well the kids in the behavioural class tended to be bullies, so
other kids wouldn’t have much to say.

Sometimes as youth had these experiences (teasing others to direct attention away
from themselves) with their peers, either within the same class in which they were, or
with the rest of their peers in the ‘regular’ classes, or their peers in shelters and on the
street. They either said things that they hoped would mitigate and re-direct some of the
stigma directed at them or would direct similar comments to others singling them out
perhaps in an effort to direct the focus away from their own self.

Y10: I usually like let people, like with my hearing I let people
know right away. Because I always end up going back to the
retarded thing…everybody assumes that because of my speech
slur …I sense that. I just sense that. Because of the way they treat
me in general, that’s what they are thinking. I read that about them.
So, I let them know: “I’m just deaf dude - I’m hearing impaired.”

Service Provider: No, he goes around quite a lot, and (says), “That
person is just ‘stupid’ dah dah dah.” And I had noticed that prior,
like before, and I was kind of wondering where does that come
from? ‘That person is stupid”? So a lot of people around here, he
comes into this environment - he’s doing OK right, he’s got the
pimp thing going on, he’s a little bit above some of the other
youth. There’s a strata of people here, some of the people around
really annoy him, yet he makes money off them, and ‘stupid,
stupid, dah dah dah’. We had a talk about that. “Call them stupid
because of your experiences at school?”

As soon as I found out that [placement in a Behavioural class in
Elementary] had happened, I started realizing why he was kind of
stereotyping if you will some of the youth around him. So they just
kind of remind him of that experience while he was in school.
This internalization/externalization as in the profile of the youth that is mentioned by the service provider in the quote above, is true to different extents for different youth and depends on their exceptionality and programming too. Sometimes they begin to act out the stigma/label thrust on them, and as the literature mentions, gradually conform to the characteristics of a label including its behaviour patterns (Fairbanks, 1992). That can further blur the distinction as to whether these exceptionalities are latent in them, or they now begin to act out the labels thrust on them.

Y1: Since I appear to be normal, so stigma ‘self-imposed’ as well as ‘actual’ stigma was always there. That is a bit more of the confusing part I suppose. Most people don’t think of ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] as one form or another. Not everybody is really very versed in the condition/disorder. Base knowledge on which they form their opinions on, but nonetheless.

During fieldwork I noticed street involved youth normally like to talk a lot when participating in sessions. In one of the life skills sessions on education where 7 youth were present, although initially there was a lot of participation, there was next to nothing said by anyone when the discussion shifted to special education. Yet when they filled out the questionnaire anonymously at the end of the session, 6 out of 7 of them, based on the supports they received, identified as special education students. In front of their peers that was still hard to admit. My fieldwork notes from that day read:

Once again I’m surprised even by these youth who don’t want to talk much about school. I wonder if it would be easier to talk about their families or that too would be difficult to talk about. On the other hand, individually they identified as special ed (at least 6 out of the 7 today) but yet in a group they did not speak of themselves as Special Ed students. Was this because of stigma? Did they genuinely know and feel that special ed was for MID and those with severe developmental issues and not for them? What would they want to call themselves other than special ed students since most of them seemed to have been receiving help here and there by way of Resource and other assistance? On the other hand, much of
this must be taken with a pinch of salt. Maybe today’s group of 7 was a different group and not as talkative as the other group I had the last time. But yet they did speak earlier during the session.  

Based on what Y7 says of one of his friends who was on the football team disclosing this to him in confidence, it could be true. It comes both from knowing what the stigma is to be considered special education students, but also based on what other students may say about them. In addition, Y7’s words also speak to his own singling out of other special ed students.

He told me that he had a learning disability and he was too afraid to tell the teacher because he didn’t want his reputation to be ruined. Like … I was the kid, I was one of the kids when I was younger, making fun of the special needs kids (Y7).

It isn’t any wonder then that youth like Y6 did not want to be tested. “No I never really went for the tests. I’d rather not know.” It corroborates what an educator who taught these youth in various programs such as the prison system, at a school for street youth, and now in a Supervised Alternative Program mentions about not wanting to belong to the general special education group:

SP-1: They are not getting a fair shake. It’s bottom line, it is not an even playing field from day one. This system [special education] is not set up to support over years and years of what they are entitled to, their academic learning styles and needs. They, in their dear developing sense of self, their self-concepts are being compromised. They are clearly identifying, even in the labeling, there is something very taboo in all of this; they know they are not normal. It is amazing how many kids say, “I don’t want to feel stupid, so I don’t go.” More than any other quotable quote “I feel too stupid” or “I feel too embarrassed” - they know they are different, they know they don’t belong in that general group and whether it is self-imposed or excluded by others - they have removed themselves.

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19 According to the Service Provider who coordinates education at Evergreen, since many youth do not speak about special education, they consequently do not realize how many others are in similar situations as well.
Or, as Y7 says, “Just … like, I was only doing it [teasing] to fit in. But he [friend] was, it’s just that … once you’re labelled as special needs in high school, or like learning disabled, or in the special class, you’re screwed. Like, you are open for bullying all around.”

Even when youth are no longer in school, they still carry too many memories of school forward. A youth who had just been released from prison and now in a pre-employment program spoke at the end of a day of training about his apprehensions of joining the program related to one of his peers using the word “dumb” (or “stupid”) to describe it.

Youth: Heard from someone this is a dumb program so you don’t want to do it; but then you come here and realize everyone is in the same place.

I have heard those stories a fair bit. Like (being) in a special ed class, there is no enjoyment in school. Another girl that I worked with was in special ed class. Mum was OW [Ontario Works]. She starts getting made fun of at school, and things compound. So there are a number of things that lead to stereotype, and the students … I have to assume teachers … But people kind of buy into that stereotype like and they start treating you a certain way. There is no question in my mind that that happens.

(Service Provider, Drop-in Coordinator)

As mentioned earlier, it is not easy for these youth to distinguish between what aspects they found helpful and not helpful because receiving service/support from special ed meant you were labelled, there was stigma attached to you and you were open to teasing and bullying. It seems particularly in Grade 9 (maybe to an extent in Grade 10 too), this was extremely difficult for these youth to accept. As Y10 says,

Regular high schools were too big, a big no no. Too many kids, - too many stigmas. Too much bullshit. All the kids were just tease, tease, tease. A lot stronger now, but when I was younger I wasn’t able to handle that - at all.
Putting them in these classes made them stand out more:

Q: So, you’ve been in touch with the Resource Teacher or whatever, for Math right, from Grade 3?
Y2: Yeah.
Q: How did that make you feel?
Y2: Eh.., truthfully speaking I was angry at my family for letting it happen and I was angry at the teachers for… I already stuck out as a child, and then with that [special education placement] just made me stick out even more.

Placing these youth in these classes/programs together with the general group of students with severe physical and developmental disabilities was not a good thing. Youth spoke to this lumping together of all kinds of students in these classes and programs.

All kinds of students are placed in there

Most of the youth interviewed mentioned that in the special education classes and programs they were in, there were all kinds of students in there. There were kids with severe physical and developmental challenges, and then there was the ‘rest of the group.’ These included students with learning disabilities, behavioural exceptionalities, all forms of autism including Aspergers and Tourettes, and also kids with just an IEP. The level of instruction could be anything from K courses\(^{20}\) that are locally developed, to essential level courses, to an applied level Course like a Math, Science or English class.

Most of the youth interviewed felt they generally never belonged to these special education classes as earlier mentioned because of the labelling, stigma and teasing. In addition, they felt they were functioning at a higher level than kids in these programs.

Related to that, the level of instruction and curriculum expectations were lower than their

\(^{20}\) K courses are locally developed non-credit courses that do not count towards graduation. Although intended only for DDME (Developmentally delayed/Multiple exceptionality) kids working towards a Certificate of Accomplishment or Certificate of Education (and not a Diploma), some of these street youth were scheduled into these classes. This angered these youth as well when they found out these credits do not count towards graduation.
functioning and this seems to be the tipping point that convinced them this was not the program that would be ideal for them. Not only were they not learning much, but these courses/credits did not lead to graduation and would not get them far in terms of their careers or post-secondary education. This was certainly more obvious when they reached high school, and then there seems to appear some sort of a realization that they do not want to play the game anymore. They see through the system and either try some alternative programs, or drop out; interestingly though, they keep coming back to formal school trying this, that and the other and not fully giving up. Their commitment to education remains. It is not a complete dropping out or giving up of school entirely - at least not initially.

Y14: Just because I felt that I shouldn’t be in those classes. I knew I never had no learning disabilities. It was just the fact that I was extremely frustrated at that time with the school. Just because I know that, I’m not really being treated like someone, like a ‘regular child’. But I kind of happened to move, happened to do this, having to prove to myself that I can be here and I was like “Why? Why do I have to like do this for?” You know what I’m saying like?

So they used to come and tell me, “Hey, you have to be in this class.” I remember I was in classes, I used to go like two classes where there was like three kids in a class. I said, “What the hell am I doing here?” I was like, “Where’s all the kids?” A kid goes, “This is like a …a…a…special class you know where you get like your one-on-one you know. You can work on your own pace.” *(says this in a funny stuttering voice)* I was like, “All right.” Like, what am I doing here, right? Like I always felt like I know I can study with kids. *(Emphasizes this again)* I knew I could study with kids. It is just the fact that I just never had the opportunity to, and I just felt kind of left out. And so that is why I always kind of, I skipped school a number of times because you know I was like it’s not for me…

As Y14 points out above sometimes it is their personal circumstances (in his case moving between a number of group homes) that puts them behind in their work but not
learning problems. Hence they tend not to accept special education placements as they consider themselves having the capacity and potential to learn unlike others with hard disabilities (Karagiannis, 2000) in the special education classrooms. However, unless youth are like Y1 who is able to pick and choose what is helpful and not helpful to him in special education, they will just want to leave like Y10 (next quote). On the other hand, Y8 still wants a very clear demarcated line in special education indicating why you belong there, or why you don’t. He just doesn’t like it becoming as he calls it, ‘a pit stop.’

Y1: Considering I was in the ME class I was a bit blunt in comparison with others. They would lump us all together in that type of program. Teacher’s aides helped those who needed it more with autism, Tourettes, Downs, dyslexia, etc. and all other forms than LD. I as a high functioning Aspergers did not get the same kind of treatment. It was fine in those regards. I did crave the independence but definitely did not have all the abilities for me to succeed by myself. Not that I didn’t have the ability, but I hadn’t refined my skills in certain areas such as organization, time management, homework studying skills, and things like that which are necessary to succeed in certain levels especially as a student in the education side.

Y10: So there would be you know… there would be an EA [Educational Assistant] in the room. There would be 10 kids all yelling, throwing paper planes, and… And I would sit there going, ‘Oh man, I gotta get out of here. I gotta get out of here.’ Eh…, so I’d just sit there watching the clock, just trying to get out of that room.

Y8: Some people I can and some people I can’t understand. I always tried to. Right? Some people in there were bullies. Some people weren’t. When you are in the class you are in the class. When you are in the class then you are different from other people. That’s what’s not good about it. When you can’t do the class then you shouldn’t be there at all. You should do it but be somewhere else. Not in… be… everything should be perfect to the fullest. Everything should be done clearly and structured. If you are not in that school then you go somewhere else to go to. You should be with other people and try to improve that, first. Not all to be there together.
Some of the students may have been generally tough to handle. They can be even more challenging when placed all together in these classes, similar to my own experience in that first semester as a teacher alluded to before. It also seems that students tended to learn behaviours from others and start to imitate their peers. Two of the youth mentioned two programs in elementary school where this actually happened. The first is at a really primary grade and the second at the Behavioural class in the junior grades. Clearly the interventions were not serving their purpose if the attitude and behaviours of students directed to these programs got progressively more challenging and were normalized from primary to junior to intermediate to high school.

Y12: After Gr 1, I was analyzed by a teacher/counsellor and recommended to my mother that I would be better in a Special School - a Section 19 school. It was called the York Centre. There I stayed and learned how to develop my frustrations into constructive activities for three years. But it still did not help. I learned how to hustle, I learned how to lie. I learned how to have the odds stacked against the other person rather than myself. And, the biggest one of all was I could manipulate anybody into believing what I wanted them to believe. I continued to see counsellors, psychologists, divorce counsellors, - getting risk assessments. My mum couldn’t figure out why I would think and act the way I did.

Y4: I was labelled “Behavioural” since elementary school so I was placed into a Behavioural class since Grade 5. And basically for me that didn’t work out because it’s all great that they have a class allotted for children with different needs or whatever, but when you group a child that you deem to be difficult to deal with because they are violent or whatever with a whole bunch of other violent children, you are going to end up with even more violent [children]. So the classroom environment was disruptive.

Y2: That was in Caledon/Brampton. The teachers were completely loonies. They had gotten letters. The kids were something else. I felt I was like in one of those horror books at that point, at that school.
The quote above of Y2 regarding the teachers in these programs is rather revealing. Very few of the youth mentioned they were able to connect with some of these teachers. Some named good teachers and it wasn’t hard to notice the impact they still had on them. But for most of the youth the teachers seemed to be those who had double portfolios, did not connect well with them or were just overworked, given how exhausting it would be to be in these classes with all kinds of kids needing variations of supports. Agreement with this was also expressed in the service provider and focus group interviews. Service providers also mentioned how sometimes special education programs and alternative programs become dumping grounds for kids who could not be scheduled or supported in regular/mainstream schools.

Y10: Yeah there was eh….There were several special ed teachers. They had double agendas, sports teachers as well. So they weren’t always there.

The frustration of saying this is what the student needs, and then saying yes, but the only place I’ve got at that time is that classroom with 25 other kids and a teacher who’s got this much to do and you know throttle them here because of all those other things. We just don’t do the continuity for the kids, and then they become a problem and then they are labelled not only as, I mean the special ed really doesn’t matter because their behaviour is the issue. Their reputation goes ahead of them. So I had a student once who said to me, I walked into a teacher’s class and he said, “Oh, so you are Johnny so-and-so.” (Retired VP, Focus Group)

VP: How many of the regular High Schools use X [name of popular alternative school in the city] as a discipline. If you don’t make it here, we’ll send you to X.

P: The alternative….

VP: So, the alternative school is actually punishment for kids who can’t make it in the regular school. So, if you make the regular school normative, then anyone who can’t make it there, is automatically ‘less than.’ So you’ve already labelled them the minute, the minute you said that they don’t fit.

SW: It’s also a dumping ground too.

VP: Yes. And then they all meet together in the dumping ground.
Y10:  *(adds of his own accord)* There was also a lot of like bullying too. So I would store up a lot of anxiety and resentment and then I would come back into class and there would be a shout or a remark of somebody and I would kind of like snap or freak out or something like that. …Like sometimes you know you go out for break or something. Because you know I was an easy target. I was just an easy target because I would talk differently and you know. Just seemed to be different.

… And then everybody else, half the time they are not that kind of a person but they get dragged into it. Yeah, and then I look at it and I’m like, you guys are just so gullible. You just fell right into that trap. And, now you are part of it. And you all think like you are the coolest thing in the world and I’m the one that is being made the victim out of it and I’m just watching it even though I’m the stronger person out of the group. It’s really hard to try and …it’s really hard to stand confident when there’s like 20 other people that feel the opposite of it. You know what I mean?

…I got centered out because I wanted to learn and didn’t want to be around the people that were trouble. Even the staff were like, “Oh you are just playing us eh?”

Overall when schools, particularly high schools in grades 9 & 10, admit students similar to the ones who were in the subset generating narratives for the study. It is a daunting task to schedule and support them appropriately within these large schools. However, if nothing is done preemptively and early in the semester, there is only more frustration built up in these students who tend to find themselves together in the same classes, feeding off one another, where little teaching is possible, the level is not right. So, then they seek other programming elsewhere because they realize they are not going to go somewhere in terms of graduation or their own interests if they continue to attend these sorts of classes and settings.

Even though it is not meant to be so, a lot of students with special education designations, particularly those with soft disability or hidden disabilities are often
referred to alternative schools because the regular schools can’t or don’t want to
program for them (S. Becker, 2010):

I processed 49 students through SALEP. These would be referrals or candidates that were coming in. Out of the 49, 25 were accepted by the formal SALEP Committee. The others, I tried very hard to give rich documentation as to why those candidates were not suitable for the work-program here and the number one reason to my surprise was that they were special education students that were overwhelmed with what offers there were or were not in their own home schools.

(Alt program teacher)

But that is definitely a piece of the pie. I cannot even program for them appropriately here. So, you have someone who can’t sit in a chair because they are paranoid or there is something else going on or they are on new meds. There just aren’t enough spots for these kids. And then they end up being a danger to themselves or others, or just become depressed or in a worse situation. That is definitely one population that is not addressed. And they certainly they would fit under the category ideally I think of special ed. But special ed does not recognize them. It is not seen I guess as….[talks about the complexity of needing a designation to receive support, but also not having enough programs meant for those with some of these designations]

(Teacher, Sec 23 school)

Special education tends to become a dumping ground for all these students. This was eloquently summarized in the wisdom of Y8 who said, “It should not be a pit stop.”

**Feelings about being in special education**

Y8 talks about the negative feelings that accompanied the placement in the special education class. He says, “If many people see people separated, or many people see people in a class like that, you feel uncomfortable, you feel out of place, you feel insecure. You feel all these things that you shouldn’t. It’s all negative things that you shouldn’t feel.” He also spoke of just the general frustration of being in special education.
On the whole the placement in special education is an alienating experience for most of these youth from a number of perspectives. They felt their education was interrupted. They felt unhappy. They felt like they just didn’t belong there, or they didn’t fit in. And so they begin to start skipping and staying away because who wants to feel this way or have a label and stigma attached to them? As they start to skip and spend time with their peers, they also begin to get more and more involved in activities with peers or other older youth that include illegal ones such as drugs, stealing, hustling, and swarming.

Y13 tells of how when he was sent out of his house he began to steal bicycles and stuff. Simultaneously he did not go to school and missed almost all of his Grade 9 credits till something made him realize that he had to be in school and he starts attending. But the following year history repeated itself, and he dropped out.

Y13: She convinced my dad that I was a bad kid and he kicked me out. And so that is when my street life pretty much began. At that point I was stealing stuff, that type of stuff just trying to make ends meet so I could eat the next day. I eventually got arrested and my dad had to come and bail me out. And when I was living with him again I got kicked out again because of my step-mum. So I was back to what I was doing before I got arrested. When winter time came around, I went to a shelter.

A teacher in the Section 23 school echoes the feelings of not fitting in that these youth write about in their autobiographies:

Then we find out when they get here, and we speak with them and in my class we do autobiographies to start, which is very popular, surprisingly for them. They write pages and pages. I think often it is because someone is going to listen; it’s just an opportunity to tell their story - very anxious 99% of time to tell their stories and be heard. And I get a lot of information about educational background in that, although I don’t ask for a lot. I just let them go where they want. Talk almost always about it [special education], and based
on that info I get in English, their educational backgrounds have been very interrupted, very unhappy. They felt that they don’t fit. They had gotten heavily involved with the wrong peer group; almost consistently they’ve had trouble with choosing the correct friends and end up in dropping out, skipping school, doing too many drugs, great time, that sort of thing. They have had bad experiences in terms of classroom setting. Some of them have been in spec ed and have had had terrible experiences there. Overall, not good.

(Language teacher, Sec 23 school)

**Disconnection from the main group and peers**

Being in special education also made these kids feel both different from the rest and simultaneously very much disconnected from the main group.

Q: What was the not helpful part?
Y7: Just the feeling of being like disconnected from all the other group. Like the classes and like the regular, like going to all the different classes. I guess the disconnection from the real group like the regular crowd.

Y8: I wasn’t the best in there. The resources are there, what you need. But you are at a place; you’re not like the other ones. It’s not like the way it’s supposed to be.
…You are put out. You are not in the place as everybody else is. You are not doing what everybody else is. You are not treated….You are treated the same. You are treated the same but it’s different, you are not treated the same. You are not treated the same as you are supposed to be.

A CYW from the Section 23 class, at the second Focus Group, reiterated similarly,

“I think that is massive. Working in a Section Class, we have a group of only 8 and although the regular schools were not working for whatever reason, personal or whatever they were, they still are looking for their peer groups and that is just the isolation factor of a specialized program can actually hinder their success, because they are still looking for their peer group.”
Avoidance

Because of all that is mentioned above, these youth started avoiding special education. This could mean not wanting to have anything to do with it: being tested, going to the class, mentioning that they needed assistance or help with their work, etc.

Y6: They asked if I was having any problems with my work but I kept on saying ‘no’ because I didn’t want to sound stupid. So I just sat there and talked and talked. So they just thought I was just a very talkative person.

Y1: I found it difficult to accept help because I am an abject perfectionist. When I accepted any form of help from them, it was a sign of weakness and failure that I wasn’t competent enough to complete things on my own. This definitely plagued me throughout my entire school career.

Y7 received a suspension for skipping. When I asked him what the reason was, this was his reply: “I don’t know but the first time it [a suspension] ever happened was with that [Special ed] class. That was it. That was the only time it ever happened.” Not wanting to go to special education together with all the other connotations it had, made these youth skip or avoid the class. This, of course, gets them into further trouble both with the school authorities for non-attendance and with peers in terms of involvement in vandalizing or illegal activities.

Parents and guardians can and do sometimes ask for a demission both from the exceptionality label and the special education program. For example, the Head of the Special Education Department in a large high school in the city with about 200 special education students mentioned “every year two or three parents request a demission and they insist this is done: ‘Take away the IEP designation.’ ‘Take away special ed.’ ‘Do not
I include this here only to mention that while it is a challenge for this subset from the study to hold on to the special education labels and placement in high school and they want to disassociate themselves, because they did not have such a strong adult intervention from their families to back them up, unlike some of their other peers, they find other ways to avoid these programs/labels. In their minds having these identifications or taking part in these programs means they are not going very far. They tend to think they will remain in a holding pattern.

**Outcomes and not going somewhere**

These students felt bored in these classes because the work was too low, too slow, and not challenging enough as they mentioned. Hence they were bored. Every so often however, they mentioned teachers doing things that helped them go further. Sadly this was more the exception than the norm according to them.

Y4:  Boredom stems from being put at a level 2 than when you are performing at a level 3 or 4 - that is what it meant for me. So my teacher really rectified that by giving me work from the higher grades. I would stay occupied while…

  She also realized that I needed an output for all the energy that I would display. So she encouraged me to get involved in sports and other extra-curricular activities. She ended up putting me in the Guess Mathematics challenges and stuff like that. So she told me to ‘put my brain to use’ *(sneers)*.

This is the piece of the narrative where Y4 indicated what led to her change, as hinted at earlier. Although in the Behavioural class/program for a year or two, for the first time she met a teacher in Grade 6 (in this same behaviour class placement) who actually channelled her energy by giving her more challenging work instead of the other work that is sometimes assigned to these classes. She adds too that this teacher was African-
American, hence Y4 was able to identify with her. But, most important, she treated her differently.

Youth disliked just getting ‘busy work’ or not being able to realize their potential. They hated not being allowed to work at their own pace and receiving appropriate work that challenged them.

Y2: I like the smaller classroom numbers personally speaking. Normally when you are in high school, like a regular high school, there’s 30-40 people because high schools are really big these days. In specialized classrooms, here’s there’s 10-15 in a class. So that, that was the only thing. I found this productive for me you know, because I was able to get help easier than you know than the one teacher having to help all these kids that need help. That was the only thing I found helpful. Basically I found the classes really slow, really boring and not what I needed you know. Because my brain works really fast so it just automatically jumps. Like they could be on pg. 1 and I’m already on pg. 30. And then twice I was getting yelled at by my teacher for reading ahead.

Youth were also aware that credits accumulated through special education classes often did not count towards graduation. Participating made them realize not just that it wasn’t the right level for them by way of instruction, but also the outcomes by way of credits were not going to get them entry to post-secondary programs. In other words, they realized that enrolment in special education (and by extension some of the alternative programs) would exclude them from the credentialing and legitimating powers that high school confers on its students in mainstream classes (Fairbanks, 1992).

Y2: All of these classes are for kids with behavioural issues, for kids that act out, or who were suspended or expelled from school, or suspended from school constantly, or just weren’t attending school at all. That is not the case for me. I don’t have behavioural problems. I never got expelled from school. I got suspended maybe once or twice when I was younger. And, truthfully I had been in school every day you know. So, I didn’t need them. There would be days when there were 5 different kids going off and I would be
sitting there trying to do my work and they’d be screaming, running down the hallways and stuff.

Truthfully speaking it wasn’t what I needed. Though, if I had stayed in the ‘normal’ high school, I would have graduated this year.

Y4: Yeah, that’s what I said. I said that yeah the work was just below the level that I was at. Like the work was not challenging. It was below the level that I was at especially when it came to the basics of Math and English. Because coming from a Caribbean background, you start learning from childhood all this stuff that you are learning at the Kindergarten level. So when I got through elementary school, like, everything was repetitive work. So it wasn’t that I didn’t know the work, but I would finish and then have time left over to give the teacher a hard time (sneers) - you know disrupt other students who weren’t finished.

Y2: No. I got like one or two credits in that entire time. The entire school was all about like trips to Playdium or the lake or this or that. I’m trying to think like are you kidding me? You have a certain amount of days to get work done, and you are taking us to Playdium and things like that? Sure, that’s great. They are fine. But do that maybe in a summer school program. Or, do these trips like once a month or once every two months but not every single day.

Y6 came from outside the city and went to one of the Alternative Programs here.

This is his evaluation of why although he liked the program, he dropped out.

Y6: I liked the school, just that I can’t focus. //Q://What did you like about it?
Y6: I liked the teachers are really nice and can joke around with you. But I think it is a little bit too easy going. [Hence he stopped going].

Receiving some of the supports and extra help, such as from an Educational Assistant (EA) was also mentioned as something that at times did not challenge them academically.

Y10: Once in a while there would be an EA, assigned to me. It was never permanent. It would never last through school. The EAs were over-tired, underpaid, and generally not very educated. And, those were some of the few times I felt not OK and it bugged the
hell out of me. There have been times when I’ve caught myself feeling like I am more better off and I was more smarter than them. That was one of the times when I do remember a lot of. Well, you are supposed to be giving me help. I want someone that can teach me not someone who like “I’m teaching.” I felt like that.

Y12: And I would finish my work, you know whatever they had for me. Sometimes I’d even do curriculum stuff they had ahead. Stuff they’d already done, really test my teachers on that. Because they’d be like handing it out, and ‘here it is’ which some teachers really hated that. You’d have like a three month program - in one month I had everything done.

Putting these youth in an alternative program, or sometimes even a behavioural class, meant a corresponding drop in the level of academic instruction. This was also mentioned by Service Providers who had similarly heard youth talk about these programs. They were not sure of all the different kinds of programs available, if identifications required to be enrolled in them and eligibility and criteria for admission. However, they did notice that youth mentioned they were unhappy to belong to these programs and also that youth knew these programs would not take them further academically. Simultaneously, youth often assimilated dysfunctional ways of coping and other anti-social and illegal behaviours in these classes. Furthermore their academic progress begins to suffer and gaps in learning increase.

He got associated with a group of people he did not want to be associated with, which gives him a bias towards people now, which makes it, harder for him to get along with some people. He did not finish school and I have heard those stories a number of times. A behavioral problem, and you are put in behavioral class. And then all of sudden they seem to have academic problems, or they don’t finish school. School becomes pretty unenjoyable for them to be in. I am not sure if behavioral is the same thing as special ed.

(Supervisor, Drop-in centre)
Doing fieldwork as part of the study gave me the opportunity to have conversations with smaller groups of youth and have conversations with other professionals who came to Evergreen from other agencies for workshops or to provide specific information about housing, welfare, drug addiction programs, employment and training programs. All these occasions gave me opportunities to gather perspectives about outcomes, levels, criteria for admissions to these life skills and employment related programs, and hear stories that they told; as well they now became interested in the subgroup I was focusing on.

One day there was a group of a few youth who were having a rather intelligent conversation on books and wizardry and symbolism. As I joined in and at some point spoke about special education. This is what I wrote in my notes for the day:

One youth mentioned how the ‘Essential’ or ‘Workplace’ level of instruction did not actually take them anywhere. These were classes that went nowhere according to him.

Another youth told his own story of how he was called stupid and made fun of in elementary school by some teachers and was told he did not know how to do things. Yet when he went to high school he actually flourished. His thinking, which was independent, was now acknowledged positively. He said his marks immediately moved from 50s in elementary, to 80s in high school.

A worker from Ontario Works (OW) who runs very popular life skills sessions for youth on how to communicate effectively with Welfare staff even when youth might be angry and frustrated at the Social Services System, would regularly ask how the study was proceeding. One day she mentioned the following to me about her own career goals wanting to be a Guidance Counsellor in school:

She mentioned how the husband of a friend of hers who was a special education teacher said that the special education classes in his school are like baby-sitting classes in that school - they do not
teach the kids anything at all. She said she would love to be a Guidance Counsellor instead.

(Fieldwork notes)

Her sessions were popular, and she always had a line-up of people who disclosed they were on Welfare or wanted to get registered to receive support. They had all kinds of questions for her. She was aware that the study was proceeding at an unusually slow pace in terms of getting youth to talk about special education through reconstructing life history narratives. One day there was a fairly communicative peer mentor in the room and she began to ask him and a small group there why don’t people want to say they were in special education? His insight was interesting: “Nobody wants to talk about their failures.” This is the deficit discourse that these youth come to accept that to be in special education is equivalent to failing the regular class.

On another day in the context of the study, a supply teacher in an elementary school and now given a long term assignment to teach the MID class mentioned about her conversation with a retired teacher who came back to supply at this school, but would never accept an assignment for the MID class. That day my fieldwork notes read:

Her comment to M* who is now teaching the MID class is, “You must have a lot of patience to teach at that level. However, it is becoming terrible these days as even ‘normal kids’ are beginning to behave like ‘special education’ kids.” (I’m wondering what images, words and stereotypes this supply teacher, now retired no doubt, but for all her teaching years has instilled into the experiences of her students. Could she possibly have told them that there is a distinction between normal and special ed, and that special ed is actually lower than normal. What would be the amount of damage she might have done to these kids?)

One of the service providers on hearing this commented that there might be many more similar persons out there whom students encounter with negative perceptions of special education.
When youth mentioned things, they acknowledged their own role rather equitably.

They were aware that the huge education system is always strapped for resources. Even so, they called for educators to look beyond this at what the bigger picture is, the broader outcomes and goals that educators need to have for them.

Y4: I wouldn’t necessarily totally point the finger at the system or whatever. I was by no means…, I was difficult to deal with, but I think teachers (says this with some sort of articulated stress) because of the position that they hold in society, are very keen to recognize the differences between students. And I think sometimes they get, maybe it’s because of an increase in class sizes the reason is, but sometimes teachers tend to pay more attention to certain students and write others off. And I think a lot of teachers up until the Grade 6 had written me off as a delinquent. And I’ve had teachers actually say it to me so…(sneer, laughter) I mean I did stuff like cut their hair and kick them, and stuff like that. So I guess that’s why they would think I was delinquent but… Sometimes you have to look beyond the act in order to see what’s being acted out. You know what I mean?

A service provider put the youth in school situation alongside the at-risk home situation and spoke to what the final outcome chosen by youth would then be in such situations:

I think the school situation can be, where if that does not go well, they go think, “Ha, enough is enough.” If school doesn’t work, then they are like, there is no point sticking with this. Dad is beating me up, mum does not believe me, my teacher thinks I’m stupid. I have no friends at school. So, why stay in school? You know what I mean…

(SP, Drop-in supervisor)

Here’s a quote from Y2 that speaks to the outcomes of special education.

Q: One last thought about you and special ed and what people really need to know about it.

Y2: Honestly, I’d say one thing: Just don’t do it unless the kid or the person needs it because it screws them up completely. It just keeps them in the school system longer. And then the government is continuing to pay for these kids to be in the school system longer than they need to be. And then the government is going, well where is all our money going to? If
you didn’t put these kids in the frickin’ system that didn’t need to go there, you wouldn’t be paying for another three years of high school for them.

I guess Y2 is speaking to the incongruities of special education once the process of identification is completed and the resources are received. Somehow the purpose of special education gets forgotten. It is meant to get the conditions right so that students can achieve successfully, rather than reducing expectations for their performance so that adults can relax (Telzrow, 1999).

Alongside these outcomes of special education, particularly when youth reached high school and they were more independent they did attend a number of schools, sometimes in an attempt to try out things and not give up entirely. Dropping out was a process rather than a one-time event for them. The following table speaks to the number of schools that youth went to.

**Table 3: Number of schools attended**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Highest level of high school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Some grade 11 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Some grade 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>* Graduated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>* Graduated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y7</td>
<td>6 schools in total</td>
<td>One grade 10 credit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y8</td>
<td>17 schools in total</td>
<td>14 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Some grade 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Few grade 9 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22 credits, grade 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>* Graduated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>All grade 9 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Some grade 10 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Few grade 9 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15 credits; bit of grade 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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From Table 3 one can gather that although these youth attended a number of high schools most of them did not graduate. Besides the ones who graduated, most of the others seemed to have acquired mainly half or much less than half of the credits required to graduate. Their narratives speak to the fact that they kept trying. Often, they themselves took the initiative of going to another school to enroll themselves, but yet were not successful in acquiring credits. However, going to high school to enroll themselves (both at this level) and many of them pursuing bridging, transition and postsecondary programs speaks to their agency of still wanting to try school and not wanting to give up completely. Perhaps not all programming was beneficial. The following chapter will speak to the kinds of programming that worked for these youth.
CHAPTER 6 Things beneficial for this group

So, sort of like ‘invisible special ed’ kind of needs to happen

Teacher, Section 23 school

This chapter speaks to the strengths and interests of youth who form the subset of street-involved youth. I highlight the agency of this group, as seen in their pursuit to still wanting to pursue school and making a number of attempts to do so. However, school and learning formats need to be inclusive, hands-on, using a variety of mediums. Group instruction and life skills instruction must be blended with the curriculum. A lot of participation and flexibility is called for. Youth must be taught self-advocacy around their learning needs as well. Instruction must be differentiated and not preferential; special education needs to be as invisible as possible.

Strengths alongside weaknesses

Street involved youth, have a lot of strengths. They tend to be highly creative, artistic right-brain thinkers and learners. So their productivity is often higher in the fine arts, literature, storytelling, poetry and music and not as much in math, science, and the mechanics of writing. They expressed deep interest in philosophy; history in general but also history of their own heritage and culture, history of music, and that of specific battles and wars; music both composing as well as mastery of certain instruments such as bass guitar, classical guitar; a variety of literature genres from collected works of specific authors to the classics, mythology, fiction especially science fiction, espionage, crime. In the subgroup I generated narratives with, in general their reading skills were superior to their writing skills and they were open about the challenges they faced with regard to writing. As stated earlier, some of them stated they were placed/tested for gifted
programs; their constant movements of residences and anger at life, family, adults, and systems in general might not have let them benefit from this level of instruction for a prolonged period of time. In addition to academics, a lot of them had skills related to digital media, computers including both hardware and software development, and other skills related to carpentry, construction, painting, culinary arts, entertainment and drama.

In the context of the group I interviewed, it was mainly the interests around reading, music and creative arts that I was able to gather. Even though they themselves might have been in marginalized situations, there was also a sense of social justice, equality, fairness and kindness that a number of them expressed.

Their specific interests in a way helped them. Some of them mentioned that on discovering their own specific interest, they found it was the one thing that helped them focus or pay attention; or gave them a background such as through rhythm and beat to enable them do other things; or gave them a world into which they could escape or be engaged in for prolonged periods of time such as when they read large interesting books and sequels.

The strengths that emerge from the following 9 respondents with corresponding details are included in this section. Within these details are also contained the challenges that these youth face as exceptional learners.

Y1: I started reading way before I was in school. I started reading around two actually. It’s something I’ve always really enjoyed. I was not interested in video games, but things that involved reading and story lines and plots. Reading and speaking are definitely some of my strengths. These are two of the three. Music is the third. I began playing bass at about 11 or 12 and now I’m really good at it. Like really good. Not something to toot my own horn. I was definitely one of the kids who had nothing to do with his time so I would sit and play for five hours at end and do this till I was 19.
… Certainly I like reading about different things, architecture, technology, all sorts of random things that I can remember and bring up in a conversation with different people. I mean that’s the communication I like - I’m not very much of a small chat person; very intimidating to do that most of the time.
… I’m not really good at meter. Like poetry isn’t really my strength. I’m good writing at prose - describing things and events and sequences of stuff. I mean I can describe that kind of thing

Y2: I knew how to read before I could talk, before I verbalized. Even before I was able to verbalize my words, I was reading first which kind of helped, huh, huh, huh. So I guess I was 3 or 4 when I was picking up like picture books and stuff like that and started reading.
… In school they really, they kind of force certain rules upon you. Like, you can’t go ahead in the book; you can’t do this, you can’t do that. I’m one of those people that like wants to read ahead. Like, you can’t make me stop me at the end of the chapter because at the end of the chapter a sentence might be happening, and I want to know what’s happening at the next. You can’t stop me at the first and second chapter; you’ve got to let me go.
… The first time they started putting it [IEP] into place was when I was in grade 3. When I was in grade 1 and 2 they noticed that with me I’d get all my spelling tests right. I’m like all my reading would be top notch and I would be getting all the prizes, because I would be the first one to complete the book series or whatever; with Math I was a bit more behind and I wasn’t adapting well to it for some reason or another.

Y3: That’s why I like the hands-on. I like music too, where I have to time things or put things in order because that is the only way I could focus. I don’t know if it is just because I am using the hands or because of the music. But my attention is brought back. I kind of zone-out of everything else.
… I listen to heavy rock. With all that insanity going on it helps me to focus. I may not … I’m content just to hear the drum beat.
… I was tested to be in the gifted class because I would finish certain kinds of work early. However, then they said I was not [gifted] and I would dispute that.
Q: What do you think will be your greatest challenges for your future given who you are?
Y3: Anything paper-work related.
Y6: We did have science but it is not part of a credit. English I did really good because we did like writing music and lyrics and all that. The teacher loved it because I would always have songs written. I finished four songs in at least an hour.
…Until I moved to Covenant House and actually met a real singer. And his name is SG and he worked at Covenant House too. And he heard me sing, and ever since then he started teaching me how to use my vocals and all that. I started feeling so much better I got into my music way more.
…Arts and cooking were the easy ones. Like they were extremely easy. I already know how to draw and write and all that. And cooking, I already knew how to cook; I learned from my mom. The hardest would have been drama or acting, and math. I can’t focus on math. I think it is too hard on me. I think it runs through my family. We are really math illiterate; we aren’t that smart for Math. And for drama, when I was in drama I really didn’t feel that comfortable being around with the people in there. The people in the drama class didn’t really like me.

Y8: I was good in Phys Ed. I remember it too.
… I learned how people feel. I learned how people feel when they are upset. I learned how people feel when they are not upset. I learned...ah, I learned. I watch little things that people do. I figure people out quick. I make sure that they feel fine. And I know when they feel uncomfortable. I know when they are upset. That’s the only thing I could do in school. That’s the only thing I could do.

Y10: The other thing is I love reading (stresses this). I love to read. I read all the time, anything I can get my hands on. I like to research things. I like to brainstorm ideas with the research that I have come up with. So reading necessarily in a text book isn’t, I think it ... If I’m reading fiction or non-fiction, I absorb it fine. If it’s a story line or a documentary, I absorb it. I guess it’s an attention span thing too. If there is a text book and it’s just boring, dull, I don’t have that - I am not able to concentrate on it. I can try. But I always end up getting sidetracked or...
… I like Harry Potter, the Lord of the Rings, Dan Brown, all of Dan Brown’s books. He wrote the Da Vinci Code. I’ve read all of his books.

Y10: Have you read Digital Fortress?
Q: No.
Y10: Oh… Read it, OK. Yeah you got to read that book (enthusiastic)... But ‘Angels and Demons’ was by far one of my favourites. I am not very religious myself. I believe in science, evolution. However, that story was just very captivating.
...[a lot of description about a huge aquarium] And I put like everything into it. I put as much, I treated them like gold. I built up and I watched it over years develop and I, I was so proud of myself about it. It wasn’t much but it was something that I was able to …you know… I was able to prove to myself that I could do that, I was not worthless like everybody said. (Animated and quick)

Y10: (My goals) they have always been that high. I mean it’s just in my life. That is what I am. I was so young when I was reading the Harry Potter book that, you know I was so young, like 7-8 years old. So from what I can remember of my life, it’s been that.

Q: What are your writing skills like?
Y10: Ah, like grade school! Like my spelling is way off. My grammar is way off. I don’t know how to write a proper paragraph yet.

Y10: Yeah I’d read a paper and I’d see something wrong with the world and I’d come up with a solution. Yeah I’d see a movie and I’d like an architectural piece in it. Like I’ve always been attracted to architecture, I love architecture. Yeah, so like I’d see a movie and then I’d like research something about it and then I’d find the history about the building and… I like a fantasy. You know sometimes it was an escape. Because you know I wasn’t into drugs at the time. And so my escape was reading. I’d put my music on, and my imagination was so good it would be like a movie in my head.

Y11: Later down the road when I was at Covenant House, I did try school again. And I got always, I always got the same compliments. “Oh you are a great writer. You are smart, blah, blah, blah.” But I didn’t finish; (I didn’t want) to deal with it again.

...Yeah I love writing.

Q: So, you love writing as well?
Y11: But actually, but it was hard for me to start writing again after my mum read my journal because... eh, I was like... I never....after that I never really felt great to talk about how my day was, or my feelings. Yeah I just felt like people were using my thoughts against me. And ...eh... I never really wrote for a long time after the, yeah after Grade 8 eh...yeah...I mean after yeah Grade 9. And it was actually that teacher in that surrealist short play that we had to do that you know.... My mind kind of opened up to like writing
again and my creative juices and stuff. But even still, I haven’t gone back into the journaling and stuff that I used to always be in like since I was… As soon as I learned how to write, I just wanted to write everyday you know…

Y12: I was never good at English but from watching TV all my life I was very articulate even at the word I didn’t understand (smiles). If it sounded smart, I would say it.
… No, my memory talent as far as visual learning is because as a kid I watched TV and all that stuff. It’s kind of the same in my head. I just visualize a TV and I have a remote and I can pick certain chapters and sections and just play it word for word, what I did, what I said, how I acted, what I was wearing. Just some of the stuff.
… Well, I just…, I’m past that. If you compared me to a normal, another kid, right, same grade, education and all that stuff, it would, they’d probably handwrite, they would print and write faster than me. They would be more legible, probably better English too. Like I can speak better English, like I can never write. All that [narrative on computer screen] out there, I would never been able to do, not without you.

Y13: [Discovers a love for reading when he is in Grade 9 Alternative School and then really takes off almost instantly] It was actually I think in High School. I was in Grade 9 actually I think. … She gave us a book ‘Of Mice and Men.’ I thought that book was…, I liked that book. And then eh, we watched the movie. After I watched the movie I had a lot to say. That’s what got me into reading. Because I never thought eh, if you read the book, there’s a smart guy and then there’s the big dumb guy. I thought it was funny because I always pictured the big guy to be black because I thought they were talking about a black person that’s why everybody doesn’t like him. It seemed to make more sense and that the smart guy was white. You know a white guy friends with a black guy and was doing what they had to do.

And there was another one – ‘Raisin in the Sun.’ That English teacher in Grade 9 was a good one I think. And there was a… I forget what was the book. It was a girl who lost her sight and hearing when she was very young. And they hire somebody who takes a lot of care. The ‘Helen Keller’, there you go. That was a good book too. She had no idea of anything because she was trapped. She was trapped in a…, she was a prisoner in her own body and she learned to speak to somebody. I guess I kind of felt like a prisoner in a sense.
So, all these youth seem to have strengths/talents that they were extremely good at. If only these were picked up, if they were taught to advocate around them in school, and if educators worked on accommodating some of the things they found difficult, such as writing, perhaps their educational trajectories may have been different.

Service providers also noticed that it was important to have work that interested youth, made use of their strengths, and was at a level they were comfortable at. It called for a flexible curriculum and continuous in-take, meaning an open door admission policy, if these youth are to be successful when it came to school.

I am always amazed how they come in here with some sort of identifications. They do not know their own learning styles and needs. So, at a base line level simply educating them is how they learn, clearly identifying their strengths and really celebrating what it is that they do well and then outlining a few coping and adapting skills in where they tend to struggle. Where they struggle putting people or practices in places that can support what they don’t do very well.

A lot of street youth were clearly special ed students as well. What I discovered was they were compromised in only one realm of learning and yet I found them and in jail as well, not so much my SALEP program - but from my jail youth and my street youth - to be highly creative, right brain sort of thinkers and learners. So their productivity was often higher in the fine arts, literature, storytelling. Not so much in math, science assignments. But they were still very bright and capable kids that had a desire to learn in spite of road blocks that had been placed up all along.

(Alt program teacher)

You have got to find what they are interested in and tap into that. You have got to have …. I have 80 different novels in that cupboard that they can choose from; nobody has to do the exact same thing. And they love the choice. It empowers them you know. And, if they start a book and they don’t like it, they can turn it in and start another one.

So it is that giving them ‘some say over their education.’ It is because they, they want to do the work. You just have to find what they want. For me it takes sometimes 2 or 3 goes with a novel;
they all do, they all get the right novel. And then, when they finally find one that they like and then they want it on audio. So I think you need the technology too. We have lots of technology here and I think the computers are a huge benefit especially to the males, to the boys. I have really noticed that if you have a computer with the guys, it just gets them right in and they are able to, they just go straight there. Yeah, sure. (Language teacher, Sec 23 Program)

From the previous quote, but also some of the other quotes it is obvious that these youth cannot be given just anything to read. They have to find it interesting. Sometimes, they need it to be available in another format such as on DVD/Video - as in the case of Y13- for them to be able to get the word pictures and character images for them to be able to relate and sustain interest in reading language texts for example. One begins to wonder why ‘assistive technology’ was not explored as one of the ways to hook them, engage them, engage another sensory mode of learning (since some of them are adept and at-home with technology) as a format of instruction. Often the system of education is set up to only explore technology when it comes to assessment and evaluation of a learning unit, but not in the very form of delivery. Using it as a form of instruction might have benefited these youth.

Doing fieldwork in the ERC, gave me the opportunity sometimes to sit with youth at the computer as they worked on their resumes. A resume was necessary if they wanted to find a job. But it was also something that very quickly demonstrated that they might speak extremely well, might even communicate quickly through email and texting, but it was a different story when it came to writing. Here’s a fieldwork entry I made one day:

I mainly worked with a few youth who were doing their resumes. I helped one of them do it from scratch. He had completed a year of college/university in the U.S. and was now looking for a job possibly as a server in a restaurant or in customer service. What surprised me was even basic mechanics such as using CAPS to
begin his name did not come to him easily. But he worked patiently and had a resume ready at the end that he printed out. Although partially obvious, I did not get a chance to speak to him about his education history or other background.

But there are a couple of steps to getting the youth to see their strengths and polish some of their weaknesses. Trust and the right moment in terms of when to intervene to offer assistance to them are crucial. It is also important to be sensitive to the presence of their peers around them and how that might make them feel towards accepting certain kinds of assistance. Here is the description of yet another afternoon at the ERC.

There were quite a few youth in the ERC today and pictures were being taken. Some youth took pictures with individual staff. While this was happening, I began to work with a youth named Ron. Simultaneously I was trying to schedule a time to go out for lunch with one of the staff. Ron was trying desperately to search for accommodation and seeking assistance with reading the binder for housing leads. He was insistent on receiving help immediately.

Another staff took over. She asked him what he would say to a landlord on the phone. She was getting into wanting him to practice with her exactly with the sorts of questions he needed to ask the landlord. However Ron politely said he didn’t want to do that now. When pushed for a reason he said, “Because everyone is around.”

Soon after I returned from lunch, I heard him speaking on the phone. I have to say I was actually amazed at how fluently he managed to communicate. He was holding a conversation, asking questions, soliciting details about rent, amenities, etc. etc. of landlords and trying to advocate for himself to get a place to stay.

Another afternoon I see Y11 trying to complete an application to move from a Bridging program into a regular University program. I see her asking for help with an essay she has written about the reasons why she wants to go on to a full-time program at Ontario University. In it she mentions that she loves the drama, the hands-on stuff. She mentions all the socializing skills she has; specifically when she had to hold her own on
the streets, in shelters, and elsewhere. Even though she told me earlier she used to love journaling, writing an essay seems a challenge. Here is a fieldwork entry about my conversation about her strengths when she mentioned she’s nervous should she get admitted to the program.

She says definitely drama and also English are her strengths, but adds that she doesn’t like writing. She then shows me what she’s written for her essay with all the correction marks [red ink edits from staff]. What she is trying to convey there, is that she is pretty good at conversing with all kinds of people that she’s met in shelters, drop-ins, on the street and elsewhere. She thinks that experience will be good to take her into the field of Social Work. I have no doubt it will. But it’s just her writing and organization that will be a challenge for her in the Undergrad Program at Ontario University. I think she knows this too, and that is causing her apprehension.

I noticed this apprehension not just with Y11. It was also true of Y9 and Y16. When it came to them being admitted to a College/University program (transitional, bridging) they still wondered if they might make it. The writing skills called for, such as requirements to hand in essays, that were often requirements even for the admissions process, were intimidating to them. They found writing essays difficult. Secondly, they are also aware that if they do not succeed in a college/university program it will set them back even further. In the case of Ron (the youth mentioned earlier, who was able to speak well when it came to advocating with a landlord on the phone), it was different when he got admitted to a Private College (rather easily). The first week was fine. In the second week, he began to find it really challenging. He eventually dropped out in the third week. The difference - and this is what sets them back- is he had applied and received an OSAP loan for this program through the assistance of the College. After he dropped out, they would not refund his fees; he was now saddled with debt. This is often one more reason
why youth are apprehensive when it comes to pursuing post-secondary education even though there might be a few, limited options available to them.

**Still wanting to do school, to pursue education, to learn**

Dropping out from school was not a one-time event. From the group interviewed it seemed like each time something didn’t work out and they were asked to leave (or suspended, fresh-started in a new school or expelled) or left of their own accord, they attempted to try another school, another program, enroll one more time not wanting to give up. On the one hand, they wanted to complete school. But on the other hand, they were searching for a pathway that progressed somewhere when they went back to school and didn’t just want to ‘do school.’ Some of them in fact seemed keener to learn than to just be in school. A number of them tried alternative education programs. Sometimes they were directed to these programs from their home schools; at other times they chose these with the hope they might be more successful, or with the hope that they would find these a better fit for themselves. Some of them even considered the GED option. A number of them also tried College (George Brown, Seneca, Humber). Here too they would enter either as mature students but more often seek entry through programs that were bridging, alternative or transitional ones that could on successful completion lead to admission into a full time College program. There were a few that also tried the private College route (For example, Everest or Trios College) but never seem to complete it; it was easy to secure admission and even a student load to help them with tuition, but these youth only ended up with more debt and often one more failure in their education trajectory. It was challenging coming with special education labels, a history of continuous movements and accumulation of only a few credits, to be admitted to another...
education institution overall - whether it was in a high school, an alternative program, or a college program as a mature student.

Only four youth in the subgroup (Y3, Y4, Y5, and Y12) had finished High School. Of these Y5, who had gone to a private school, was now enrolled in University and was finding it very challenging. She did complete one narrative but opted to drop out of the study. Y3 wants to pursue the apprenticeship route. Y4 who went initially to Humber for Television and Broadcasting is now in an Ontario University for the Social Work Program. Y12’s priority is to get his housing and employment stable. Rather than describe each of their educational trajectories which are very interesting, and include numerous attempts to find out what would work for them, I shall focus on bits from narratives of Y9 and Y11 first, and then include bits of insights from teachers in the school at Covenant House and service providers at Evergreen who conduct a pre-employment program and finally conclude with actual goals from one cohort in this pre-employment (CYTW) program. All these speak to their agency in their attempts to still pursue school.

Y9 attempts to go to school are varied. One of these was also to consider going to prison, just so that she could complete school. Presently, she has completed the CYTW, worked as a Peer Housing Worker for 10 weeks and then been employed out in the community at a non-profit organization for 32 weeks. Additionally, over the summer she has completed a 6 week program at Georgian College and is now at a crossroad deciding whether to take the General Arts or Child and Community Justice Studies at Georgian College or not. She got admission to both programs for September ’09 but was

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21 HYPE – Helping Youth Pursue Education, a summer program aimed at direct entry for other full-time College programs.
hesitant and hence deferred her start by a semester to January ’10. Her goal is to be a Paramedic; simultaneously she is asking if there is any way she can receive a psycho-educational assessment because she feels like she has some sort of learning difficulties but isn’t sure. One can never tell if an assessment was begun in school, if someone might have mentioned it to her, or what other reasons she has for wanting to pursue this such as a feeling of apprehension when it comes to structured learning environments and programs. Maybe even if things just went differently for her with/without the assessment, but having the right supports in place, she might have graduated and might find the decision to go to College or not easier to make. But not having graduated she finds making this commitment to post-secondary difficult; one thing is certain though that she loves to learn, and wants to pursue education to get a degree even if it is done while she is in the prison system.

Y9: I have no money for a place…. I came to Toronto thinking five to ten years, I’ll do my degree in jail. You can do high school in jail. I’ll be a doctor and come out. Wait, seven years - have my degree and stuff. So I come to Toronto that night, I go to the arcade and spend $300. Need for speed, need for speed. I ate so much candy that day. I didn’t want to have money in jail. I just ate, ate, ate. I was right on Yonge Street. I didn’t know Covey or anything. [The following morning] I turned myself in. I took all my rent money, all my stuff is at my mum’s house. I am broke. … I go in the jail thing [outfit]. They bring me down. There’s no way that I could have by myself used 5 credit cards and spent that much money. Times didn’t match up. It’s not just me… there’s other people. I wrote it out for my lawyer, he gave it to the judge.
“I didn’t know. I was so naive. D-man… gave it to me and he told me to do it. I was just framed.”
“Oh you were framed? Dah dah dah.” They threw the case out.
“You are free to go.”
“Go? Where?”
The Judge is laughing.
“Go where? Do what? No, I want to stay here. I thought I could do school [in here, in jail].”
“Go to Springboard to (receive help to) go to Hamilton and come back. (They will give you a) two-way ticket.”
… Go to Covey or Phoenix? (expresses dissatisfaction with these two options) I want to go to school. All that time I did all that stuff, always in summer. Every semester I went to school. Even if I am not learning, I go. So then I went to school at Covey and it was not good. September 25, 2005 is the day I came to Covey – horrible!

Y11: I left school at the end of Grade 11. I tried to go back for a couple of months but it didn’t work.
Later down the road when I was at Covenant House, I did try school again. And I got always, I always got the same compliments. “Oh you are a great writer; you are smart, blah, blah, blah.” But I didn’t finish (school). (I didn’t want) to deal with it again. Then there was eh…, a Humber program which was free for eh…, what do you call those people - disadvantaged or something? For Culinary Arts. So I did that for about a month. But I am not a cook. I don’t know who I was I trying to fool. My thought was that if I just did a year, then I could just transfer into any program I wanted. But I didn’t last a year huh, huh, huh. So I stopped going to that school.
Later on when I was in Scarborough, I decided I was going to try the school thing again. This time I decided I was going to do Everest College. This is like the Private College thing. I don’t know what I was thinking. But I was just thinking something quick, something fast you know, and a career out of it. So I took Medical Lab Assistant. I had a small class. I was the youngest in my class. I had the top grades. I thought it was just so easy; I couldn’t understand why everyone else wasn’t acing every test. We learned how to take blood and do a whole bunch of medical stuff. It was interesting. But I hadn’t paid for it yet, through OSAP, and I was realizing that I don’t want to do this for a career. Then I stopped going huh, huh. And that’s how my education story ends. So, anything you want to ask?

It is obvious both the youth mentioned above wanted to go back to school and negotiated a number of attempts to do so. On the other hand, even if they do not accept outwardly that they are special education students; they still know something’s different. No matter how hard they try, learning is not the same for them as it is for other students.
There are many challenges for them. But it is also a challenge getting back into school.

Finding the right program, the right pathways, and the right broker/advocate who will let them in and then the right environments with supports to enable them really learn does not come easily.

On the other side, kids who were on the street who left school what the Early Leavers Study [(Ferguson, et al., 2005)] identified is these kids said they wanted to go back to school. Everybody who dropped out of school said they wanted to go back to school - schools were uninviting. When they went back and tried to re-register, they were discouraged from coming back. They weren’t given pathways even though there are great pathways now in order to be able to stay in school.

For the kids who come through the criminal justice system the challenge for the child and youth workers or the social workers who try to get them back in school always hear this. The schools say, “You know what, build us a safety plan. We want a safety plan before we can let this child back into school because they’ve got a criminal record.” Or if they let them (back), they say they will let them under one condition; if they step out of line ONCE, they are OUT. These are uninviting environments for kids who are coming off the street and trying to get back into the school system. So there really needs to be almost a broker to help navigate these kids back into the school system. There are multiple pathways. There are multiple streams. So, going back to Foresthill Collegiate is not going to work - probably - but other places and other steps to getting back to school. You need somebody to be able to negotiate.

You know our school system is a marvelous system, but it is also very complicated.

(Researcher, Sick Kids hospital)

And it is not just that they need the right broker that will admit them to the program. They need also the right environment to succeed. They have strengths and challenges; willingness to learn is not lacking however. But because they are so far behind in terms of credit accumulation and the system is not set up to fast track them to graduation, they do find they have to commit a lot of time, maybe go back with into
classes with much younger peers, and put other things on hold, if they want to go back to school.

It is surprising. I would have thought, you know I’ve been here 12 years and I would have thought, coming in here that I would be dealing with a lot of literacy issues. And maybe it is because of the type of school that we are and we are attracting the kids more academic. Kids, who want to be back in high school, want that high school routine; want to get the high school Diploma even though they are very far off. I quite frankly don’t see nearly as much literacy problems as you would think. I think in math it is a different story, lots more numeracy (problems). But by and large these kids are very good writers. Certainly, I have taught many years in the regular system as well. They are as good as any grade 11 applied English classes I could teach in the community; 90% of these kids can hold their own. But they wouldn’t probably hand in one assignment if in a regular class with 35 kids. I don’t think these kids would hand one thing in, but given the environment we are able to foster, and just the assistance too. A lot of them are very nervous when they come. So the first few pieces of writing might be kind of weak. You know they are worried about their spelling… Spelling is an issue, but I wouldn’t call that hard core literacy you know. Spelling and verb tense. But I mean you are going to get that in Grade 12 Academic too. You’ve got that in a lot of adult emails too - I make a lot of mistakes.

(Language teacher Sec 23 school)

That come to our school? Generally the students that we have, that come here, have been out of school for a period of time. So may be a lot are excited about returning to school but some of them are apprehensive about their ability to complete the work. So we see two sorts of story lines: Either somebody that “I’m going to complete that credit in 2 weeks and move on” because they feel motivated that way. And we have others that are coming here from a different stream. So maybe they may have been on parole and being in school is part of that. And those students are often apprehensive about their ability. They may not want to disclose very often that they had any special education contact in the past, or they may be apprehensive in handing in work. The one common thread among all of our students is they are very needy. They need attention, a lot of immediate feedback on their work, encouragement, an environment that is not going to be punitive or intimidating in any way. They are just very needy I would say. And some I would say, their behavior does not match their chronological age. So, for example I might have a 20 year old student that is really more like a 10 year old in terms of how they
perceive criticism and compliments, in terms of how they relate to authority. So they might be a bit rebellious, or are just overly complimentary to them and they just melt into a puddle, the same way as someone might in elementary school. (Teacher, Sec 23 school)

The youth who generated narratives for this study wants to pursue education no doubt, but it must be relevant to their career goals if that pursuit and interest is going to be sustained.

But in spite of that, in spite of us not having that, I am encouraged to see the number of kids, who especially in the CYTW program, because the light bulbs start going off in their heads and they start looking at what is holding them back, what their long term career goals are and we do some of that through exploration with them and we do the personality assessment: Who am I? Career Cruising - which is what the school systems use to help link kids skill sets and interests and abilities with possible jobs and careers. So kids think about that and say I like to be a paramedic, what do I need to get there? I am encouraged that kids explore that on their own and try to do correspondence.

(ERC Program Director)

And youth just need help knowing what options are out there: Alternative schools, bridging programs, transitional programs, entry into College as mature students, apprenticeships. What might not have worked once for them when all the at-risk stuff such as family, relationships, pregnancy, housing, addictions, was being dealt with might change over time as they are mature and take another crack at school.

Also I think it is important for people to know that these youth do have dreams about pursuing further education, and they do have goals. Many know that they need an education to get into a career that they actually like, need to get beyond flipping burgers, and they know they need that [education], and they do want it. But they don’t know how to start necessarily because it feels like it has been so long since they were there [in school], and it was such a bad experience maybe at the time. A lot of them are afraid I think to go back to school because they relate to their experience of being ostracized, or feeling stupid or feeling frustrated a lot in the system. But they do … many of them dream of going back to
school and they know they need to, but are afraid to and so don’t want to.

I think a lot of them too don’t know the options necessarily. They might not know the way school may have changed over the years for them. For example, there was a youth I worked with, who had not completed high school, had been in the shelter system since she was 16. And she ended up going back to alternative school and loving it. Totally doing really really well. Getting A’s and just like loving the school and probably did not have that experience in high school and so thought that school couldn’t be like that. Then she found this alternative school and really felt she fitted in, everybody accepted, cared for (her), so it was a different experience for her.

(CYTW Supervisor)

Finally I conclude this section enclosing what transpired during the first week of a recent cohort of CYTW youth. It is the second session on the first day of the program. Twelve of the 13 youth (one will be admitted the following day) in the program are present for the session. The topic is GOALS. The facilitator, who is known to most of them since she works at the ERC, begins by asking them what their goals are. Here are their replies verbatim:

P1: Career goal is to be WEALTHY. It is not just money but family, friends, acting and being a model and then winning an Oscar someday
P2: Trying to figure out what career path to get into
P3*: Stability and going back to school and getting a good job
P4*: Trying to go back to school viz. College for Culinary Arts
P5: To be in all three parts of CYTW
P7: To be in all three parts of CYTW; finish my debts; stable housing; and then go into the Army
P8*: Become a Chef
P9: Look for stability and not look for dead-end jobs
P10*: Finish a Course and go to College for Carpentry
P11*: Do a program and then go to University for one year
P12*: To complete my school because the program I’m in is challenging and stressful.

As can be noted (*), right at the outset, at least 6 out of 11 youth present at the time mention school directly.
The session then moves on with quotes, reading from a hand-out, and other activities. The facilitator does speak to them about the importance of ‘planning’ and that’s when there is an exchange between P1 and P5.

P1: For me, I don’t like to plan.
P5: I got to get all the training to get ready for my goal. That’s planning. So, I want to do Food Safety, get all these Certificates to get into school.22

As can be seen, certainly stability and education are very much a part of what their goals are. When given the opportunity and the pathway, they do tend to move incrementally. All the 13 participants graduated from the two week life skills part of the program23 and were placed in supportive employment for the next 10 weeks. P1 becomes a study participant (Y14) and is now placed for Part 3 of CYTW at a Community Recreation Centre in the city. P5 is also now in Part 3 of the Program; he’s at a kitchen in an upscale restaurant in downtown Toronto and loving it. P13, who joins Part 1 a day later, came to the program almost rough from the streets. His goal is to pursue an apprenticeship. He is assisted with securing a placement at a welding shop for Part 3. He is also Y13 in the study.

What made and would have made things different?

Alongside what was helpful to them, in terms of feedback and observations from the programs they participated in, there were a couple of other distinct things that seemed to work better. Sports or music certainly according to these youth helped them focus better when enrolled in school. Good teachers and good adults to whom they can relate were certainly another support for them (Ferguson, et al., 2005). Anything that they could

22 P5 hadn’t directly mentioned school before but does now
23 Summer ’09 cohort
connect/relate to made a difference to them; some mentioned characters in books, some mentioned real life and employment – there just had to be some connection. In other words, abstract concepts were challenging.

_Music, drama, movement_

Something that was hands-on such as drama or playing a musical instrument or just listening to music in the background helped them work better. This benefits them not just in terms of helping them focus on the task at hand, but also helps being able to tune out other things that might be disconcerting to them at the time.

Y3: If music was not there for me, I would probably not have graduated.
… Music was almost an outlet also for the anger. You could make as much noise as you felt like. I use two things to calm me down when I am angry: Go to the Gym and train, punching as hard as you can on the punching bag. Or I go to music, either listening to the calmest music or the most raging. Either (way) I let it subside. Sometimes I mix it too. That is why I like music too. I can just improvise in my heart and play how fast or how loud. I could also play random notes however I wanted. It would also take my mind off whatever was bugging me. Again, calm me down.
… I used my music to help me focus. To someone else it could be art or painting. Someone else had sports. We all had like ADHD and did need something. (Things) at the back of the mind could now be brought to the front. Attention from the back to the front so you could focus better on it.

Y11: And so I wasn’t that interested in school. The only thing I was interested in was in drama. And so when I got a leading role in my school Play it was the happiest moment in my life (smiles). … ...And pretty much so after that Play I felt like I hit rock bottom.

Y12: And from there it was really boring because I would find better ways to entertain myself because I couldn’t sit still. Even to this day I can’t do a sit still job. I like to be up, you want me to do something, I’ll ‘do’ it. …
Y12: Eh…, he [teacher] thought me how to do like a book report and more or less still have fun. Like go and play because he knew how I get bored quite quickly. But he would say, “Do you have music?” I would say, “Yeah.” Then get me your CDs, Eminem and all that stuff. Well, eh, does it make you, you know, tone off the rest of the world? And you get all driven type thing, you just want to do something with that beat or something he said? And I’m like, “Yeah.” “Well,” he says, “well anytime you are doing homework, the way to get it done, rather than listen to your mum say Yes or No, listen to music as you do it. Stomp your foot down to the beat and just have that brain tick away.” I would get my stuff done. Sometimes I’d even get inspiration by some of the words I was hearing. Depends if it is a creative essay or not.

Finding connections

Anything that created a sustainable interest such that they were able to connect or relate to practically, was something they mentioned as helpful. Without this connection, processing the material, or seeing the different steps to achieving a goal for example, or relating to abstract concepts was difficult for them. In terms of academic instruction, the hands-on, connecting to real examples, using their strengths, were something that these youth found helpful for them to grasp academics.

Y10: And Dan Browns books for example, I didn’t necessarily…the way he writes the personality of a character, I would look at a person in a book as a role model. And I would say, “OK, I like that about him. I like this about her…I like this about him and that’s what I want to be in the future.” So a lot of the things I liked were intelligent novels. People that have dignity, respect. People that had integrity - integrity was a big thing for me. I really wanted it. I wanted that.

Integrity was one of the characteristics that I derived from Dumbledore. Dumbledore was the biggest role model when I was younger. It was Dumbledore, Arnold Schwarzenegger, then it was a few of the characters from Lord of the Rings. Wizardry was something I admired, not necessarily because of the abstract and the weirdness about it, that I didn’t like, but because how they strive for knowledge. That...so, integrity was something that I saw Dumbledore had a lot of.
Y10: Oh yeah - the tactics of learning, like if my dad could teach me Math, any concept would be frustrating to learn from him. If my mother thought it to me… Like my dad might sit with me three or four hours to teach me long division. And then I’d go to my mum and I would say, “I don’t get this; I don’t get it. It doesn’t make any sense.” And then, she’d explain it a different way and I would understand. So it’s just a matter of you know connecting, like finding something that I could relate to…

Y10: Let’s say I’m a hands-on person. I learn out in the field, right? The education system isn’t geared towards that until you are in the apprenticeship programs or something like that, right? You give me a Rubik’s cube, I can figure it out. But you tell me on the blackboard, I’m going to be like….what???

Connections between school and work are also important. Focus group participants, particularly those from alternative programs spoke of the importance co-op has had in reclaiming students and perhaps getting them back to school. It has worked for students because it gives them something useful and hands-on to do to occupy their time. Often it shows them a career pathway that they were unaware of and they now become motivated to pursue education be it completing school, going to college, doing an apprenticeship or whatever is required to pursue this career pathway. Furthermore, the stipend or remuneration was a good incentive to these youth to complete the program.

That’s unique, the COOP in terms of reclaiming past students. The ones, who have probably the highest attendance in high school, are either the ones that are there just for one or two credits to upgrade, very few. And the other ones [that attend regularly], are the ones that get engaged through COOP and a number of different programs - like one offered by the government so they are paired up [with a co-op placement].

(Science teacher, Alt school)

Peer group support

These students functioned best alongside their peers. There were numerous incidents mentioned by them and the service providers and focus group participants to
speak to the importance of letting them work with their peers. In this regard it can once again be seen how isolating them in special education - away from their peers and the main group - was not the way to go.

And they continue to come back because they are engaged with each another, and the task that I offer them to do [Daily Bread Food Bank, etc] isn’t hopefully beyond their abilities and that they are able to do it.

(Success for All teacher)

**Group instruction that values participation**

My most significant learning around successful instruction workshop formats for these youth came from my fieldwork experience through observation and participation in various kinds of workshops/groups they attended. I keenly observed what style of facilitators and topics for instruction youth enjoyed. The key to success in these workshops was a combination of choosing topics youth can relate to, whilst letting them know what they needed to be aware of and change in terms of their behaviour (life skills sessions). Simultaneously, it was necessary to allow them to converse during the workshops. Sessions could never have a direct form of instruction where the facilitator speaks and the youth listen - top-down, questions later. Immediacy was important as well. The facilitator needed to keep it real with real life stories, actual facts, relevant examples, personal experiences. I learned the most successful workshops were the ones where the youth participated. There was mutual aid going on during those sessions and they called one another on things that were shared. Youth like clear rules and expectations, a bit of structure that is not too overbearing and they want you to call them when they stray beyond the boundary. But relationship, especially in terms of how the facilitators/teachers treat them as equals, is important too. They resented being spoken down to.
The following quotes are from a focus group participant sharing her experience on the kinds of formats youth are attracted to. I then include my own observations on two sessions: one the beginning of a workshop on resumes, and the other reflections based on my observations just after a new teacher did a Teachers College version of a well-prepared lesson.

But I think too the piece is the relationship, right? Street kids they don’t like my co-workers but I’m pretty popular there. I do workshops. Who is there for an OW workshop, and we can’t curb the discussion. People are raising hands. One of my favourite workshops, my co-workers go all crazy when I say it is ‘The top 10 things you hate about OW workers.’ I do it as a life skills piece, right?

“Oh, I hate how they never call me back.” Okay. So, I inform you of what your rights are, this is the protocol that within 24 hrs if they haven’t called, you should ask to speak to a supervisor. Now let’s look at what you [youth] could do differently that maybe we [OW staff] are not calling you back. Exchange cell phone numbers like there’s no tomorrow. So I balance… I validate, right, their experience. “Well, you know, no respect.” Okay I understand dah, dah, dah. You know sometimes I understand it’s hard; I can only say as much as I can to be angry … I know you are hungry but when you go off, how do you communicate because you get hurt. If you swear at me, you are giving me licence to hang up on you. I don’t have to take that. So, you are making it easier. Now I’m not saying, ‘Hold on to your anger, but how do you channel it?’ How do you phrase it differently? Now you don’t have to give up.

You know, being in the ERC I saw the sort of white boys, hip hop, the fierce little gang looking tattoos and they are looking for housing and they are like, “Yo man, I hear you got a place for rent.” I’m like, “Come, come, come.” “With all due respect” I said, “You’re young and you’ve got tattooed up just like there’s no tomorrow.” When they open the door, first of all you are not getting to go to see the apartment. Some guys are going to open the door, they are going to close it on you because they are going to think ‘party’, ‘drugs’, ‘gangs’. So, how can you present differently? You can maybe keep your hat twisted, but maybe you wear long sleeves. “Hello Sir. I’m looking for an apartment.” So, that kind of stuff.

I’m not going to tell you things are going to get better because it’s not. It’s actually like going to get worse probably, right? And so people like, honour that. “You know, at least she tells it like its
real.” So, what can we do to make it better? How can we improve the quality of your life? You stay on welfare, it’s going to suck. You can barely exist, let alone live, right? So, what I really explore is the relationship. At the same time saying that, it’s within a particular context, it becomes very difficult. And the way I can be at Evergreen, I can’t be in a booth [in the Welfare Office].

(FG Participant)

I thought this session began well and the youth would take it to heart because the Facilitator is a head hunter and seems to have experience of having read a lot of resumes and it can be advantageous therefore to listen to her. However, there is some starting trouble. As P1 comes in late, he reads her name (from her name tag) and calls her by her first name. She responds by saying, “Oh, I see you can read!” That does not seem to go over very well. P1 is upset at this comment regarding his reading ability and can no longer get into this session. Each time the Facilitator tries to say something; he will say his experience has been different and contradict her. For example, she speaks to the number of times people have to go for interviews before they finally land a job. P1 says he just went to an interview and they hired him right away. She says he’s lucky...etc... A constant back and forth banter between him and the presenter goes on during the session.

(Fieldwork notes)

At one of the alternative classes serving street-involved youth, there was a new hire. The teacher came with a lot of energy and initiative. On the first day the teacher was given time just to get used to the place and get ready for the next day’s lesson. I don’t know what the lesson was except that it was on Science, but I noticed the teacher spending a lot of time in preparation of charts, posters, audio-visuals, and displaying them around the room. I returned the next day just in time to find things had not gone as per plans and expectations.

On one occasion there was a sort of mutiny when a new teacher - good intentioned, well trained, experienced, but coming from another high school - tried to teach a lesson to these youth using a lot of charts, aids, audiovisuals, information on the topic. The youth rebelled. It wasn’t that the teacher was unprepared for the lesson but was not adequately prepped on procedures to solicit input, acknowledge prior knowledge, and ways to facilitate group
participation and discussion all through the lesson. What next happened was an exchange that became almost a battle between staff on one side and youth on the other. The staff wanted to rally together, take control of the situation, and not let a colleague’s preparation go unacknowledged. Youth wanted staff to know that they saw through what they thought was a façade. According to the youth although this learning program said it was different, in practice it wasn’t. Youth felt once again that they were up against a system. They were losing control of their lives and a learning situation (and the environment) once again. It reminded them too much of ‘other’ formal school situations they’d come from where similar incidents had taken place.

Other support staff, including counsellors who work with these youth outside this learning program (school) but within the same organization, were called in to speak to some of the youth. It now seemed more of an ‘us-them’ situation. Not only was the presentation interrupted, but a change in schedule was called for. Things were tense and taking a break would help. This change left the youth free for the rest of the morning. Students were instructed to come back after lunch for the final learning session of the day.

Staff and support staff met over the lunch period and came to the conclusion that they couldn’t just let things be; something had to be done as they were teachers, the ones in a leadership role. They became aware that a few key youth were responsible for the disruption, including wanting things to be done their way, and if they couldn’t be run along those lines, because these were teachers and no different from other teachers, these youth would choose to leave. Staff decided to pre-empt this and ask one/two of the youth to leave instead.

While this is how it was resolved prior to my walking in to a rather tense afternoon as students arrived for the final session of the day, I realized what learning environments help these youth: small, one-on-one or small group instruction, lots of participation, a confident trainer who is flexible, sharp, inviting, and certainly not phased by discipline and behaviour situations that emerge readily in a classroom with similar youth.

While being there to see this first-hand and also listening to the teachers’ description of the situation, I realized once again that dealing with these youth in large numbers can be quite challenging. They want things their way, are great in ganging up on some figures that represent the system, and are good at arguing to get their point of view
across. They also often tend to have a sense of entitlement and demand things go their way.

**Other things that work**

In addition, what works best is the relationship, flexibility, creative curriculum that is at the level of these youth. It is also important to pace the program and have flexible start dates and continuous in-take and registration procedures.

I think it is very very important (i) this ‘caring concerned adult’ role I serve; (ii) the smaller classroom, smaller school all around; (iii) completely reasonable school expectations where I individually prepare programs for each of them clearly knowing what their identifications were. So I was able to take curriculum and create programs they could do both here in the classroom and on their own; (iv) The flexibility in the schedule where they only had to be there a couple of days, twice in the week - some came every day and I had to send them out; so I think just having flexibility here was useful for them.

(Teacher, Alt school)

Well I know George Brown had a program in Welfare Support, it is called ‘Redirection to Life’ and I have really pushed a lot of people in that direction - younger and older because it works with people that have been street involved, addiction involved ... You start by taking College English, Assertiveness training, and life skills. And what they do for you is they try to work with the individual and help them, and see what their need educationally is, and work them down the road to get into one of the regular programs. But, start slow. And they get an educational counselor and they don’t go 9 to 5 every day; it’s a lot easier scheduling. Go maybe 3 times a week. Have Groups. Have people you can talk to, and if you have a problem go any time talk to any instructor, or people in the program to get help that they need.

So, many kinds of programs like that. But people need to know about them, and they need to have easy access to get in. Like it can't be complicated. Even for a lot of kids that have any kind of learning disabilities, filling out a million forms is another problem. They just don’t have the patience to do that. Or, they need help to do that.

I think too for a lot of kids, like a lot of youth have a hard time focusing and so there needs to be new learning techniques for kids
that have a hard time with focus. Like even different teaching styles, like teaching with music, learning from song lyrics, or from movies. There has to be more creativity I think in actual teaching styles because there are kids that just can't sit. They just have those problems. You have to find ways to educate them. Or, help them in ways that they will understand or interest them. And, let them be involved.

(Drop-in & Prison worker; Pastor)

A staff member at Evergreen runs a Jujitsu program for street involved youth. It helps the youth learn and develop their bodies. In addition, they begin to experience a certain dissonance and discrepancy within their present lifestyle and begin to change their habits, their nutritional intake, and other personal activities and routines once they start to find what works for them and makes them feel successful.

A lot of them, they love it - number one I think! Two of the guys I know suffer from depression. They have been diagnosed actually when they were incarcerated.

One of ways that they work through the depression was through exercise. And exercise will improve the serotonin levels and their endorphins and that would help them work through a lot. A problem with that is it’s hard to get a job when they are depressed basically. It is so simple. And I think if we can manage some of that depression, manage some of that frustration. It is a way for them to just let that out. Great for self-esteem, they see the results. They realize that boxing or martial arts is an endurance sport. So that would either mean the elimination, or even the reduction of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. Because if they continue with the amount that they are using, when I work them out, they will be begging god for air. So they realize that they have to either reduce or eliminate their chemical or alcohol intake. So that is just one way.

(Drop-in staff)

**Blending of life skills with instruction**

Service providers and focus group members spoke to the importance of addressing not just academics but life skills for these youth. Youth have had vast life experiences in terms of what they may have gone through, but somehow the basics of
communication, problem solving, ‘assertiveness and not aggressiveness’ need to be addressed at all times.

It is sort of like a basic like getting back in school but not how to write a paper, but also some life skills kind of related stuff. So I think probably for street youth they don’t need to know just how to write a paper, they really need a little extra support as to how their life is going to tie into their education. I am just trying to approach it from like employment focus. I mean what we need to do is work. I mean going to work and doing a good job is only part of what we deal with. It is also so much of life skills. So the budgeting, and how to keep yourself healthy, and all that stuff is really related to street involved youth. They have to be. That life stuff has to be addressed in some way and they need support to address it.

(CYTW Supervisor)

You know if I reflect on it, our kids say “I just never could fit in the classroom.” Or, what is it about the teaching style or the learning style of the youth that makes the classroom unbearable? Maybe more hands-on learning needs to happen and it is about less learning the facts to pass an exam and for those kids more learning about life and learning to cope in life.

(ERC Program Director)

The one common thread among all of our students is they are very needy. They need attention, a lot of immediate feedback on their work, encouragement, an environment that is not going to be punitive or intimidating in any way. They are just very needy I would say. And some I would say, their behavior does not match their chronological age. So, for example I might have a 20 year old student that is really more like a 10 year old in terms of how they perceive criticism & compliments, in terms of how they relate to authority. So they might be a bit rebellious or are just overly complimentary to them and they just melt into a puddle, the same way as someone might in elementary school.

(Teacher, Sec 23 school)

**Self-advocacy**

Youth need to be made aware and taught about their strengths alongside their challenges that come with their exceptionality and learning style. They need to be made aware of how they can use their strengths/exceptionalities as learners positively so that they can learn and not get frustrated and give up. They need to be able to accept and
make choices around these strengths. They should feel comfortable to advocate with educators, employers and others, to give these strengths alongside their challenges due consideration in curriculum development, program delivery and evaluation practices.

And those advocacy pieces are missing for a lot of youth, period. Especially for those with LD or other special education profiles.

So I think a school program also needs to have a life skills piece to it where they can get basic information. I think all kids can benefit from it, particularly this population. Like: How do I get an apartment, how do I budget my money, what is like appropriate nutrition? Like those pieces as well as having an academic piece. Like a space for them to be able to ask questions and get some answers from people who are trustworthy, rather than asking somebody else from the street a question who is equally uninformed. I think (of) those bits of the school (that are needed). So if I would summarize it like an understanding from where those students are coming from.

And like the flexibility around start times, and the other pieces of just working and seeing yourself as part of a team that works for that student. And in a lot of ways that’s what sort of did not work out for them earlier on in life [at other schools].

(Teacher Sec 23 program)

Once the right environment and the right supports are in place for these youth, they provide outstanding work. The exceptionalities which initially were barriers to their success, are now not even a consideration as they start to move forward.

So (not) bigger schools….I guess we know what they like because they respond so well to the environment that we provide. And they are able to say, “Oh, so this is why the bigger schools did not work for me, because this works.” They will often say, “Wow, I cannot believe that I am getting this work done, I’m actually getting a credit. I’m reading a book. I come to school and I do my work.”

They identify why, that is because they say the environment is so much calmer, they have easy teacher access, PTR eight to one. Their every need is met, in terms of right from you need a pen it is right there for them. They have a question, the teacher is right there. And they seem to need that kind of reassurance. And then they slowly get very independent; and we are all of us across the board astounded at the amount of work these kids will pump out. And they feel safe here, they feel calm, they don’t seem to have the anxiety that they have in the bigger school system, where there is a
lot more I think of external peer pressures. And, I don’t need to provide accommodation for 90% of them.

All of a sudden the ADHD and ADD disappears. It is because this environment is so peaceful. And, I find the Computer Lab helps a lot. They interact with their computer. And, they can listen to music. They find ways that they can learn. If they need to, they can get up and go to the bathroom, get a glass of water. It is a very sort of adult model and they like that and respond really well to it. They don’t abuse it - you know they are not chatty; they are just perfect, producing tons of work in a very nice little environment to them. To me it is really environmental.

… And, they want the boundaries, they want strict teachers. They don’t want you to take any nonsense in the class. No. And they respond very well to very clear boundaries. But, you know at the same time you better be a bit easy going, and be able to laugh little bit about it all.

…But, I think, the thing that shocked me the most coming into this field of work is the outstanding work I get from them. I would hold it up to anybody to show how bright they are. Because the stereotype would be that they can’t cut it. They dropped out, they can’t cut it and it is so not the case. And that we have to provide the environment. I mean they are here instead of out of the streets, involved in crime, involved in things that lead to the public safety being comprised you know. So you want them in school, and you want to give them the opportunities. I think we owe them you know. The family structure has let them down and it is not their fault. So, we owe them a safe place to learn and to be able to have the chance at a future, at maybe college education.

(Language teacher, Sec 23 program)

It is necessary, as part of the group format where these youth work with their peers, to allow them to sort things out. The mutual aid piece is important unlike in a traditional system of education where it was the teacher who was primarily responsible for instruction, evaluation, rules – everything. The final quote in this section is from the session on goals. It speaks to mutual aid in the group and a good facilitator who knows to let it take place, but also the right way to step in at an opportune time.
The Facilitator talks about sharing your goals with others and P7 says he will share it with CYTW staff and people at Evergreen who have kept him going.

P1 is 23 years old and by 28 wants to have his own place. “Who will I share it with???? My dog.” Immediately P2 says it’s not realistic. She has begun the process of challenging him which also takes place in these groups. They take it well. There is laughter that goes around. P1 is not willing to give up his point of view and keeps processing while arguing what he aims to do and continues giving a number of reasons why he would do so viz. share his goals with his dog. The Facilitator jumps in: “I have a dog and I love him to death. But, I wouldn’t share my goals with my dog.”

The kind of special education that is beneficial

From talking to the youth and the service providers, it did seem that these youth have needs that need to be addressed, but somehow the way their needs are presently being met in the school systems they came from is not the ideal way it should be done. While supports need to be provided to the youth, they should not be made to feel different from their peers while receiving these supports. This means they should not be completely withdrawn from regular class, but perhaps offered the supports rather discreetly. This is like ‘invisible special education.’ It should be seamless. The supports are offered, but not in a manner that makes the kids stand out as needing something different or extra in comparison to the rest of their peers. We should also train youth to know exactly what their needs are and help them advocate to have these needs addressed so that they can be successful. So it is not treating them ‘special’, or making them feel special as youth do not like that, but giving them what they need to help them be successful.

And the kid that I took that had a mild intellectual disability, what he did not want to be was in a class, with the same kids all the day that were separate from everyone else. He wanted to have that
experience of being able to rotate and feel normal and not sort of ostracized. So if there are ways to be inclusive, while allowing the student to have the supports that they need. So, sort of like ‘invisible special ed’ kind of needs to happen and that piece of just having ongoing open discussions built into all classes about you know learning differences, because everybody has a way that they learn or a way that they can show their knowledge that’s stronger than another. So, I’m more verbal than I am in another area for example. So you know that kind of sharing.

So by saying, ‘Invisible special ed’ and I will use the example of the kid who approached me and says I can’t take the notes off the board. I made sure as a teacher that he had the notes. So he had a time he could come to meet me to get the notes ahead of time. But he had to take onus for that which is fine. He was able to do that. So he already had the notes and he could highlight things or whatever. But I did not make a point of saying “Now let’s wait class, Philip’s not finished writing everything down.” Or, hand the notes to him in front of everyone else because I can appreciate as a 14 or 15 year old boy, it is humiliating that people might think that you are different. You just want to be sort of invisible or just like a part of the crowd. So it is finding ways to get the supports for the kid without making them stand out.

(Teacher, Sec 23 program)

We also have to learn in special education to normalize differences so that students receiving this support appear not to be the exception, the ones always needing additional support. If students are trained to realize that mostly all their strengths lie in the unique ways they learn and this is seen as normal, then they will come to accept different learning styles as more the rule than the exception it presently is.

So if we normalize more of…like if you make it more normal, to do the kinds of things so that people are doing presentations with Video Cameras and PowerPoint rather than with written (formats) all the time. Once the teacher can normalize that, and I’ve seen them, I’ve seen them do brilliant things in the English classrooms and you know other classrooms where every kid has the opportunity to select something like that so that the kid, who needs to use it, is no longer “abnormal”. I think what you have to do is try and create an environment where that becomes more normal. And, that’s what I meant by, “Its differentiated program, it is not preferential treatment.” If a kid gets preferential treatment because
they are labelled, then they don’t want the label as such and it’s not fair.

(VP, Focus group participant)

Overall there seem to be ways to go when one looks at how things are done presently. There is need of education to build awareness around looking at differences and exceptionalities as strengths that benefit everyone, all across the board. It is not just these students who need to look at an exceptionality and support provided as positive, but also their peers, their parents, their teachers, and society in general. We need to come to normalize the assistance provided even to hidden disabilities such as learning disabilities, which may not be seen but are nevertheless there and require accommodation.

SP: I suppose more education also in Teachers College Pre-service. Perhaps like a required special education course where they have to just academically look at all the criteria and realize that if a student has an LD they are actually quite bright. Most people know that but I think some of us don’t, and whether we realize it or not, what we believe, what our true values are, that gets communicated to students all the time unconsciously. And so it could be part of like the teaching profession. But I don’t actually think it is.

I think most of the time it comes from the family and the friends around the student. And whoever their peers are, if they are not understanding and they tend to, you know when they are little they make fun of each other. Even when they are big they make fun of each other, and I think anybody who gets told that they are not smart often enough starts to believe it. Or, if they are told, they want to hide it, right? It’s almost, it’s very hard because an LD is like a hidden disability. I’ve seen people who you know, we always used to remark with my colleagues that I used to work with, we see like people turn cartwheels for a student in a wheelchair, because you can see the disability. But for the learning disability, you can’t see it. Part of you doesn’t really think that it’s there. And I think that is really hard to get over. It’s very hard to get your head over something that you can’t see, and actually believe that it is real. I’ve had people tell me, “I think it’s a crock.” They don’t believe it.

Q: When you say you’ve had people tell you, are talking about professionals?
SP: Yeah, huh, huh, huh. Well, they don’t have the nerve to tell me. They tell other colleagues and then the colleagues tell me. It doesn’t happen very often; I think those people are in the great minority. A majority of teachers are very professional about it and they do want to know. But there are the minority of people that possibly don’t quite believe it because they can’t see it, right? The same thing with someone who is deaf or hard of hearing. If you can see the hearing aid, then you know that you have to accommodate. If you know a student has a hearing loss and they don’t use the hearing aid, then you don’t necessarily register that you have to accommodate. It’s like you need to put the label right on the forehead of the person - but that would be even worse, right?

SP; Head of special education

In this regard, much is spoken about having these youth come to see their learning style, as a strength and not a weakness. Being aware of this strength and using it to their advantage is what will help them succeed. It will compensate for other weaknesses they may have in learning situations. The breakdown occurs because on the one hand the exceptionality is looked at as a deficit, and on the other hand we do not train the youth to ask for things to be done in certain ways and expressed through mediums they are comfortable with. In other words, be self-advocates. Strength and self-advocacy pieces are lacking in the present system of identifying and offering supports although one can see they are beginning to be put in place even by those who are involved in testing, labelling and writing reports on behalf of these youth.

So, I believe in special ed. I think the ‘integration’ is helpful. I think we need to be sensitive to what the student feels. And I think that relationship and that explaining to them that, “No you have lots of strengths.” I think one of the things that might be difficult is so often we are focused on what’s wrong. (This is) where the breakdown is...

I think it has been [a deficit model]. I think we are turning that around. And I think, certainly in psychology [Psychology Department at the School Board] we are talking much more about strengths, and strength-based assessments and resilience. So I think, what we are thinking is, we need to help them see what they
are really good at too. So that when they are presented with a picture, they don’t just see what their weaknesses are. They need to see where their strengths are and where those strengths could take them. So we are doing a lot of talking about that. We are trying to incorporate that into our reports. I think this is the piece that’s missing too for them, right?

SP; Psychological Associate

So we do have ways to go. Stigma around labelling and placement in special education still exists. It is still looked at as a weakness, as something is missing for these students. However, they still want to go to school and learn. There are certain formats that are both appealing to them and allow them to excel. Some of these have been outlined in this chapter such as hands-on instruction, academics connected to life and work, group instruction, participation, self-advocacy and most important, ‘invisible special education.’ Having gathered all this from the analysis of narratives, service provider interviews, data from focus groups and the count question there is need for a general discussion of this subgroup’s disassociation from special education, the shifts and changes in perceptions that are needed and also the kinds of programs and assistance for students and street-youth with exceptionalities that will positively impact them. While this will be taken up in the next chapter, there is need to link together the narrative methodology used with each individual youth and how the narratives they constructed spoke individually to the themes highlighted in the last three chapters.

**Summarizing and analysing a narrative of one of the youths**

In this dissertation, the word ‘narrative’ is used several times. It is now time to bring some closure and specificity to it. Narrative research analyzes the extended account, rather than fragmenting it into thematic categories (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 395). It is important for narrative researchers to pay analytic attention to “how the facts
got assembled *that way*” (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 393). I began the section on findings with the activation of Y15’s story in chapter 4, and a description of the context and circumstances that led up to him consenting to disclose he had been a special education student and participate in the study. The narrative he then completes over four individual sessions speaks about his lived experience with special education then and now. Earlier, I spoke to inviting him to generate his story, now I speak to interpreting his story.

A narrative has a unity/pattern of its own, beyond the activation itself. In popular usage, a ‘story’ seems to speak for itself. But “when narratives are used in research they require close interpretation – narrative analysis – which can be accomplished in a number of ways...” (Riessman, 2008, p. 3). It would be useful to conclude this section including a general analysis of the pattern in Y15’s narrative, and present a summary of the text from his narrative in this section as it further demonstrates and ties together the themes spoken about in these last three chapters.

The pattern of Y15’s narrative can be analyzed in terms of purpose, plot and the resources on which he draws. The purpose of his narrative seems more to deconstruct his formal educational career in terms of what happened to him, and construct his own “revised” identity that lies latent until after he completes his assessment. This identity is a commitment to pursue learning, and his agency in the process of doing so. The occasion/precipitating event seems to be the relief he experiences after completing a psycho-educational assessment as a young adult during the first semester of college that concludes that he does not have a learning disability. The plot is constructed around comparison and variation between dyadic sets of events in his life: between the first and
second semester in college, and the differences in his feelings between these two based on this assessment; between the differences between college and high school in terms of his individual agency and the impact of systems and structures; between the differences in his membership in special education in high school and elementary school and the process of disengagement. In his narrative, there is always a moving back and forth between one and the other and a revised interpretation of these events in the light of the present assessment. The resources he draws on are assumptions, assessments, and his student records that he accesses. While assumptions made about him during his school trajectory confined him to believe he was not capable, he now feels the conclusions made in the assessment motivate him to try and challenge obstacles he had been socialized to accept passively. Overall, he doesn’t deny he had certain problems in school. What he wishes could be changed is how these problems are looked at when the education system focuses more on attempts to define and label him instead of addressing them. “If they had focused less on trying to represent me as someone with a common definable problem, [and] instead had tried to address my issues as one individual student, they would have gotten better results.” In his own words at the end of his narrative, he summarizes the rationale for his participation as, “the biggest incentive for me to show up for the study is because I felt compelled to talk about this stuff. I felt embarrassed about it before, but I have come to terms with it.”

His narrative contains sequence and consequence. While sequence is the linear unfolding of the narrative, consequence refers to how events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful over time (Riessman, 2008; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). The outline included below gives a snapshot of the sequence of Y15’s
narrative. It is constructed entirely by him. I, the researcher, mainly scribed and listened; if there were a few questions, their purpose was mainly to seek clarifications. There were also a few profound discussions where he shared his opinions on homelessness, transience and culture but they did not make their way into his narratives, and remain almost as asides. Similar to some of the other youth (For example, Y12 who calls his story a movie that he can play, forward and advance, like episodes of a television series, or Y14 who narrates single scenes, such as the one included outside the Principal’s office that was a turning point for his school career which he intends one day to make into a movie), it contains a coherent story-line, uninterrupted even over successive interviews, and fused with emerging themes. Interestingly the different themes that weave it together serve to summarize this section of findings. If one wishes to see how events are selected, organized, connected and evaluated within the narrative, it is included as an extended account in the Appendix of this dissertation. Including it there allows space for the readers’ alternative interpretations (Chase, 2005).

The following is a summary of Y15’s story and major themes interspersed within it. This provides a useful framework for anyone wanting to know the parameters of Y15’s story that other street youth in special education, similarly situated, may tell once they find their voice despite the resistance or denial of an identity constructed for them. In this sense his narrative is both unique and similar.

- Testing and placement in special education are circumstantial
- Placement is in the critical period, grade 3, and you pretty much are expected to remain there for the remainder of your time in school
- Problems at school make for problems at home with parents; problems between parents make for problems at school

- Special education curriculum and being in the class of special education makes you feel like an idiot, a ‘loser’

- Insults and teasing related to ‘craziness’ or ‘stupidity’ are assumed or thrown at you when you belong to special education

- There are benefits to being in special education like lighter work load. In the early grades it’s enjoyable, but later you realize you are falling far behind.

- Special education puts you into a holding pattern in the sense that you lose your competitive drive. It becomes self-fulfilling, self-perpetuating in that you assume the identity of the label

- If the special education curriculum isn’t interesting, students can’t relate and focus on it. But educators think that students can’t focus because they don’t get it or maybe they are lazy

- Everyone defaults to the assumption that the kid does not fit in, they forget to ask what about the program and whether it needs reform

- Dropping out of high school is not a one-time thing. It is also based on a collection of contributing factors, one of them being, you simply can’t do school the way it is structured for you

- Somewhere on their own, they come to the realization that something isn’t wrong with them but with the system, the family, the program, the placement. But they can’t sift through what it means to be ‘normal’ because they’ve always been assumed to be ‘not normal’
- There is a quest for an authoritative valid diagnosis: Looking for some piece of paper to confirm there is something wrong with me, because I’m being told that is the case. But an assessment just isn’t that clear-cut

- Feel very *intimidated* in college or post-secondary

- It’s not easy to get through a semester even in college operating under the assumption there’s something wrong with you. It is far easier to get through a semester under the assumption there is nothing wrong with you and you have to perform to a standard

- Differences between college and high school: In high school, work is given to you as if you have the learning issue or label and correspondingly the quality of the work is dependent on this. In school, there are inconsistencies among different students within the class, or for the same student with different classes and teachers as teachers accommodate structure, leniency, and allowances for lateness inconsistently. They also have different beliefs about what an exceptionality means. In college, you are the authority and have credibility when it comes to your own school (learning) issues, not your family or the guidance counsellor. You are independent and can negotiate things around your strengths/exceptionalities and your interests

- When youth in special education are made to operate under the assumption they are not capable, they stop trying and start living as ‘incapable’ of making it unlike the other youth who graduate from school and move on

- Medication is often proposed as the first alternative. Reluctance to medication occurs over time because it keeps changing and because of its side effects which
include that it seems to influence thinking, makes you emotionally numb and influences sleep patterns
CHAPTER 7 Discussion

“You think I don’t know the difference between GLC and GLE?? One is the Careers class; the other is the Learning Strategies class, the class for retards”
- Adult employee in a high school

Citizenship in special education and its social connotations

The subset of street youth in this exploratory study, those who shared and generated their narratives with me, seemed unwilling to claim citizenship in special education. This is the one thing that stood out very clearly, both individually and as a group in this study.

Individually, it was challenging to get youth to participate in the study as can be seen from the difficulties of recruitment. The literature indicates many street youth do not graduate from high school (Barber, et al., 2005; Barwick & Siegel, 1996; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Yonge Street Mission, 2009). The survey question asked of all new in-takes at the ERC had shown that only 38% of new intakes and 25% of life skills session participants were not special education youth (see Table 1) and the large majority of them were former special education students\(^\text{24}\). Yet youth did not want to take part in the study, often denying they were special education students.

As a group, there were times during life skills sessions when there was silence as opposed to any discussion when it came to topics related to special education, although generally youth love to talk at sessions and can talk passionately about almost anything relating it to their own experience or something that had happened to a friend recently. Even when talking with youth informally when they were with their peers, it became

\(^{24}\) Among new intakes 56% and among life skills sessions participants it was 70%. Some indicated they don’t know and this indicates it could be either that they didn’t know or didn’t choose to reveal the same.
clear that the default position was a denial of any involvement with special education. When one of the OW volunteers, who is very popular at the drop-in, asked one of the peer mentors about why it is difficult to talk about special education involvement, he mentioned that the reason in his estimation that youth do not want to disclose this is because no one wants to admit that they have been a failure. She no doubt was unaware that he was a participant in the narrative piece of the study, but it made me look deeper at why this was so. I began to compare it to different labels and identities including their disclosure of ADHD on the one hand, but several other disclosures related to abuse, trauma, gender changes and sexual identity, substance abuse, convictions and charges in the juvenile and criminal system, and sex trade work that youth disclosed. Interestingly, similar to what this peer mentor had mentioned, youth in general seemed to have considered association with special education to be associated with failure and hence they wanted nothing to do with it. They did not want anything to do with citizenship in special education. Citizenship, although a broader concept in structuration theory (Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1982b, 1984, 1989; Held, 1997), can lend an analytic perspective to this discussion.

Anthony Giddens uses citizenship and autonomy as a framework to analyze some of the key features of modern society and the contributions of the major theories of political and social theory, above all, liberalism and Marxism (Held, 1997). Giddens borrows from Marshall (1973, as cited in Held, 1997) the notion of citizenship which is ‘full membership in a community’, where membership entails participation by individuals in the determination of the conditions of their own association. Citizenship is
a status which bestows on individuals equal rights and duties, liberties and constraints, powers and responsibilities.

If citizenship is a principle of equality, class, by contrast, is a system of inequality, anchored in “property, education and the structure of the national economy” (Held, 1997, p. 263). Citizenship is supposed to create access to scarce resources and move towards full participation, while the class system does the opposite, creating tiers, distinctions and access based on (class) membership. While I am oversimplifying and generalizing beyond some of the specific contexts of structuration theory, and this notion which Giddens took from Marshall who himself was looking at Britain and how universal political citizenship developed there, there are detailed references in the original essays of Giddens (Held, 1997) to social rights, including development of public elementary education as a step towards other redistributive measures of the postwar welfare state including other rights such as health, social security and progressive taxation. These proved to be the foundation of equality (from the inequality created in traditional feudal society) on which the (modern) structure of inequality (yes, inequality) would be built. So, even though citizenship has progressed from one era to the next, according to structuration theory, there are still inherent paradoxes contained within it with regard to equality/inequality historically. Special education can be seen as moving towards a ‘fuller measure of equality’ in its attempts and claims to enrich the experience of those on whom it bestows citizenship.

Citizenship however is complex and multidimensional. If citizenship involves the struggle for membership and full participation in a community, then its analysis involves examining the way in which different groups, classes and movements struggle to gain
degrees of autonomy and control over their lives in the face of various forms of stratification, hierarchy and political oppression. Here we can see connections to issues posed by disability studies to access and participation. The youth in this study were struggling for full participation in education, and not citizenship in special education. From their agency and individual perspectives, particularly as they mentioned around the time when they came into high school, they became aware that to belong to special education meant accepting other social connotations that accompanied it. These were labelling, stigma and ‘stupidism’ on the one hand, but also citizenship in special education, if anything, meant less than full participation in education. They realized they were being singled out for educational problems, identified, labelled and placed in special education, but as special education citizens they were less than likely to fulfill socially acceptable goals in life, such as being accepted by their peers, success in school, and progressing to a career or post-secondary pathway (Finlay & Lyons, 1998). In the words of Telzrow (1999), “systems [in special education] are in place to level the playing field, the game score often remains a losing one for students with disabilities” (p. 10).

Citizenship in special education comes with discourses that are focused on deficits (Portelli, et al., 2007). Deficit discourses pathologize students in powerful therapeutic language full of medical authority. They attribute educational failure to individual and family shortcomings rather than to institutional or structural practices and power relations. They identify intellectual, cultural, and linguistic differences as disabilities and deficits. The implication is that these differences represent pathologies in need of cure rather than alternative and legitimate ways of being in the world (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005). Youth (for example, Y10 & Y15) spoke about how they and
their families believed in doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, teachers and guidance counsellors. Yet, at each successive visit, the labels and the diagnosis changed. The medication and the placements were also changed often. It seemed that different medications and programs were being tried on them and they often spoke about how the medication made them feel lethargic, unmotivated, apathetic and generally losing control. Rather than things improving, they were only made to feel worse, as if something was wrong with them. Ultimately, they gave up, realizing that if they followed what was being offered to them, they were getting further behind the rest of their peers.

Part of special education discourse is the organizational pathology that occurs in schools. Youth once within a program are expected to remain within it for the rest of their school career and special education becomes a sort of a holding pattern (Fairbanks, 1992) that limits their opportunity to perform complex tasks. Youth spoke about the quality of the instruction, the very choice of classrooms and portables for special education classes, and the holding of some of the behavioural classes in facilities that were less appealing than the facilities offered to their peers in the regular steam.

So, the citizenship that they were denying is the following: One that had all kinds of social connotations attached to its members, one that took them into a downward spiral - one that is self-fulfilling, self-propagating - ultimately one that is anything but equal. Simultaneously they did acknowledge some of the good parts that demonstrated that they are judicious in their evaluations. They spoke about the smaller classes in terms of student-teacher ratio and one-on-one instruction as beneficial. In addition, they liked flexible deadlines including extra time to complete assignments and even opportunities sometimes to change assignments according to their interests. They were also able to
speak of teachers who made a difference when they listened, believed in them, and imparted quality instruction and challenged the potential these youth had. If only these encounters with caring adults were more universal (Ferguson, et al., 2005), and if all of these programs and placements came with corresponding instruction and full credits leading to graduation and post-secondary, then this might have mitigated some of their reluctance and resistance to participating in special education.

Using the framework of Giddens, one can further analyze systems comprising special education. School resources are allocated towards special education (Bennett, et al., 2008), but not tracked to see how individuals benefit from them. Special education creates structuration, a way of doing things. So it has assessments, committees and processes in place for categorization, legislation to support its delivery (For example, Bill 82; Bennett & Wynne, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a), master lists and advisory committees to advise the public, philosophies that include inclusion and learning for all presently (L4A)\textsuperscript{25} and a common vocabulary that is understood by educators. But if we don’t look critically at all these systems, structures, discourses, practices from macro, meso and micro levels, to see who benefits and/or gets marginalized by these practices and constructions, and if we automatically endorse them without paying attention to the purpose and consequences of our actions or the possible inconsistencies between our beliefs and values, intended and unintended outcomes, then we run the risk of perpetuating inequality rather than promoting equal participation and access for all citizens in these systems. But that analysis though important, is not the main purpose of this dissertation. Keeping in mind the overall categories and forces that affect this subset

\textsuperscript{25} L4A, “Learning for All” from K-12 (Kindergarten to Grade 12) is the new conceptual framework being rolled out by the Education Ministry this academic year.
of youth in the context of the deliberate eclecticism of structuration theory, it is the individual that is seen as active, knowledgeable, and discursive. It is certainly their voices that must be taken seriously.

**Importance of gathering the voices of participants**

Disability studies (Denhart, 2008; Karagiannis, 2000; Telzrow, 1999), critical education theory (Egan, 2002; Lewis, 1993; Payne, 2008; Portelli, et al., 2007; Vibert, et al., 2002) and narrative analysis (Chase, 2005; Denhart, 2008; Fairbanks, 1992; Frank, 2009a; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 1993, 1994) highlight the importance of using voice in deconstruction and authentic understanding of the impact of meta discourses and systems on marginalized groups. The challenge is for research to grant persons the agency to speak of the forces that disable them (Denhart, 2008) and not leave it only to nonlabelled researchers, policy makers and practitioners to represent, debate the issues and set agendas for these persons.

Most research on special education that includes participant voices is centered on perceptions of teacher candidates, and the voices of adults pursuing higher education speaking of the barriers they’ve had to overcome (Brown, 2009; Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 1993; Denhart, 2008; Fairbanks, 1992). Others are based on individual case studies or small samples of youth mainly in the elementary grades (Doyle, 1990; Muskat, 2008). There has also been some inclusion of how the rhetoric of special education is navigated in settings such as alternative programs (Becker, 2010). There needs to be greater inclusion of participant voices.

Although the growing body of research on homeless and street youth, unlike special education, seems more open to including the voices of their participants (Burns,
very little is mentioned about the learning exceptionalities of homeless youth, their perceptions of special education and perhaps how this could be taken into consideration in service delivery and transition programs to help them exit homelessness.

Hence, I think there is a need to include and highlight the narratives of street youth with special education background within the literature. It will inform education reform, particularly special education reform. It will demonstrate the need for a different way of doing things both while they are in school and/or street involved with a view towards satisfying the desire they expressed through their narratives for participating in formal educational programs, and addressing literacy, numeracy and the need for education and training particularly in this knowledge based economy with a view to improve their chances for a brighter future. It will also help educators and others to know about these youth including the complex lives they lead and the challenges that they face when their narratives are not understood but they are just labelled and placed in special education.

Overall, though, I have to say none of the youth, not even one, liked being called a special education student. They completely disassociated themselves from special education.

**Disassociation from the discourses and supports of special education**

In general the youth in this study disassociated themselves entirely from special education because they considered it the class for those with more severe learning and physical needs such as those ‘other students’ with MID or DD designations, but not for themselves. Furthermore the stereotypes about these groups of students are still very
negative including such labels as ‘slow,’ ‘stupid,’ and ‘retards.’ Some of the youth in the study themselves mentioned how they teased and picked on these students. Whether it was their own pattern of behaving just like other adolescents in terms of picking out and teasing those who are different or seem in their estimation weaker than them, or whether it was a way of diverting attention away from their own problems be they social or educational, I was unable to tell. But they did mostly mention how they stereotyped and teased these youth specifically imitating how they spoke, or describing them as the ‘ones who came on the short bus’ when they referred to these students. But mostly, as mentioned throughout this dissertation, they feel they were different from this (other) group with significant and severe exceptionalities, and hence these street youth concluded that they didn’t belong in special education.

Belonging to special education also meant being separated from their peers in two ways. The first was physically in that they had to attend these classes either for a limited time in elementary grades or when they reached secondary school they were in the learning strategies class, sent to the special education/resource room to complete or catch up with work or receive extra accommodations. Sometimes it meant going to a program in another school (for example the behaviour class or an alternative class at a centralized location) and once again, going to these programs meant being separated from their peers. They didn’t want to be separated from their peers physically. Furthermore this separation meant being identified with special education and all its other connotations related to labelling and stigma which made them stand out from their peers. This was picked on immediately, and they received the message that they just couldn’t make it in the regular classroom and hence either had to leave that classroom, or could stay but with
these extra supports. It is these feelings of inadequacy that are passed on to youth as related to special education that educators need to be aware of. For youth they are signs of weakness and classify them as failures.

Similar to youth, educators and other support staff who work in schools also consciously and unconsciously still used deficit discourses and stigmatized special education youth in general, and also ones such as those similar to the subset in the study. This is because teachers sometimes continue to be invested in the notion that most of their students who are difficult to teach in the regular class are simply not willing to learn and their parents are apathetic about establishing pathways toward education success (Payne, 2008) or they are not able to learn. They are written off easily with not enough effort made to understand the environmental factors that might be impacting these students.

There is still a general shift that needs to occur in terms of detrimental perceptions of special education as some of them are still alive and well. A memo that I wrote in my notes in the beginning of December as I was writing this discussion chapter, perhaps best illustrates what I still hear, what I feel, and what others (not just this group of youth) feel too.

Today I was at one of the high schools and overheard a conversation between two adults in the school system. They were in the Guidance Department and talking about Course Codes. There was a discussion between GLC and GLE [Careers & Learning Strategies]. One adult said to the other, “You think I don’t know the difference??? One is the Careers Class; the other is the Learning Strategies Class, the class for retards.”

I guess I couldn’t believe what I was still hearing. These are both adults dealing with students in the school system all day. To be fair, only one of them made the comment. Even so, imagine her perception of the students placed in these classes. Not only is it related to my study as I write the findings and discussion chapters,
but it concerned me so much that I mentioned it to four different persons today. The first was to a Guidance Head in the very office this took place. The second was to two small groups of social workers at our Christmas/holiday dinner this evening. I had also mentioned it to the Head of Special Education in another school, one of the Service Providers I interviewed for the study. Her reply by an email was, “And although the GLE story is really sad, it goes to show that the stereotype is alive and well, and sometimes the student disengagement is perpetuated by our own colleagues. Even if they don’t say it, they give off an "aura" unconsciously!”

Another Guidance Counsellor, also at a high school (another school) replied by email saying, “PS (Regarding GLE.....talk about a teachable moment......someone should help clarify their "ignorant" and "unnecessary" comments....actually very embarrassing!!!!!!!!)”

(Memo, Dec 10, 2009)

On a number of fronts then, there is still need for shifts in the language and rhetoric around special education that is being perpetuated. Besides the deficit discourses, these youth are also given other messages on resilience and hard work that also need to be critically looked at. While highlighting their resilience is positive, as are their efforts to take control of their learning, it begs us to ask, “What, then, are the contributions of special education teachers, support staff, school boards and also the Ministry of Education to ameliorating their learning problems? Why would we classify them if the message to them is one related to assuming control for their learning?” These liberal discourses are not deficit discourses explicitly, but seem to camouflage a similar message. Methods and ways to overcome risk are often described through narrow policy prescriptions or through notions of individual ‘resilience’ (Levin, 2004) used to explain how inspiring it is that students occasionally succeed in spite of their at-risk status. Messages of hard work, take control of your life and learning, leave structures in society and systems such as special education ‘unalterable.’
Similarly, sometimes students in special education are offered discourses that show them how even though they do not presently view special education positively, in the long run it will be beneficial to them. A placement in the resource room, or enrollment in an essential or K-level course (locally developed) is offered with the explanation that if they succeed in it, they might be able at a later time to take a similar course at a higher level of instruction. What is not stated is that perhaps the youth may not come back as they might have other interruptions in their lives, or they may not want to do it with a group of younger peers which might only re-enforce some of the other stigmatizations and labels. These youth did not seem to like these or similar discourses that asked them to accept special education citizenship as a way to secure benefits later on, for example in post-secondary education. While I have found other youth (and parents too) accepting of this discourse, the youth in the study wanted nothing to do with negative labels even if they were going to get them some future benefits. Here might be mentioned the discrepancy I noticed but found difficult to resolve. Some youth (for example, Y10 in the study) refused to fill out some forms for more permanent housing for those with mental health issues. Y10 said he didn’t want admission to a program if he needed to admit something that he felt was not true of who he was even though his shared accommodation at that time was both precarious and substandard. Simultaneously, though, youth will accept some disability designations when it comes to getting (financial) support from ODSP programs, as the support offered through them is much more substantial than that offered to other welfare recipients.
Services, supports, beneficial formats and initiatives within the school system

The group in this study likes being empowered by choice. Hence permitting them to choose their programs/courses and specifics within them such as being able to select which novel, independent study unit or evaluation method they would feel comfortable with is definitely a way of engaging them. There must be formats within the curriculum that incorporate interests like music, drama and movement that appeal to these youth. Curriculum should explore connections to life situations and the workplace so these youth can relate to school more readily. Hence co-op placements and paid work placements are certainly attractive to these youth and sustain their engagement in school. They need peer and group interaction and so separating them from their peers in individual learning activities is not perceived as being to their advantage. In this regard they are not used to the didactic pedagogical methods, but want to talk, ask questions, and be active contributors in the learning environment. Life skills instruction relating to how to find housing, budgeting, anger management, sex education, must be blended with the curriculum. Flexibility in deadlines, registration procedures, handing in of assignments, and assistance with organization and time management skills is certainly advantageous as well.

There is need to create an environment where LD and other exceptionality labels disappear or fade into the background, not where they are seen as barriers to be overcome/accommodated. Extra considerations to achieve this environment need to be in place prior to any learning taking place. Educators must be comfortable with this and also be willing to spend time building relationships with these youth (Ferguson, et al., 2005).
Without positive relationships, very little instruction and learning takes place with these youth. As well, initiatives like co-op placements, school-college joint programs such as the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Partnerships are beneficial. These programs directly connect these youth to the workplace, and also accommodate the kinesthetic “hands-on” learners they often are. Given the experiences of these study participants, it is perhaps time to consider taking the “special” out of special education, and accommodating some of these youth in the regular stream with programs and initiatives geared to their learning styles and make the supports as invisible as possible. Perhaps, as one of the youth expressed in the study, it could be time to stop making ‘special education’ the pit stop it has come to be.

**Limitations of the study**

The exploratory study has a number of limitations. Right at the outset, advertising a study on special education in an agency working with street-involved youth can be a challenge. Youth may not want to self-identify in the presence of their peers as having been in special education, as this can be seen as a sign of weakness and lead to them being further teased and marginalized. Besides, the street persona that they present as tough and in control of things may be eroded and their street credibility may be lost, should they disclose they were in special education.

Although I tried to make certain the sample was comprised of youth who were street involved and homeless in as much as they lived in a shelter, transitional housing, or on the streets, and had some special education involvement, the study may have obtained a sample that certainly includes only homeless street youth (and not just street involved youth) but is not representative of the rest of the population who belong to this subgroup.
For example, no MID youth took part in the study. These youth present differently on the streets, and have learned to hide their exceptionalities because they have to be tough to survive on the streets. It may be even more challenging for them to survive, given their limited cognitive skills. Taking part in the study would render them vulnerable to teasing, bullying and being taken advantage of. Many of them also tend to be in subgroups of peers, and may not want to let the rest of their group know they were youth who had MID exceptionalities. Personally, they may have different challenges to face than the group that generated their narratives and they might not want to recall these as they might still feel marginalized and have unresolved negative feelings because of them. Also, street youth who are refugees and immigrants may have a very different experience coming from their own native educational system or trying to integrate as newcomers. They were not a part of the group of youth I interviewed. During fieldwork I also came across youth who have very low levels of reading and writing (abilities below Grade 4), but none of them consented to participating in the study. They also did not seem to be present at the life skills sessions I animated, where the topics were always related to education. Presenting education as the topic of these sessions itself could have been one of the reasons for them not participating in the life skills session.

The youth I interviewed congregated in the downtown core of the city. Although they are fairly representative of groups that come both from the larger group from outside the city, and the smaller group of local city youth that hangs out in this corner of the city itself (Yonge Street Mission, 2009), being in the downtown core and receiving the services of two agencies from where the sample was drawn is certainly a limitation of the study.
Since the design of the study calls for the generation of narratives, a certain amount of rapport is required to be built up with the researcher. My own social and academic location as a visible minority who has been an educator in the school system can certainly influence the rapport and trust that is built up in the pre-activation or pre-contemplation stage of the study. Perhaps if the researcher was of a different gender and ethnicity, and without familiarity with the school system, the information may have been less biased. I entered the research with some specific questions, which were outlined at the start of this section.

I may also not have been completely open and without opinion. While the perspective of the researcher becomes part of the analysis of qualitative studies, my previous experience with this population both in the school system and with street youth in general may have influenced the analysis of data even though interviews with service providers and other educators both in regular and alternative programs are included. My familiarity and experience working with this population also offered me a running start with the research and gave the participants a comfort level that I understood the terms and acronyms that they referred to when talking about special education, learning strategies, the behavioural class and IEPs. It also gave me further appreciation for this group and their resilience in the face of the challenges they have to overcome not just because of their dysfunctional families, but also learning difficulties, being in special education, and now as street-involved youth.

Although the youth self-identified as having special education background, if the design of the study offered some simple testing to more definitively conclude what their literacy level such as reading and arithmetic was, or permitted me to trace their school
psycho educational reports (certainly no easy task given the transitory patterns and numerous schools they attended) perhaps a more complete picture of the specific needs of the subset would have emerged.

Another limitation comes from using structuration theory. While structuration theory lends itself to useful analytic perspectives that consider both agency and systems and structuration between them, it is a fairly vast framework for a qualitative study. For example, within it are contained many historical contexts that while useful to understand as parallels, say with regard to the context of the evolution of disability studies and special education alongside rights and social struggles that Giddens makes reference to, it calls for a lot more than a generalized understanding and quick mapping on to the analysis in this study of an exploratory nature. Also, there are many unresolved issues posed in the works of Giddens, such as between Marxism and pluralism and attempting to gloss over them can be problematic. But many followers of Giddens do use his framework to analyze case studies and conduct program evaluations that are diverse and range from environmental projects to housing complexes, crime patterns in certain neighbourhoods to racial differences in educational achievements in school board districts, and even gender-based property relations in Ghana (Wilson & Huff, 1994). Hence using his framework to critique and reconstruct social and political theory with its scope and range of insight within this study is neither new nor far-fetched.

All in all given these and other limitations, interviewing service providers and using ethnographic fieldwork in addition to generating narratives was advantageous to the researcher and the study. Furthermore, the count question enabled a snap shot of a larger magnitude to be included.
CHAPTER 8 Implications and conclusions

In reporting qualitative work, I avoid the term “conclusion.” I also avoid the word “findings,” for it seems to have a similar effect on reporting style by calling undue attention to details amenable to rigorous analysis rather than to the basic issues we may want readers to ponder.

(Harry Wolcott)

As an exploratory study of street youth with special education background, this research through reconstruction of their educational trajectories and experiences has contributed to a better understanding of them. Their narratives highlight the extent to which they still resist being considered as special education students. For them, citizenship in special education was a marginalizing experience, where they were selected and placed in a holding pattern that not only emphasized their deficits and made them stand out from their peers in the regular programming in school, but also did not adequately remediate their identified learning difficulties they were given to understand they had. Not only did their educational experiences often not lead to graduation but many of these identified students didn’t even learn how to read, write, or use the library effectively. In many cases, the schools failed to engage them in a dynamic learning process. Information from their narratives suggests the possibility that some educators may have written them off as students who could never make it on their own in mainstream education. While initially there were some bits of isolation accompanied by gradual conformity in the elementary grades, later many of these special education students became more aware of the need to actively change things even though they might not always have done this in acceptable ways. Another factor which stood out from their narratives is that while they connected to some good teachers who understood them, this was not the norm. Mostly they perceived that teachers and other support staff did not
take the time to understand their backgrounds such as the many challenges related to abuse, dysfunctional families, child welfare involvement, and the constant residential movements these youth were subjected to that often impacted on their ability and engagement with learning in school.

There has been much progressive reform within special education in recent years. Its focus and rhetoric has changed from segregated classrooms to mainstreaming to inclusive education. Rhetoric in education presently is changing from ‘Success for All’ to ‘Learning for All.’ While much is positive in these reform initiatives, if reform programs and initiatives do not connect with the reality of the “local people” — students, caregivers, teachers, then there will be “so much reform, but so little change” (Payne, 2008) yet again. Reform in special education is unlikely to work if it is restricted to catch phrases and is less about connecting to the social contexts, emotional complexities, and learning challenges of the students served by its mandate. This education system needs to get back to them, to hear their voices and experiences and include these in considerations related to what would make things significantly better for them. We may also need to return to the purposes of special education which in its delivery is eclectic, varied and specialized, yet still is designed as a way within the school system to help individual students participate in a dynamic learning process through minimizing problems related to learning and maximizing learning outcomes. While it is good to identify students as a way to obtain much needed additional resources for program delivery (Karagiannis, 2000), there is also need for a good fit between individual students and programs delivering quality instruction that addresses their learning issues and helps them move
forward (Reschly, 1996; Telzrow, 1999). So we need to find a good fit between the individual needs of students and quality instruction that meets these needs.

This exploratory research is not focused on a rush to suggest or evaluate specific programs. Its purpose is not to scale up interventions based on the experiences of programs (Portelli, et al., 2007; Vibert, et al., 2002; Witt & Compton, 1996) that may be somewhat helpful. It is clear that these youth want to learn and to be challenged; that many are right-brained, creative persons who love creative arts, music, visual arts, and drama; they are hands-on and learn best when they have choices in terms of subject content, particularly when they are able to relate it concretely with work and life. They are interested in reading, but writing and organizing written assignments such as essays can be a challenge; they need flexibility around schedules and help not just with learning but with other social and emotional problems, and perhaps even financial and residential stability. They certainly need mentors and caring adults who can believe in them, provide ongoing support, envision futures and keep them moving towards them. When it comes to addressing their learning and related exceptionalities and challenges it is best done invisibly, emphasizing their strengths rather than singling out their weaknesses.

**Implications for research**

More research needs to be done with and about this group. Using samples from a variety of contexts, including other drop-in shelters and locations within the city and beyond and a sampling frame of diverse urban and rural youth, would certainly offer a broader range of contexts for study and evaluation. Also research distinguishing between different exceptionalities and offering learning and literacy assessments for those who wish them would be beneficial to alert researchers to understand the varied needs of
different subsets of street youth with special education background such as street youth with Mild Intellectual Disabilities (MID). Similarly, because of the number of female youth identifying as youth with special education exceptionalities in this study (50 - 60%; Table 1), and many of the female youth (amongst the group who shared their narratives; n=15) having concrete plans and attempting post-secondary alternatives, this is a group that could be further investigated. Research could also be done evaluating behavioural programs that are offered to many street youth. These and other alternative programs should be evaluated gathering present and past student feedback for outcomes and include tracking of graduation rates among other things. One more suggestion for research relates to research studies using discourse analysis methods to evaluate the discourses, rhetoric and special education processes of educators and support staff leading up to the placement of students in special education as they often seem to be related to classification and placement of students of certain gender, ethnicity, and parent literacy levels.

**Implications for practice and policy**

The results have implications for all those who work with these youth. For service providers who work with street youth, education is an important goal that needs to be considered in programs aimed at transitioning youth from homelessness or towards employment. Providing supports around assessments, literacy instruction, scholarships, and contracting for educational services with external agencies, school boards and colleges would be beneficial. Child protection workers also need to consider the impact of multiple changes of residences and schools on school and learning outcomes for youth who are exceptional.
Teachers and support staff connected to special education and alternative education students need to be aware of the stigma and labelling that is still attached to participants and the resistance of youth to be considered special education students. They must also be aware of the importance of making positive connections to mentor these students, and provide quality instruction that is related to helping them move forward. Campaigns to boost awareness of disabilities need to also include acceptance of the varieties of learning styles of students. These must target students in schools and teacher training candidates as well. Negative stereotypes about individuals who receive special education programming must be challenged, in particular those that blame individual students for their academic struggles and have social connotations related to ‘being stupid’ attached to them.

Those formulating special education policy should make reform a matter of more than classification, new programs, rhetoric, and funding formats based solely on numbers. Reforms should be long-term, multi-dimensional, connected to the lived contexts and complex realities of students and their families and mostly geared towards increasing resources to assist teachers and students in the classroom.

**Study’s relevance for the advancement of social work knowledge**

Social work is concerned with ensuring optimal outcomes for oppressed individuals and communities. The Code of Ethics of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005), the National Scope of Practice Statement of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2000), as well as The National Association of Social Workers (1999) include statements endorsing respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons, the
pursuit of social justice and the obligation of societal systems to provide equitable structural resources for all their members.

A better understanding of these youth and their experiences in special education has the potential to impact direct practice with street youth who were in special education. School social workers should provide service to students with exceptional needs and other circumstances that put youth at risk for graduation or dropping out. Social workers are in a position to be brokers between these individuals and the many challenges they have outside school, and the school community including when placed in programs such as behaviour classes, TIPPS (Transition Intervention Program for Suspended Students), the Learning Strategies Class to name a few where many of these students are found. School social workers need to make educators aware of these extenuating circumstances that impact on these students’ academic success. Mentoring these students, empowering them to take control of their learning, and working for attitudinal changes for teachers, caregivers, students, policy makers and the public at large are essential in order to enhance both short-term and long-term outcomes for groups of persons who were in special education, such as these street youth.

**Concluding comments**

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to the fifteen youth who came forward, albeit after some coaxing, but nevertheless very bravely and generously to share their time, experience and thoughts with me in the creation of their narratives. In spite of multiple challenges and struggles encountered on a number of different fronts, they were all keen to pursue formal education, and expressed hope that they would one day move beyond the situation in which they presently find themselves. It gave me hope to share
their journey as I listened to their narratives and hear of how they strive to develop their skills, gifts and talents even in the midst of the many personal, social, emotional, financial, judicial and other challenges that they face.
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Appendix A: Y15’s narrative

Living my life under the assumption I am incapable because I was given the label ‘loser’ (Y15)

I can remember my Grade 2-3 years best. The Grade 2 teacher was probably the most supportive teacher I had there. She was probably my favourite teacher. About the only teacher who didn’t send a note home to my mum every day. But in Grade 3, I had Ms D, a pretty mean old English lady. The first time I went to special ed was in Grade 3, thanks to her. I made crappy decisions thanks to her. She was convinced that because I was using the washroom so often, I wasn’t using it for the right reasons. I couldn’t find anything interesting in that class. I wasn’t allowed to go to the washroom and ended up pushing her and throwing a pencil at her. I ran to the washroom. On my way out of the washroom, I got dragged to the Principal’s office. The next thing I was in special ed.

Special ed was a sort of a social club because I got to play with legos and eat cookies and not have to deal with the crazy old English lady. The issues weren’t such a big thing right then – you can’t argue with a lighter work load. But in retrospect, I didn’t like the fact that you were sort of associated with special ed for the remainder of your time in school. That’s how it felt to me. It was kind of concerning in that sense. But at that time I didn’t have some point of reference. So, I didn’t feel too bad about it. I guess the social connotations of being in special ed at that point didn’t make up for the benefits that I experienced in the sense that I didn’t have to do much work. I could relax. Special ed didn’t seem like a looming threat till later on.

The first time that I was suspected of having ADD was when I went to special ed in Grade 3. They wanted me to see a therapist and take some kind of mood stabilizers. My mum never agreed with medication so I never did. She reached some kind of agreement with my dad that I wasn’t going to go that route.

(Parents divorce. Keeps transferring schools between dad in South America [three places; two languages] and mum in Northern Ontario)

If I came out of Grade 6 in Ontario, I went to Grade 6 there. But coming back here was a different thing. I wasn’t put in a segregated class or anything. Like it wasn’t really a special ed class. There was one school there, a private middle one. But in that school there was no special ed class. But they treated me in the same sense that I didn’t have to learn Spanish. I was using my incomplete Spanish as a crutch to avoid homework. That year in school, there was no isolated special ed class or anything. But because it was such a small school, they were able to teach me. I felt I was granted many more exceptions than most of the other students. If I had a homework assignment done late, I would be given a figurative slap on the wrist. Other kids might be deducted marks and given a penalty or they might not be able to do their assignments. At the same time when I was going to that school was the first time I met a psychologist. It was the same time I familiarized myself with special ed and all the connotations of special ed. It would be when I developed a complete perspective of whatever happened to me in Grade 3. The
psychologist felt we (both dad and I) should be going to therapy and not just me alone. He felt that being diagnosed with ADD wouldn’t have helped me any way. It wasn’t the thing we should be focussing on as it wouldn’t have helped me anyway. It was only circumstantial. If I was interested in something, I could focus on it. But instead of family therapy, I did end up trying several of the meds for ADD – Ritalin for about two months and I experienced no positive results. It made me feel drowsy and tired. So I ended up coming off the drug as predicted by the doctor. And that was when I moved back for Grade 7 in Ontario.

My family kept having issues with the Principal at the Gr 7 school. The Principal and Guidance Counsellors in the school kept trying to throw different ideas at my Mum. One day I had an argument with my Guidance Counsellor and they ended up calling the psychiatrist in South America... hung up the phone. No more than an hour later, my mum was told I should get tested for asocial conduct disorder. I am pretty sure it was out of spite.

The issues I have regarding special ed weren’t so much with the actual class. Just the way they went about determining who needed and who didn’t need it was an issue. If you weren’t acting very much as the class was, then I guess you were limited and needed special ed. You don’t start throwing diagnoses at people until they start having social problems. I was shown a roster with the symptoms or signs of someone with ADD. It pretty much looked like I was looking at a sheet that described a ‘loser’ – didn’t know how to socialize properly, cut people off, got angry fits. My father got a sheet from the school that was supposed to motivate him to seek therapy for me. We had trouble finding out what I had. I didn’t find it interesting; I was more concerned about meeting up with my buddies and finding out about other things.

The way I understood how the school was set up for me was it had a program with wide criteria. It was supposed to be applicable to everyone. If it wasn’t applicable to you, then you had some kind of ‘bad boy syndrome’ or ADD or something like that. They made it so vague that you couldn’t possibly have issues with it unless you had issues yourself. I have met so many people from my generation that seem to have the same issue. It seems to me that the popular one now is FASD. Everyone is classified with visual and behavioural signs of FASD. Everything that I noticed in terms of the people who told me that I had ADD was very abstract. How do you determine I have it – no interest? It’s the same thing that if you watch a movie that you don’t like - then, if anything, your attention span is under stress.

The way you are taught in school, you are taught as though school is the authority and it’s perfect. The default concept you are given is that you an individual are flawed. There is something wrong with me, not wrong with the program. I went through most of my primary and secondary school trying to figure out what was stopping me. Even now I still wonder, if I still have something that is stopping me from performing at the same level as my classmates. Nowadays I find myself more often critiquing the subject matter of the class and the ability of the teacher. It took me a lot of counselling to arrive at the position that something doesn’t have to be wrong with me.
At that time being in special ed would have been like asking a fish what it felt like to live in the sea. Needless to say, the fish would fail to mention that it is very wet. It would have been the same. What is it like to struggle with the curriculum in the school? They would fail to mention, they give you curriculum that makes you feel like an ‘idiot’. It is something you grow up with in primary school. It wasn’t so much that I felt like an idiot, but I felt like everybody was smarter than me. In that sense I lost a lot of my competitive drive. Insults begin to make a lot of sense to you basically. Even in high school, it wasn’t so much insults. When I went to a psychology course, I would read the descriptions to see whether I would conform to that criteria of “crazy.” It is pretty easy to convince a kid that he is in need of counselling and change, not whether the program is in need of revising. All this is a kind of self-fulfilling thing. You have an issue paying attention. After sometime, you convince yourself that you can’t pay attention. I’ve now come to the conclusion that I can’t focus because it is something boring.

Dropping out of high school is because of a collection of contributing factors that motivated me to get out of high school – the assumption that I simply couldn’t do it was the major factor. My grade 9 in Northern Ontario was traumatizing after a year of private/military school in South America. The year got off to a generally crappy start. This was the first period of the year, let alone the first day. I got into a fight with a girl who poured a two litre bottle of coke over me and I took exception. There was some sort of police involvement. I was asked not to press charges – she was pregnant and being prosecuted by the Crown. Needless to say the school year got off to a really crappy start. For most of the year I was pestered by kids. At the end of the year I showed up late for my exams because of a nose bleed. No medical note, a difficult situation. Outside that, I was having a lot of serious problems with my mum. So I moved back to dad in South America.

The second time I dropped out was because of issues with my step-mum. I got kicked out of the house and stayed with my friends for a while. But I ended up going back to school. I had begun to notice I had developed a pattern by now. Basically I had gotten to the point where I kind of budgeted my assignments. Then I would decide which assignments I wanted to do, and which I didn’t, based on how many marks it was worth. It was the same with the tests and projects. I would decide whether to do this project or not based on my current estimation of the final grade. For me achieving excellency in school at that point seemed kind of pointless. It wasn’t entirely my priority considering the fact I could pretty much study for an hour or two and be able to write any exams they could throw at me, even if I hadn’t showed up for half the classes. This wasn’t necessarily a good thing for me. It worked because I passed all of my courses barely. That particular year, I noticed this pattern, because I did not show up for any of the final exams and I passed all the classes. Essentially it dawned on me that I had prepared myself for most of the year to be exempt from my final exams. Of course it was a dispute at home, because at the time of the final exams I had left the house again. I was looking for a job. In South America if you miss an exam, they give you an alternative exam, or what they call an extraordinary exam, that is standardized - as opposed to one written by the teacher. If you passed the exam, you achieve the equivalency for that grade. There were four exams in total and I passed all studying for a collective eight hours over two
weeks. I wasn’t allowed to claim my grades because at one point they found out my visa expired. So I wasn’t allowed to work, go to school, work legally. My dad ended up paying for a ticket for me to get back to Canada. So I ended up in Toronto.

Coming to Canada, my goal was to go to college and get some kind of education. I was 21 and one of the staff from McDonald house mentioned to me that it was possible to apply to college without a high school diploma. So it was by the advice of this staff member that I had gotten a copy of my old school transcripts. And in the transcripts, for most of my life, I operated under the assumption that I had some kind of valid authoritative diagnosis or something. Like something official. Some piece of paper. Some undeniable evidence that there is something wrong with me. But in the transcripts, people in the school assumed there was something wrong with me. Basically there was a piece of paper that said, pretty sure he has ADD. But there was no official process that took place. Seemed a kind of dismissal on their behalf. It looked like they were treating someone who had ADD. Then there was a later date, this performance in special education, this discussion. This got me curious because I had met with a psychiatrist in South America who said ADD wasn’t the case. Then we all in my family had the assumption maybe I had LD or something of that sort.

I was going to an alternative program which I didn’t complete. I got a psych assessment paid for by McDonald House. “Results were I did not have LD whatsoever.” It made me feel confused kind of. Took me a while to appreciate that. At first, I was angry. I felt no excuse. To me the first thing it meant was I wasn’t going to access special bursaries for college. At the end of it, soon after, I saw the more important affect of these results. I felt pretty good. Basically the fact that if I had any difficulties in school, that was based on the original idea that I simply was not interested in what I was being presented. It is obvious it introduced a plethora of questions that I hadn’t really considered beforehand. That in itself, I found interesting. It didn’t occur to me before that that I don’t have any learning disabilities or anything wrong in me. That was just some sort of self-perpetuating issue.

Even after I got the assessment, I was pretty sure there must be something wrong with me. But I applied to college as a mature student. I felt intimidated because I felt, LD or not, it is going to be tough to get through. I did not even go to high school consistently or complete it, so going to go to College is going to be a big obstacle; very challenging. So I thought the best way to get that sorted out was to go to a therapist, get them to refer me to a psychiatrist, get the psychometric assessment. And yeah, now it comes back saying nothing is wrong with me, no LD or anything.

When I tell the psychiatrist I’m pretty sure there is something wrong with me, I’m asked to go for therapy. I go see another psychiatrist. He concludes I have dysthymia. The first meeting lasted an hour, and he was positive, I had dysthymia which is low grade chronic depression. So it doesn’t work in cycles or peaks like manic depression. It is just something that is consistent and it is enough of a presence to disrupt your life. It is very subtle. So for about half a year, I operated under the assumption, that I must have dysthymia. I hadn’t applied to college yet. I had put it off for my reasons; I was focussed.
on housing and what not. After about half a year, when I started to meet with the therapist consistently, Dr TL, she concluded I wasn’t really depressed and I don’t have dysthymia. She said if I have it, it is something subtle but it was more important to get to know me. To this date we still haven’t concluded that I have dysthymia. But I have recently completed my first semester in college without much of an issue except that I couldn’t stand the course material. It was much easier to get through this second semester operating under the assumption that there was nothing wrong with me and that I simply had to perform up to a standard by reassuring myself. I didn’t have to operate under any obstacle that I previously assumed. It was much easier to deal with my course load than it ever was in high school.

I am pretty good at spatial thinking; I am pretty good at visualizing things. I love to draw because I like to construct stuff. I played with legos a lot when I was a kid. My dad encouraged me to draw as much as I could when I started drawing. The converse side is that he would tell me not to worry about the stuff that I was bad at. “The thing you can take an interest in, you should focus on.” I was pretty athletic, but not good at anything. I don’t know if I should say I am a good or bad reader. This is one of the issues I faced in school. I took a longer time reading stuff. Even nowadays I still take like two weeks to read a book that would take a couple of days for my friends to read. But I like to think I read things thoroughly. It was always hard to understand how people could skim through a paragraph so quickly.

Being given a label works like this. You operate under an assumption you are a certain way. Say, ADD, I adopt that into my identity. I become familiar with – sleazy way to say it – the benefits of having ADD. Benefits are offered on social platforms or academic settings. For example, there might have been a way for me to access ODSP, not for ADD, but for one of the different things I’ve been told I have in my life. So at the back of my mind, I’m thinking, what if I had this?? – I could get ODSP. I could get longer times in exams. Maybe a reduced work load or something like that. The other thing is when you are living with something [a label] your whole life, you wouldn’t know what it felt like to be ‘normal.’ So it was a bit difficult to sort that out. There is a risk that there isn’t anything wrong with me. Maybe there was, but it didn’t seem something was chemically wrong with me. Hence I preferred to go into long-term therapy with Dr TL because my alternative was medicine. I decided the safest thing to do was to just avoid the medicine until I had a more concise idea of what I was dealing with. Dr TL suggests medicine (what the other doctor had said) and therapy. I was thinking of doing it for a while and then it dawned on me that I didn’t want to change how I think, and that was the only negative I could see to taking medicine. Plus, they jumped right into Prozac and that kind of intimidated me. I was worried about changing the way I think. I kind of like the way I think.

After hours of sessions, Dr TL concluded I didn’t have dysthymia. She was convinced the diagnosis was entirely circumstantial. We are still sorting through it. We are examining the possibility that I might have seasonal affective disorder. It’s a possibility that needs considering.
High school is hell for just about everyone I know. I say college is a lot easier, because we also have to consider all the social bull shi* that concerns high school. College is a lot easier even in terms of the workload. I think college is easier for me personally because in high school I was trying to perform as something that I was told to perform as. But in college you get a lot more say than what you think your issues are related to school. In high school, your parents have to assert that you are not lying about what you think are your problems. In high school I was trying to work through the spectrum of someone who has ADD. I am not saying I was deliberately trying to act it out. But the work that was put before me, the way I was helped, was as if I was someone who had these ADD issues. In school’s defence, in retrospect, I feel now I had way too many allowances with some of the work. For some of my classes, there were inconsistencies. In art class, I was allowed to hand in just about every assignment late. To me this is not how it should be managed. So, all of my assignments ended up being late in school. It frustrated me personally, it was an inconsistency. It would have been hard to say anything then, but I think I would have preferred something more structured. If we are going to get allowances, it should have been across the board. You would be in the same classroom as everybody else, and you would be getting different assignments, or a more lenient criteria on your assignments. In retrospect, it was inconsistent, because needless to say, not all teachers worked that way. Every teacher had their own idea on what a kid with ADD needed or what a kid with any disability needed. And, it was different.

The reason I find college easier, is in college I have more credibility than my guidance counsellor when it comes to my problems. So I can meet directly with my teachers and give my input as opposed to having to meet with my guidance counsellor and have her/him tell my teachers what is best for me. If I had taken this course three years ago, I would probably have wanted someone to tell me what was wrong with me. Once you have that much say in it, it’s easier. It is not as if you are losing the quality of education. I had this assumption for some reason, the harder school is, the more you were learning, which is completely bull shi*. If anything, college is more focused on facilitating your education instead of trying to make you a better kid. The trust thing is in college. Teachers aren’t under the assumption that you are trying to get out of doing an assignment or something. It has been a few essays that I have written now, where I have actually managed to change the essay because it is easier to work with my interests. I learn a lot when I have to challenge something or some idea. That is when I am most avid.

After my assessment and knowing I don’t have LD, or a social conduct disorder, I’ve realized I’m capable of doing that stuff. Before, if I had the same work, I would have concentrated for a while on my disability and be deterred from doing something like psychology or psychiatry because I was pretty sure I couldn’t keep up with the work load. I guess when I felt like I had ADD or whatever it was that I had, or asocial conduct disorder, or something, it all boils down to the same thing that you can’t focus. So the sort of way I behaved is I avoided stuff. I would read for 15 minutes and then let my brain relax. It didn’t occur to me I could tolerate mental stress. When I got this assessment done, it was I don’t have ADD and you can focus for hours if you wanted to.
And, I don’t have LD. “Well, in that case, I’ll go to the library and borrow a book.” And sure enough I finished the book in a couple of weeks. It was a novel. I actually borrowed a book and flipped through it till I finished. It wasn’t as much of an issue to sit down for an hour, or an hour and a half, which before that did not seem possible. It was ‘The Brothers Karamazov.’ After reading that book, one of the things that occurred to me is that I could have been reading lots of books for a long time. I guess it seemed that a lot of the time that I had put into movies and video games and going to parties and whatever could have been used more productively.

My encounter with special education has definitely impacted where I am today. If it had occurred to me when I was 16, that I could have been maintaining a full time job and improving my working culture, my work ethic, then I would have been cooking my own meals when I was 16 or 17. If I had gone to this assessment when I was in my early adolescence, I probably would still be living with my parents today. Or, I would be successfully housed with a stable income. I may or may not have been doing university at this time. But I would be living my life under the assumption that I was capable of all the things I am capable of now without the obstacle of ADD. After a while you live with this obstacle and eventually you stop trying. Like, for example, you stop trying in a place like school. You look for the easy ways to get around things that are put in front of you. In high school, especially at the time of adolescence, you begin to apply this to your whole life. I believe I have effectively applied that to my whole life. If I had instead been motivated to try and challenge those obstacles, maybe act as if I didn’t have them, I could achieve so much more. I’d probably be in university right now. I think I mentioned something about a competitive drive before. That is definitively correlated. I might have lived differently.

Or even if I had been treated individually, like a student with his own set of problems, who would deserve his own set of solutions, then I would have got a lot further in school. But I feel I was put into a list. When I looked at the description of a kid with ADD/ADHD, it looked at me and my friends defining us as “losers.” It always felt when I looked at the transcripts they had tried to change the criteria of the list to better fit my personality and behaviour. If they had focused less on trying to represent me as someone with a common definable problem, [and] instead had tried to address my issues as one individual student, they would have gotten better results.

Finally, the biggest incentive for me to show up for the study is because I felt compelled to talk about this stuff. I felt embarrassed about it before, but I have come to terms with it. I am now in my second semester in Niagara College. After Niagara, I am hoping to go into the social work program but I’m not sure because I like graphic design. I am dead set to take graphic design and teach about media literacy at some point as I feel that is an issue that should be talked about in society more often.