RISK, RESILIENCY AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES IN THE CONTEXT OF ONE INDIVIDUAL’S LIFE

A SELF-STUDY

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine my own balance of risk and resiliency factors in the context of my life, with emphasis on the clash that occurred between my values and those of the education system. This thesis is a self-study that describes my academic, psychological and spiritual journey from a child and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes, to a graduate student in a Masters of Education Program.

To improve academic outcomes for children and youth at risk, it is important to understand that risk and resilience factors can be a delicate balance and unique to each individual. Risk and resilience must also be viewed through a sociological lens, with an understanding of the impact of underlying societal cultural expectations, values, social constructs and implied meanings and definitions of characteristics commonly associated with risk and resilience. The boundaries between risk and resilience can be blurred and ever changing.
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The pursuit of my Master of Education Thesis: Risk, Resiliency and Academic Outcomes in the Context of One Individual’s Life is a self-study and the writing of it was an experience that has changed me on a very deep level. I wish to express appreciation to the individuals who influenced the making and the telling of this story:

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

General Overview

This self-study reveals my innermost thoughts and feelings about significant events in my life, particularly those having to do with my experiences as a student in the education system. My journey has often been a difficult one. In the early years it was at times damaging and hurtful, often generating in me intensely negative reactions, such as feelings of self-doubt, alienation, powerlessness and confusion. As time went on, some of those early negative effects metamorphasized into resignation, belligerence, disdain, defensiveness, apathy and anger. When I returned to university as a mature student at age twenty-five, I felt out of place in the classroom. At age forty-five, I experienced those feelings following me into my graduate studies. In looking closely at that feeling of alienation and reflecting on its meaning, I realized that feeling I did not belong in a Master of Education classroom was connected to my childhood classroom experiences. With that realization came the decision to bring some anyalytical meaning to my educational journey. I examined a large body of literature, and themes within that literature on variables affecting academic outcomes. "Risk" and "resilience" emerged as integral components to bringing clarity to my past, and hence healing and closure to my personal experience of struggle within the education system.

Disengagement

Although I always felt that my difficulty in school began in grade three, it is likely that at age seven or eight I simply became more cognizant of my surroundings and therefore more of an observer of my environment and myself. According to child development theorist Jean Piaget (1952), age seven or eight is when we enter the concrete-operational period, which corresponds to a growing awareness of one's surroundings. A child becomes less egocentric and, through interaction with peers and the school, begins to realize that their own view is not the only view of the world (Kail, Cavagaugh & Ateah, 2004).

While I may have had difficulties in the classroom, or from my teachers' perspectives was a problem student, it is only as of age seven that I have memories of not meeting academic
expectations and interpreting classroom dynamics as negative. Previous grade three memories, if not 
positive, were at least devoid of worry and doubt about my status within the classroom. However, by grade 
three, I had formed an opinion of my place in the classroom and was conscious of both negative and positive 
responses from my teacher. I had developed the cognitive ability to be aware of my impact on my 
surroundings, and therefore had some understanding of being welcomed or accepted. It is notable that 
heightened awareness of my surroundings also marked the beginning of my disengagement from the 
schooling experience. The disengagement was accompanied by growing anxiety, restlessness and general 
boredom associated with being in class which would remain with me for many years after. 

Without question, grade three marked a clear transition from being completely secure within the 
classroom environment to perceiving that school was at best, a mixed bag, where anything might happen, 
both good and bad. In that memorable year of my life, the classroom became an environment where I might 
find myself happy and confident one minute but in the next, anxious, fearful, and filled with shame. From 
grade three onward, the classroom became an environment where I would often feel threatened and 
defensive. While in class, I was prone to displaying behaviours that could include disruptiveness, overt verbal 
belligerence and disrespect toward the teacher. At times I could also radiate quiet and dark sullenness. In 
contrast to my problematic behaviour as a student, elementary and high school were never problems for me 
socially. I enjoyed meaningful and satisfying peer relationships all through elementary and secondary school. 
However, from grade three on, the role of student in a classroom became more and more difficult. My 
tolerance for classroom mores and teachers’ rules lessened with each passing year. The role of student 
became an emotional, psychological and philosophical struggle for me. Had I been asked, I could not have 
articulated why I was having difficulty. As a young person I defined all those feelings and struggles 
simplistically and without depth of understanding. As an adolescent, I emphatically proclaimed, “I hate 
school!”

When I returned to university at the age of twenty-five, I was dismayed to discover that much of what 
I had experienced in the classroom as a child and youth still plagued me. Once again I experienced the 
same feelings of anger, resentment, and intense disconnectedness that I had first become aware of as a 
seven year old child. In elementary and high school, I simply did not want to be there. In university, not
wanting to be there was also accompanied by an acute sense that I did not belong there, in that
classroom with those university students. As might be expected, the deep sense of alienation prevented
me from developing relationships with my professors and classmates. I felt completely out of place and
believed that all the people around me saw me as an outsider. I believed that in their eyes, I did not fit in
or measure up. I was a “stranger in a strange land” (Heinland, 1961). Unlike in elementary and high
school where I at least had friends, a social life and my family around me, while attending university I had
none of those distractions or supports. I was truly alone.

University was a chore through which I grimly plodded, using up every resource I had. When it was all
over, I thankfully left the experience behind me, vowing never to return to a classroom. Attaining a Bachelor’s
degree was an element of my life that was completely separate from my regular, everyday life. I rarely
mentioned my university experiences to anyone. At the time, none of my friends or family could identify with
that part of my life or sympathize with my struggle to get a university degree. In fact, I never fully integrated
the university part of my life into my own consciousness. It was therefore almost unexplainable that I fell
into teaching and working on a Master’s degree. However, after being a Master’s student for a period of
time, I began to experience a shift in my perspective. Through teaching sociology, criminology and
counselling, I began to find theories and explanations that allowed me to examine my own experiences
objectively. I began to understand my past experiences and how those experiences were related to the
negative feelings and struggles that ensued.

Challenging My Paradigms

Having worked in the counselling and child and youth worker field for over fifteen years, I began to
consider doing some teaching at the college level. I had been conducting training and workshops with young
adults and enjoyed being that. I took a few courses in adult education and, just as I finished a teaching and
training adults certificate at the local community college, a chance to teach a sociology course at that same
college arose. I jumped at the opportunity. After teaching part-time for only a few weeks, I realized that
teaching was my vocational calling. I felt fully engaged in that teacher-student dynamic, and passionate about
being a teacher. I had never felt as passionate or as sure of anything before. My elementary, high school,
and undergraduate experiences were dim memories and, at that point, completely unexamined ones. In
order to obtain a full time position as a community college teacher, it was necessary to have a Master’s
degree or be a Master’s candidate. I knew I was a good teacher and I enjoyed being in the classroom with
students. That gave me confidence and drive to enrol in Nipissing University's Master of Education program.

I had some doubt as to whether or not I could be successful at the graduate level, given my previous
poor academic performance. However, years of successful work experience gave me confidence in my
abilities. In any case, if I was to realize my dream of teaching full time, becoming a Master’s student was what
I must do. I believed I could be academically successful as I had never really applied myself in school before,
not even while doing my university undergraduate degree. I certainly planned to do my very best at the
Master’s level. I was at a place in my life and at a level of maturity where I could and would put everything
into my studies, and so believed I would do much better academically than I had in the past. Therefore, with a
great deal of enthusiasm and hope I entered the classroom to study at the graduate level. I had no sooner
set foot in the classroom door, when the same old feelings of self-doubt, anger and disconnectedness
came rushing back. I believed I was being judged and falling short. I was in conflict with regard to how I
felt about the other students in the class, the professor, the university, and even the physical location and
specific design of the classroom. And, most importantly, I felt like an alien. I believed on a very deep level
that I did not belong there. I had no place in that room with those other students.

I was not consciously aware that I did not feel I had a place in that classroom. Initially, I was also
not conscious that I tended to identify with the problem students the professor and my classmates were
constantly complaining about. I only knew that those difficult students were being dishonoured, and I was
furious on their behalf. On a much deeper, but unexamined level, I was feeling dishonoured and furious
for me as well. I was dismayed and completely shocked by my adverse reaction or, rather, overreaction to
that new education environment. My negative initial response was surprising because I had forgotten
about the classroom dilemma of earlier years. After all, being a teacher felt completely comfortable and
enjoyable to me. It was being a student that was causing the difficulty, I realized. There was a difference
in how I felt as teacher versus how I felt as student. I had become aware that the role I played in the
classroom could make that environment comfortable or not. I realized that I had to do something about
the discomfort I felt as as student. That discomfort was a problem that could impede the realization of my
goal and so I wished to remove the problem. As in other parts of my life, when tackling a problem, I started to analyze the circumstances. I began to think critically about why I was having such negative feelings.

For example, I could see objectively that no one was doing anything to me personally to cause those intense emotional reactions. I did not even know anyone in that class so how could anyone have formed an opinion of me, or be judging me? I knew that a natural reaction to a threat is defensiveness. I was forced to see that it was only a “perceived” threat and that I was reacting to what I feared could happen, not what was actually happening. It was finally in seeing how irrationally defensive I was that I recognized the huge discrepancy that existed between my inner turmoil and external classroom conditions. That obvious discrepancy between inner and outer realities and the difference between how I felt in the teacher role versus the student role allowed me, for the first time, to challenge and examine my own reaction and attitude in the classroom, both past and present.

Having done well in my first graduate assignment, I was able to assure myself that I was not incapable of meeting academic expectations. I still believed on some level that obtaining a Bachelor’s degree was the result of a trick I had played on the University of Toronto. I started to see with growing clarity that my feelings of anxiety in the role of student were psychologically based and not due to inability to perform the work or any other element actually occurring in the classroom. In that introspective moment, still in the earliest stages of my graduate program, I asked the question why? Why did I doubt my ability or my right to be there, in that classroom, as a student? It was then that the seed of “children who fall through the educational cracks” as a thesis topic was planted. Surprisingly, it still took time before I realized that in fact I had been such a child. It took even longer to realize that answers to my questions could be explored in a self-study.

Early on in the graduate program, I assigned a specific identity to my defensive state, and my just-below-the-surface “bad” attitude. That was the first step in recognizing that the defensiveness had something to do with the past rather than any present circumstances. I called that identity Chip; short for “blue collar chip on the shoulder”. Chip’s defensiveness, pugnaciousness, and outright belligerence was all clearly linked to her working-class, blue collar roots and experiences. I was to discover that Chip
became defensive and critical of those around her when they were perceived to be of a higher socio-economic standing than she was and when Chip feared she was being looked down upon. When Chip felt insecure or discriminated against, she could be angry, paranoid, bitter and ready for a fight. But she could also be clear-sighted and very aware of the role class played in shaping all aspects of human social behaviour. However, in the early days of the naming of Chip, I could not confidently control her, nor was I always able to detect when I was being controlled by her. As her lens was somewhat different from my current, professional lens, I wished to challenge and change the basic way in which she viewed the world. However, Chip was many years in the making and reflective of my younger self. At some point in my life, my perspective had shifted and then the Chip lens had become an unconscious influence. Chip had lived at that unconscious level for a long, long time and could not be outed, analyzed and deconstructed overnight.

Initially, as I watched and listened to the other students who were predominantly elementary school teachers speak about their experiences or observed them standing in front of the class doing a presentation, I realized that I felt very uncomfortable in their midst. Their tidy printing and precise explanations, use of voice, tone and volume set my nerves on edge. I was thrown back to my early elementary and high school years where issues of no-nonsense control and precise expectations of good academic performance were the norm. Needless to say, being in a room with the same values and absolute belief in the rightness of those values placed me into a heightened Chip defensive mode. Sometimes I was reacting emotionally and irrationally, but at other times, my discomfort was warranted. On occasion, I felt that some of my fellow classmates demonstrated a profound lack of awareness of their own upper and middle-class beliefs and biases. They seemed unaware of the negative language they used in regard to children and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes. It seemed they had a deep belief in their own higher power and authority to determine student worthiness or unworthiness. I understood the concept of being emotionally triggered by a seemingly unrelated event or comment and recognized very quickly that I was being triggered by everything in that classroom. It was obvious that my discomfort was based on my past experiences, as there was no overt display of negative feelings or attitudes specifically directed toward me. On the other hand, it felt
that a predominately white, middle-class value system permeated our classroom discussions. I became aware of how differently I saw the world compared to many of my classmates.

It was a struggle to be in that classroom. My churning emotions caused by my past experiences as a student were incongruent with my status as adult learner and the graduate school environment. I am sure from the outside I looked like an adult learner, but as was always the case in the past, I wanted to act out! I wanted to doodle and talk to my neighbour, challenge, confront and contradict! I wanted to hear something funny. I wanted tell the speaker to “shut up” because they were boring, and who cared anyway? I wanted to disrupt. That is what I used to do as a child and youth, but what did it mean that many years later I wanted to behave in exactly the same way? I had to exert a considerable amount of self-control not to exude disdain and disregard or display outright disrespect towards my fellow classmates, and, at times, the professor. Chip desperately wanted to shout at them, call them names and make fun of them. Chip and my classroom personae were in conflict. When triggered, Chip was willing to disrupt in order to avoid absorbing what felt toxic to my spirit. But as an adult I could not disrupt the classroom. I believe having to “behave” and sit quietly allowed me to connect to how angry I was about what was occurring in the classroom at that moment and what had occurred in the past when I was a child. I sat there and listened, examined my reactions, and began to make connections between the past and the present.

For the first time I had a sense of the force of this conflict in me, and it was shocking in its intensity. But because I was in such a different place in my life than I had been as a child or young adult returning to university, I really began to ask myself what that conflict was all about, rather than succumbing to it or masking it with other emotions and behaviours. As a mature person in that moment, how could I allow myself to surrender to that disruptive, angry part of myself? I was able to take a step back and begin to examine my emotional responses from a more objective standpoint. It is an understatement to say I was stunned, dismayed and somewhat embarrassed by those intense negative feelings. However, I was also secure enough in my current role as student and “grown up” woman to ask, "What the hell is going on here?"

After the second weekend of classes, I sat at home and felt very discouraged. I felt terribly alone and confused and yet was still marvelling at my own extreme and obviously irrational reaction to the classroom and my classmates. When I have a problem, I try to use logical, rather than emotional thinking to
help me solve it. When I was feeling insecure, angry and on an internal rant, I would challenge myself. So, I asked myself, “What is the real problem?” and “Why are you angry?” I was completely in a defiant child/adolescent reactive mode and could not help but see I was being triggered and was re-living some past, profoundly unpleasant experiences. I realized I was not reacting to my current reality but was being reminded of past events. At age forty-five, I was feeling as inadequate, confused, sad, and insecure as I had when I was seven years old! My life was generally happy and rewarding, and I felt for the first that I was on a path with a clear destination. For the most part, I had dealt with adult issues and struggles arising from my childhood and youth. I had been diligent about doing the emotional, psychological and spiritual work required to change my perceptions, and enhance my self-esteem. I felt successful in both my personal and professional life. Even though I was intellectually aware that there could be no real substance or truth to feeling like I was not fitting in, emotionally I again felt like an outsider. The school environment and the role of student were contrary to my sense of peace and security.

In spite of all the emotional turmoil, I pushed on in the program because, unlike other times in my life when I would skip along with no clear understanding of the path I was on or my final destination, I had a very specific and desirable goal in mind. I wanted to teach and I would not let anything, including being taught, get in my way. Thankfully, because of that stubbornness that manifested as tenacity, I began to realize that I was learning something of great value, not only about education in general, but about my particular place in it. I came to understand that I was not, for the most part, like many of the other students enrolled in the program. There were some fairly significant differences between them and me. Those differences were most obvious in relationship to our educational pasts, our expectations, how we philosophically viewed the education system itself, and the educator’s (our) possible role in it.

One notable difference was that most of my classmates were elementary school teachers and/or administrators within the public system while I was a community college teacher. I was of the social/community service ilk, while many of my classmates had been teaching in a school for most of their adult lives. I learned through some classroom discussions and group work that my classmates’ personal lives and experiences were not incongruent with where they found themselves as adults, participating in a Master of Education program. That was where their families expected them to be and where they too expected to
find themselves. On the other hand, I was somewhat of an anomaly. It appeared, given my personal life and experiences, particularly my earlier ones, I may have exceeded many expectations, most significantly my own. Unlike the other students, my presence in that particular classroom was somewhat of a surprise to me. I really did not have a clear understanding of how I found myself there. Rather than seeing a direct path or clearly defined set of goals, it was as if I had been transported there with no bridge between my current life and my past. If anyone had asked why I was doing a master of education degree, I would have answered only from a practical point of view, with future goals in mind that is, I wished to obtain full time employment at a community college. However, on a philosophical level, I could not have answered that question. I simply could not have found the deeper meaning for me being a graduate student.

I very quickly became aware of that lack of understanding of the all the steps in my educational journey. There were some missing pieces. Many people know they will go to university and graduate school and they do not question that understanding. Not so in my case. There was no knowing. There was no clear path to follow. It became very important for me to learn why there was a profound absence of understanding of being a graduate school student. Just how does one come to a place in their life with no clear understanding of why they are there? I understood how, as retracing my steps and the chronological events was easy, but I certainly did not truly understand why. In spending many hours cogitating on this very question, I knew that in satisfactory resolving the "why", I would have to explore and resolve my feelings of detachment and antagonism as a student in a classroom. The "why" became "why not?" Why did I question my place in the Master's classroom? Why did I see myself as split between two realities and truths about who I was, the teacher and Masters student and Chip, the blue-collar girl? Perhaps in answering both the whys and the why nots, those two aspects of my psyche could become one, with one voice.

**Study Questions**

In trying to address some of the following questions, “Why am I here? Am I supposed to be here?” and “Why am I surprised to be here?” I began to find some initial understanding, particularly in looking more closely at the areas of "risk" and "resilience". I had been exposed to those two concepts and implications in the education system through the papers that I had researched and written for my graduate courses. I must emphasize that I had worked with at risk children and youth for a number of years in the Child and Youth
Worker field, and certainly understood many of the factors contributing to my clients being at risk. In the field of social services, there are many who have experienced some of the same struggles that our clients have. In fact, that is what may draw an individual to the helping professions. I did not grapple with understanding my place in the social service realm. I was not struck with the incongruity of being an administrator in a youth servicing agency. However I did feel there was an incongruity with my past experience and performance as a student and as a Master of Education student. As I learned more about education and being an educator, particularly when viewed through a risk/resiliency lens, I began to see that I was indeed unique in "the academy". Risk and resilience literature overwhelmingly acknowledges that some people achieve much more than was predicted of them, not having been defeated by the circumstances of their birth, childhood, adolescence, and in my case, negative experiences in the classroom. I began to see that I might be one of those people that may have overcome the "odds". Acknowledging my own uniqueness in the academy and, a lack of a deep understanding of how I found myself there, was the primary reason I chose to make that the focus of my dissertation. I knew I must, for my own psychological, emotional and spiritual evolution, find my answers to the above-mentioned questions.

In summary, in this thesis, I will filter my personal story (self-study) through a risk and resilience perspective, with the goal of specifically addressing some of the questions posed in the previous paragraph. More specifically, I will examine the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contributed to being a child and youth both at risk, and resilient. I will determine whether my story corroborates current risk and resilience research and theory. What follows in Chapter Two is a review of the pertinent literature relating to risk and resilience and factors contributing to poor academic outcomes. It will provide a basic framework for the self-study that is presented in Chapter Four, and fully discussed in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Emerging Themes

I began the literature review seeking knowledge of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to children and youth being at risk for poor academic outcomes. The review focused on research that sought to explain why a child or youth who did not have intellectual or cognitive challenges still might experience poor academic outcomes. I also wished to review literature that examined resiliency factors, specifically, how an individual who did poorly academically in elementary and high school was then able to complete post-secondary schooling successfully. I was also interested in determining why some individuals who did poorly in elementary and high school, returned to post-secondary education as mature students.

In an initial review of the literature, several themes emerged that seemed to have particular impact on student motivation, engagement, and overall academic success. I was able to identify within the literature on risk and resiliency five major themes or variables that have a direct impact on scholastic outcome. What follows is a summary of those five emerging themes from the literature, themes that resonate with my own story.

Theme #1- Parental View of Education

Parental views of education and the degree to which the parent values education will have an effect on academic outcomes. If parents, for whatever reason, are not participating in their child’s education, they are unable to provide guidance and direction or establish expectations. When the family places little value on education, children are less motivated to concentrate on school (Levpuscek, 2001, Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005).

Family attitudes and values, as well as the child’s concept of self, can affect the child’s perspective and overall experience of the world. Although the list varies somewhat, most sociologists agree there are several forces that heavily influence the socialization of an individual. Those forces are referred to as “agents of socialization” and for the purpose of this literature review, I will refer to a list advanced by Richard Schaefer, Richard Floyd and Bonnie Haaland in Sociology, A Brief Introduction (2003). Their list of what they consider to be agents of socialization include family, school, peer groups, mass media and technology, the workplace, and the state.
The family is considered to be the most powerful agent of socialization. In the last few decades, the fields of education, sociology and psychology have begun to look to each other to fully understand factors contributing to academic success or failure in regard to family influence. Authors Bruce A. Ryan and Gerald R. Adams (1998) note in their article "Family Relationships and Children’s School Achievement: Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth," that, prior to 1978 and the publication of Sara Lawrence Lightfoot’s book World’s Apart: Relationships Between Families and Schools, there were almost no scholarly works studying overlaps in a child’s family and academic life. There was very little consideration of factors occurring outside the classroom that could affect academic failure or success such as specific role of parents, economic status, child characteristics, school environment and peer relationships. However, over the last twenty years, there is a growing body of research and writing documenting the importance of socialization and how the family unit helps shape academic outcomes.

There is an abundance of current research linking social economic status and the family’s function or dysfunction to cognitive, physical, emotional and psychological development in children (Wadsworth, 1979). The literature also overwhelmingly supports the connection between the family’s social economic status and academic outcomes for the child (e.g., Archangelo, 2003; Audas, 2001; Davey, 2003; Hauser-Cram & Sirin, 2003; Jones, et al., 2002; Levpuscek, 2001). However there is a tendency to stereotype and oversimplify the problem of academic failure by merely attributing it to low economic status of the family (Audus, & Willms, 2001). Low economic status is the most easily identifiable external factor in children struggling academically, but economic status represents only the tip of the iceberg. To fully understand factors that affect academic outcomes, we must again turn to sociological theory and the socialization process to truly understand the complex interplay between school and family.

Parents who are of low economic status and who have a low education level themselves may feel a “deep ambivalence” about school (Archangelo, 2003, p. 247). Archangelo stated, “These parents want their sons and daughters to go further than they did. However, they also accept almost passively that their boys and girls are not suited for school, which is exactly the same as they feel about themselves” (p. 247). How a parent will interact with a school and the teacher will also have an
effect on how that child is viewed by the teacher and on the expectations the teacher has of the child. “Children are presumably disadvantaged when their parents and teachers hold different values with respect to desired classroom practices and behaviour” (Housser-Cram & Selek, 2003, p. 814). The child whose parents are actively involved and advocating for their child will be perceived differently than the child whose parents are uninvolved and disconnected from their child’s school experiences.

The literature also supports that in younger students motivational levels are affected by perceived parental behaviours (Levpuscek, 2001). Lack of involvement and parents’ disconnection from their child’s academic performance may influence that child’s motivational levels. It has been well documented in studies of “blue-collar” or low income families that parents may have difficulty in knowledgeably guiding their children through the complexities of education (Miller & Kastberg, 1995) “The way in which parents are involved in their child’s studies matters, and when there is lack of interest, motivation to concentrate on school may be lacking” (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005, p. 209). The need to be encouraged to do well in school, particularly for girls, is highlighted in Davey and Jamieson’s (2003) article Against the odds: pathways of early school leavers into university education: evidence from England and New Zealand. Without question, parental involvement is a key predictor of academic self-efficacy (Adeyemo, 2005).

**Theme #2- Self-Concept, Self-Efficacy and Motivation**

There is a well-documented phenomenon of underachieving and lack of motivation in children who have intellectual ability to do well academically. Underachieving in intellectually capable students has been attributed to disengagement, lack of expectations for that child and lowered sense of self-efficacy. Parental involvement and school environment are the most significant predictors of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is linked to self-concept and self-concept becomes a key focus when a child reaches adolescence. Then the peer group will further enhance a young person’s self-efficacy and self-concept.

Self-efficacy as defined by Albert Bandura (1997) “is concerned with people’s judgement of their capability to organize and execute a designated type of performance. Adeyemo (2005) refers to Schunk’s definition that “academically, self-efficacy refers to one’s perceived capability to perform given academic tasks at the desired level” (p. 169). Again, level of parental involvement has a direct
effect on academic self-efficacy, as does the degree to which home and school are working toward the same goal for the child (Adeyemo, 2005). Parental involvement is the number one predictor of self-efficacy while the school environment is the second most important predictor of self-efficacy (Adeyemo, 2005). As noted by Alfassi, (2003),

Students’ belief in their capabilities to master academic activities affects their aspirations, level of interest in intellectual pursuits and their academic achievements. Furthermore, these beliefs influence emotional states such as stress, anxiety and depression, which can intrude on and impair intellectual functioning. Students engage in tasks in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not. (Alfassi, 2003, p. 2)

Lack of motivation and underachievement can begin to manifest themselves very early in children’s academic life and, for the most part, underachieving is attributed to personality characteristics of the child (Dixon, 1993). In her study, *The Affective Characteristics of Underachieving, Intellectually Gifted Children*, Dixon lists the accepted explanations for underachieving as being:

1. Inadequate motivation; lack of challenge leading to poor study habits; and eventually skill deficits; inability to persevere;
2. Social pressure or mal-adjustment, resulting in rejection by peers unless they conform to group standards;
3. Inadequate school curriculum content and poor teaching; a school atmosphere low in intellectual content; school may fail to recognize the child as gifted;
4. Home climate and parental rejection; parental attitudes towards education; unrealistic pressures to achieve;
5. Personality characteristics, specifically lowered self-concept; negative outlook on life; strong ego defences; perfectionism and unrealistic expectations for achievement; and,
6. Undiagnosed learning difficulties. (p. 2)

Dixon (1993) goes on to list the individual personality traits that are associated with underachievement, including “lazy, unmotivated, perpetually ‘off-task’, bright, but not trying very hard” (p. 2). As noted by Dixon, “self-expectations for future achievement” (p. 2) had yet to be extensively
studied in relationship to lack of motivation and underachieving. Since 1993, when Dixon first
conducted her study, further studies have supported the connection between self-expectations and
academic achievement (Alfassi, 2003; Archangelo, 2003; Audas & Douglas, 2001; Davey &

Although there should be a direct correlation between ability and academic outcomes, it
would appear that self-concept has a significant role to play in the final result. Self-concept may distort
the ability/performance connection. "Underachievers often exhibit low self-concept or low self-
perceptions" (McCoach & Siegle, 2001, p. 6). In my opinion, the connection between self-concept and
academic performance cannot be underemphasized. "Research suggests that as much as one-third
of variance in achievement can be accounted for by self-concept alone" (Lyon, 1993 in McCoach &
Siegle, 2001, p. 6). "In fact, academic self-concept has been identified as a predictor of academic
achievement beyond what can be explained by prior achievement. Children who are secure and
confident in their ability to succeed are likely to put forth the effort to master schoolwork" (Flock &

In the most extreme cases, poor academic performance results in dropping out of school.
Drop-outs have also been referred to as “early school leavers” (Davey & Jamieson, 2003). In their
2003 study, Davey and Jamieson define early school leaving as “having left school with less than four
years of secondary education” (p. 268). For the purpose of this dissertation, I wish to expand that
definition to include those who leave school before they have reached their full academic potential,
with the exception of those who wished to continue but could not due to financial or health factors or
issues of being sole provider for a dependant or dependants. Within my definition, early school
leavers or drop-outs include those who, for various reasons, had the intellectual ability to further their
education but opted not to.

If a child has already begun to experience motivation and self-efficacy issues in the
classroom, adolescence will likely enhance problems that have already begun. Any educational,
social, personal and vocational related issues already identified can become extreme during transition
into secondary school (Adeyemo, 2005). Adolescence is a turbulent time and it is usually at that stage
that those who are not likely to succeed academically and are at risk for dropping out are identified. It
must be emphasized that there are many earlier indicators of future academic difficulty but the nature of adolescence, particularly the challenging of authority and the importance of peer relationships over family and teacher/student relationships, draws attention to the “problem” student.

As another agent of socialization, the peer group, begins to play a significant role in the evolution of self-concept. Peers will influence values and ultimately choices that a youth might make for self. The literature acknowledges peer influences on academic values (Jacobs & Vernon 2004; Quinn, 1997).

The influence of peers can be both positive and negative. On the positive side it can serve as an important incentive for adolescents to perform well in school. On the negative side, peer influence can lead to discipline problems and delinquent behaviours both inside and outside of school. Thus, the values of peers can play an important role in student’s educational outcomes. (Xiagliiei, 1997, p. 1)

Perhaps the most important information that has emerged from more recent literature is that poor academic outcomes, with the result being early school leaving or dropping out before completion of high school, are the result of many factors and a long and complex process which begins early in a child’s life (Audus & Willms, 2001; Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Davey & Jamieson, 2003; Jones, et al., 2002; Ryan & Adams, 1998). As mentioned previously, the most extreme result of all the identified factors working together to create poor academic performance, is that the youth will eventually drop out of school. Therefore one can postulate, “dropping out of school is not a single act of defiance, but is better characterized as a process that in many respects begins at birth and can cover many years of an individual’s life” (Audas & Willms, 2001).

**Theme #3- Psychological and Emotional Factors**

Other emotional and psychological problems occurring at home and in the classroom will affect a child’s well being and therefore will affect academic outcomes. Negative home and school environments, due to the psychological health of parents and teachers, affects the relationships the child will have with those important adults and potentially decreases academic performance. Next to a positive family environment, a positive school environment is highly important to positive academic outcomes.
The literature clearly recognizes the strong link between family functioning and child outcomes (Richardson, 2005). I have defined “child outcomes” as a term that refers to the physical health, emotional well being and cognitive development of a child. The family stress model, as discussed in Poverty, Social Capital, Parenting and Child Outcomes in Canada (Jones et al., 2002) explains stress levels in a family can affect children due to parents being less effective.

Child outcomes of high levels of family stress and ineffective forms of parenting include poor emotional adjustment, which may be externalized as various forms of aggression or internalized as depression or low self-esteem. Healthy child adjustment, on the other hand should emerge as achievement and on task behaviour in school, persistence in difficult tasks and enjoyment of daily life. (p. 3)

What Archangelo (2003) described as “social ruptures” can adversely affect children’s social, emotional and cognitive development and negatively affect their academic performance. However, there is difficulty in gathering information about adverse family conditions that might be relevant to poor academic outcomes. Parents experiencing difficulties that are negatively affecting their children’s academic performance are unlikely to participate in a study. As a result, researchers must rely on parents who positively respond to requests for them to participate in studies about social processes. “Agreement is typically forthcoming from reasonably well functioning, educated, middle-class families” (Ryan & Adams, 1998, p. 12). Therefore, the research within this particular sector remains largely underdeveloped and remarkably under-represented.

Issues occurring in the classroom and relationships with teachers will also affect academic outcomes (Wadsworth, 1979). Along with stressors at home, stress a child might feel in the classroom will also cause a decrease in academic performance. Teachers face many barriers to being an effective instructor and role model to their students. Teachers can experience “‘burn-out’ defined as a result of inadequate stress management, high levels of frustration, and ongoing and inadequate support and supervision” (Stephenson, 1989, p. 54).

In addition to concerns with teachers’ ability and well being, and how that might affect their students, the school environment can play a huge role in how students feel about being there. Is
being at school a positive or negative experience? Do they feel safe in their school environment? Do they trust the adult who is in charge of them during those hours when they are away from their family? The literature points to the importance of positive school environment and student/teacher relationships in enhancing academic performance (Adeyemo, 2005; Archangelo, 2003; Audas, et. al., 2001; Beekhoven, et al., 2005; Levpuscek, 2001; Miller, et al., 1995; Stephenson, 1989).

**Theme #4- Factors in Early School Leavers Returning to the Education System**

Early school leavers report having experienced many of the factors that place them at risk for early school leaving including parents’ lack of involvement in school, emotional and psychological issues in both the family and classroom, diminished perception of self-efficacy and self-concept, negative peer influences, disengagement with the education process, and low expectations of their academic ability and level of achievement. Even so, many early school leavers do return for more education due to a growing confidence and heightened sense of self-efficacy gained outside the education system. Research suggests that emotional intelligence plays an important part in success outside of the school environment (Goleman, 1995), which, in my opinion, factors heavily in an early school leaver having the confidence to return to school.

The list of factors common to youth at risk for poor academic outcomes includes low socio-economic status family, inadequate parenting or lack of parental involvement, little or no academic expectations, and peers with low academic aspirations. However, studies also suggest young people who cut their educational career short are not necessarily living problematic lives (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005). In a 2001 study, six types of early school leavers were identified: the successful unschooled manual worker; the career planner; the money earner; the doubter; the unemployed drop-out; and the employed (temporary) drop-out (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005). Other factors such as choosing the wrong vocational track and lack of commitment, lack of pressure from parents to complete schoolwork, undiagnosed learning disabilities, and simply not knowing what to do career wise were all reasons why the participants in the study left school early (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005).

Davey & Jamieson (2003) asked the question “How did the early school leavers come to participate in university education, whether previous to entering their current study or through their
current study, after what could be seen as an unfavourable beginning in the education system?” (p. 270). The framework for answering their question was the “life course perspective”. That perspective focuses on the “interplay” between individual change and changing social context as well as how an individuals’ social realities affect decision-making and in particular, a decision to return to school (Davey & Jamieson, 2005). Some of the reasons participants in the study cited as influencing a return to school are a keen interest in a specific field requiring more training; self-confidence (from increased maturity and life experience) in the ability to succeed in school; encouragement from those closest to the individual; changes in society’s view of women in education; good timing; improved self-image; growing feelings of responsibility; an emergence of a love of learning; and influence from peer group who were high achievers and successful in own their careers (Davey & Jamieson, 2005). As previously mentioned, a growing self-confidence and self-efficacy gained outside the education system tended to change the study’s participants’ view of their ability to succeed in secondary education.

In none of the articles reviewed did results state that early school leavers felt that education was not important or that it could not help them in their lives. Unfortunately, most young people who have experienced poor academic outcomes only attribute those poor results to their perceived abilities and intelligence rather than to the numerous factors in unique combinations that can negatively affect academic outcomes. The literature does address the fact that academic performance, intelligence quota (I.Q.) tests and other measures of academic aptitude are not the best predictors of success. “Current research has concluded that emotional intelligence (E.I.) and related non-traditional measures of intelligence and human performance are just as predictive of academic and career success” (Low & Nelson, 2004, p. 2). It is now being recognized that, in school, these types of abilities must be identified and nurtured before behaviours like lack of motivation and underachievement often resulting in poor academic outcomes are evident (Low & Nelson, 2004).

And while emotional intelligence would appear to help predict academic outcomes, it is also likely that it will play a part in an individual’s later return to school after early school leaving. Low and Nelson (2004) discussed skills associated with emotional intelligence as being “time management (self-management), drive strength (achievement drive), and commitment ethic (personal
responsibility”) (p. 5). While those skills may not be identified or evident in children and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes, they are skills that, after leaving the school environment, would become evident in the workplace or in an individual’s personal life and relationships. It is through those skills and other non-academic successes that individuals would see themselves as capable of taking on school again and as more fully able to understand why they were not successful the first time.

**Theme #5- Class and Gender**

Statistically, working-class people, and particularly women from the working class, do not attain higher levels of education or rise to the professional ranks (Miller & Kastberg, 1995). As a result, women who have overcome the odds to attaining higher education often feel misplaced and that they are an outsider. Once they attain this higher education and status in the workforce (performing a white collar job as opposed to blue collar jobs), they must leave their social class and some of their own family values behind in order to fit in. Because nothing in their past, including their family’s expectations of them, have prepared them for this unfamiliar, “upper” class, they may never feel as if they belong. They do not feel that they are really “one of the group”. Miller and Kastberg (1995), referred to Collins and Lorde’s naming of this phenomenon as “impostor syndrome”. In summary, women from a working class background “experience a profound sense of not belonging” (p. 7). In my opinion, a woman who feels she is an impostor would also fear that, if others knew of her blue-collar background, they would treat her as an outsider. Surprisingly, statistics reveal that

Less than 10% of the U.S. population rises from a blue-collar background to attain professional positions...Women in higher education from blue-collar backgrounds are pioneers. These women are often firsts – the first from the family to go to college, the first to work in higher education, the first to have a career...They are successful despite the barriers of class – working class values and experiences differ from those found in the academy – and despite the paucity of female academic role models. (Miller & Kastberg, 1995, p.1)

Yet, as Miller and Kastberg (1995) note, there is a price to pay for the choice to take the higher education path. The choice entails leaving a part of yourself behind, and as a result women who choose that path struggle with identity and affiliation, isolation, guilt, shame and rejection.
Summary

In summarizing the five emerging themes, there are multiple factors with complex interplay that determine a child’s educational outcomes. It is unlikely that one event or attitude leads to early school leaving. Generally, it is a unique combination of many factors and a process that begins very early in a child’s life.

The literature, some of it already examined, supports that, given my family background, personal characteristics, academic performance, attitude, availability of opportunity (or lack of opportunity), and expectations, there was a statistically significant possibility that I might not succeed scholastically. I must emphasize that I have defined “lack of success” as not feeling capable of doing what your heart desires due to beliefs about what you should or should not do, rather than an actual inability or lack of potential to reach a goal. I do not differentiate between drop-outs who did not finish high school due to reasons other than intellectual ability, from individuals who do not go on to higher education because of their perceived academic inadequacies. As per my definition, “early school leaving” simply means leaving school before reaching your full potential. But as the literature reveals and is apparent in these five themes, there are many barriers and combinations of circumstances that create obstacles to education. Therefore, it is important to consider risk and resiliency factors in much greater detail in order to examine how they help or hinder children and youth on their educational journey.

Risk and Resiliency Defined

Since the early 1970’s, child development theorists have attempted to understand the interplay between risk factors that place a child or youth at risk for negative outcomes and resiliency and protective factors that are believed to outweigh risk factors. The result of resilience outweighing risk is that the individual goes on to have a healthy and successful life rather than succumbing to the risk factors (Garmezy, 1971). It is understood that resiliency can overcome risk factors but only if resiliency factors outweigh risk factors.

Resiliency is a term that has emerged as a result of studying vulnerable and at risk children and youth who have defied expected outcomes and have not succumbed to risk factors (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983). As noted by Michael Ungar in Nurturing Hidden Resiliency in Troubled Youth (2004),
“risk” and “resiliency” are two elements of the same phenomenon. Resiliency is not present or, perhaps more accurately, is not recognized or observable and named, unless it is viewed in conjunction with risk or vulnerability. The term “risk” emerged from the field of medicine when it was noted that children born into impoverished conditions were at higher risk for health problems. More recently, the term has been adopted when looking at other factors that place children and youth at risk or make them vulnerable to not just negative physical and health outcomes but also negative emotional and psychological outcomes.

Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker (2000), discussed the growing body of research that has emerged on risk, vulnerability, resiliency and protective factors that affect outcomes. They refer to a landmark longitudinal study conducted over several decades by Emily Werner that focused on risk factors associated with poverty in children born in 1955 to Kauai plantation workers. In some of the first analysis of the data emerging in 1971, Norman Garmezy noted that even though a majority of the children were negatively impacted by multiple risk factors, a number of the children (about one-third) were developing normally in spite of multiple risk factors (Werner & Smith, 1992). The children were described as “invincible”, “invulnerable” and “resilient” (Werner & Smith, 1982). Those terms continue to permeate research and theory on children and youth at risk, although it is becoming increasingly apparent that defining those terms is somewhat problematic and therefore the use of such terms as foundations for risk and resilience research is debatable.

For the most part, there are common definitions for risk and resilience. The word “risk” is often used when describing groups of people (Johnson & Wiechelt, 2004) i.e., youth at risk or families at risk. Johnson and Wiechelt (2004) refer to Arrington and Wilson’s definitions stating “vulnerability” is more often used when describing individuals. Risk factors can be very broad depending on the lens through which risk is viewed. With regard to children and youth, definitions of risk can vary to some degree depending on whether it is viewed from a medical, psychological, legal, social, educational or familial perspective. Ungar discusses the number of ways in which these terms can be defined and applied referring to Kirby and Frasers’ discussion of the different lenses through which risk and resiliency can be viewed. Risk factors “may include genetic, biological, behavioural, sociocultural, and demographic conditions, characteristics, or attributes” (Ungar, 2004, p. 41). It is fair
to say that no hardship, adverse condition or challenge existing in an individual’s life would be dismissed as a potential risk factor. It is also fair to say that the social/psychological literature and research is beginning to reflect the complicated interplay among risk, resiliency and outcomes. Therefore, it is difficult “to identify a narrow set of risk factors that can account for the variance between healthy and unhealthy children” (Ungar, 2004, p. 40).

Vulnerability is generally considered as resulting from exposure to risk (Ungar, 2004). Individuals’ vulnerability increases as their exposure to risk increases. For example, if risk factors for a child or youth are considered to be poverty, neglect, abuse and violence in the home, then the greater number of these risk factors and the extent to which they exist in that individual’s environment will determine the degree of risk and vulnerability. Quite simply put, resilience and protective factors are defined as any element of an individual’s life, including intrinsic and extrinsic factors, that enables an individual to overcome a risk factor and decrease vulnerability. A very common definition of resilience appearing in the literature is that it is “the human capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by experiences of adversity” (Grotberg, 1999, p.66).

While there is some consensus, even among various disciplines, of what warrant inclusion in a “risk list” and what would be considered universal resiliency factors, as more research is conducted on the topic, it becomes increasingly apparent that it is extremely difficult to predict which child and youth will be successful and which individual will experience a negative outcome. If the definition of “success” and “negative outcome” is also challenged, then risk, vulnerability, resiliency and protective factors become even more difficult to explain. What is constant in the literature though, is that risk and vulnerability can be mitigated or even negated by resiliency and protective factors but determining what the definition of risk, vulnerability, resiliency and protectiveness is for any one group, may not be possible. Understanding the essence of these elements, and their interplay on an individual basis may be the only reliable way of predicting or understanding a long-term outcome.

It must be emphasized that an awareness of the existence of resiliency came as a result of studying risk. Resilient individuals defied expected trajectories of individuals with multiple risk factors existing in their lives. They did not turn out as expected. Ann Masten (1997) articulated the “discovery” of resilience.
How do children and adolescents “make it” when their development is threatened by poverty, neglect, maltreatment, war, parents disabled by physical or mental illness, or natural disasters? The scientific discovery of resilience – children succeeding in spite of serious challenges to development – emerged about 25 years ago, when a group of pioneering researchers kept bumping into examples of successful development in their studies of children at-risk. (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p.425)

Those investigators realized that there was a lack of understanding of how good outcomes are achieved in the face of risk. In order to improve the odds for high risk children, a deeper understanding of resilience was vital (Masten, 1997).

**Social Construct of Risk and Resiliency**

What is now gaining some momentum in the literature is defining and explaining the interplay between risk and resiliency from the perspective of the children and youth being studied, rather than through the adult educator, social worker, psychologist, criminologist or any other individuals and their disciplines, that seek to understand children or youth at risk. An earlier definition of resilience used in this literature review was “the human capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by experiences of adversity” (Grotberg, 1999, p.66). However, what starts to muddy the definitional waters is what the school’s, or even the community’s and larger society’s views and definition of “positive” and “negative” behaviours are. For example, the literature is riddled with very specific lists of resiliency factors that have been shown to outweigh risk factors seen through an educational/classroom expectation lens. Deardon (2004) refers to a Jackson and Martin study on adults who had been in the child protection system and who later experienced educational success. The authors listed several protective factors existing in childhood or adolescence that were believed to have contributed to later success. Those factors included:

- Stability and continuity
- Learning to read and fluently
- Having a parent or caregiver who valued education and saw it as a route to a good life
- Having friends outside of the care system who did well at school
Developing out of school interests and hobbies (which also helped to increase social skills and bring them into contact with a wider range of people outside of the care system)

- Meeting a significant adult who offered consistent support and encouragement and acted as a mentor and possibly a role model
- Attending school regularly. (Deardon, 2004, p.188)

The difficulty in determining whether this is, in fact, an accurate list of what made those previously at risk adults resilient is that their adult selves were defining the experiences of their younger lives. They might describe their younger selves from the perspective of adults who now see themselves as “successful”. Another successful adult, the researcher, might also filter the account through their beliefs of what constitutes success and failure. In my opinion, it is very important to critically view those kinds of statements and findings in risk and resilience research. I know from my own personal experience that one might wish to leave the “unsuccessful” non-conforming, outcast self behind and might readily accept the new more positive labels that go with belonging and acceptance as defined by the dominant culture. One may forget why, as a youth, one chose not to engage in what was deemed to be positive, pro-society behaviours and actions. We are taught from a very early age that if we behave “this way”, the outcome will be “that”. The road to success or failure is a clearly worn path and incorporates all our society’s values, norms and expectations.

Although Bonnie Bernard (1991); Norman Garmezy (1991); Nan Henderson and Mike Milstein (2003); Gina Higgins (1994); Martin Krovetz (1999); Ann Masten and Douglas Coatsworth (1998); Nel Noddings (1988); Steven and Sybil Wolin (1993); Michael Rutter et al., (1971); Ruth Smith (1989); Margaret Wang (1996); and Emmy Werner (1996); have written extensively from a risk and resiliency perspective, it is Michael Ungar’s research and findings that most closely parallel my own experiences.

In Nurturing Hidden Resilience in Troubled Youth, Ungar (2004) states that the concept of resilience “has been the property of well-intentioned researchers who have sought to define a particular set of outcomes, behaviours, and processes as indicative of well-being” (p. 5). In my opinion, it is difficult to truly capture the attitudes and interpretations of experiences of children and
youth at risk. It is the difficulty every anthropologist faces as it is nearly impossible to study a living
culture and emerge with unbiased, uncorrupted data. It seems obvious that we have few
ethnographers living in, and recording, the culture of youth and particularly youth at risk. For the most
part, we only have outsiders (adults) looking in.

As adults, even adults that were once at risk, we must concede that we are far removed from
our childhood experiences. In viewing our own pasts, we are filtering data through an altered lens.
Therefore, as mentioned previously, it is important to view critically data gathered and interpreted and
theory developed on children and youth at risk. Much of the research conducted started from largely
unchallenged views of what “normal”, “healthy”, “acceptable” and “desirable” are. And from those
accepted and unchallenged criteria come unchallenged and accepted definitions of risk, resiliency,
success and failure, and positive and negative outcomes.

As noted by Ungar (2004), and Luthar, et al., (2000), all those terms are socially constructed,
as are their definitions. Ungar refers to various studies and work in regard to views of “normalcy” and
“health”. Ungar makes reference to Foucault (1976/1954), Sedwick (1982), and Weeden (1997) with
respect to the social construction of risk and resilience, claiming they are the labels typically given
behaviours of people who appear to have internalized society’s expectations of them (Ungar, 2004).
Since much of the research conducted on children and youth at risk, at least to date, has come from
pre-determined, accepted, and unacknowledged socially accepted meanings, we must consider that
a great deal of the research and theory is biased and is potentially inaccurate in fully describing and
explaining the concepts of risk and resiliency.

Ungar’s (2004) current research on risk and resiliency begins with Blundo’s (2001) and
Margolin’s (1997) premise that resiliency is a social construct based on the mental health system’s
desire to have a “codified system of assessment and categorization in which professionals have
become powerful advocates for particular visions of social order” (Ungar, 2004, p. 4). Further to
that, Ungar notes, “as more and more young people are slipped neatly into these well-defined
boxes, the meaning they construct for their behaviour and the context in which it takes place is
overlooked” (p. 4). There is research that supports that mental health can be enhanced by what
are referred to as “delinquent behaviours” (Ungar & Teram, 2000, p. 229). Youth will exhibit
behaviours that are contrary to the expectations and tolerance of the dominant culture. It is possible that there is a payoff for that behaviour, and that the behaviour could have a greater, more desirable effect on the youth than would choosing the conforming acceptable behavior.

However, most adults in positions of authority, such as teachers, counsellors, or police and justice system workers, are unable to conceive that ultimately the negative, and usually antisocial behaviour can in fact be the best means by which the youth can find a level of well-being (Ungar, 2002, 2004; Ungar & Teram, 2000). In Playing At Being Bad, The Hidden Resilience of Troubled Youth, Ungar notes, “The deeply troubled youth whom I meet through my work tell me they play at being bad because that is the simplest way to feel good…” (Ungar, 2002, p. 10). Suggesting that at risk youth should find better and more acceptable ways to “feel good” must be combined with strategies to ensure at risk youth have the opportunity to positively enhance and maintain well-being in socially acceptable ways that make them feel as good as their negative and socially unacceptable behaviour does. To suggest that at risk youth choose the negative behaviour simply because they are attracted to it for its negativity, is trivializing the reality of an at risk youth’s lack of opportunity to succeed in a socially acceptable way.

**Risk and Resiliency in Context**

Ungar’s collective research within the risk/resilience dynamic is significant in that it seeks to understand the reason for the negative behaviour within the context of a youth’s life. His long time work with at risk children and youth has revealed three primary reasons why youth choose to participate in risky and deviant behaviour: the behaviour is the best coping mechanism they have at their disposal to deal with recent trauma and resulting pain; those youth don’t have socially acceptable ways available to them to more positively cope with emotional pain and trauma; and even children with no obvious or intense dysfunction occurring in their lives may choose deviant behaviour in response to disempowerment, lack of opportunity to make choices about their lives, and expectations that they will desire the order, sameness, stability and status of their “normal” lives. In discussing such youth who may be from “functioning middle-class” families but who are also engaging in risky behaviour, Ungar (2002) states, “these lucky kids are the least understood because they are the ones who seem to explode without warning from their middle-class roots, embarrassing their
parents and communities who hang their heads in disbelief when their apparently healthy children commit unthinkable acts of destruction” (p. 21).

From an educational point of view, the classroom is where poor academic ability, performance and social marginalization can begin to place young people at risk for poor academic outcomes and potentially poor social outcomes. In my opinion, poor academic outcomes in children and youth who do not have learning differences are indicative of other factors occurring in those individuals’ lives. However, we must refer to Ungar’s work, which critically examines poor academic performance and negative behaviours. While creating a negative outcome in the classroom, those so-called negative behaviours are in fact having a positive effect on the children or youth in other, potentially more important aspects of their lives. In essence, behaviour presenting as a problematic in the classroom might be contributing to the health and well being of that individual. It must also be emphasized that over the course of a lifetime, the classroom may prove to be the least hospitable environment to foster some forms of resilience. Some behaviours, while non-conforming and unwelcome in the classroom, may be the manifestation of a child or youth’s resilience.

From that perspective, it is vitally important to hear the stories of children and youth who struggle with what is expected of them as a student. It is also important to hear the stories of adults who have made the decision to return to school after a long absence, even though, like me, the classroom causes anxiety for them. In Chapter Three, I will discuss self-study methodology. Aside from the opportunity self-study methodology has given me to tell my story, it is my contention that many important, unique stories can only be told in this way. As we begin to gather the stories of children and youth considered to be at risk, we learn about risk and resilience within the context of individual lives.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Rationale for Self-Study

How does one rationalize the telling of one's own story? It is notable that, before I attempted to provide a rationale for readers as to why I chose self-study and this particular topic, I had to justify to myself why my personal story was important and worth telling. That need to convince myself of the value of my own experience was multi-layered. Initially, I had come to understand that I was an individual who was at risk for poor academic outcomes and so did not expect to be writing a thesis at a Master's level. That presented an intellectual and psychological conundrum because I had been accepted into the post-graduate program and I was doing well academically. Reality and a core belief clashed. Logically, I could obtain that degree. Emotionally, I was in conflict and somewhat disbeliefing that I was capable of such a feat.

We can understand something intellectually but believe something completely different on an emotional level. Having internalized the belief that I was not capable of a high level of academic performance yet writing about that aspect of myself and my history in a Master’s thesis seemed to be a complete contradiction. I believed those two internal views to be a dichotomy. The two perspectives must be mutually exclusive. As discussed earlier, that feeling of being in the wrong place and not belonging caused conflict in explaining my own reality and, on a deeper level, my own truth. At that point, I was intensely aware of a distinct split in my internal world. I could think and speak with two distinct voices, but in deciding to conduct a self-study I was taking the first step toward integration of these two voices. The current, educated, master student persona, was attempting to give voice to the other persona, the child and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes.

There was another phenomenon that occurred often for me when I was physically in the academic setting, specifically, when I was teaching or speaking with students in my office. I referred to this phenomenon (only partly joking) as an “out of body experience”. At certain moments when I was teaching or conducting academic advising or any other intensely “professor-ish” activity, I would suddenly be struck by the oddness of it all. I would see myself from an earlier self's perspective. This
earlier, younger self saw current self in that place and the two selves would say to each other, “Who would have thought you would be doing this?”

Because of this growing awareness and understanding of the cognitive dissonance between having my job as a professor and coordinator of a college program and existing internalized beliefs, I began to see that my past youth at risk perspective was potentially unique in the academic environment. It was an unusual set of circumstances and could perhaps provide insight for other teachers into a world that is not often viewed from the inside out. However, the thought of exposing my past and experiences in such a way was frightening.

At that point in my self-understanding, I had not begun to explore the politics of self-study or how such work might be perceived within the context of the academy (Cole & Knowles, 1996). I was already dealing with a feeling of not belonging in an academic milieu and, as I began to read more about self-study, I realized that there were political implications to abandoning traditional quantitative research methods. Not only did I risk exposure of a person who did not really belong, I was also about to “challenge the traditions of the academy” (Cole & Knowles, 1996, p. 4).

An important element and part of the struggle in choosing to do a self-study was that I wanted the work to be credible. I wanted my self-study to further educational research. I did not want it to be less than compelling yet I did not want it to be perceived as a fanciful work of fictional drama. I wanted to be as honest and true to memory as possible when telling my story from my child/youth perspective and, be as objective as possible when analyzing those experiences. I did not want this to be a sociological study of the oppression of the lower classes by the “system”. I did not want to lay blame or negate my own responsibility or fail to give myself credit for my accomplishments. This was not to be a story about a victim, a rebel or a martyr; nor did I set out to be overtly political, inflammatory or provocative. Yet I came to realize that if I was to talk about issues of gender, class, labels, social systems, opportunity or voicelessness, it must then become, on some level, political, provocative and perhaps inflammatory. There was risk in taking a position on any topic that related to any of those issues.

In spite of all perceived or real repercussions, to avoid engaging in a self-study because I feared all of the above would give credence to the sense of not belonging and would silence a voice
largely unheard in the academy. To not do a self-study would come from a place of fear, and fear too often squelches change. In my case, fear of disrupting the status quo might be because I had found shelter and comfort in the status quo and to question that structure would possibly risk my own comfortable place. Should I forget my past and the struggle to gain that status and comfort or question the very system that was affording me that status and comfort?

I made the conscious decision to move ahead with self-study methodology with the understanding that the purpose of the self-study would be to relay and analyze events, circumstances, and personal characteristics that resulted in my early academic failure and ultimate academic success. While I did believe that my voice in that forum was unique, I did not believe my story or the particular circumstances of my childhood and youth were in any way unusual. I believe that the experiences I have had within my family and the classroom is a fairly common story. The child in a blue-collar and/or dysfunctional family who also does not do well in school, is not a unique circumstance. I attended school from kindergarten to grade twelve with a core group of people, most of them from blue-collar families as I was. A very small percentage went on to post-secondary education. I knew their stories, knew their lives, and in some cases knew how they felt about pursuing post-secondary education. The fact that many of my peer group did not complete high school or go on to post-secondary education was not surprising.

There is a great deal of literature that draws a correlation between economic and social status and level of education obtained. What the literature does not provide in great numbers are detailed, first person accounts from those who did not attain higher education, or data that highlight experiences that caused them to be early school leavers (as per my definition of early school leaving in Chapter Two). Obviously, if individuals from lower socio-economic classes do not attain higher education, then they will not often be conducting research and writing about why they did not attain higher education. It was my hope that my self-study would help me to understand how I found myself in a place where I was researching and writing about those experiences. It would also give insight and voice to the worlds of other children and youth like myself who would not soon find themselves in a position of authority where their story might be told. Most importantly, from a personal perspective, it would explore and attempt to explain my clashing core beliefs and current realities. In other words, I
had issues to resolve through my self-study research. As noted by Avi Rose, “I wanted to ‘go deep’ and incorporate my own lived experience into a research endeavour. As the last step of my formal education, I wanted to sum up my learning and discuss the journey that it had been” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 171).

Self-study is about seeking understanding and hopefully a deeper connection to one’s experiences and therefore one’s truth. I wanted to understand and ultimately be accepting and philosophical about my experiences, my relationships with teachers and my choices in life. In his book Liberating Scholarly Writing, Nash (2004) noted that most students who choose to write a personal narrative share a common need for transition and self-empowerment. They are “trying to find just the right words to describe who they are struggling to become” (p. 97). Nash also notes that we hope that our stories “might heal the rifts that exist between… personal and professional lives” (p. 99).

This self-study is written not just from a personal point of view but also from an anthropological and sociological perspective. Being an “observer” is how I have always absorbed and digested information. In addition, I have kept a journal since I was fifteen years old. Always, I recorded my experiences analytically. Why was I doing that? Why did I feel that way? I believe that a predisposition to be watcher and recorder with a penchant for analysis and dissection has served me well in a multidimensional or rather multi-layered recounting of my educational experiences in addition to my retrospective adult understanding of those events.

The Quantitative/Qualitative Debate - Validity, Value, Credibility and Truth

A criticism of ethnography from a feminist perspective is that it is a reflection of a “privileged, male discourse that maintains unequal relationships between researchers and the members of the culture who are studied” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005, p.357). There may also be an unequal relationship between researchers and the children and youth they are studying, and therefore research findings may also reflect the researchers’ values and sensibilities. In my self-study, I am a member of the culture and the observer and recorder of that culture as well. In the story section of this dissertation, I attempt to portray how I really felt and interpreted the experiences at the time I was experiencing them. As I wrote the story, I made every effort not to filter it through my current analytical processes. Writing about past events without attaching current understanding to the story was difficult. It required
that I maintain a high level of self-awareness and a conscious avoidance of interpreting and manipulating the story as it was being written.

As I was writing my story, it was important to acknowledge that in some cases I had already reframed many of those experiences. However, in many cases, I was not divorced from the original emotions and interpretations I had at the time of the experience. I could still accurately describe how I felt the day I left the vice principal’s office after getting the strap as that experience had created an emotional footprint in my psyche that could not be erased. More importantly, I can remember what I was thinking at the time some of those significant events happened. In writing about my thoughts thirty or forty years ago, I am aware of the fact that they are child thoughts, child rationalization, child interpretation, as it is not only the event I remember, but also the conversation I was having in my head about it. Therefore, I am not recalling an event only. I am also recalling the thoughts I had at the time of the event. That is a gauge I used in determining how accurately I was recalling the event. To what extent did I remember it well enough to recall not only the detail of what happened physically, but also what I was thinking at the time?

In considering the integrity of self-study, one must ask whether there is a distinction between honesty and objectivity. Nash (2004) discusses “truth”, “facts”, and “story” in Liberating Scholarly Writing. He states that truth is what we honestly believe it to be and not necessarily factual. The story is the relating of one’s own truth, conveyed in a factual manner. If one knows that one’s telling of the story is not factual, then there is a danger of drifting into the realm of exaggeration or even lying. Nash suggests that the reader will begin to feel mistrust and that “…the facts of the narrative just don’t add up. They are inconsistent and contradictory” (p. 137).

Inconsistency and contradiction do not necessarily reveal lack of truthfulness. Nash does qualify his contention by stating that through inconsistency and contradiction readers will discover when the writer is not being ethically truthful. Individuals can be full of contradictions and inconsistency and still passionately believe that what they are saying is true. I would contend that contradiction and inconsistency, particularly when dealing with memory and emotion, are states that even the most scientific and logical thinkers would find themselves in. It is the readers’ responsibility
to find their own truth or understanding through the story, the recounting of the experiences and later analysis of those experiences.

In regard to the quantitative-qualitative debate and credibility, trying to determine validity of the philosophical underpinnings of any topic is virtually impossible. I believe, however, that it is safe to say that some research would glean more information and more accurate information using quantitative methodology while other topics and issues require qualitative methodology or a mixed method to fully explore the presenting issue/phenomenon/problem. I do not believe that the important details of an experience like mine could be told quantitatively. And that is the basis of the growing acceptance of life history research.

Life history inquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other human...It is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place...To understand some of the complexities, complications, and confusions within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insights into the collective. (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11)

An interesting element of research methodology and one that relates to how I have approached this self-study is the premise that any credible, valid and valuable research sets out, without bias, to gather data to evaluate and interpret in the hope of learning more about the issue/phenomenon/problem. While the quantitative-qualitative debate concerns itself with the method of gathering data and the truthfulness or accuracy of that data, Dr. O’Neill takes the question of validity and truthfulness back several steps to the earliest definition of the issue/phenomenon/problem itself. In his article *The Ethics of Problem Definition* (2004), he states:

The way we look at problems affects how we study them and try to solve them. Different interventions become salient depending on whether we focus on individuals perceived to have the problem, on the social setting that fosters it, or on an interaction of the two. (p. 13)

As researchers, whether employing quantitative or qualitative methods, we seek to discover patterns and themes which can then help us understand how to address the issue/phenomenon/problem. However, the assumptions with which we begin the research affect the
choice of method of research and, in some cases, the method choice has already biased the data and the interpretation of the data.

**Voice, Voicelessness and Context**

To some degree, all data gathered from a study subject has passed through the researcher’s belief system, including implied cultural truths, belief about how the data should be gathered, and perhaps even personal and subjective definitions of the terms that relate to the subject matter. In regard to studying youth at risk, the data may be gathered with pre-established and unchallenged definitions of such concepts as risk, resiliency, success, failure, and negative and positive outcomes. As noted by Ungar in *Nurturing Hidden Resilience in Troubled Youth* (2004), “concepts such as risk, vulnerability, and resilience have been studied tautologically, with emphasis on outsider constructions of subjects’ realities” (p. 62). Ungar reminds us that researchers state what “seems initially obvious” but such statements “while readily accepted are often not substantiated when compared to narrative accounts of study subjects” (p. 62).

It is my contention that for some truths to be revealed unedited, uncorrupted, and in the correct context as intended by the subject, the subject’s own words must be heard and *believed*. Perhaps more importantly, the subject’s *interpretation* of the data must be accepted. In some cases, the only way to ensure the data has met the above criteria is through self-study. The subject’s interpretation of the data is the underlying truth of the experience even if the subject’s interpretation is distorted by emotional or psychological factors, or cultural definitions and contexts. It serves no purpose if we listen to personal stories and the meanings the storyteller attributes to the experiences then to not choose to accept the storyteller’s meaning and interpretation. We may decide we will choose our own interpretation of the story and in essence, choose not to believe the effect the story has had on its teller. As Ungar discusses, McNamee and Gergen noted that in studying children and youth at risk, we believe ourselves to be “experts who hold knowledge regarding healthy functioning” and “are self-referential, arguing ‘be like me’ or ‘be as I want to be,’ all according to the social standards represented by the knower” (as cited in Ungar, 2004, p. 26).

In understanding youth at risk for poor academic outcomes, it is vital to hear about their experiences in their own voice and in the context of their lives. The meaning they ascribe to the
experiences takes precedence over the meaning we ascribe to their experiences. In addition to justifying a need for more narrative inquiry, there is another obstacle to overcome that has its roots in oppression and inappropriate distribution of power. In order to hear truth, we may be required to “flatten the hierarchy” (Ungar, 2004, p. 30) between ourselves and the children and youth in our education system. While researchers may have opened the doors to narrative inquiry, in the school system and in the classroom, the hierarchy exists. That hierarchy is a cultural underpinning of our education system, and both teachers and students often “buy into” the hierarchy. As educators we must be cognizant of our own wish to preserve the hierarchy and, hide behind that hierarchy or use it as a way to safely distance ourselves from a true connection to our students.

I decided to do a self-study because I realized I had an opportunity to explain my child/youth experiences of risk and resilience from a child/youth perspective. I could analyze how I had been an individual with no expectations or encouragement to pursue higher education but found myself exceeding those expectations, pursuing higher education, and employed in higher education. The events that see a child/youth at risk overcoming a mediocre elementary and dismal high school academic history are at times subtle and occur over a long period of time. It would be difficult to map the chain of events that resulted in such an unexpected outcome. The barriers to positive academic outcomes and the resiliency factors that allow an individual to overcome those barriers are multi-layered and complex. I was not fully aware of that subtly and complexity until I started trying to unravel my own story. I now see myself as a researcher who somewhat unknowingly, while living with a family for eighteen years, mentally recorded the factors that both thwarted educational aspirations and supported the realization of those aspirations. Ethically, a researcher could not observe a child and the barriers and difficulties in that child’s life and stand aside and watch and record how the child/youth overcame them. A researcher could never hope to conduct over a forty year period such intimate research that would accurately record the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the study participant.

Cole and Knowles (1996) write of that resistance to the close examination of the structure and processes of educators examining the education process: “Self-study research, by its ‘up-close and personal’ nature, renders both individuals who conduct it and their affiliated institutions vulnerable
and accountable...It razes to ground level the ivory tower. It enables the commoners to peek inside”
(p. 6). I believe my story takes that aspect of self-study one level higher as I am both the commoner
and an insider. That allows my self-study to, potentially, have a double impact. Like other self-
reflections on teacher practice, it will bring to light and will challenge the existing structures. My self-
study will also reveal issues happening on a very personal level for the student. In many cases,
teacher intervention or a different teacher response to a situation I describe in the chapter four story
section could have had a huge impact on the effect that situation had on me. My teachers had
choices about how they would relate to me and handle whatever they saw happening in their
classroom. But, I ask, if making the connection between my academic success and failure is in part
about a very personal connection or lack of connection between the teacher and myself, then would
the telling of my relationships with teachers be threatening to some educators? Would, in fact, any
teachers want to hear what every student in their classroom felt about them as teachers and the
quality of their teaching? If rejection of self-study research is to “conserve, insulate, and protect
academic reputations” (Cole & Knowles, 1996, p. 6), and if self-study research about teaching
practices might force educators to “see themselves as part of the problem” (p. 6) how then do we as
educators ensure we are addressing all aspects of the classroom experience and hearing what we
can do to make positive changes in our classrooms? We acknowledge that our education system is
flawed, but ultimately it is teachers who must change the education system rather than divorce
themselves from what occurs in their classroom. Throwing our hands up in frustration at the structure
in which we teach may negate a teacher’s power and responsibility to positively influence every
individual sitting in the classroom.

Self-study evokes emotional responses, particularly if readers see themselves as any of the
individuals in the story. Reading the personal story of a student may create feelings of guilt for a
teacher, or reveal teacher inadequacy and bias. It may force an acknowledgement of teacher’s
personal perpetuation of discriminatory education and social class structures. It may require teachers
to say, “yes that’s me”, before teachers then acknowledge the need to change their own teacher
practice. Even though there are those who are willing to take responsibility for flaws in the greater
system (which self-reflection on teachers’ practice might do), it is still difficult and perhaps overwhelming, to take responsibility for the child or youth sitting in your classroom now.

That, I believe, is one of the greatest barriers to adults telling about the experiences they had as a child or youth at risk for poor academic outcomes. At the point that an individual would get to a place where he or she might tell the story in a way that could affect the distribution of power and hierarchy, the individual might be criticizing the very power and hierarchy that now elevates and protects him or her. Why then, would one shine a light on flaws existing in that hierarchy or system? I believe there is a possibility that when we get to a comfortable place in the hierarchy (where we have climbed, maybe even clawed, our way up to a secure spot), we then are averse to undermining our safety in the hierarchy. As we sit on one of the higher branches in that social construct, do we make the trip back down to the roots and shake the tree? I believe that, for many, we accept our status, our comfort, the fruits of our toil, and leave our pasts behind. We wish to leave our pasts behind. We are now an accepted part of the dominant culture and system. We become old, complacent, re-socialized and may forget our stories, the injustices, the angst of adolescence and our burning desire to create our identities. Or those memories manifest in other ways, perhaps creatively through words, music or performance. I have found people more “like” me in other fields, such as the arts and social services as well as in the many semi and unskilled jobs I performed before returning to university. However, those other types of jobs are not the world of academia—the place where changes to how we deal with children and youth at risk in the ten, eleven, or twelve years they spend in elementary and high school could have proactive and long-term social impact.

From my perspective, even with my background and experiences, becoming a teacher has changed my attitude towards students who, at times, remind me of my younger self. Each day I move farther away from understanding and empathizing with the youth at the back of the class, perhaps unengaged, perhaps disdainful or disrespectful towards me, the teacher, who wants the classroom to be what I dictate it to be. Some days, I feel about some students, as I am sure many teachers felt about me: I feel irritated with their behaviour and imagine a classroom without them in it.
**Challenges and Insights in the Writing of Self-Study**

There is a balance to maintain when attempting to be truthful and wanting to be believed, but also wanting to have an impact and lasting effect on the reader. One must be careful of sensationalizing, emotionalizing or exaggerating the telling of the story in the hopes of evoking a response from the reader. My hope is that teachers reading my paper will see a child in their classroom and will take an interest in that child or at the very least will feel compassion for that individual and will seek to understand the classroom in the context of that child’s life. I hope that a teacher might make a concerted effort to ensure that even the most disagreeable, distasteful student will not feel what I believed teachers felt about me which might be dislike, irritation, or anger. There were teachers who made me feel safe in their classroom. It may not even be that I felt liked by them, only that they did not dislike me and that they somehow brought the best academic performance out of me, without me even noticing. They are what I now refer to as “oasis teachers”. They were individuals that passed through my educational life as I passed through their classrooms with just enough regularity to help me build up my depleted emotional and psychological stores. They were restorative, nurturing (although at times I was unaware of that) and able to fortify me for the next leg of my educational journey. I hope that when reading this self-study, teachers will be moved to be some unlikely student’s oasis teacher.

I must be honest about not wanting the reader to dislike my younger self. I know that I was not always a pleasant student. I realize that when I read I form a picture in my mind of the person I am reading about. I accept that the reader might also have a picture of me in their mind. Perhaps I look just like a student that currently sits in the reader’s class. My story may inspire feelings of like or dislike. The readers may find moments where they can identify with me or have found an acceptable rationalization for a teacher’s treatment of me. Perhaps the reader will make a judgement regarding my own self-sabotaging behaviours and choices. Humans are feeling, emotional, reactionary individuals. We all have accumulated experiences and perspectives that influence our opinions. Readers will be affected by the tone of the personal narrative and its reflection of me. Even though the story is completely familiar to me, at times my emotions fly off the page, surprising me with their
intensity and barely contained anger and disdain. At those moments I am shocked and embarrassed by that younger, angst-ridden me.


This was the story I wanted to tell without sentiment or cynicism; the one I thought justified speaking hard truths. The flash of insight I’d had — that I could not leave my mother because I’d become my mother — was my wisdom: a tale of psychological embroilment I wanted badly to trace out. To tell the tale, I soon discovered, I had to find the right tone of voice; the one I had habitually lived with wouldn’t do at all: it whined, it grated, it accused; above all else it accused. (p. 21)

That was a key element of the struggle in writing of my self-study. The self-study research was revealing, not just of those who had caused difficulty in my life, but revealing, either purposely or unconsciously, of all of my own petty smallnesses and weaknesses. There is simply no avoiding your own part in the story or having to accept your part in the outcome you have experienced. And while many children and youth at risk were victims of abuse and injustice, as an adult there is little accounting for why one might still be purporting past indignities as the cause of current anger and resentment or, as Gornick states, the “whining” of today.

In writing my story, I was faced with several possible perspectives I might take as the narrator, but perspectives that could have been inherently distasteful to the reader. One narrator perspective might be “victim.” The difficulty for readers is that readers might experience guilt. They might ask themselves, “Have I caused such discomfort for any child or youth under my authority or in my care?” Another uncomfortable reading experience might be caused by me, the narrator, assuming the role of “fighter/survivor.” That might be the perspective of the anti-social self-proclaimed resilient child or youth who may have made the reader’s/teacher’s life hell. Another, perhaps less distasteful perspective is the narrator voice that is “disconnected/clinical”, although it is unlikely I could truly be completely disconnected or clinical (which implies objective) about my own experiences. While disconnected/clinical might be less distasteful, in my opinion it would also be less revealing and therefore less truthful. Neither the reader nor the narrator has to actually emotionally connect to the
story. Everyone can keep a safe distance and while, for some, this perspective makes the details of the story more palatable, it leaves out some of the emotional truth and repercussions of the experiences.

Gornick (2001) articulates the struggle with the distastefulness of writing about one’s self and the negative feelings that are brought to the surface, not just for reader but also for the writer. She describes finding a diary that she initially believes will help her tell of past events, and then is appalled by the person she finds in the pages. I experienced the same thing, in that I have kept a journal since I was a teenager. I, too, found a piece of writing that perfectly explained the influence of my peers and my perspective on my place in my peer group (see Appendix A). It was so relevant in revealing an aspect of “at riskness” that I was dismayed by the fact that it also embarrassed me. Although it was a very important link to the past and my mindset then, it was a part of me I did not want to reveal. I was angry, tough, dramatic, and at times un-likeable, at least to the current day me. I felt a compulsion to edit it or leave that piece of writing out. My desire to write the great Canadian novel began when I was about twelve or thirteen years old after reading The Outsiders (Hinton, 1969) and The Catcher in the Rye (Salinger, 1951). I wanted to be a writer like the authors of those books and so I would start off a memoir only to abandon it after a few pages. Several of those memoirs survive to this day and are revealing glimpses into my younger reality and mindset. The piece of writing from age sixteen was disturbing to me. It presented me as someone I wanted to be rather than who I remember myself as actually being. It is full of teenage angst and bravado and reveals an obvious lack of understanding of my impact on the reader or those around me. That it is written for a reader aside from myself is clear, but quite frankly, it exposes elements of my personality I wish to keep under wraps. That I am revealing much more than my sixteen-year-old self had intended is clear.

While on one hand, there might be a belief that narrators of their own story have a desire to cathartically reveal everything, I do not believe that is true of my personal narrative. As mentioned, I have journaled for thirty-five years and worked through many issues through my writing. I have had the benefit of going back to those journals and seeing repeating patterns of behaviours and choices. I believe I have worked long and hard to overcome attitudes and philosophies that sabotaged my adult well-being. That growth occurred mostly in the personal, emotional and relationship based realms of
my life. However, in order to reconcile myself to my current reality of being where I find myself now, and to discuss my experiences through an educational and risk and resiliency lens, I was forced to re-examine my childhood and youth in reference to educational experiences and outcomes. I had to face, challenge and embrace that young person and reveal her in all her angry, distasteful, drama queen extremeness. She was the part of my past that truly gave insight to my struggle with the understanding of my place in the education system. She was one of the two perspectives through which I saw the world. She was Chip. Chip was my younger voice, and I had to allow her to speak in the telling of my story. Gornick (2001) refers to this as being devoted to the narrator.

Devotion to this narrator –this persona, became…an absorption, that in time went unequalled. I longed each day to meet up again with her, this other one telling the story that I alone –in my everyday person –would not have been able to tell. I could hardly believe my luck in having found her. It was not only that I admired her style, her generosity, her detachment—such a respite from the me that was me –she had become the instrument of my illumination. (p. 23)

I believe I have found a connection to parts of myself in seeking the answers to the questions I posed for my thesis. As my sixteen-year-old writing reveals, I was a sociologist and anthropologist at a very young age. I always sought to understand my circumstances in relationship to the larger world. I often commented on the meaning of my environment while living it. In revisiting my past and, hence, reliving it, I have come to better understand my educational journey. While I may have not yet completed that journey, telling my story has been my “instrument of illumination” (Gornick, p. 23). I believe my story can be illuminating for other educators who are interested in risk and resiliency and in academic outcomes within the context of an individual’s life.

**Ethics in Story-Telling**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, honesty, objectivity and what can be confirmed as “truthful” are of great importance in any research. It is particularly important when telling a story in this forum that is about personal, emotional events. Criteria that must be adhered to in order to ensure that a self-study has integrity is include avoiding purposeful exaggeration, sensationalism or attempts to bias the reader by consciously “spinning” the events in a manner that influences the reader’s
analysis of the events. For as the writer of a self-study, I believed it was is essential to be honest about what aspects of the story were filtered through intense emotions and feelings associated with an event and therefore less likely to be objective. If I was to relay an emotional memory as “fact” when I knew that it was an emotional perspective of the event rather than a factual one, then I would be purposely attempting to evoke an emotional response from the readers and manipulate their view of the event. To be unaware of one’s own emotional bias might be an indication of one’s depth of involvement in the event; however, to be aware of emotional bias but present it as fact breaches ethical boundaries.

As discussed in this chapter’s section, “The Quantitative/Qualitative Debate-Validity, Value, Credibility and Truth”, determining whether a self-study is an honest account is a decision the readers make based on whether they feel the facts of the narrative ring true and whether there are contradictions and inconsistencies in the content of the narrative (Nash 2004). Again, it seems that in fact Nash is saying that what the author is presenting as “fact” is expected to be consistent with other facts and presented information. All those elements cannot contradict each other. It is therefore vitally important when writing a personal narrative and conducting a self-study, that the author be very precise about what is being presented as fact and declare emotional bias when it is appropriate to do so.

While I have conveyed to the reader my child/youth perspective and opinion of the events at the time they occurred, I have also attempted to take a more critical and objective stance when analyzing those events. I believe, in most cases, the two perspectives have been clearly defined. However, the reader may find that his or her perspective of the events and my analysis of the events differ greatly or while I believe I am providing an objective analysis, that analysis is still wrought with emotional bias obvious only to the reader and not to me. An outside observer may be able to dispute what I really experienced and how it really affected me. There is value for the reader in seeing what I perhaps do not see.

It is impossible for autobiographical writers to be aware of all their own blocks and biases, yet such information can be glaringly obvious to a reader. It is possible that anyone reading any narrative will see dimensions of the story that the writer cannot see, yet has revealed through the story. What
will hold the reader and give credibility to the story is the belief that the writer is recounting events and analyzing those events in an ethical manner. It is important that readers should know on an instinctive level that what they are reading is the writer’s truth and not a *purposeful* stretching or manipulation of truth.

In my self-study, I have attempted to recount the events as truthfully as possible and, recount the meaning I attributed to those events at the time they occurred. I then attempted to pull back from the recounting of the experience to analyze the experiences with as much intelligence and emotional integrity as I could, utilizing my adult knowledge and experience of such events. There are likely contradictions and inconsistencies that I am not able to detect or if I desire to remain truthful in the telling of the story cannot ethically try to resolve for the purpose of a smoothly unfolding story. Memories do not work that way, nor do the perceptions of a child. In some cases I saw those discrepancies, but in some cases I am sure I did not. In my opinion, the crux of ethics and self-study is, does the reader believe that the writer believed the contents of the story? Does the reader believe, specifically in my case, that I have provided a fair analysis of the story’s contents? I believe that this is the gauge in determining whether what I presented to the reader is truthful and therefore ethical. To expand on that “believability gauge”, does my story conform to the reader’s sense of reality and does it have verisimilitude (Bruner, 1990). In other words, is it realistic, believable and “true to life”?

What readers will find in my story are events and circumstance that do not require an immense stretch of the imagination. For the most part, I believe my story to be commonplace. I believe there is nothing sensational about the story itself. In fact, when analyzing risk and resiliency factors and being at risk for poor academic outcomes, the facts of my story, the events, emotional constructs, and outcomes did not seem remarkable in any way. There are many years of subtle and unsensational life experiences contained in my personal history. However, examining those events in the context of one child’s life, and then from a wider perspective, pulling back and looking at expectations, perceived potential and achieved outcomes, gives dimension to the story and ultimately explains an *unexpected* outcome. It was not that I necessarily possessed an unusual list of risk and resilience factors. Rather, it was the combination and interplay of the factors and the meaning I attributed to such factors and events that might be considered extraordinary or unique. Again, I wish
to emphasise that an “outcome” in relationship to an individual’s risk and resilience factors must be
examined within the context of an individual’s life.

**Ethics in Writing About Others in One’s Personal History**

In regard to disclosing information about others in the writing of my self-study, I have again
referred to Nash (2004) for guidelines. Nash uses three general ethical rules when dealing with issues
of privacy and discussing other individuals in the telling of the story:

First, a person’s right to privacy in my writing is nearly inviolable, except when my infringing
on this right might prevent harm to the person, or to others who exist within the direct orbit of
that person. Second, following Kant, I try always to treat each human being as an
autonomous end rather than as a means to my end. In other words I refuse to use another
person merely to serve my own SPN (scholarly personal narrative) purposes. And third, in
spite of these first two principles, I do not believe that the right to privacy is an ethical
absolute; it is only conditional. Under some circumstances, the SPN writer might have to
override the right to privacy in the interest of some other equally important moral principle, for
example the right to tell one’s own story in one’s own voice as honestly as possible. (Nash, p.
133)

Many of the events discussed in this study happened over four decades ago.

The world I refer to is not just far removed by time, but also social class and
geography. I have created fictional names for any person or place that might help identify someone
who would chose to remain anonymous. There is no extreme abuse, missed learning disability or
overt oppression to specifically blame anyone for, however there are milestones in my educational
and social evolution that certainly created shifts in my perspective and were factors that contributed to
my academic difficulties. At times the events are viewed through my much younger self, filtered
through my unformed brain and thought processes, and therefore my depiction of teachers or others
in my life at that time may unknowingly be distorted.

I have attempted to shed light on these experiences by drawing on educational,
psychological and sociological research and through using a risk and resiliency lens to help me
explain and understand those events. Some events have dimmed with time and others, illuminated by
it but all are wrought with emotional meaning. The way I have recalled those events, the individuals involved, and any meanings I have attributed to those events and interactions should foster a better insight into the full impact of that history.

Again, in the relating of these experiences, descriptions of the people referred to in the study and speculation of intent or meaning inherent in their words and actions are to some degree subjective, but I have made every attempt to portray those events ethically and honestly with empathy and respect for others.

**Methodology**

One of the struggles noted by those writing and examining self-studies is “about going places without a traditional map” (Arvay, 1998). Cole and Knowles very well may have produced a Lewis and Clark-esque map and guidelines to life history research in *Lives in Context* (2001). They provide a definition of life history research as well as delineation of different approaches to the form of research categorized as “personal experience methods” (p. 15).

The various approaches include autobiography, autoethnography, biography, case history, case study, ethnography, interpretive biography, life narrative or life story, narrative accounts, narrative, life history, oral history and oral narratives, personal experience story, personal history and story (Ayers, 1995 as cited in Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 15). I refer to my methodology as “self-study” which is a very loose label of what I have attempted in this thesis. My methodology, for the most part, is autoethnographic which “places the self within a sociocultural context” (p. 16). As per the Cole and Knowles explanation of autoethnographic research, I have used myself “as a starting or vantage point from which to explore broader sociocultural elements” (p. 16).

In their article *Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study Research*, (2001) Robert Bullough and Stefinee Pinnegar create a list of guidelines posing the question “What makes a piece of self-writing research?” (p. 14) and further to that, “What makes self-study worth reading?” (p. 16). Bullough and Pinnegar list fourteen guidelines under two categories: autobiographical self study forms and correspondence, e-mail and recorded conversations.

Their extensive list highlights issues arising in the two dominant forms of self
study, autobiography and correspondence (p. 13). If those guidelines are adhered to, it is the authors’ contention that it would determine that the piece was in fact “quality” “research” (p. 13). In a response to that article, Alan Feldman (2001) takes the discussion of quality of research to another level of consideration; that is, determining or ensuring “validity” in qualitative research. He states that Bullough and Pinegar “sidestep the question of what makes it valid” (p. 26). He discusses earlier developments of criteria such as “believability, credibility, consensus and coherence, to replace accuracy as a warrant for validity” (p. 26).

I wish to emphasize that the discussion about value and validity (as discussed previously in this chapter) in regard to self-study takes place within the realm of teachers’ practice and teacher educators’ practice. In fact, for the most part, discussion on teacher practice and self-study “recognizes, at least implicitly, that to improve our teacher education practices, we need to change our ways of being teacher educators” (Feldman, 2001, p. 27). Self-reflection on one’s own practice is considered important but I have yet to find reference to the importance of student reflection of impact of teachers’ practice as a means of improving teachers’ practice. In this matter, I believe my self-study takes a different path in the development and growth of the self-study method although Feldman offers significant suggestions and guidelines to ensuring validity in self-study research along with Bullough’s and Pinnagar’s guidelines for quality in self-study research. Feldman states that: “If we want others to value our work, we need to demonstrate that it is well founded, just and can be trusted. By making our inquiry methods transparent and subjecting our representations to our own critique, as well as others, we can do so” (p. 27).

In discussing issues of youth at risk, I must also emphasize that, in order for my self-study to be “well founded”, “just” and “trustworthy”, it was important to adhere to other guidelines that factor heavily in psychological, sociological, and anthropological research and, more recently, educational life history research. It is important to voice concerns regarding issues of researcher bias, distribution of power, voice, and what Feldman (2003) refers to in his article as a distorted view of the world. Most significantly, Feldman advised that “we need to do more than represent our findings; we must demonstrate how we constructed the representations” (p. 27). He continues to stress that to lend our self-study research validity we must “make public the ways that we construct our representations of
our research” (p. 27) and that validity is strengthened “if readers have some knowledge or insight into the way the researcher transformed data into an artistic representation” (p. 28).

As mentioned previously in this chapter, methodology, constructs, representation, distortion, and challenging accepted data on children and youth at risk figure prominently in my study. Along with the critiquing of data existing on children and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes, I also critique and think critically about my own accepted beliefs about intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributing to risk and resiliency existing in my life and affecting my educational experience. Writing from an emotional/reactive perspective as a child and youth in the classroom, is combined with the critiquing of my self-study data and other qualitative and quantitative research on education and risk and resiliency factors. It is impossible to disconnect from one’s own beliefs and biases when conducting a self-study but I believe that it is in fact those distortions, perhaps seen only by the reader, that also contribute to the value and validity of the self-study research.

**Further Considerations When Conducting a Self-Study**

Cole and Knowles (2001) have effectively mapped areas of research that, as noted by Avray, (1998) had no traditional map. *Lives in Context* builds guidelines into life history research process and practice. The authors refer to life history research as “diverse explorations into the human condition, studies of human lives” (p. 9). One lone story generally does not affect us on a deep level unless it reflects some of our own experiences and emotions. If that is what the story is able to accomplish, it is because it truly is not one lone story but one story that speaks of a common experience. As stated by Cole and Knowles, (2001), “Every in-depth exploration of an individual life-in-context brings us that much closer to understanding the complexities of lives in communities” (p. 11).

It is interesting to note that I came upon the Cole and Knowles, *Lives in Context* after I had written several drafts of the first three chapters and first drafts of the last two chapters which are the story and analysis chapters of my thesis. Because I view the world through a sociological, anthropological lens, I wanted my own story to reflect those disciplines and my story to shed light on not just one life, but other lives that might be like mine and therefore shed light on a social phenomenon which was, children and youth at risk of not reaching their academic potential in the education system. When I began, I did not know that there was a specific term for this type of
research, i.e., autoethnography. However, autoethnography was exactly the way in which I wanted to tell my story. I wanted to tell my story in that way before learning that others might want to hear the story and that; in fact, authoethnography was what such research was called. I always believed that the telling of those events would be through fictional writing and that there was no forum, at least in the field of academics for a non-fictional account of those same events.

When I decided to do a self-study while taking a research methods course at Nipissing University, it was with trepidation, and based on the fact that I thought myself an anomaly in the academy. However, I also knew I had something unique to say. While Cole and Knowles have mapped and defined a path into life history research, I believe the personal reasons for commencing such an undertaking often comes from a deep and compelling need to shed light on a reality or truth that is currently unknown or hidden. The revealing of that truth transcends the importance of who is the teller of the story and who will listen. That need to tell the story happens independently of outward expectations or the repercussions that may result in the telling of the story. The naming and manifestation of my own compulsion (this thesis) lends credence to the premise of Lives in Context and other discussions regarding value of personal history research in that such research reveals other layers of human need and universal truths.

I hear my voice and thoughts in earlier chapters, and even earlier in this chapter, and what that voice and those thoughts reveal is a great need to convince readers that they should value what I have to say. Ultimately that need comes from my very beginnings, those early years of wanting to be valued and heard. Had I read Lives in Context before writing those chapters, I would have simply quoted Cole and Knowles and left it at that. Two well-known and respected scholars speaking about value, credibility, validity, usefulness and importance of personal life history research is enough to convince other scholars that what I have to say is important. However, at the time of writing earlier portions of this thesis, I was trying to convince myself as well, and I did not know I had Cole and Knowles backing me! I had not yet found work that allowed me to believe that I could be supported or respected for the telling of my story. It is important to me that I had decided I would tell it none the less.
At the moment I wrote this, I was realizing that writing my thesis has been a journey within a journey. Outwardly, the journey was the telling of my story that took me, and hopefully the reader, to places forgotten or never visited before. Inwardly, the thesis itself represented a journey of discovery about my place in the academy and connection to my place now, in my life. I realized that I was now speaking with more confidence about what I believed was important to hear. I chose to not go back and edit those earlier attempts at convincing the reader of the importance of the story of a child or youth at risk for poor academic outcomes and exceeding expectations. Part of the "exceeding of expectations" happened right here, in this thesis. One of my goals in choosing this topic and methodology for my thesis was to integrate the two voices with which I spoke and the two perspectives with which I viewed the world and I believe I have achieved that goal. However, the integration was not seamless and was occurring not only outside of the thesis process. In fact, it happened through the process of writing this dissertation.

And so this is another element of the methodology I have employed. Perhaps it might be defined as stream of consciousness data gathering. It is allowing the immediate emergence of my truth and understanding and discovery in the living, breathing document that is this piece of work. While writing this thesis, it allowed an unbroken flow of an awakening thought without objective, analytical discourse. This document became not just an account of my history and an assumed stance and analysis of that history or simply a perspective presented in words on paper. It also documents the unfurling of consciousness and stimulated personal growth that occurred at this very moment I wrote this page, this word.

**The Writing of the Story**

The events I chose to write about in Chapter Four, the story section, are experiences that I believe had a profound impact on me and either directly or indirectly affected my academic outcomes. The events are stored in memory because they were important to me or happened so often that they have been imprinted on my psyche. So, while getting the strap was an extreme event that I remember clearly but happened only once, being sent out in the hall for talking happened so often that it feels I spent as much time in the hall as I did in the classroom.
I heard some of the family history stories as a young person or, later on, from my brother and sister, as they are twelve and fifteen years older than I am. Their stories have given me insight into how different our family was from when they were children versus what I experienced as a child. In the Chapter Four, the events that happened before I was born, for example, my grandmother not allowing her children to do their homework and throwing their books out into the yard, was an event that had a deep impact on my mother and so she told that story to me more than once.

In essence we were, and are, a family of storytellers. The stories that we choose to tell over and over again are about a mistake made, a lesson learned, or some peek into our deeper natures. Stories are not random ramblings in my family. There must be something about the event that stands out and was important to the storyteller. The story must be told well, with a good introduction, some interesting middle parts, and a solid ending. After telling such a story, it should make your audience laugh, or cry, or wonder, or exclaim, or nod sagely, as the message and the importance of the story become apparent. More importantly, the storytellers should learn a little more, understand a little better what the story truly meant to them. Otherwise, what is the purpose of the telling of the story?

What was difficult about recording all the details I needed to in order to explain my difficulties in school, is that I had to recount some events that, in my opinion, were not very interesting. I also had to talk about elements of myself that I was not pleased with. I often found myself laughing as I wrote certain pieces, but also felt hot tears running down my face as I recalled other parts of my history that have left a permanent sadness in my heart. At other times, I marvelled at how truly patient some of my elementary and high school teachers were. Sometimes, I became angry as I recalled the meanness of teachers and their disrespect and disregard for the hearts of the children in their classroom.

Before I started writing, I made a list of some the areas I believed were important to explore which essentially became some of my subheadings in Chapter Four. For example, the first two subheadings are family culture and history at the time of my birth and family attitudes toward education. My story began with the stories of my parents’ that related to their own schooling and, in my opinion, contributed to their attitudes and beliefs about education. I then began recording the significant events in my school and home life that I thought were the most influential in moulding me
into the kind of student I became. I had already thought about many of those events and how they had affected me. I knew that my parents’ attitude toward education or my experiences in grade three were significant in explaining why I did poorly in school. In writing the following chapter, I recorded the events chronologically beginning in kindergarten and ending where I find myself now –writing this thesis.

However, it must be noted that telling the story by *writing* it was an important part to my self-discovery and, in my opinion, the way in which the most important information in this thesis was revealed. As Laurel Richardson noted in an essay, *Writing: A Method of Inquiry* (1994), it is difficult to begin writing an academic paper before you know exactly what you want to say. It goes against how we are taught to prepare to dissect information and data. However as Richardson later stated, “…I wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied…I made accidental and fortuitous connections I could not foresee or control” (2000, p. 972). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, while I did have some ideas of what I wished to write about and the subheadings under which I might categorize different topics, the actual writing took me to a level of understanding that I could not have anticipated or have reached any other way. Richardson articulates how I felt many times as I was typing and thinking about my past:

Thought happened in the writing. As I wrote, I watched word after word appear on the computer screen –ideas, theories, I had not thought of before I wrote them. Sometimes I wrote something so marvellous it startled me. I doubt I could have thought such a thought by thinking alone. (p. 972)

In Chapter Four, I write about circumstances that shaped the person I am today. I have recorded events that are significant to understanding extrinsic and intrinsic factors that placed me at risk but also saw me as resilient and overcoming the risk factors to have, ultimately, a successful academic outcome. In the writing of this thesis and the fourth and fifth chapters that follow, I have truly been transformed as I was able to integrate the at risk child and girl I was, with the woman I am today —a woman who has achieved her academic goals.
CHAPTER FOUR - THE STORY

1. Family Culture and History at the Time of My Birth

My parents, , and , were children of immigrants. Our family was an interesting mix of British and eastern European cultures, values and sensibilities. My mother’s side of the family heavily influenced my immediate family as we had a great deal of contact with them. However, my father’s parents died when he was quite young and he rarely saw his siblings who lived thousands of miles away in western Canada. Both my maternal and paternal grandparents immigrated to Canada between 1910 and 1915.

My maternal grandmother mother dominated the extended family. She was a matriarch, with a very strong will and personality who, in parenting her six daughters and one son, had either passed her domineering personality on to her children, or had oppressed them with it. Three of my aunts were loud, pushy, often rude and crude women, but they were also funny, witty, with sharp minds to match their sharp tongues. My mother was outwardly passive but could be spectacularly passive-aggressive, and at times all the sisters could be insulting, unkind or even vicious and hurtful. My Uncle was the oldest of my mother’s siblings and in contrast was quiet and gentle. When my family would visit them all in Hamilton, it seemed to me that the aunts spent most of their time yelling (screaming) at their husbands and criticizing or making fun of whichever sister was not present. While it made for interesting visits, it also required one to be “on her toes” and be vigilant to comments and slurs that could be easily thrown your way.

A few days after my birth in December 1958, arrived in our little northern Ontario town of Rockton to see her new granddaughter. I was two or three days old, still in the hospital with my mother, and had been given the name “Brenda Lee.” My mother told me that upon her arrival at the hospital, said “No, her name is going to be ‘Kathleen’, after me!” My mother, in a rare show of defiance, refused to give me as a first name but agreed to name me “Kathleen ”. As a child, I thought the name was hideous.

There were many stories about and her behaviours, which my mother and the aunts told in a matter-of-fact-way. As I grew older, I realized the stories were about a woman who was self-centred, unhappy, and at times abusive and cruel. My mother told me that complained about
having so many children, and that she wished she never had children at all. When my mother and aunts spoke of my grandmother, it was with reverence even as they recalled the outrageous things she had done and said. They remembered being herded outside to play, and told to “go away” and to “leave her alone” while she sat for hours with her head buried in a novel. Photographs of my mother and her siblings as youngsters show a dirty, scruffy bunch of tow-headed girls and one dark-haired boy. “Street urchins” or “ragamuffins” are the descriptions that come to mind when looking at those old pictures. My mother recalled “running the streets” of 1930s depression era Hamilton, looking for rags and metal to sell to the rag man or the scrap collector for a few pennies that the children would then spend on ice-cream and candy. Again, later in life, when I began to critically think about those family stories, it seemed my mother and her siblings had little love, protection or care from their mother.

My father’s parents were deceased by the time I was born, but he had little contact with his parents before their deaths. He said he was taken care of by his older sisters, as his mother was already forty-nine years old when she gave birth to him, her last of fifteen children. My paternal grandfather died when my father was only four years old. He was eighteen when his mother died. After he left Saskatchewan at the age of twenty-four to come to Ontario to join the army, he rarely saw his family. He had left the prairies and the family farm because the farm and livestock had been pieced out to his older siblings and there was nothing left for him.

My mother’s father [REDACTED] was also in the army and my father was one of several young men he brought home to meet his daughters. In fact, [REDACTED] managed to “marry off” several of his daughters that way. My mother stated she was pressured to get married at age eighteen because she was at risk of being a burden to the family and already verging on being an “old maid”. My father was seven years her senior, and while she agreed to marry him, it was not completely willingly. The first year of their marriage was extremely difficult according to my mother. They fought often. She left him more than once, returning to her mother’s home, but she found no shelter there. She was not welcomed and returned to my father because she felt she had no other choice.

After my sister [REDACTED] and my brother [REDACTED] were born, within three years of my parents’ marriage, the family moved around seeking employment on farms in southern Ontario. My mother
briefly left my father one more time when my brother was about nine years old, and my sister was eleven. was left in northern Ontario with my father, and my mother returned again to Hamilton with . My brother later told me that was a very bad time for him. He was devastated to be left behind, and to be left with our father.

My parents stayed in southern Ontario for several years after they were married, then took advantage of the Veteran’s Land Act of 1952, which allowed them to purchase farmland cheaply in northern Ontario. My siblings were three and five years old at that time. My parents built their own house and barn, and farmed the land until 1961. When I was almost three years old, ten years after they had moved to the farm outside of Rockton, they moved into town. My father began working for the Department of Highways of Ontario. I believe that it was at that time of transition, when my siblings were also adolescents that the family started to experience severe problems that would have long-lasting effects on all its members.

2. Family Attitudes Towards Education

My grandmother, the domineering , influenced the schooling of her children specifically deciding when they would cease going to school and would begin to work to help support the family. There was a story I heard several times over the years that was a clear insight to my grandmother’s attitude toward education. The story was surprising in light of the fact that had a secondary school education, obtained in England, as well as post-secondary training as a milliner (hat maker). All of my grandmother’s siblings had secondary and post-secondary education and training which is notable given the time in history and the attitude towards women and education. They would have received those educations in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Yet, in regard to her own children’s educations, did not allow them to continue in school after grade eight.

The story often told was of my mother and her siblings sitting around the kitchen table with their schoolbooks doing their homework. In a fit a rage, my grandmother scooped up all the books and paper on the table and threw them outside into the back yard screaming, “What is the use of school? It won’t get you anywhere! You need to get a job!” That, claims my mother, is how her schooling ended and her employment began. Another story that partly explained my grandmother’s behaviour was that she had gotten pregnant shortly after emigrating from England. was a “wild
girl” is how my great Aunt [s youngest sister) later described her. She was nineteen years old when she married my Bulgarian grandfather who according to my aunts was “right off the boat”. My grandfather was two years her junior and could not speak English and it was implied by my aunts that she tricked him into marrying her and being a father to her unborn child, my Uncle [s. If the story is to be believed, [s manipulated my grandfather and “came down in the world” by marrying him in order to cover the shame of bearing a child out of wedlock.

My mother worked until she was eighteen, met and married my father at nineteen and had her first baby at twenty years old. She often said that her working years in a hospital kitchen were some of the best years of her life and she wished she could have continued to work and never marry. Unlike her own mother, she made sure her children knew that even though she did not really want to be married, she was thankful for us. When in a good mood while doing a household task my mother often sang an Appalachian ballad with a line that went, “Oh I wish I was single again!” (Cargill, n.d.). She told me it was a song her mother use to sing.

My father had a grade six education. According to my parents, during the depression of the 1920s and 1930s, education was a luxury for the wealthy, and they did not have an option to stay in school. However, neither of my parents ever expressed any regret at not being able to stay in school longer. They both had good basic reading and writing skills and they seemed to have no aspirations for higher education. Of all my grandparents, only my maternal grandmother, [s, had an education and more education than any of her children. I believe my maternal grandfather had basic literacy skills and my paternal grandparents were illiterate.

My parents did not value education for education’s sake. They never conveyed to me that education was important, and I do not believe they understood that education could be an escape from financial struggles, and a way to have an easier life. They never spoke to me about the importance of getting good marks. No one ever checked to see if I had homework or if I had completed it. I suspect that when I brought home a report card, if I had passed, that was acceptable. I do not remember anyone commenting on my grades and do not even know if I got good grades as a young child. I believe I would have remembered if I had failed, but it was not until around age eight or nine that I became conscious of the need to meet a certain standard and whether I was doing a good
job or poor job with my schoolwork. I believe my parents did care about whether I passed or failed, however, they never indicated any expectations around school or the effort I put into it.

3. Home Life in the Early Years

In 1961 my family experienced its own urbanization process, moving from a rural, farming existence to living in town. My father went to work as a patrolman for the Department of Highways and was a self-proclaimed “ditch-digger”. My mother became a housewife. The lifestyle change had an effect on family dynamics. My mother always talked about farming life with fondness and according to my siblings, who are twelve and fifteen years older than me, our mother was a vibrant, robust, strong young farm woman –hardworking and a much happier person than the one I knew in my childhood. There was a vast difference between her life as a farm wife and a housewife. As a farm wife, she was responsible for all aspects of the home, including growing and preparing food, washing and mending clothes, making bread in a wood stove, as well as harvesting, canning and pickling vegetables and fruit for the coming winter months. She helped with the care of the farm animals and helped in the field as well. Her aunt, [name], (known to me as Aunt [name]) who was my grandmother [name]’s youngest sister, had also come north with her husband and child, and the two of them lived quite close to each other, less than a mile apart in houses they had both helped their husbands build. They were close companions and both women always talked about the farming years as being some of the best of their lives, although admittedly, requiring never ending hard work.

My mother did not seem to fare well as a housewife. I do not remember her being healthy or robust. After a full and busy life and being vital to the family’s survival, life as a housewife with two adolescents and a toddler, may have been boring and unsatisfying. She had a very different life in town than the one she had on the farm. My father was the sole breadwinner and a domineering man, and she became less of a partner to him and like many housewives of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960’s, became a slave to her home and the rearing of her children. Like many women of that era, she had a degree of power and status stripped from her as her husband became the sole breadwinner and seen as the family’s only means of survival (McDaniel, 2000). At the same time my teenaged brother and sister began to be too much for her to handle. In tracing the family’s history, that transition from farm
to town also seemed to mark the transition from a functioning, fairly healthy family to a dysfunctional and unhealthy group, bound together in an unhappy home.

In town my parents moved into a decrepit apartment while they saved money and looked for a house to purchase. My mother had always been conscious of her weight and was a solidly built young woman, but began gaining more weight because of her sedentary (and perhaps less interesting but more stressful) life. She was the patient of a doctor who prescribed the newest kind of help for losing weight, the “diet pill”. My mother became addicted to amphetamines during the first two years we lived in town. That was the beginning of a long history of addiction to prescription drugs, as well as mental and physical health issues associated with eating disorders. My father toiled away at his new, low-paying job trying to support all five of us, and save for a house. My brother and sister became surly teenagers and conflict between them and my parents started to occur. A rift between my two siblings grew. By the time we moved into our house, when I was three years old, they did not even speak to each other. I have a very early memory of sitting at the kitchen table and watching them leaving for school. My sister walked twenty feet in front of my brother. My brother told me in later years that when they were at school, my sister did not acknowledge him as her brother.

As a way of helping to support the family, my mother took in boarders—young, single men, requiring a room to rent while they worked at a local job. After my Aunt’s husband died, she also came to live with us. At times it seemed the house was filled with people, many of them strangers, sitting at our kitchen table, watching television in our living room. I can remember having to share a bed with Aunt for a long period of time when the house and its five bedrooms were overflowing. She would often sleep with her head at the end of the bed as she complained that I tossed and turned too much. I remember waking up from one of the many nightmares that plagued me as a child and snuggling up to her feet to help soothe myself. At another time, when the house was full, a little compartment was made for me by pulling out a massive buffet cabinet in the dining room and putting a small single bed behind it. I valued that space because it was cozy and I had privacy.

During that time, stress in the family was growing. While I was not privy to the details of the recurring adult issues, I certainly understood that family life was tumultuous. There was a great deal of fighting, yelling, tension, and anger as the family unit cracked and split apart. I absorbed everything
around me, and at times reacted to the conflict around me, not really fully understanding what was going on. My father and siblings fought often. My parents fought with each other. They were loud, emotionally infused arguments. I would yell and cry as they screamed at each other not knowing why I was upset, or why they were upset, only knowing it was painful and frightening. I remember my father and brother fighting in the front hallway because my brother was drunk and heading out the door and my father was trying to prevent him. I was in my parents’ bedroom, just off the hallway, under their bed screaming as loudly as they were. When the fighting stopped, I remember my brother (not my mother or father) crouching down on the floor to try to soothe me and get me out from under the bed.

My brother was often in trouble and the police visiting our house became a regular occurrence. My brother epitomized the 1950s “greaser” emulating a Marlon Brando or James Dean persona with all that entailed: slicked back hair, white t-shirt with cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve and a leather jacket. By the time he reached grade ten, he was also a high school drop out. On the other hand my sister was striving to be a preppy, 1950s sock hop, poodle skirt kind of girl, joining the cheerleading squad, wearing her boyfriend’s letter sweater, ironing her hair, and trying to fit in with a crowd of young people who were children of upper middle class parents. The veneer of the “girl next door” thinned as time went on. She struggled academically, failing both grade ten and grade twelve and being left behind by her peer group. It must have caused her shame to “flunk out” at school, particularly when many of her friends were going on to college or university. She had hopes of further education and of bettering herself. She managed to graduate from grade thirteen and went on to one year of nurse’s college; however, that seemed to be another stressor for my parents.

Based on later stories told by both my mother and brother, and some recollections I have myself of that time in the family’s life, my siblings’ behaviours and choices seemed to cause a great deal of strife for the family. Even my sister’s desire to go to school, which should have been a source of pride, was instead a source of stress. My mother later stated that financially it was very difficult for my parents to help pay for her schooling. My father thought she should “settle down” and get married. My sister stated that our parents did not support her in many ways and that was the reason she failed in several aspects of her life.
As in high school, she struggled academically in college too. Always a social girl, she partied and dated and began to rebel against my parents’ rules. I recall her sitting at our blue and gold speckled Arborite kitchen table, the sunlight shining through the plastic blind and hitting the brandy she was drinking from a gigantic snifter. It is an understatement to say that brandy in a snifter (which looked like a small goldfish bowl to me) was incongruent with our family’s lifestyle. Every Thursday, my father bought a bottle of the cheapest rye with a label that read XXX. If the brandy in the snifter was not outrageous enough, she took long movie-starish drags off her cigarette while her gold hoops dangled in her newly pierced ears. She claims now that she was very frightened of my father back then but at the time she only radiated disdain and disregard for my parents sensibilities, rules and values. I thought she looked wonderful. She was very pretty and seemed very sophisticated to me. I was impressed that she had her ears pierced and that she smoked. It was 1966 or 1967 and she also epitomized a look of the time, which was a Holly Golightly (Capote, 1958), airheadish, beatnickish, very cool, very hip, non-conformity. She was not really non-conforming though; she was trendy. She had great clothes and great shoes and she seemed to exude an air that took her beyond our lower class reality. She was what would have been described at the time as “classy”.

In my early view of my family, everyone seemed bigger than life and there was no other child around to help me maintain a perspective on the adults in my life. They were, and still remain in memory, as movie characters or perhaps less flatteringly, as caricatures.

It seemed my sister wanting to go to college was just as disappointing to my parents as her later failing in college, but with the failing, came an “I told you so” attitude from my parents. My sister states she felt unsupported and sabotaged in her attempt to get a post-secondary education. In any case, she was demoralized after failing in her first year of nursing school. She received a one-year registered nursing assistant certificate and left college defeated. I believe my sister never fully recovered from that experience. I grew to understand that in my immediate and extended family, such lofty aspirations were seen as “uppity”, “snobby”, being “too big for your britches” and thinking you were “better than everyone else”.

After my sister’s shameful return from college, the tension in our home reached even higher levels. Again, I did not understand the dynamics occurring among the adults around me. I only
learned what was truly going on after I became an adult myself. In later years my parents’ portrayal of those times differed vastly from my siblings’ interpretations. At that time, my brother was out of school and while always had a job, was drinking and carousing, and constantly in trouble with the police. As an adult, I learned that my sister got pregnant shortly after returning home from college. She abruptly left for Winnipeg to have the child in secret and gave a daughter up for adoption. When she returned home, relations between my siblings and parents were pulled taut and for me there was a sense that people might snap at any moment. [Name] continued to live at home (she was then twenty-two years old) and seemed to be living the life of a carefree socialite much to the outrage of my father. On the other hand, she states she felt oppressed, judged and harassed by my father. I remember my father being very angry with her one evening as she ironed a skirt to wear to a party. He was using words like “tramp” and yelled at her about going out with her friends. She ironed and cried, and said not a word back to him.

During that time, my mother’s mental and physical health continued to decline. In later years, she talked about how stressful that period of time was for her. She said that she and my father would go to bed each night and he would rant about my brother and sister and all the other people in the house. She would lay there, exhausted wanting to sleep, but having to listen to him, her stomach in knots, also feeling harassed and railed against by my father. It seems everyone felt oppressed by him, except me.

My mother experienced several bouts of poor physical health during that time that manifested in odd and disconcerting ailments. From 1963 to 1967, she was hospitalized twice for long periods of time, once to have her gallbladder removed (quite a serious operation at that time) and a second time for an ailment that my mother called “Quincy”. I later learned it was a disease that caused abscesses on the tonsils and in the throat. She was also afflicted with several other plague-like ailments including a bout of boils in her armpits and under her breasts, and then sties all around her eyes that recurred over several months. She spent a great deal of time at the doctor’s getting blood tests, but the diagnoses were always vague.

She seemed always ill, always with sores, discomfort, pain and fatigue. Later on, I read Go Ask Alice (Sparks, ed., 1972) and Valley of the Dolls (Susanne, 1966), which provided first insight to
the possibility that one could be addicted to and have negative side effects from drugs prescribed by a doctor. Many of the side effects of overuse of prescription drugs described in those books resembled the kinds of illnesses my mother experienced. It was many years later that I understood that my mother was also displaying physical and psychological effects of an eating disorder. My mother suffered from anorexia and binge purge syndrome over a 15-year period.

She recalled that in her last hospital stay, which, later she admitted was about both her physical and mental health, my father cleaned house metaphorically, and literally. He put things into order and removed all aspects of our home life that he believed were causing my mother stress. He asked my Aunt [ ] to leave and got rid of the boarders. My sister had met a man (a boarder at our house) and had gotten married. My brother had also met his future wife, and while was not quite through his self-destructive behaviour, it had diminished to some degree. My soon to be sister-in-law was from a big, loving family and he allowed himself to be enveloped by them. When my mother returned home from the hospital, the house was all but empty. The family was quieter, and life became peaceful.

During those early years, my mother, essentially a loving woman, would at times erupt into anger and violence and from those moments would come physical and verbal punishment. She seemed to be generally unwell. She was grossly overweight; at only five feet tall she weighed between 275 and 300 pounds. She slept late into the day, and was often up late into the night. As mentioned, she was hospitalized for long periods of time and suffered from many ailments that indicated a depleted immune system. She drank coffee and smoked incessantly, but rarely did we see her eat. At times she was very neglectful, emotionally depleted and unavailable to me. At other times she would be inappropriately emotional, clingy, overly protective, fearful and needy. She asked me to tell her how much I loved her, and required assurance that she was a good mother.

In regard to her erratic and violent behaviour, it would come as an explosion, with no warning, and no building of tension. She was unpredictable, like a “loose cannon” going off at the most unexpected moments for seemingly mundane reasons. While I remember getting spanked for misbehaving, it was during these times that I remember being punished for no reason other than my mother had snapped and reacted in a physical way with me. She was very frightening and
intimidating at those times, while most other times, she was easily manipulated and passive. I remember her becoming enraged because I dropped a Christmas tree ornament of no sentimental value and worth a few pennies. She screamed at me as if a precious family heirloom had been broken. I remember another incident when I got into the car and bumped my head on the rear view mirror knocking it out of alignment. She raged about that as if I had done something terrible. It was only when I became a driver myself and realized how easy it was to adjust a rear view mirror that I wondered about my mother’s reaction to things like that.

On other occasions, when I did require discipline, she would laugh when I was disrespectful or was being what was called “saucy” or “mouthy”. One summer day, after telling her one of my dolls had been stolen while out playing with the neighbourhood girls, she erupted into anger, slapped me across the face, charged at me to spank me when my sister stepped between us. That was the first and only time that I remember anyone challenging my mother or intervening on my behalf. It was not the first time or the last that my mother reacted irrationally or punished me in a fit of rage and behaved in what seemed to be an unbalanced and unpredictable manner.

That behaviour was not uncommon during that time and there were many similar incidents. Another incident that reveals the extent of her psychological decline occurred one Saturday morning, when as usual, I was up early, had made my breakfast and was watching cartoons on television. On that particular day, as I was walking back into the living room, a glass came flying across the room, missing my cheek by a fraction of an inch and smashing into the wall beside me. My mother had come stumbling out of the bedroom in the late morning and had knocked my glass of milk off the arm of the chair into the seat. She had picked up the glass and thrown it at me as I entered the room. She then broke into a tirade of swearing and screaming. I was always shocked and confused when she behaved that way. It was like being hit by a sniper’s bullet. I did not know when or where it might come from. She would be terribly sorry after one of those incidents and would try to make it up by buying me yet another doll, or taking me for ice cream or french-fries, which she would help me eat, gobbling the food down like a starving woman, which likely she often was. The house, my erratic mother, the comings and goings of other family members, the tension and fighting made my life feel like a roller coaster at times. There was unpredictability in the house, along with a great deal of anger
and tightly wound tension. Oftentimes that tension would explode into physical or verbal violence. That seemed to be one of the few ways my family had of dealing with conflict and high levels of stress.

So much of what was going on was beyond my comprehension and that made it all the more frightening and puzzling to me. I did not know my sister had gotten pregnant and given up a child. I did not know that my father was at times physically abusive to my brother. My father’s form of discipline for my brother and sister was to meet their resistance with force, verbally for my sister and verbally and physically for my brother. It was all very confusing and chaotic for me. While those adult issues were occurring, I was left to my own devices, going unnoticed until something significant brought me to their attention. I listened to many adult conversations, thought about adult problems, and worried about adult matters a great deal of the time without the adult ability to fully understand or work through those issues. Those adult matters and the accompanying tension ate away at me as likely it did the other members in the family. Unfortunately for me, I was not protected from that which I did not understand, and also was not given any support to help me comprehend what was going on around me. I was just a child and literally and metaphorically, their words and behaviours flew over my head. I could see it and hear it, but did not understand it, and because I was below their line of vision, they did not think to spare me it.

One of the last stressful family problems occurred with my brother just before he got married and left home. He was in a serious car accident and was being charged with impaired driving just a few weeks before his wedding day. There were several intense days when my (now) sister-in-law debated whether or not to call off the wedding. I remember sitting on the couch, staring out the window as they talked in the car for what seemed like hours. I felt compelled to watch and pray although I was not clear about why I was doing that. I was simply trying to diffuse the problem by being vigilant of it. Now as an adult, I realize how toxic that was to my child spirit, believing I could in any way affect the outcome between those two young adults. I watched them, and in my mind begged her to forgive my brother and marry him. I believed I had to continue to watch them to make that happen and so I sat there for what seemed like hours. Fortunately for my brother, she did marry him. Because of past convictions, he served a short jail sentence and lost his drivers licence for two
years. I know that I believed at the time that if she did not marry him, he would be crushed and something very bad would happen as a result. I knew at the time there was a great deal riding on her decision. I believe on some level I understood that if she broke up with him my world, my family life would be affected by the fallout. When the outcome was positive, and they did get married, I really believed that I had something to do with that. I had put in a lot of time and energy and had felt a lot of anguish on their behalf. I did not doubt that all my worrying and vigilance had paid off and breathed a sigh of relief that the conflict was over. I realize now that it was detrimental to my emotional development to believe I was responsible for other people’s emotional well being and that I could affect an outcome in such a way. It caused a great deal of problems for me in my relationships as an adult woman.

The years from grade five until my own adolescence mark a period of time that I perceived as normal family life. Once my sister and brother were out of the house, my Aunt [ ] sent on her way, the boarders also gone and no longer creating extra work for my mother, life settled down and it was just the three of us, my father, mother and me. For my parents, that more peaceful existence was a return to an early and simpler time when they lived on the farm, but for me it was a new peacefulness, for which I had no experience. It was a different kind of family life. For a few years, my parents became more involved in my life and in fact their own lives. We did things as a family like going fishing together, visiting friends who still lived out in the country, visiting my sister and brother and their new and growing families. That kind of family life was refreshing and some of the best years I can remember. I liked the quietness of the house and my parents being happier. I liked having my own room and privacy. To this day, my desire for quiet, solitude and serenity in my home is of utmost importance to me.

4. Outside Influences and Significant Events in Early and Middle Years

I have remnants of very early memories of my life, as early as two years old, when we lived out in the country, and at three years old when we still lived in the apartment, before we moved to our house. My memories from age four, when my family was then living in our house, are much clearer and detailed. I first met two girls who lived next door, Lee and her sister Darlene. Later, by the time I had started kindergarten, I had met all the other kids in the neighbourhood which included sisters
Shelly and Carol, cousins, Chantelle and Louise, and the boys, Mike and Tony, most of who were my friends for all of my childhood. We lived in the same block and played in the neighbourhood, or by the lake that was just down the hill from our homes. For the most part it was a safe, fun and interesting childhood growing up in northern Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s.

We were not closely supervised and in fact, as young as four years old, I often played alone in that neighbourhood. I know that is how old I was because I can remember being bored that all the other kids, who were a bit older were already at school and I did not have anyone to play with. I would roam around the neighbourhood by myself looking for something to amuse me. I recall being bored and restless and deciding to play “rap-tap-ginger” on an elderly, reputedly mean, older couple. I had observed older kids playing that game and thought I would give it a try. I knocked on the door and then as quickly as I was able, ran across the street to try to hide behind another neighbour’s house. I did not make it by the time Mrs. L. opened the door and saw me still running, directly in her view. She yelled, “Kathy, you stop being a bad girl and ringing my doorbell or I’ll tell your mother!” I was horrified at being caught and riddled with guilt over the crime I had committed. I promptly went home to confess to my mother. She was kind and not overly stern, but confirmed that it was not a good thing to do. She was not concerned that I was playing outside in all parts of the neighbourhood by myself.

What is remarkable about such stories, and in fact that place and time in history is the age I was when I was out of the care of my mother and on my own, unattended. What is also notable is the fact that I seemingly had nothing to do and was rustling up some excitement for myself. In later years, when there were always children around to play with, I would often be the instigator of activities that were often mischievous. I know that I had to be almost constantly intellectually engaged and challenged, even at a young age.

That neighbourhood and those kids were a big part of my life from ages three to about twelve years old when, as adolescents, we went our separate ways. We had never been school friends, as most of the neighbourhood kids my age that could have been in the same class with me, went to the Catholic school. The non-Catholic kids were older than me so I had two distinct peer groups as a child, my neighbourhood friends with whom I played on weekends and during what seemed like
endless summers, and my school friends with whom I socialized during school hours, and occasionally after school.

From kindergarten to the end of grade three, a neighbourhood girl, Shelly was also a classmate and for a few years she became my closest companion. She was a feisty and bright girl and I liked having her as a friend. She was entertaining and stimulating. She did come with some negatives though. She had a bossy, domineering and sometimes mean older sister named Carol and a grandfather she called Bobo, who all of us children initially liked as he seemed very sweet and grandfatherly. He eventually became someone I disliked intensely.

Shelly’s father took care of them, did the cooking and cleaning and also had a white-collar job. Shelly’s mother was a quiet, almost invisible woman who drank excessively, spent a lot of time sleeping, and outwardly was not present in Shelly’s life. Having an absent parent and even an absent mother was not odd in my neighbourhood. Almost every one of my neighbourhood friends had at least one parent with a substance problem. One neighbour died from an overdose of sleeping pills and alcohol. There was much speculation as to whether it was accidental or had she taken her own life. Our parents had issues, we all knew that, but we did not speak about it to each other and never made fun of each other because of it. We would become silent and watchful and I believe all of us felt empathy when one of our parents would “act out” in front of the rest of our group. It was not odd to us that both Shelly’s or Chantelle’s mothers would sleep all day or be drunk in the middle of the day. Lee and Darlene’s father was also an alcoholic. Tony’s father was an alcoholic too. My mother had the distinction of not being an alcoholic, but as a result of her prescription drug use, certainly displayed erratic, irrational, neglectful and sometimes angry and violent behaviour. She had also been known to act out in front of my friends, for example threatening to hit me with a stick she had picked up off the ground when she thought I was ignoring her calls to come home. All the other kids saw her do that as she came barrelling across the lawn towards all of us, stick in hand. Later on Tony spoke on behalf of the group, kindly and sympathetically telling me how surprised and shocked they all were that my mom could be so mean. I knew much of that behaviour on my mother’s part was just bluster, but felt gratified that they recognized that my home life was difficult too.
There was definitely an absence of strong and healthy parental involvement in our lives. All of our mothers seemed to be emotionally absent and as was common during that period of time, our fathers were also absent and away from the home working to support the family. In my mother’s case, she would be either sleeping, having been up all night, “wired” from amphetamines, in the hospital, or recovering from one of several afflictions that plagued her in those early years of my life. My mother was also a “couch potato”, spending what seemed to me her whole day watching the one English television station we received in northern Ontario.

Our parents had little influence on the life we had together outside our homes as a neighbourhood pack of kids. Shelly and Chantelle’s houses were the two main play areas and this was probably because their mothers were not inclined to monitor our activities and behaviours. They had wonderful yards and houses and child friendly environments to play in. We had a great deal of freedom. Chantelle, who was from a much wealthier family than the rest of us, had a splendid playhouse in her back yard with its own porch, and a swing set. At her house, there were always lots of food and treats, and she had the freedom to indulge her friends. Chantelle learned the fine art of entertaining and hostessing at a very young age. Many, many days we would play inside Chantelle’s house, watching her giant television in a rather posh living room, much different from the living rooms in our houses. Often, Mrs. B. would call downstairs on the telephone extension and order a drink that Chantelle at age seven, eight or nine would pour into a heavy cut crystal glass with some ice and take up to her mother before resuming playing with us.

During the summer, it was a good life for us children. We ran free, from morning to dinnertime. For the most part the day was ours, to do with as we pleased and we did all kinds of wonderful things with it. Most kids had to go home for meals, but I did not. So I would play with my friends in shifts over the lunch and dinner hours. Darlene and Lee ate at five, but Chantelle would not eat until six so by the time Chantelle was having dinner, Lee and Darlene would be done theirs. Sometimes I would be out from early morning to early evening, not having eaten or drank all day.

Rarely did a parent intervene or manage us. We fought, and we made up, and we chose who would lead us in whatever activity we had planned for that moment. We demoted them if they did a poor job and put someone else in place as leader. We negotiated, mediated, entertained, counselled,
and socialized each other, completely by our rules and expectations and governed by our child norms and values. Although we did not always like each other, and there were often leadership struggles or temporary exile from the group, we respected and for the most part, trusted each other. We loved and hated each other like brothers and sisters. To this day, I know that I could go and visit any one of those neighbourhood friends and be welcomed even though I have not seen some of them for over twenty-five years. There was a bond between us because we all lived in our own little world together, at times creating a safe haven for each other as our dysfunctional family lives stormed around us. We were often happy and contented when we were together. At those moments life was sweet, and we were just children, playing in the eye of a hurricane.

Two incidents occurred during those years that I believed transformed me in some ways, but also re-enforced emerging personality traits, and beliefs about myself. Both incidents involved my friend Shelly’s family members, her sister Carol and her grandfather Bobo. I am unsure which incident occurred first, but I believe it was the incident with Carol. I was at their house after school. They lived only four houses from mine, just around the corner. It was a rainy day and I had a little child’s umbrella with me. I remember it was pink. Shelly, Carol and I were on their big front porch watching the weather. It had begun to thunder and the sky was lit up with dramatic forks of lightening. Carol and I were having some sort of argument. I remember I was disagreeing with her and she was becoming angry with me and then because I was not backing down, she became threatening. The argument progressed to a point where I said something to Carol in a last attempt to win the argument, but whatever it was seemed to tip her over the edge and I was aware that I was now in danger of Carol’s wrath. So as soon as I said it, I started to run, heading for home with Carol pursuing me.

While those earlier moments are unclear to me, in that I cannot remember what we were disagreeing about, I recall my thoughts in the short time from when I left the porch running and when Carol was about to catch me. That was only in a distance of about forty feet because Carol and I had our argument on the porch of her house and we were just across the street when we had our confrontation. I believe Carol was about three or four years older than Shelly and me. I remember I had to look up to Carol because she was much taller. From my perspective she seemed huge and menacing.
That space of time from when I took off running from the porch and processed what was happening and what I must do was only two or three seconds but I remember thinking, “Carol is running behind me. She’s close and she’s big and she’s going to catch me. I can’t outrun her, and any second now, she’s going to grab me.” I can remember feeling her so close I could almost feel her breath on my neck and imagined how her hand would feel as it clamped down on my shoulder. My back felt terribly exposed. I could not bear it. I made a decision. I came to the realization that I did not want her to grab me from behind. My back crawled with the thought of it. I could not outrun her and I realized the only other choice I had was to try to prevent her from grabbing me because if that happened, pain was inevitable.

I stopped abruptly, swung around and, aimed my little, pointy-ended umbrella at Carol. My legs were slightly bent and I held the umbrella like a spear, one hand further up the umbrella than the other. The point was a mere six inches from Carol’s gut. I remember that moment because it is frozen in time, and seared into my memory. I see that scene through my child eyes, my hands on the umbrella, the pink umbrella still rolled up with its band carefully wrapped around and held with a silver snap. At the end of the umbrella stood Carol, completely motionless, a look of pure shock on her face. She slowly looked down at the umbrella and then just as slowly, back up to my eyes. “You… wouldn’t…. dare,” Carol said wide-eyed and disbelieving. And I replied with all the conviction and menace I could muster. “Just… try… me.”

She did not. She retreated. I continued on home at a much more leisurely pace, somewhat stunned, but marvelling that my strategy and feigned ferociousness had worked. I had made her believe I would fight her and perhaps run her through with my umbrella and I had avoided being nabbed by her giant big girl hand from behind. My flight or fight response was evident at that very moment although I can say with absolute surety, I would not have actually fought her. It was pure bluff in that moment. But I discovered something very valuable in those few seconds about what I might do and what others believed I might do.

A second incident that occurred around that time was that I was sexually interfered with by Shelly’s grandfather Bobo. I choose to describe the incident as “sexual interference” rather than “sexual abuse” or “sexual assault”, since based on the details of that event, if a person was charged
today because of an incident like the one I had with that man, it would not likely qualify as sexual
abuse or assault in the Criminal Code of Canada (section, 151).

I was having a sleep-over at Shelly’s and my hair had been in braids and was now unbraided
and loose, but kinky. He had picked me up and held me balanced on his hip, and at that time I had
not been picked up that way for a very long time. It was the way you held a baby or toddler, not a girl
my age and size. He was holding me in his arms saying in his thick eastern European accent,
“beautiful, beautiful” and stroking my hair. I remember feeling flattered but a little embarrassed that I
was being held like a baby when I was so big. It seemed a bit silly to me. Perhaps, for a moment, we
were left alone because then his hand, which had been stroking my hair, moved between my legs
and he started to rub me in a very hard and insistent way. I had never been touched that way before
and I did not like it. He then kissed me but not in a “peck” kind of kiss like my parents did. He pressed
his mouth to mine and then stuck his tongue in my mouth. That repulsed me and I drew away from
him in disgust. I also insisted he put me down, which he did, since there were people close by, if not
actually in the room with us.

I stayed at Shelly’s that night and the next day, I told my mother what had happened. Her first
response was “Don’t tell your father!” Then she said, “Don’t let him do that to you,” and “You don’t
have to be nice to him”. I believe that was all that was said or done about the incident. To my
knowledge, my mother took no further action. She did not speak to Shelly’s grandfather or parents.
She did not prevent me from going back to Shelly’s house or even having sleepovers there as far as I
can remember. Perhaps she checked to ensure he was not molesting me, but I do not recall that.
What I do recall is that I took her advice. The next time I saw him, I was cold and rude to him and
would not speak to him, laugh at his jokes or go near him. My mother said I did not have to be nice to
him and so I was not. Fortunately for me, he was not an aggressive pedophile, or perhaps I was
showing too much willingness to tell on him if he tried anything, but he never did touch me again. Like
the Carol/umbrella incident, I marvelled that I was able to control the behaviour of someone who I
perceived as older as and stronger than me. In that case, I had influenced an adult’s behaviour
towards me. I had proven myself capable of defending myself and that belief has never left me. I
learned you did not have to be bigger or stronger. You only had to be “smarter” and able to convince
them they might come to harm if they tried to harm you.

In later years, I railed against my mother for not protecting me, for choosing to keep the family
peace instead of telling my father, and I accused her of “selling me out” and putting me at risk to be
molested in order to avoid her own discomfort and family conflict. She explained that had she told my
father, he would have tried to kill Bobo. Her words were, “He would have taken a two-by-four to him.”
She said my father beating up Bobo would have been much worse than what Bobo had actually done
to me. She admitted that our family was “a mess” at that time and there was so much going on that
she could not have coped with my father’s reaction. She believed my father would have ended up in
jail. In any case, she reminded me, it had worked, hadn’t it? I had managed to get Bobo to stop his
behaviour hadn’t I? She then told me about an uncle who was known by her and her sisters to have
“feely hands.” As young girls, they simply made sure they did not encourage his behaviour with overt
friendliness and ensured they did not find themselves alone with him. When they had daughters
themselves, they then did not leave their girls alone with him. She had taught me the same coping
skills. It was difficult to argue with her rationale. Given the circumstances, it did seem my mother
made what appeared to be the best choice for all the family members. In other words, giving me
permission to protect myself by not doing what an adult was asking of me was perhaps putting me at
risk, but it was the “lesser of the evils” in her mind. Telling my father would have been catastrophic.

In later years I also learned that although I had only seen glimpses of my father’s capacity for
violence, my siblings were much more aware of it. I suppose that my siblings’ behaviour at the time of
my becoming a conscious and self-aware individual took a great deal of focus off of me, and
behaviours he might not have allowed in my sister and brother went unpunished with me. I recall my
father only spanking me twice, whereas I got many spankings from my mother for real or imaginary
transgressions. I did see my father grab our cocker spaniel and beat the animal with a closed fist for
snapping at my sister’s dog, a huge german sheppard. That memory is cut into my psyche and to this
day I cannot help but feel sick and sad at my father’s behaviour. I cannot imagine how I would have
felt if he had hit me in that way. My brother told me in later years that my father would often beat the
farm animals if they disobeyed or simply irritated him. My brother remembers my father beating one of
the horses with a two-by-four inch board. That lends credence to the fear my mother had of him beating Bobo with the same kind of weapon. It was obviously something he had used to inflict pain before. I did not know about that part of my father and so he only occasionally and very mildly intimidated me. However, at the time when my mother explained what would have happened if we had told my father, it rang true. That was why as a young adult confronting her I accepted her explanation and essentially forgave her for her decision.

Molestation and incest were not unknown topics in our family and I remember from a very young age my parents talking about my father’s sister and “goings on” with her children, in her family. Her husband, who had been married previously and had come to the marriage with one daughter, went on to molest several of his and ’s daughters. The daughter that he brought to that marriage was also named and she had a developmental disability. After that uncle died, and my aunt’s biological children had grown up and left home, she kept her stepdaughter with her, but was terribly abusive to her. The daughter was treated like an animal and slave to my Aunt . Stepdaughter cared for the house, did all the chores, and waited on my aunt and whatever guests she had visiting, silently and as unobtrusively as possible. An error would cause my aunt to physically and verbally abuse her. Daughter was a quiet, timid and nervous woman, who never spoke and jumped instantly at my aunt’s command. I met her twice on family trips with my parents and felt deeply sorry for her; however, her lot in life and my aunt’s treatment of her was accepted in my father’s family.

On one trip out west to visit my father’s relatives, was sitting by a group of my cousins and me as we played. She looked on earnestly, as if she wanted to join in. One of my cousins, Bobby, drew our attention to her when he made fun of the fact that he could see her underwear as she sat on the step close by. He said things like “Are you showing us what you got?” It took her a moment to realize that he was not being kind to her but instead making fun of her and she then adjusted her legs and worn, old dress to hide her underclothing. She had a smile on her face until that point, enjoying watching us play, but when she realized he was making fun of her, her face crumpled and saddened. Bobby’s younger brother Danny and the other Saskatchewan cousins laughed and
jeered. I felt so badly for her. I had never seen an adult treated that way by children. I thought they were cruel.

The next summer or perhaps the summer after, those cousins and their parents came to visit us. It was the summer between grade five and grade six and Danny (who was a year or two older than me) and I became fast friends, spending every moment together. One night we were playing some silly game of spying on cars where we would try to avoid car headlights by darting from tree to tree, bush to bush and hunkering down as if we were spies on the run. As the game went on, whenever we would lay down behind a bush, Danny would put his arm around me. I thought that odd but it was also comforting and flattering. That continued on for a while, and then suddenly he was kissing me and trying to touch me, and get his hands up my shirt and down my pants. It was a fast and furious attack, not a speculative or tentative experimentation one might expect from children of that age. He was trying to overpower me, and I was fighting him. We struggled in the grass for several minutes.

I finally broke free from him and got up and started walking quickly toward my house. He was behind me, asking me to slow down, to not be mad, to wait for him. He was saying, “Stop, I love you!” I remember that I was crying, angry, my arms crossed over my chest as I marched toward home and straight into my house. I continued up the stairs to the room I was sleeping in while company occupied the nicer rooms, which included my and my parents’ bedrooms. I sat in the small upstairs room feeling shaken, confused, angry and betrayed. Up until that moment, I had really liked Danny and had enjoyed playing with him. He and his family were leaving the next day and I was glad about that.

I sought my mother out as soon as I could and brought her back to my temporary room to tell her what had happened. Her response was shocking. She said, “For Christ sake Kathy, don’t make a big fuss. It’s nothing and you’re being stupid. They’re all leaving tomorrow, so just shut up about it. I don’t have time for this!” She left the room and left me feeling even more betrayed but also questioning my own reaction to the incident. Was I being stupid? I now felt silly because of my mother’s reaction, but also felt totally violated by Danny. There had been an underpinning of violence in that altercation and I had no doubt that if I had not fought or been strong enough to free myself,
something “bad” would have happened. I was very confused and traumatized by the incident but had no one to talk to about it.

The visitors left the next morning but I did not go out to say goodbye. I watched them from the bedroom window as they piled into their car and drove away forever. I never saw any of them again. My mother did not bring up the issue of what I had told her about Danny. Unlike the incident with Bobo, I was very angry with my mother. I felt betrayed by her. I understood on some level that she had dismissed the incident to avoid the hassle of dealing with it. I felt I had been sacrificed to maintain her peace. She could not, or would not help me in those matters, I realized. I believe at that moment, a break and then a shift occurred in regard to my relationship with my mother. For the first time, I was truly seeing her as the weak and unhealthy person she was. I saw how much she disliked having my relatives there but what a phoney, pleasant face she presented to them. Already an independent child, I believe it was at that time that I realized my mother could not or would not protect me. My mother had never really stood up for me in a public way and she was of little help to me in serious matters such as what had just happened with my cousin.

That incident occurred with the coming of adolescence and my natural progression towards individuality and separateness from my mother. But it was a painful break from her. There was an acknowledgement that I was truly on my own. I could not expect much more from my mother than what she delivered on that day. Danny and my emotional upset was a problem outside her ability to cope. Any further such problems would be my responsibility to deal with as it always had been for the most part. Something that occurred to me and still haunts me to this day is what had Danny, Bobby and my other cousins done to poor [Redacted]? Why did Danny behave that way towards me? Why did he say, “I love you”? Why was he so sexual and violent when he must have only been eleven or twelve years old? Why did he not understand the taboo of that kind of behaviour, even without the violence, between cousins? As an adult who has worked with sexually abused children and sexual predators, I think I know the answers to all those questions. I also know how deeply impacted I was not just by what happened to me, but of thoughts of the life the daughter [Redacted] must have led. I cannot forgive my father or his family for letting her be treated that way.
5. School Life in the Early Years

I have very clear memories of school as early as kindergarten when I was four and five years old. Although I do not remember the first day of school my mother told me that once she had dropped me off, I told her to go home. I believe that to be true. In later years, I would always try to get my mother out of the picture in any social setting where I would eventually have to be on my own, so I could get on with making my way in that environment. When fully engaged and attentive, my mother was very overprotective and that embarrassed me. I was in the hospital around that time, either in the summer just before starting kindergarten, or just after. I was having my tonsils and adenoids removed, a common operation in the early 1960’s. My mother brought me to the hospital and I do remember saying, “Ok, you can go home now Mom” and her asking me “Are you sure?” and my reply that yes, I was sure. I wanted her to leave.

I recall that what I was feeling in asking her to do that was not overt bravery or not wanting her to be there; it was more a, “Let’s get on with it” and, “I am going to have to do this alone at some point” attitude. I was like that with all good-byes or with any difficult transition, employing a “just get it over with” way of coping. When it came time for needles and inoculations at school, I would always volunteer to go first. It seemed to me it was better to do it before you knew how awful it might be by watching ten or twenty children get their needle first. That was a characteristic that was part of my decision-making processes throughout my whole life. It was best to “jump in” than worry about it, particularly if you had no choice about whether you were going to do it or not. Sometimes it worked for me; sometimes it was rash. It is only now in middle age, that I have learned to temper that tendency. What I have found in the tempering of that characteristic though, is that by waiting, weighing, and hesitating, there is time in that indecision for fear to grow. That is why I often have chosen to quickly move forward in something that would cause fear if I thought too long about. I think I have always thought fear to be paralysing. I believe I thought it better to make a mistake than be fearful.

I have several memories of kindergarten and grade one that I believe shed light on my emerging personality, cognitive development, methods of coping and my mother’s parenting and coping style. There was no kindergarten class at the neighbourhood school, so the school closest to my home was where we caught a bus that drove us across town to the other public school. My first
year of school entailed walking the three blocks to catch the bus. One day on the school bus I was sitting in the front seat, directly behind the door. I was hanging my arms over the partition between the door and the first seat. The bus driver told me to pull my arms up or the door would open on them and I would be hurt but I continued to hang my arms down. The bus driver opened the door, and as he predicted, my arm was pinned, or rather squished, behind the door while children boarded the bus. It seemed my arm was pinned there for a long time and I recall it hurting, but I also recall that while the pain was intense, it was bearable, and so I bore it. I chose not to tell the driver he had pinned my arm (which I suspect he must have known) and therefore was in that position for the entire time it took twenty or thirty kids to board the bus. I did not want to complain to the driver because he had already told me not to do that and what the consequences would be. I waited, in some pain and felt great relief when my arm was freed. I remember it being bright red and looking with interest at the effects of my arm being pinned. I was accepting of my slightly damaged arm and did not complain about the consequences of my action. I understood that it was my fault, and I had been warned.

Another kindergarten memory is of sitting in circle on the floor and having a story read to us. I was bored. Another child whistled. The teacher told him he must leave the circle and put his head down on his desk. That looked like a good option to release me from my boredom. I whistled, got the same punishment and was allowed to leave the circle and put my head down on my desk. At that moment that was preferable to being in the circle with the other kids. It did not concern me that I was being punished. It was where I wanted to be at that moment, quiet and alone with my own thoughts.

As mentioned earlier, my grandmother had given me the name Kathleen [redacted]. On one particular day, we were asked to give our full names, addresses and phone numbers. I already intensely disliked “[redacted]” as a middle name. When it was my turn to give that information, I provided all the information except for the “[redacted]” part. The teacher, Mrs. Marshall said, “And what is your middle name Kathy?” Although I wanted her to know I knew my middle name, I simply could not tell everyone what it was, so I chose to pretend I could not remember it. I recall feeling I was in a tight spot. I realized the teacher would not think me smart enough to give her that information, but I did not want to say the name out loud. Later on, in a quieter moment, I asked the teacher to come down close to me so I could whisper in her ear, “My middle name is [redacted] but I didn’t want to say it out loud
because I don't want everyone to know what it is.” The teacher nodded sagely. I thought Mrs. Marshall very kind.

My mother also told another story from this time of being in that kindergarten classroom where the teacher had a bulletin board that marked some academic progress we were making with the advancing of our own paper car. The car would be moved forward on its paper road after some accomplishment. My mother told the story in this way: “Kathy’s car was one of the furthest ahead but it was black! I said to the teacher, ‘Why is Kathy the only one with a black car?’ thinking Kathy had a black car because the teacher didn’t like her. And the teacher said, ‘Kathy picked that colour.’ My kid was the only one in the class that picked black!” That story would be accompanied by laughter and disbelief at my “uniqueness.” My mother told this story proudly.

In kindergarten or grade one, my mother got a call from the teacher who my mother claimed said, “I think Kathy should be advanced to the next grade because she can read.” That observation of the teacher came after the “show and tell” hour we had once a week where I had brought a book from home and “read” it to the class. My mother’s response to the teacher was laughing/scoffing. “She can’t read, my mother claimed she said, “I’ve read that book to her so many times she’s got it memorized!” In my mother’s account that was the end of any discussion of me being bumped up a grade. My mother said she didn’t believe in kids skipping a grade.

My mother claimed that she read to me a great deal. She said that she would allow me to pick out at least ten small storybooks and at one sitting she would read all of them. Sometimes she might read fifteen or twenty in the course of a day. The book she said I had memorized was one of my favourites and I picked everyday. It was a book she said she hated called “Lampikins Visits His Granny” (author unknown). It was filled with repetitive phrases that my mother complained were very irritating to read aloud but I obviously enjoyed that book. During show and tell, I appeared to be reading, turning the pages at the right times and repeating every word of the book. The teacher was impressed and assumed I was advanced. I am unsure if I could read at that point or not.

The time out for whistling in kindergarten was the beginning of many, many, time outs. They entailed either standing with my nose in the corner at the back of the classroom, or being in the cloakroom. However, I never felt regretful about whatever rule I had broken that resulted in being sent
there. I did not feel “bad.” I felt resigned to my punishment and perhaps a little regretful that I now had
to stay there with nothing to do until the teacher set me free. My main focus while in such a situation
was finding something to keep me stimulated. If I was very lucky, and was in a cloakroom rather than
a corner of the classroom, some other kid might have left a book in there and then I would have
something to occupy my time. I became very adept at counting ceiling tiles, bricks or discerning
patterns in panelling or tile. For example, by the end of a time out I would have identified a ceiling tile
pattern consisting of three dots then two dots then a grouping of four dots followed by another five dot
cluster, repeated over and over again in every tile. Even now as an adult, if I am sitting and having to
listen to someone talk on long after they have ceased to be interesting to me, I will start doing the
same sort of thing. How many people are wearing blue, white, or green? How many are left-handed?
How many cars can I see outside from where I’m sitting? How many are grey, blue, white?

I remembered that tendency to try to keep my mind stimulated long after I had become an
adult and was teaching in a classroom as opposed to being a misbehaving student ousted from the
classroom. I was teaching a night course and I was having a performance evaluation done by the
students. A student was selected to administer the evaluation and I was required to leave the class
and wait in the hall while it was being done. It was quiet and brick and tile surrounded me. I
immediately started trying to occupy my mind while I was waiting, and half way through counting a
wall of bricks I realized what was happening. I was in the hall, doing a time out, and engaging in tasks
to keep me from noticing the passing of time. As I stood there I actually said to myself, “I’m feeling just
like I did when I was a kid being sent out in the hall for misbehaving!” I marvelled at the fact that that
was not the case now. Now, as a teacher, I could talk as much as I wanted and no one would punish
me for it! That was an epiphany. It helped me understand what a huge difference there was between
me being a teacher and being a student. It also helped me understand that my boredom and acting
out in class as a child should not have been met with further lack of stimulation.

I am unsure whether grade three was indeed my worse academic year up to that point or
only the year in which I became aware of the problems I was having in the classroom. But the year
with Mrs. White still seems to be the worse school year I ever experienced. The year is clearly divided
into two parts because at Christmastime, we moved out of our old classroom into a new wing of the
school and so I can remember how things were going before and after the move. Before the change in classroom, I remember having some difficulty with a book report, not bothering to read the book and making a half-hearted attempt at doing the report. Mrs. White handed it back to me and said that it was not acceptable and to choose an easier book to do the report on. After that, I did a report on a very simple book that took me a short time to read, and got a better grade.

Mrs. White may have believed me incapable of doing a better job on the first report rather than seeing I had not put forth a good effort. Perhaps that partly explains why I was put in the lower reading group in the class. Aside from assignments that required reading, I often did very poorly on any kind of work that required studying and homework because I never did homework as a child and only later as an adolescent and teen if it was absolutely necessary. Nobody at home checked to see if I had homework or made me do it. For example, we had a spelling book and each week we were to practice spelling a group of words and then we would have a test. I would usually do very badly on those spelling tests.

It was in grade three that I began to realize that I was not living up to the teacher’s expectations and when I started to feel some stress about getting work done to a certain level of competency. I also missed a great deal of school due to several childhood illnesses like whooping cough, mumps and measles but also because my mother would let me stay home, almost whenever I wanted to, and I wanted to often. I would return to school not really knowing what was going on and have to try to pick it up as best I could. On many occasions one of my classmates, Kelly, a smart and dedicated student, would try to fill me in on what we were doing a few days after the rest of the class had already been working on the project. On one occasion, it was creating a topical geographic map out of plaster with features like mesas, plateaus, deltas and canyons. Kelly was an ace student and I could always count on her to lend me a hand. I would pitch in as best I could with only another child’s explanation and instructions of how to proceed.

My time outs continued, but in the new wing, there were no cloakrooms and I would sit in the hall for what seemed like hours with virtually nothing to do. I found modern architecture to be very bland. There were no bricks to count. If it was the desire of the teachers to torture me with that punishment, it worked, although not for the reasons they hoped. Sitting the hall did not cause me to
ponder my transgression, which was talking too much. How does isolating a talkative child stop them from talking? As soon as I got back in class, I had to make up for lost time and visit with the classmates I had been separated from. It was a never-ending cycle, and in all those years of sitting alone, I do not recall ever feeling like a bad child. I never felt talking was bad. It was only bad to get caught, sent out in the hall and then be denied any interaction with anyone. I believe the amount of time I spent in cloakrooms, and hallways, contributed to strengthening an already developing creative internal world. In that world, I would think deeply on any topic that might come to mind. In fact, when I got older, I would choose a topic to think about to help pass the time away. I still do that. I spend a vast amount of time watching and thinking and analyzing people and interpersonal dynamics. It is interesting to consider whether I developed that internal analyzing process as a result of the removal of stimulation, or the pre-existing analytical mind helped me cope with the lack of stimulation. It is a nature versus nurture question.

That talking pattern reached a peak when because of talking, I was sent to the vice principal’s office. The visit to the office was a result of causing a “disturbance” while standing in line waiting for the bell to ring so that we could proceed to our classrooms. All the girls in the school were in the lower level old wing gym, and we were required to line up in our grades. Each grade lined up in the same spot every day. The teacher would stand on a landing while we were required to stand in complete and orderly silence below her while she scanned the room. On the day I got sent to the office, I was standing first in line for my grade, at the base of the stairs to the landing the teacher was standing on and therefore only a few feet away from her. Behind me there was some shuffling. Lucy, Kelly, and all the other girls I knew so well, got jostled in the line and I got bumped as well, causing me to fall forward on the steps. I turned and said something to the girls behind me – perhaps, “quit pushing” or something to that effect. The teacher, who was my teacher from the previous year, Miss Redding, sent me to the office.

Being sent to the office for this offence was considered very, very serious. We had been warned many times that if we were caught talking in that particular circumstance, it would result in getting the strap. When Miss Redding pointed me out and sent me away, everyone, including me knew that meant THE STRAP. No one had broken the rule to know what the outcome would really
be. I walked up the two flights of stairs to the principal’s office with apprehension and fear. I sat outside the office until the bell rang and all the girls had filed into their classrooms. Mr. Devin, the vice principal, came out of his office and asked me what I had done. I told him, and true to the rumour, I got the strap. The moment when he asked me to put out my hand so he could lie the strap across it is as vivid to me today as it was then. The strap seemed huge. There it lay across my palm until Mr. Devin pulled his arm back and for a moment it seemed the strap was suspended in time, poised motionless in the air, until he brought it down with a swift, sweeping motion. There was a loudly resonating SMACK, once on each palm. It was very dramatic, but I suspect, not a very serious strike on Mr. Devin’s part.

As I walked back to class, I was absolutely astounded at what had happened. I did not think it was fair that I had got the strap because Lucy had pushed me on the stairs. I was on the verge of tears but was fighting those tears valiantly as it seemed important to me to not walk back into my class crying. I had some time to pull myself together as the principal’s office was on the other side of the school, so by the time I got back to the classroom, I had managed to get my tears under control and was already past the worse part.

I do not know how I got into a conversation with a few of the other girls shortly after returning from the office. Surely I did not start talking when I got back to class? But I remember Lucy, Kelly and Patty all saying, “What happened?” and me replying that I had gotten the strap. They were disbelieving, I showed them my still bright red palms and they were awe struck. Somewhere between the walk from the principal’s office to the showing of my impressively red hands, I became proud of the fact I got the strap, lived to tell the tale and did not cry. I still felt no remorse for talking in line. All the years that I was punished for talking never made me feel bad about it.

Kathy and the strap was a big event in my grade three class, for that day anyway. Many of the kids in the classroom had been with me since kindergarten. They knew I was not the “strapable” type. I certainly was not in the league with Jerry and Jimmy for example, who often got the strap, or one particularly badly behaving (hyperactive?) boy named Ricky, who pushed Mrs. White so far one day, that in screaming exasperation, she sent him to the office telling him to instruct Mr. Devin to give him the strap fifty times on each hand! Being experienced in getting the strap, I realized even as she
said it that no one could get the strap one hundred times. I remember Ricky’s face as he left the classroom. One would think by his expression that he was headed for the gallows. I am doubtful that he got one hundred straps in that one strapping session, but by the end of the school year, his total may have actually exceeded that. Boys were always getting the strap, however no other girl in my class got the strap while we were in elementary school. To this day I have not met a woman who got the strap in school. If I do tell other women about my experience, their eyes grow round and they look exactly like they would have if they had been in my grade three class and I had and I stuck out my hands to show their fiery redness!

Most children who received such punishment at school would have had to face equal or harsher punishment at home, but I knew instinctively that would not be the case. I told my mother what had happened and she was shocked. She then told my father what happened and what did he do? He laughed. There were no repercussions at home because I had been punished at school in such a way. Nobody in my family thought my talking was bad. My chattiness was encouraged for the most part. Most times, I think my parents found me entertaining. It seemed the only immediate negative fallout from getting the strap was that it hurt a bit at the time but the pain was more than manageable in light of the “positives.” I had not cried and that was what was of utmost importance to me. I had gained a great deal of respect from my classmates and that far outweighed any physical pain I had experienced. Did it curtail my talking? Not in the least. In fact it gave me something to talk about.

However, there must have been negative repercussions in regard to my reputation with Mrs. White, the vice principal, principal and other teachers who would have heard the story. It was a small community and a small school. In any case, things became worse for me academically. I became more aware of what I perceived to be Mrs. White’s feelings for me. While my relationship with most of my classmates remained solid, I believed Mrs. White’s eroding tolerance for me and my behaviours affected my social status in the classroom.

As an adult, I now have some empathy for Mrs. White. She and her four children moved to Rockton at the beginning of my grade three school year. She was divorced, an unheard of state for a woman of her age at that time, in our community. Connie her second youngest daughter, was my age
and therefore in my class with her mother as our teacher. Connie and I became friends and I actually spent some time over at Connie’s house. At some point in the school year, another girl, Patty and I were visiting Connie and we were in her bedroom playing. Her bedroom had two twin beds, both unmade I recall, and I was sitting on her younger sister’s unmade bed and Patty and Connie were facing me, sitting on Connie’s bed. I remember the crinkly sound the bed made and when I asked Connie what it was, she said it was a plastic sheet under the cotton bed sheet. I did not really understand that, as I had never heard of such a thing.

When I stood up from the sister’s bed, Connie looked at where I had been sitting and pointed to a quarter-sized spot on the sheet and yelped, “You peed the bed!” I was flabbergasted. Peed? In a bed? Babies did that. I had never heard of anyone but a baby peeing in a bed, and I had certainly not peed in Connie’s sister’s bed. I looked closely at the spot. It seemed oily, not wet and I pointed that out to Mary and Patty but Mary was having none of it. She kept insisting that I had made that mark. In the way of nine year old, uninhibited about her body as a result of years of swimming and wearing a bathing suit, I pulled my dress up and said, “Look! My pants aren’t wet anywhere! My dress isn’t wet! I didn’t do it!” Patty looked unsure, but Connie kept repeating, “You peed the bed! You peed the bed!” I was angry with her and appalled that she would think I had done such a thing, but hoped she was just teasing me, and that she did not really believe it was true. Obviously peeing the bed was something that occurred in Connie’s family though, because both Connie and her sister had plastic sheets on their beds.

A few days later, I learned that I was no longer allowed in Connie’s house and that she was no longer allowed to play with me. That was very odd to me. I did not fully understand it, but did understand that it was Mrs. White who made the decision. I did understand what she must have thought about me. She believed I had peed in her daughter’s bed! I wanted to explain myself and defend myself but of course there was no opportunity to do that. Connie separated herself from me and we continued to have mutual friends, but it was a blow to my sense of my social self. To some degree, it shook the security I felt with the other kids in my class; but as always, there was a close bond and loyalty within the core group and although my supposed “best friend” Shelly continued to
play with Connie and exclude me, the other girls that I had been in school with since kindergarten treated me the same as always.

Another difficulty I faced at that time had to do with a boy in my class. He was part of a pack of four boys who terrorized all of the other kids in the class. Their names were Jackie, Jerry, Jimmy and Johnny and I thought of them as “The Four Mean J’s”. They would punch other kids, chase them, and basically roam around after school looking for trouble and striking fear in everyone’s heart. One of the boys, Johnny, seemed to have a particular grudge against me and continuously threatened me. He would say, “Just you wait until after school. I’ll get you!” There was no doubt in my mind that he would beat me up at first opportunity. Kids, including girls, did get beat up after school. I told my mother about that, but made her promise she would not tell anyone. At my request, my mother began meeting me after school at the corner store where I made her promise she would pretend she just happened to be there at the same time I just happened to be passing by. The store was only a half block from the school and so on many days we would meet up there and she would walk me the rest of the way home. That went on for weeks and although my mother knew Johnny’s mother quite well, she again left the choice of how to deal with this issue in my hands. If I wanted her to wait for me at the store, she would do that. If I wanted to try to deal with Johnny on my own, she would let me. Being afraid of Johnny and the rest of The Mean J’s, added to all the other difficulties I was experiencing at school that year. I am not sure if my mother feared the boy would harm me. In any case, she did not intervene and it seems odd now that she would not simply call Johnny’s mother, and put an end to it, even if I did not want her to,

Boys were a different breed, I realized. They were very interesting to me though, in spite of the fear The Four Mean J’s were causing. Terry had given me a big surprise kiss in the cloakroom. Fred gave me an “I love you Valentine” and Robby chose me to chase in the schoolyard (which according to our rules, a boy did only if he liked you). But unlike the Four Mean J’s, when a boy chased you, it was only to tap you on the shoulder and to run away again and that was thrilling. I had absolutely no doubt in my mind that if Johnny caught me, he would try to kill me.

The problem with Johnny finally came to a terrifying and initially puzzling conclusion. One day after school, on a cold and snowy winter day, Johnny and the other Mean J’s caught me and some
other girls on our way home. We all made a run for it and the other girls scattered in different directions, being pursued by Jackie, Jerry and Jimmy. I was being chased by Johnny, and instead of sticking to the laneway; I tried to cut through a back yard and got bogged down in the snow. I was powerless to get away from Johnny who was taller and stronger and was ploughing through the snow towards me. It was one of the most frightening moments of my life because I thought something terrible was going to happen. I was going to be beat up. He came closer and closer and finally he was beside me. All the other Mean J’s were further along, going about their terrorizing business and it was just me and big mean Johnny up to our thighs in snow. Like the earlier incident with Shelly’s sister and the umbrella, I stopped. No point in running although this time I had nothing to defend myself with.

He finally caught up with me and pulled his arm back and…gave me a little punch on my shoulder, and continued on his way. I was shocked. He did not beat me up! He did not even punch me hard, and with that small punch, the reign of terror was over. I told my mother the story when I got home and she said that Johnny probably liked me, and all the threats were because he wanted to get my attention. That seemed ridiculous to me but I believed what my mother told me. What a horrible way to get anyone’s attention I thought, but none the less I was flattered. Again, when I look back on that story, I must question my mother’s choice of action and the lesson she chose to teach me about boys. Boys behaved badly when they liked you? What a terrible seed to plant in a girl child’s mind!

A final and what ultimately was the worse blow to my sense of “place” in the classroom occurred in the spring of the school year. It was 1967 and all the schools in the province were celebrating Canada’s 100th birthday with sporting events, competitions and outdoor group activities. At the beginning of the school year we had been given a choice about which sporting competition we wished to be involved in. One choice was a winter sport where you speed skated at the town rink. I was a fairly good skater, but not a competitive sports kind of kid. I chose skating in the fall because it seemed a long way off but in any case, my mother allowed me to stay away from school on the day of the event. I heard her say later it was because I was sick, which may have been true, but I also know I did not want to participate, Perhaps I pretended to be sick. Perhaps she pretended to believe me. In retrospect, I wish my mother would have made me go. I would have done well, I am sure, but my
mother never made me do anything school related if I chose not to. I believe I chose not to go that day because I lacked confidence in my ability even though I was a strong skater.

When I returned to school, I learned that Mrs. White had talked about me to the class. She made a comment to everyone about the fact that I was not really sick, I was just staying home because I did not want to skate. A few of my peer group confirmed that she had stood in front of the class and said that. It was devastating to me. The poor academic performance and shame of being in the lowest reading group, getting the strap, being forbidden to play with her daughter and being banned from her house, did not compare to how badly I felt knowing Mrs. White had spoken that way about me in front of my whole class. I was hurt and terribly embarrassed.

I poured everything out to my mother when I got home. She was angry and told my father about it when he came home from work. He became very, very angry too and at the height of his anger demanded I give him Mrs. White’s phone number. I was now immensely sorry I had told my mother about the problem. I refused to give him the number, and so he looked it up in the phone book. I was hysterical at that point because I could not bear the idea that he was going to call my teacher and yell at her. That seemed the worse possible thing that could happen! I did not want him to make trouble and saw him getting angry with my teacher as writing my social death warrant. If she were behaving in such a way at that point, it would be worse for me if my father called her up and said whatever he was planning to say.

As my father dialled her number, I was screaming, pleading, begging him not to talk to her. But he did, and true to my worse fear, did what my parents called “bawled her out”. He bawled out Mrs. White at the top of his lungs, in fact. He was extremely angry and said to her, “You quit picking on my Goddamn kid or I will make you sorry, you bitch!” and other such insults and threats. I missed a large part of it because I was raising a tearful din, horrified and humiliated that my father was speaking to my teacher in such a way. Looking back, I know how horrifying that must have been for Mrs. White. My father talked like that all the time though. The word “bitch” did not mean much at all in my family. My aunt and mother often exclaimed when I was being particularly bratty, silly but cute, “You little bitch!” It was a term of endearment. I cannot imagine what she must have thought. At the
time I thought it would make her even angrier with me, not realizing she probably felt quite threatened by my father.

So, I was surprised when Mrs. White did not exact revenge on me as I expected. In fact she was different after that. She seemed subdued and neutral but perhaps she was afraid. I was pleasantly surprised. I had expected her to make me pay for my father’s harsh words but instead she seemed to not dislike me anymore. I was wary and careful, hence likely was much more subdued as well and perhaps even behaving myself. There were no further incidents with Mrs. White that I can remember. It seemed the rest of the school year flew by.

Summer holidays came again and I learned a few weeks later that Mrs. White, Connie and the rest of the family had moved away. I do not recall being affected by that information. Shelly and her family including Bobo also moved away that summer too. I was very sad to see Shelly go. To this day I think of her often. The experiences I had with Shelly, Bobo, Connie and Mrs. White soon faded though, as it was summer, glorious summer, and life went on. Some of my most stressful relationships were over though. Mrs. White and Bobo were gone from my life.

As usual, I enjoyed being with my neighbourhood friends, swimming in the lake, and playing all through those long summer days. Some of the trauma of my grade three year dissipated and the more difficult elements of the past year were stored away, seemingly forgotten. When I returned to school in the fall, I was happy to discover that my grade four teacher was Mrs. Shirley, a pleasant woman who had a reputation among students of being nice. She was also the mother of one of my classmates Ronnie, and so had known me since kindergarten. Mrs. Shirley was the first, of what I term “oasis teachers.” Her classroom was like an oasis to me after a long and torturous journey through the desert of grade three.

Had I experienced another year like grade three, I really do not know what would have become of me. Grade three was damaging to me on many levels but fairly short lived and by grade four, my life was less stressful. The most noticeable change from an academic perspective is that I immediately got promoted to the grade five reading class. I remember noting that it was odd that I was in the bottom reading group in grade three, yet somehow managed to advance my abilities so that I was now leaving the grade four class each day to sit in with the grade five’s.
Mrs. Shirley would likely have had some influence on the decision to move me to grade five reading. Eighteen years later when I had enrolled in university as a mature student, I ran into her one Christmas when I was home for the holidays. When I told her what I was doing she was so obviously happy and pleased that I took note of her response. She said, “I always knew you could do something like that!” I can remember thinking that yes, I believe you did know, Mrs. Shirley! I felt good in her class. I felt accomplished and proud again that I was in grade five reading. I felt *liked* by her and I felt safe. In fact, I never again felt as threatened as I did in Mrs. White’s class or as safe as I did in Mrs. Shirley’s class. Those two years were the most extreme classroom experiences I have ever had and they occurred one after the other. That further emphasized to me how drastically different one classroom experience could be compared to another. I attributed those extreme experiences to how the teacher felt about me.

6. Home Life and Emerging Adolescent Social Life in the Middle Years

As mentioned in section three, the middle years, (ages nine to thirteen) at home were somewhat quieter and more peaceful. Both my siblings were out of the house and married even though my brother’s last negative episode, where he ended up in jail, took a toll on the family. He was married shortly after that and was making an effort to be more responsible. His new wife was a good influence on him. My sister had two more children in 1969 and 1971, and those children brought a lot of joy to us. My sister and her family lived an hour away but were at our house every few weeks for an overnight visit. The house was filled with people at those times, but it felt “normal”. It felt like I thought a family should feel.

My sister’s children were like younger siblings to me, and I really was on my own as far as where I was developmentally. My siblings were adults and my nieces and nephews small children. No one had a clear idea of what was going on with me and quite frankly, no one was taking the time to find out. Since the time when my siblings had been adolescents and teenagers, much had changed in the world and in our small community. What they were doing or not doing at my age was vastly different from my experiences. After the incident with my cousin, as discussed in section four, I had already begun to understand that my mother could not, or would not help me with some issues occurring in my life. My father worked, came home, ate his dinner, puttered in the basement, watched
television, and went to bed. My mother was a housewife, in charge of child rearing, and already I was presenting her with concerns and issues that she seemed unable to understand or cope with.

I grew further apart from the neighbourhood kids, as everyone had become adolescents and were no longer playing outside as a neighbourhood group. We were all old enough to walk to other parts of town to meet friends and socialize. Although I could always meet up with a neighbourhood friend and have a long conversation to catch up, I had developed other friendship groups based on my school connections and developing personality. After grade five, I no longer attended the neighbourhood school which was just a few of blocks away but like in kindergarten, caught a bus or walked to the school on other side of town to attend junior high. I met a whole new group of friends there who were well suited to my emerging views, attitudes and behaviours.

I was neither a “leader” nor a “follower” during these years. I associated with some very strong-minded girls, but did not seek to gain dominance over them. I do not believe I was dominated by them either as it was rare that someone wanted to do something that I had not already decided I wanted to do. Like with my neighbourhood friends, sometimes I would take a stand or argue with the leader and then I would get ousted from the group until ruffled feathers had been smoothed, and I was allowed back in. I was always able to be alone and on my own when there were no friends around and so would only try to get along to a certain degree as I had no fear of having to be by myself for a period of time. I think generally, I was likeable and fun and so eventually I would be forgiven and allowed back in the group. I always had as many friends as I wished for, and if my new friends were angry with me, there were still the people I had always had friendships with or new friends to make. I did not always have a “best friend” but do not recall ever feeling disliked or left out – not for any length of time in any case. I was capable of spending a great deal of time alone and although I always had an active social life, it was necessary for me to take time to read and be alone. It was very rare (and still is rare) that I ever experienced feeling “lonely”. I had an internal world that kept me entertained and occupied that sometimes was preferable to the external world.

My parents did not have much to offer me as I made my way into a world they had little experience with. They did not have the communication skills to impart what knowledge or wisdom they might have had to prepare me. I could not talk to my parents about any of the thoughts, feelings
or experiences I was having. They would have been horrified had they known what I was interested in and actually doing both at school and socially. My brother and sister’s behaviours were so overt and obvious that I believe in my case they felt “no news was good news”. I also believe that they thought there was not too much I could get into trouble with at that age, and so they missed several blossoming behaviours that came to their notice later but were beyond their ability to change. They only had my siblings as examples of what they might expect, but I was very different from my brother and sister who were twelve and fifteen years older than me. I was the first child raised with television and movies, and a wider view of the rest of the world. It was the 1960’s. I watched the Vietnam War footage on television. I watched people walk on the moon and students being shot on American college campuses. I watched the beginning of the shifts that occurred in our society between the post-war contentedness of the 1950’s, to the social discontent of the 1960’s, to the drug, music and sex media culture that began in the 1970’s.

In the chaotic years of my brother and sister’s peak negative behaviours, I had developed attitudes, personality traits and behaviours that had gone unnoticed, unexamined and unchallenged. Although my mother likely felt closest to me because I was her youngest, I never felt she truly understood who I was, what attracted me, what “fed” me or what I wanted in life, only because she did not really understand the world I was growing up in. She understood part of me, the baby/child part and sought to keep that element of our relationship alive, but neither of my parents understood the teenager or adult I was, in the world I lived in. They attempted to deal with my negative behaviour in the same way they had dealt with my sister and brother, and it was equally ineffective. They did not see the changes that were occurring in the world that were making me different from them and my siblings, such as attitudes of society in regard to the changing roles of women, the emergence of open expression of one’s sexuality, or the drug culture that was permeating small, seemingly safe communities like ours.

In those early adolescent years however, I was not overtly causing any difficulties, and I was mastering the skill of flying under the radar, something I had learned at a young age. A “break” had occurred with my parents and their values and beliefs and like many adolescents who start to partake in risky behaviours, I began to lead a double life. The gap between what my parents thought I was
doing, and what I was actually doing, grew. Although we had had a few years of peace with just the three of us being a family unit, as I entered early adolescence, I began to drift apart from them and they made no attempt to draw me back. This was of no concern to me however. I was wrapped up in my own life and understood they wanted peace and quiet and when I was at home, so did I. It was not an unhappy existence. In fact, it was the best family life I had ever had.

While I had always had close relationships with my neighbourhood friends, they were friends of convenience, and there were aspects of my personality and interests that I could never express with them. As an adolescent, I was now in a school with a whole group of new people that I had never met before. They had attended the earlier grades on their side of town in a different school. It was exposure to this group that allowed me to choose friends that were more like me, and had similar interests and goals in regard to social and recreational pursuits. In my mind, they were more interesting and adventurous than my old neighbourhood and school friends, and that was because they were willing to take risks and seek adventure, and this appealed to me. Several of them also had artistic natures and they introduced me to new music, books, art, and other elements of popular culture. They were a perfect group to take me in the direction I wished to go, which was a quest for stimulation, new experiences and experimentation.

In that crucial transition time of adolescence, my mind yearned for those experiences. It yearned to feel, taste, and touch everything that life had to offer. Even now, at times I feel like I must seek out experiences that will acknowledge that emotional and psychological “ache” for something new, something bigger, and something outside of my realm of current understanding –something that can challenge me intellectually, physically and emotionally. In later years, after my marriage had ended, I was seeing a psychologist about a number of issues, some of them dating back to childhood and adolescence. I told her of this discord I always had with taking the well-trodden path and how often I had blindly, bravely, unexplainably, irrationally or stupidly chosen to strike out on my own, in a direction no one, including myself expected, with no map and therefore no clear destination. We talked about my willingness to take risks and how my need to take risks had helped or hindered me in my life. The therapist told me I had a “radical artistic nature.” That was a label that appealed to me. It
was edgy. I embraced it and, it helped me understand why I often made choices that did not seem to make sense to me or those around me.

As an adolescent though, I did not understand my nature or the awakening I was experiencing, which was not just the emergence of individualism, sexuality, or any of the other processes that occur when moving from childhood to adolescence. The awakening was *knowing* that I was connected to a bigger idea or perspective of what my life could be, and that possibility called to me. That yearning was expressed by the literature, art and music that I began to pull into my life. I identified with words in books and lyrics in music, the music itself, and whom I felt like when I listened to and immersed myself in these words and music. Long after adolescence had come and gone, I spoke to a friend named Greg who had been my classmate at that time. We talked about those days fondly and in particular our grade eight educational trip, which had been a much-anticipated experience and the highlight of junior high.

He remembered one night in particular, going back to the university residence we were staying at while on our trip in southern Ontario. I remembered it too. We had likely been out the whole day, visiting museums and historical sites. It was late and we were tired but full of the wonder of our experiences in a big city. We drove along some highway in the dark with the city lights outside, more lights than most of us had ever seen, feeling changed and changing in that acutely immediate, all consuming way that only an adolescent can feel. On the school bus the radio was playing music that we never got on our northern Ontario radio station, music that we only listened to on record players. There was something magical about driving through the night and listening to the radio playing Neil Young’s *Needle and the Damage Done* (1972). My friend Lorranne and I listened to her older brother’s *Harvest* album obsessively and knew the words and nuances of every song.

Lorranne and I sang along with the radio and the bus grew quiet. In our clear girl voices we sang with the quiet tinny, school bus radio. The lyrics were somewhat of a mystery to us, and we only understood the words and emotion of the song abstractly, but were drawn to its darkness and depth. Life as a child was lived in the moment and on the surface, but that song drew us into a shadowy place that was irresistible. The music was un-childlike, the lyrics about something none of us had yet experienced but it touched those deeper, emerging parts of us.
I sing the song
because I love the man
I know that some
of you don't understand
Milk-blood
to keep from running out.
I've seen the needle
and the damage done
A little part of it in everyone
But every junkie's
like a settin' sun. (Young, 1972)

Greg said that this was one of the most memorable moments of that trip. The song had meaning for us beyond the words that were about drug use, to the meaning of the balance of life, making choices, finding yourself in a life that was like a “setting sun.” That was important to us as we hurled toward that possibility at that suspended, poignant moment in time when it felt like our lives were new morning suns, just freshly up over the horizon. Is there another moment in life that feels so full of hope, fear and potential?

7. School Life in the Middle Years

As mentioned in the previous section, social life and school life merged during those years and so my world was school and home, without that third element of neighbourhood influences. I believe I was a humours, outgoing, verbal, mentally active young person, but also edgy, challenging, and at times angry or overly emotional. Some of that was simply typical adolescent behaviour but some of it was the growing discord I had being in the classroom. The conflict with teachers was more intense and as the responsibility to learn academic material grew, my poor academic work habits resulted in a continuous struggle to keep my marks at a passing level. I became aware of the fact that the struggle was of my own making. At times I was frustrated with myself and gave myself a “talking to” which resulted in a short-term improvement. I believe there was no doubt in anyone’s mind, including my own, that I was capable of the work asked of me but I was actively underachieving. In
grade six, we were divided into top, middle, and low performing classes. I was always in the top performing class but never performed at my top level except when absolutely necessary, and in a short burst in order to avoid failing. I always knew I was in the higher level class because as I looked around, I saw the “smartest” students who were well known. If you were in a class with them, you knew you were in the top class.

In an attempt to prepare us for high school, we were assigned to different teachers for each subject, in grades seven and eight. At the sound of the bell, we moved from classroom to classroom and teacher to teacher. It was impossible not to take notice of the difference in teachers’ personalities and teaching styles as well as the difference in the relationships I had with each teacher. At best, I had a neutral relationship with them, but in many cases, the relationships were conflictual and I had several difficult encounters. Unlike previous years, when it was obvious my happiness hinged on what the teacher felt about me, I appeared blasé about the struggle, although I was not immune to it. Unfortunately, my way of coping now was to stand up to them and engage them in discussion and debate about what I disagreed with and if that did not work would often resort to disruptive, silly, bratty behaviour.

In junior high, the first teacher I recall having a bad relationship with was Mr. Brandon. He was my grade seven Geography teacher, fresh out of teacher’s college, completely inexperienced in teaching, and was an earnest, and unfortunately, humourless young man. He was therefore an easy target for any student wishing to make him look silly. He was very unpopular, and all the jokesters constantly played tricks on him. Having total disdain for him, I simply would not behave myself in his class. In fact, it seemed impossible to behave myself at times. I began to fail miserably and after the first half of the year had a mark of twenty percent in Geography. Eventually, he sent a note home to my mother.

I do not recall any teacher ever sending a note home to my mother to talk about my grades or behaviour. In the note, Mr. Brandon spoke of my bad mark, my bad behaviour and lack of effort in completing my schoolwork. My mother reacted in a way I did not expect by grounding me. I had never been grounded before. My mother and I had no previous guidelines with which to behave during my grounding but she was clear that she was upset with my mark. I was astonished that she cared about
my mark at all. I was to be grounded for two weeks, and if I did not work harder, she claimed there would be more punishment! The grounding only lasted a few days, until my mother cooled off and forgot about it, but I did pull my mark up. It did not take much of an effort for me to pass; it just entailed doing homework and a project on world gross national products—an acutely boring topic for me. As a result of some real work on my part, I got a perfect mark. I see now that Mr. Brandon was trying to redirect me and reward my positive effort. I am not sure if that changed the dynamic between Mr. Brandon and me or not. I still got kicked out of the class often. By that time, students were no longer getting the strap, otherwise, I am sure I would have got it again. Mr. Brandon seemed genuinely at a loss as to what to do about me. He was my grade one teacher’s brother and on one occasion, Mr. Brandon said that he had told his sister about the difficulty he was having with me and she said she did not understand what had happened to me. She remembered me as being “a nice little girl”. Apparently, I was no longer so.

It was in grade eight when I finally got a sense of how my behaviour was impacting teachers’ opinions of me. After a confrontation with the music teacher, Mr. Tucker, I was told I had a bad attitude. Unfortunately Mr. Tucker and I had clashed a few years earlier when I was in grade five. I had tried out for the choir and Mr. Tucker had stated I was not good enough to be in the choir. I can say with complete confidence that I was good enough to be in the Rockton Public School choir, however I do acknowledge that I had given a bad audition. I could carry a tune, and loved to sing, but the problem had arisen I believe, when, for choir try-outs, Mr. Tucker asked that we sing in clear voices which I took to mean big voices. I belted out Silent Night in an Ethel Merman-esque manner and was told I sang too loud and would drown out the other children’s voices and therefore could not be in the choir. I was upset, particularly after checking with a boy who had been waiting for his turn to try out confirmed that yes, I was pretty loud. I was disappointed and confused because I was trying to please Mr. Tucker and as a result had not been allowed in the choir.

I told my parents about my disappointment, not expecting anything to happen as a result of that, but for the second time in two years my father intervened on my behalf. He had always prided himself in being in the Brownson, Saskatchewan (population five hundred) church choir and it seemed he was unwilling to let his child’s choir aspirations to be thwarted. He actually went up to the
school to see my grade five teacher (Mr. Devin, the vice principal who had given me the strap two years earlier) and demanded that I be allowed in the choir. I was allowed in. Mr. Tucker could not have been happy about that. Later on, when I joined the grade seven junior high choir, while he did not object, he certainly was not welcoming of me.

Mr. Tucker was one of two teachers who actually caused me physical harm and I disliked him intensely. In grade eight I still held a grudge for an incident that had occurred the year before during a choir performance. Just as the curtain was about to rise, he scolded me and poked me in the hollow between my neck and collar bone because I was not holding my hands properly. He poked me with so much force and with such impatience that I believed he must be very angry with me. It seemed to be such an extreme response to a minor error. At the time that happened, I was very upset. He poked me so hard with two of his long bony fingers that I had a large, violently blue bruise and soreness in the hollow between my neck and shoulder for days after. So, needless to say, Mr. Tucker and I had some “history” when the subsequent “ukulele-version-of-Raindrops-Keep-Falling-on-My-Head” (Bacharach, 1969) confrontation occurred.

My classmates and I were in music class with Mr. Tucker who, as mentioned previously, had now had several dealings with me, starting in grade five and all through grades six and seven as he was the music teacher for the entire school. He was an intense, nervous, jittery man who demanded we do things that as adolescents, we thought silly, like verbalizing a beat in a song using the words “ta” and “tee-tee”. We would verbally march through a song chanting “ta, ta, tee-tee, ta, tee-tee, tee-tee, ta, ta. It sounded odd and prissy and made us laugh. He also taught us the words to old-fashioned songs utterly of no significance or interest to us. To his credit, he never wavered from his method of teaching music, including the ta ta tee teeing, even in an openly hostile adolescent environment.

In spite of my difficulty with Mr. Tucker, I loved music. By grade eight, I already had quite an extensive music collection and wide musical tastes. I listened to music at home all the time on the record player or radio. I was enthralled with Neil Young, The Rolling Stones, Black Sabbath, as well as older groups I listened to from albums my brother had left behind like The Supremes, The
Ventures, Cream and The Bryds. I listened to many different genres of music from my family's large pop music collection but the only music we studied with Mr. Tucker came from ancient songbooks.

So on the day Mr. Tucker decided to introduce a pop song "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" and play it on the ukulele for the music class, I was hopeful even though the ukulele was worrisome. I knew the song well. The one radio station we had in Rockton played it constantly. I had seen the movie Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969) and the scene where Paul Newman and Katherine Ross meander along a country path together on the bicycle. It was a pretty tune, with light music, accompanied by B. J. Thomas's smoky voice. Mr. Tucker was playing and singing up a storm and I felt he was massacring the song. I was sure Burt Bacharach never intended it to sound the way it did as Mr. Tucker strummed that ukulele in a hard fast rhythm ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, tee-tee! He accompanied his ukulele playing by singing the lyrics in double time—twice as fast as it was meant to be sung. He put my Ethel Merman version of Silent Night to shame because he sang the song like he was on a Broadway stage. In no way did it resemble the happy uplifting tune sung by B.J. Thomas. It was horrible. Mr. Tucker was out of control. He was a flurry of bony, strumming fingers and manic double-time singing. I was appalled and not meaning to intentionally confront and challenge him, let out what probably was a somewhat snarky, tisk/grunt/laugh/snort that left no question how I felt about his performance. He stopped dead.

"What is so funny?" he spat out.

"That's not the way you're suppose to sing it." I said matter of factly.

"Oh really?" replied Mr. Tucker, "If you're so smart, why don't you sing it for all of us—the right way?"

I already knew that singling out someone and putting them on the spot like that this was a teacher's way of shaming a student into quiet submission. I suppose it was Mr. Tucker's hope that I would not have the ability to do better than him, or would be too embarrassed to try in front of everyone. Mr. Tucker was mistaken on both counts. It was me and Mr. Tucker and all the kids I had been in school with since kindergarten. I trusted them, even the Four Mean J's, and others who were not close friends, more than I trusted Mr. Tucker. I was not afraid to sing in front of them. I knew I had a passable voice, was able to carry a tune, and certainly could sing a simple melody like Raindrops.
So I sang it. I sang it clearly and sweetly (in my opinion) while Mr. Tucker glared at me with hate and anger. When I was done a verse, I stopped and waited expectantly. The class was absolutely silent. There was a long pregnant pause as the two of us looked at each other from across the room. Then, Mr. Tucker said, “Wipe that sneer off your face.” I was not aware of what was on my face, but knew I had to change my expression. I remember literally how it felt as I tried to form my face into something else. He then yelled, “I SAID WIPE THAT SNEER OFF YOUR FACE!” I could feel my face moving, but whatever expression was left, did not please him. But we continued on with our music class. It had been a tense and difficult few minutes, but I thought it had turned out all right. I thought the incident was over.

The next day however, my homeroom teacher kept me aside after the other kids had left the room. She explained to me that Mr. Tucker had reported my behaviour to her, and that she was referring me to the guidance counsellor, Mr. Corridor. She said that she was concerned that I had a “bad attitude” and had been disrespectful to Mr. Tucker and that I had in fact, been disrespectful to a number of teachers, like Mr. Brandon and others. I knew I had problems with the French teacher, Mr. Fortier, who made me write hundreds and hundreds of lines in French, again for talking. I was sure Mr. Ostler, the religious education teacher who denied there was such a thing as evolution even though we had just studied it in another class, also felt disrespected because of my challenging questions. I suppose that by the time my homeroom teacher, Mrs. Smiley decided to refer me to Mr. Corridor the guidance teacher, I had raised enough red flags to warrant her concern. The label “bad attitude” struck me as odd though. Surely it was Mr. Tucker who had the bad attitude? He had insisted on singing Raindrops in a way that it had never been sung anywhere before. His way was wrong. My way was right. My way was as close to the Bacharach and Thomas version as I could manage, while his was something unrecognizable, Mr. TeeTeeTaTa’s version of the song. In my mind, I had simply demonstrated to him the correct, radio and movie version of how the song should be sung. That had resulted in my visit to Mr. Corridor, because of my bad attitude.

I did not even know what a guidance teacher was. Mr. Corridor had just been a regular teacher the year before, now he had a new title of “guidance teacher”. To his credit, Mr. Corridor, a seemingly gentle man, asked me what had happened. I described the whole incident including a
rendition of how Mr. Tucker had played the ukulele (frenetic strum, strum, strumming of the instrument) and sung the song just like Mr. Tucker had sung to us. Then I sang the song the way I had in class. Perhaps Mr. Corridor had enjoyed the movie and the song in its original form or perhaps he understood what had really happened in the music class with Mr. Tucker, but that was the very last I heard of that incident. There was no further discussion, and no further repercussions.

There were intellectual and emotional repercussions however in regard to my understanding of the incident. I now had several key lessons in how a relationship with a teacher affected one’s place in the classroom and, unfortunately as my adolescent angst gathered steam, I stopped arguing with teachers about what I believed to be true, and I sometimes argued just for the sake of arguing. Teachers fell into three categories for me, foolish, neutral or oasis teachers. Very rarely would I have difficulty with a teacher who was popular and considered by the majority of students to be interesting or fun. I could be engaged intellectually through humour, and it was rare that such an engaging teacher failed to have my respect. It did not necessarily mean I did well in their class or stopped talking to my classmates, but I did not seek to make those teachers’ lives difficult, or in fact my life difficult while in their class.

That year I spent quite a bit of time in front of the principal’s office. Mr. Marshall was the husband of my kindergarten teacher and had also been the principal at the time of me getting the strap in grade three. He certainly knew my “history”, however he was diplomatic in how he meted out discipline, and he somehow managed to punish me without making me feel he disliked me. He treated me with humour while making me sit in the hall outside his office, write countless lines or other standard punishments for bad behaviour. On one occasion, I had to sit on the floor in the hall in front of his office door. I had been caught chewing gum and so had to sit there while students moved from one class to another with the gum on my nose. I did not take the punishment personally. I never took the punishment personally, nor did I ever feel “bad” for talking or chewing gum or all the other reasons I got punished at school. Even when I was caught smoking cigarettes on the hill behind the school, Mr. Marshall never lost his temper or his ability to separate me from the behaviour.

In grade eight, I ended up in a small English class comprised of a mix of about fifteen students from several different classes. I had started out with another girl Anna, in a different class,
but on the first day, the teacher said that the two students with the highest marks from the year before would be leaving the class to join a class with the principal, Mr. Marshall. Anna’s name was called out, and before my name was called I wondered who would be the next student. I looked around. There were no “top performers” in the class. I had no idea what my mark had been the year before but I was not completely surprised when mine was the second name called.

I suppose Mr. Marshall’s class was an experiment in open learning concepts. We were allowed to go to the book room or library and pick what we wanted to read. We were then permitted to go anywhere in the school to read our selected book. That year I remember reading Lord of the Flies (Golding, 1954), Anthem (Rand, 1946), Brave New World (Huxley, 1932), The Outsiders (Hinton, 1967), Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Stowe, 1852) and To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1962). I have re-read those books many times and Anthem always reminds me of the front foyer of school as that is where, sitting on the floor, I first read the book.

All of us might be reading different books and would tell each other about the book as well as doing other interesting and different things, like pretending to be astronauts living on the moon and recording our experiences while eating freeze-dried food. Because I missed so many days of school, I am unsure why we pretended we were on the moon but we did really have freeze dried food to eat. As often happened with me, I had missed the teacher’s explanation of the project. Kelly, yet again, attempted to fill me in but I never really “got” what we were doing. It was the year man landed on the moon so I suspect it was a curriculum package that Mr. Marshall brought into that advanced reading class.

Part way through the school year, a new boy joined our class. His name was [redacted] and he was an American. That was very exciting for all of us as we hardly ever had new kids in our class, and especially not as different and interesting as [redacted]. He wore an American flag t-shirt, swore and told stories of sexual conquests and use of alcohol. Because he came so late in the school year, he was put into Mr. Marshall’s class but before being allowed in, Mr. Marshall said, “What is the meaning of the word…” and gave [redacted] a word that I did not know the meaning of and [redacted] promptly gave him the definition. I was impressed. [redacted] got to be in our class and I was glad to know him and hear about his life that was so different from ours.
claimed he had moved with his parents from town to town, because he said his father was a draft dodger. We all loved  and were very happily shocked, when one day he drove his mother’s white convertible to school and parked it in the teachers’ parking lot.  was thirteen years old at the time. That was one of the best things that had ever happened in school as far as I was concerned and  was one of the most interesting kids I ever met. His driving to school caused quite a kafuffle. He was so different from all of us, that it made me curious about the world outside of our little northern Ontario town. I took interest in the reports on the Vietnam War, the war that  ‘s parents were “dodging”; however,  did not come back to school after the car incident and I guess after drawing attention to his family, he and his parents were forced to move on again.

Just a few years ago, my sister told me she had ran into Mr. Marshall at a gathering of some sort in another town and the two of them, being close in age and from the same home town, spent time talking and catching up on mutual acquaintances. My sister told me the part of the conversation they had about me. This is how she recounted that.

“I said to Bill, ‘You remember my younger sister Kathy?’ He said ‘Oh yes, I remember her. How is she doing?’ And I said, ‘She’s the director of the youth centre in  ’. He looked surprised and said ‘Really?’ and I said ‘Yes, and she’s teaching part-time at a college!’ And he said ‘Really!’ And I said, ‘Yes and she’s working on a masters in education!’ and he said ‘Really!!!’ He just kept saying ‘really!’ It was funny!” exclaimed my sister. ( , personal communication, December 1, 2005)

I thought that was somewhat funny too, but also wondered what was going through his mind as my sister was giving him that information about my current life. In one way I was gratified that he was interested, but wondered at his surprise at hearing of my accomplishments. But was he surprised? I realized that I did not really know what any of my teachers thought of me. I only knew what I believed they thought of me. It occurred to me that if my sister had told him I was serving time in Kingston Penitentiary for some hideous crime, he might have been less surprised. But perhaps that was my insecurity, my perception that my teachers had no belief in my potential. At that moment, I acknowledged that he might not have expected much from me given what he had observed of me as a child. That both saddened and angered me. It was possible though that he expected more from me
than I myself expected. The truth of the matter became abundantly clear to me. I had absolutely no idea about what my teachers thought about me at that time. I had no connection to them aside from negative or wholly neutral interactions. I had no point of reference, nothing to define my place in the classroom, because I had no real connection to the classroom experiences or my teachers as individuals. My whole perception of me in the classroom came from my own analysis of events, rather than relationships with adults and seeing myself through their eyes. What does it mean to have one’s developing perception of self be so unaffected by the adults in one’s life? To determine what those teachers might have thought of me became a “connecting the dots” exercise. I have pieced together events to help me understand who I was to them or what they might have believed about me without truly knowing what their opinion was. No teachers actually ever told me what they thought of me. I gleaned all my beliefs and formed all my opinions through non-verbal behaviour and indirect comments and actions.

I know that a great deal of what I remember about how I felt at those times is often through the lens of the music and books I read at that time. Books, songs, music, and lyrics are like windows to my life then, as I can still recall the way I felt at the moment I was reading that book or listening to that music. Books and music define my “place” more so than any student/teacher, parent/child, relationship does. I have old friendships with certain books and pieces of music that when I want to remember who I was and what I was feeling at any given moment in time, I can go to them and slip through an opening in time, back to where I was at the first moment I read those lines or heard those notes and words. That phenomenon was articulated in Orhan Pamuk’s (2007) forward in a book of short stories by Albert Camus (1957).

We admire writers first for their books. But as time goes on, we cannot remember reading them without also revisiting the world as we then knew it and recalling the inchoate longings they awoke in us. We are attached to a writer not just because he ushered us into a world that continues to haunt us, but because he has made us who we are. (p. IX)

Books were my mentors; they were my emotional gauges and they were my role models. The characters in books were the people I looked up to. In my everyday life, there was no one who touched me or inspired as those book people did. No one helped me understand my
heart and soul to the degree that a piece of music or a line from a song could. Books and music could so exquisitely and accurately explain what I felt, and why. There was no one in my world that was in contact with me on those levels.

8. Academic Patterns Continue in the Teenaged Years

In high school, my social life and school life flowed into each other. My friends and classmates were now one in the same. Family life was steady for the most part. I continued to experience difficulties with adhering to classroom rules and often behaved inappropriately, usually stemming from feeling bored and restless. I did find some subjects intensely interesting, but I still did very little to get good marks. I got high marks in English because I read every book assigned to us, not because I put any effort into my schoolwork. If I liked the subject and would have voluntarily read the material, I did very well. If the material was boring to me, I did very little work beyond reading to pass tests. Sometimes I did not do enough and would fail a test. In every case though, I pulled it together by the end of the term, “aced” the final exam and manage to squeak by.

Each fall, I started the school year with a promise to myself to do better and work harder. I would be tidy in my note-taking and bring my books home with good intentions of doing all my homework. That would only last a few weeks, and I would inevitably return to my old pattern of not doing any work at home, unless it was a last minute, all-nighter essay or other assignment. I recall being captivated by aspects of Geography and History, but skipped many classes and passed tests by reading the textbook on my own. I always felt completely confident in my English class although I did badly in French, Math and Typing. I believe that missing some important foundational pieces in those subjects was starting to affect me. One cannot miss massive amounts of time in such classes and be able to make it up by reading a book. Unlike previous years where the material was easy enough to learn, Math and French required more work than I was willing to do. For the first time, I was unable to grasp the material by attending a few days a week and borrowing notes.

I failed French in grade nine and had my first major issue with the typing teacher who gave me nine percent as a term mark at the end of the fall semester. Even I was astounded with that mark as it was lower than any mark I had ever received. The teacher, Mr. Beck was a loud, surly individual who was often in conflict with students. Surprisingly, I did not get the lowest mark in the class. My old
classmate, Jerry, (one of the Four Mean J’s) had received five percent. I was called into the office of the department head, Mrs. Salway, who was also the mother of one of my classmates, Linda. She asked me if my mark was about personality difficulties with Mr. Beck because she said, “Mr. Beck is known for getting into personality clashes with students.” It was the first time I ever heard a teacher suggest that any difficulty between a teacher and a student could be the teacher’s fault! But in my desire to not be vulnerable and to be cool, I shrugged off Mr. Beck’s verbal aggression and took full responsibility for my poor marks. Mrs. Salway had given me an out, and I had chosen not to take it. The result was a failing grade in typing for that term as well as many, many detentions for arriving to class late or missing it all together. I did know that my failing grade was not a result of Mr. Beck’s nasty disposition. I was not doing enough work and I could not read my way through it in a practical course like typing. Not wanting anyone to feel sorry for me and ultimately, being honest, resulted in my well-deserved failing grade. I had been given an out by Mrs. Salway and could have claimed I was not doing well and having difficulty because Mr. Beck did not like me or more dramatically, that I was afraid of him. In fact, both were true to some degree. But if I had failed in every course where a teacher did not like me or I was inwardly intimidated, I would have passed very few courses. So rather than claim “victim”, I took “failure”. That was what my mother would have called, “cutting your nose off to spite your face.” However, I do not see it that way. I think that I was already demonstrating a willingness to take responsibility for the difficulties in my life even if I had not yet made the changes to make my life better.

Socially, high school was exciting; however, it was apparent that those negative patterns of behaviour were starting to have an effect on all of us. Peers began failing, dropping out of school or being indefinitely suspended. By grade nine, two of the Mean J’s, Jerry and Johnny had dropped out and later so did Jimmy. Those three boys were very bright, but as they grew into adulthood, they became terribly angry, and at times physically threatening and violent. From a teacher’s perspective, they must have been intimidating boys to have sitting in a classroom. I do not know what happened to Johnny after he dropped out of school except that I saw him around town, rowdy, tough and still somewhat frightening to me. Jerry was arrested for trafficking marijuana at the end of our grade ten year and went to jail for a year. Jimmy went to jail when he was eighteen or nineteen years old for
beating up a former teacher. The fourth of the Mean J’s, Jackie, had moved away in grade seven and the only thing I remember about him is that he could not read.

I started getting detentions for various behaviours and attendance infractions; in grade nine and that did not change all through my high school years. Detentions were the high school equivalent of being sent to the cloakroom or out in the hall and those detentions could accumulate over the year if they were not served immediately. I recall waiting for the list of grade twelve graduates to be posted and not knowing whether or not my name would be there, again not knowing what my standing was in my courses. Right to the very last day, I did not have a clear idea of whether my academic effort had allowed me to pass or not. So while relieved that my name was on the list, and I was to graduate from grade twelve, it meant I would have to serve all my detentions before receiving my diploma. In a “special offer” the Vice Principal allowed one full day at school to act as ten detentions. So days after other students had written their exams, I was at the school serving detentions. The teachers having to supervise us were as unhappy about this as we were, and so some teachers let us bring our blankets and books and suntan lotion and lie out on the grass for the day. I did a week of detentions to pay off the forty-five or fifty detentions I had accumulated over the year, and I got a spectacular tan as well.

9. Social Life in the Teenaged Years

As mentioned, my school life and social life had merged. With the streaming of all children in town into one high school, I had exposure to many different kinds of youth and so my peer group even more closely reflected my personality and preferences in social activities. So while I maintained acquaintanceships with some of the original classmates I had been with since kindergarten, I found a peer group that for the most part, suited my interests, which were boys, adventure, experimentation and stimulation. My friends shared my taste in music, preferences for how to spend leisure time, and were funny and stimulating and at times, daring, adventurous risk takers. Our hometown lacked stimulation and positive outlets for teenagers so what we did for excitement was, at times, extreme, but I believe fairly typical for a rural community.

I started smoking cigarettes in grade eight, drinking alcohol in grade nine, and smoking pot and becoming sexually active in grade ten. By grade eleven, I was smoking pot before school almost every day. On a few occasions, I also did harder drugs at school for the experience of being high in
that environment, but quickly came to realize that doing drugs in such an environment was psychologically difficult for me. Ultimately, that is what drugs had become for me: a way to heighten the interest factor in any given situation. If the situation was “heightened” enough, drugs proved to be too much for me to handle. I disliked feeling “too stoned” or not able to adjust my behaviour to suit the environment.

The first time I smoked pot was a result of telling a friend (an old classmate, Will) that I wanted to try pot. His older sister was dating a local drug dealer and Will had already been “smoking up” for several months. He said the next time he got a joint, he would come and get me and we would smoke it together. I had known Will my whole life and in fact, our mothers shared a hospital room on the day of our birth. Will was a mere two hours older than I, so there had always been a special bond between us. I trusted him completely, and since none of my other friends had started using drugs, I knew I could also trust him not to make fun of me as I smoked my first joint. That is an example of “planned” experimentation as opposed to being swept up in the moment and falling under the influences of “peer pressure.” I do not believe I was ever swept up in such a way. That kind of behaviour was always about making a fairly clear, level headed choice about experimenting and knowing beforehand I was seriously contemplating engaging in a risk behaviour.

My friend Karen and I began to plan our use of the harder drugs to ensure we had an optimal experience. We would schedule our evening so that we would get to do things that were fun, but not too highly stimulating and not around people we did not trust or like because we knew from past experience that you could really get “freaked out” if something threw you off. We had also discovered as we were coming down, after five or six hours of moving around, walking around town, experiencing the physical and cognitive effects of the drug, that we would get into very deep, philosophical, analytical discussions. We came to really enjoy that part of our “trip” and planned for it, ensuring we had a safe, secure place to do that, and proper clothing to withstand the deep night or early morning chill of northern summers.

For me, use of hallucinogens, or what were popularly described as “psychedelics” or “mind expanding” drugs, was thought altering. They did cause a change in consciousness, and while under the influence of those drugs, that change of consciousness came to be what I most desired from the
use of the drug. Use of such drugs began as a recreational activity but became a purposeful and intellectual, consciousness altering experience for me. Karen and I discussed all the big topics, religion, politics, relationships, as well as our hopes and dreams for ourselves. Both of us earnestly wanted experiences that intellectually, emotionally and spiritually would take us outside of the realm of small town life. We had an ongoing story of what we would do when we were “old enough” which included buying a van and travelling across the country. We talked about what we might see and whom we might meet. Oftentimes, our conversations were much more analytical or abstract and at some moments seemed so profound to us, so “mind blowing” as we used to say, that we would look at each other in awe, mixed with fear, and laugh nervously. “How had we thought of that?” we would ask each other in surprised wonder.

There were still enough remnants of 1960s drug culture around for us to become aware of individuals such as Timothy Leary who was advocating for the use LSD as a method of expanding consciousness. We embraced that idea; at least I did and I believed in the mind expanding potential of those drugs. I recall feeling “different” each time I had such a drug induced experience because I would be altered by where my mind had taken me. Although we were very young in the 1960s, as teenagers in the 1970s, we embraced some of the ideology of that transitional time in society and certainly the music of the time. I do not believe that drugs ever became a problem for me, or that I used them for any other purpose than to have fun or a stimulating experience. I do believe that the use of chemical drugs did alter my consciousness and that I did psychologically and intellectually grow from experimenting with those drugs. For me however, substances and experimentation were never used to deaden experiences, thoughts and feelings but to heighten them. I sought out any experience that stimulated me intellectually. An aspect of using drugs at that time for such “experiences” and “stimulation” were a reflection of the lack of positive outlets to achieve the same goals. In grade twelve, I was fortunate enough to be part of a trip to Italy and Greece. I experienced the same results being on that trip as I did on any chemically induced trip. It changed my perspective, it broadened by horizon; it moved me and altered my consciousness. That really was the experience I was looking for.
Many of my acquaintances were heavily into drug use, and for different reasons. I watched as some of them got arrested, got “messed up”, dropped out of school, got kicked out of their family homes, went to jail, or all of the above. Even from my “saying yes to drugs” perspective, I could see that it was destroying some people and that some individuals had gone from partying and having fun, to self-destruction. Some individuals were using drugs to elevate their status, to give them confidence, and I saw that allowing a substance to take first place in your life was dangerous and destructive. Even at that time, I saw that the reasons for using drugs could vary, and some reasons were more harmful and devastating than others. I did not see use of drugs as inherently dangerous, but rather the combination of the personality of the user and reason they were using substances. I recognized that drugs “overly” influenced some individuals and I never allowed that to happen to me. I always believed it was not “cool” to be out of control. I felt disdain for the weeping, vomiting girl who had drank so much alcohol she was passing out at a concert. I felt she had shamed herself.

That is why over indulging in drugs never appealed to me. For example, alcohol was not something I was very interested in because alcohol deadened my ability to function, to think, to react and to take in what was going on around me. Alcohol was much more unpredictable for me and I had very little physical tolerance for it, often becoming violently ill long before I became too drunk to remember being ill. Alcohol also lowered inhibitions to the point where I would do things that were unplanned and after I would feel regret, and like I had let myself down. I was much more comfortable in being in the altered state that drugs allowed me because it was never about losing control, only about heightening awareness and excitement. Pot and hashish and other drugs like MDA (Methylenedioxyamphetamine, precursor to Ecstasy), Acid (Lysergic acid diethylamidereal), and Mescaline (derived from the Mexican cactus peyote) became my substances of choice. Doing drugs was simply a recreational pastime for many of us young people as it greatly enhanced something as mundane as sitting on the steps of the local bank, which we spent an inordinate amount of time doing, for lack of anything else to do. Sitting on the bank steps could be very boring. Sitting on the bank steps while high could be a lot of fun.

It is interesting to note that the peers who were my core group, all became involved in the same kinds of activities, and generally around the same time and to the same degree. I do not recall
being “influenced” by anyone or overtly influencing other people to partake in those activities. It just seemed to be what we all wanted to do although perhaps others in the group did not feel that way, and may have felt pressured to engage in activities they were not comfortable with. We were risk takers, but not to the degree other youth in our community were. We did not use intravenous drugs and some of the more addictive, cheap drugs around today like crack or crystal meth (methamphetamine) that might have pulled us into more frequent drug use did not exist then. We consumed alcohol moderately. Several of my closest friends had a parent or parents that were alcoholics, and openly stated they did not want to be like them. It is also interesting to note that although I went through a phase of using street drugs, I never used prescription drugs. I would not even take an aspirin for a headache as my mother’s use of prescriptions drugs bothered me, and in my mind was a sign her weak character. Even when my father died when I was sixteen and my mother and sister suggested I take a sedative as they had, I would not. That kind of drug taking was dangerous in my mind.

My peer group was not notably outstanding in any way. Those in positions of authority would not consider my closest friends stellar young people. We did not join clubs or get chosen as valedictorian, freshman queen or win any academic awards. We did not even try to do any of those things. Those types of pursuits just did not interest us much and on some level, I believe we did not feel we would succeed anyway. Two of our peer group were very good artists though. To this day they are the most talented artists I have ever met. One of those boys won a scholarship through one of the Toronto colleges to go to study in Europe. Even though their talents went unacknowledged by their parents, we recognized them as “artists” and were proud of their abilities. We collected their art and hung it on our bedroom walls.

I believe I would have enjoyed joining some creative groups at school, like the theatre arts group, but had conflict with the teacher facilitating it. He was also the creative writing teacher in grade eleven and while I entertained getting involved in that group too, I did not see myself being able to be in a group with him. I had had him as a teacher for one year of English and he had a low tolerance for my antics. At one point, he asked why I could not be as sweet and well behaved as my older sister. I was surprised that he could compare me to someone who had attended school fifteen years earlier.
He had a good memory apparently, because fourteen years later when my niece (my brother’s daughter) was in school, she told me that the same teacher exclaimed in exasperation “You’re just like your Aunt Kathy!” My niece claims she said “Thank you!” Both my brother and I were proud that his daughter had aligned herself with the anti-establishment faction of the family. Unlike my older sister who always wanted to fit in with the “popular” kids, for me, and I presume for my brother and niece, it was much more important to be cool, funny, have a good time and if necessary, rebel. Being anti-establishment was an underlying value of our family culture.

Shortly after my sixteenth birthday, my father died suddenly at age fifty-seven of a massive heart attack. My mother was only fifty years old at the time, but of course, to me, she seemed much older. She did not deal with his death well, although she tried to keep our lives together, her pre-existing anxiety, overuse of prescription drugs and obsessive-compulsive behaviours around the intake of food, manifested in extreme dieting and exercising, and a severe addiction to codeine. She lost one hundred and twenty-seven pounds in a one-year period following my father’s death. In the early stages of her “diet” she seemed healthy and vibrant, but then her dieting became full-blown anorexia and bulimia. After that year of treating her body so badly, she then got breast cancer and had a mastectomy. She was consuming massive amounts of prescription painkillers as well. The eating disorders and addiction to opiates plagued her for the rest of her life.

Two years previous to my father’s death, I too had gone on a similar diet and modelled how my mother dieted. I almost completely stopped drinking and eating for about six weeks and very quickly lost thirty-five pounds. I too had struggled with weight and was a chubby kid, being an amplifier for my mother’s distorted eating habits. My mother allowed me to eat whatever I wanted and in fact would encourage overeating by making me french fries for lunch for example, likely so she could eat them too. I was not required to eat fruit or vegetables or meat. I could leave food on my plate if I wished or eat three plates of food if I wished. I was not required to be home for meals either. I remember feeling hungry a great deal of the time, even though I was overweight.

So when I got to the age that I cared about what boys thought of me, it is not surprising that I chose to go on a diet and lose weight. On some days, I would only allow myself a sip of water. On other days I would drink only grape Freshie and eat sunflower seeds. During that time my mother
encouraged me in my extreme dieting, and taught me how to keep my bowels moving by taking castor oil. She did not try to get me to eat or drink. It was a time of bonding for my mother and me. I felt like a grown up woman, displaying my power and strength through my tenacious ability to not put food or drink in my mouth. My mother was proud of my willpower. My disordered eating was less extreme than my mother’s though. I never did another long-term starvation diet after that early one, but to this day I struggle with being overweight. However, having seen the behind scenes result of eating disorders, being overweight has always seemed the lesser of the evils for me.

After my father’s death, any semblance of control, discipline or expectations of following rules disappeared. My mother’s sorrow and obsessive dieting consumed her, and it was obvious that I truly was taking care of myself. I knew I had to be responsible for my safety and therefore, had to think about the choices I was making. Unfortunately, I was still young enough to not have the wisdom and experience to make the best choices. I did know however that there was no one to bail me out if I got into trouble of any kind. My older brother and sister were involved in their own lives and did not offer any kind of support around the death of my father or my mother’s increasingly alarming dieting and prescription drug use.

In the last summer he was alive, my father became very watchful of me. I was fifteen years old and now boys were as interested in me as I was in them. My father was ever so slightly menacing and unfriendly towards any boy who came to our house. He was likely trying to prevent the same sort of thing that had happened with both my brother and sister, unaware that while I was not drinking like my brother or a party-girl like my sister, I was heavily into recreational drugs and already sexually active. I do not think it would have been long before I would have come to the full attention of my father, and that he would have taken action to curtail my behaviour. He was becoming increasingly angry at my lack of respect for him and my mother. My talking back was causing tension to once again rise in the house. I was having arguments with both my parents just as my siblings had done a decade earlier. On one occasion, my father was complaining and yelling about my going out and misbehaving although I was still following curfews and never revealed my use of various substances to my parents. He called me a “tramp” and I told him to go to Hell. He jumped up from his chair and stood over me where I sat on the footstool. He pulled his arm back and raised it, ready to slap my
face with an open hand. I did not flinch, but stared up at him and he remained frozen in that position as we glared at each other. What I said then, even now, shocks me. In a quiet and steady voice, perhaps the same voice I used with Carol in the umbrella incident, I said, “I...dare...you...” My words hung suspended in the air. He did not hit me. He lowered his hand and in that moment, something changed between us.

I believe my father and I would have come to a crisis in our relationship, just as the relationships with my brother and sister had, but he died before that degree of confrontation and conflict happened. After he was gone, there was no adult left in my life who was willing to challenge me, and truly, I do not think anyone was concerned about me because I was still falling within acceptable boundaries of behaviour for our family. Although for years after, my brother and sister would always see me as the most non-conforming member of the family, that was because I left northern Ontario and lived with my boyfriend in Toronto. They could not understand how I could move to “the city” and they felt somewhat scandalized that I was living with my boyfriend. I believe they must have thought me in a terrible downward spiral simply because they did not understand my choices however in the time between when they were teenagers and I was a teenager there had been some huge shifts in society. They had a different set of values and saw what I was doing as much worse behaviour than anything they had done. In their eyes I was spinning off in a world they did not understand and I think they believed it more dangerous to my well being than their own partying, car wrecks, pre-marital pregnancies and jail terms. I was always treated as the “wild child” and for a time, accepted that family label. In fact, I was much more discrete than they had ever been. I had no criminal record and was using contraceptives so would not be getting pregnant. Giving me that label revealed their lack of understanding of my life and that I was choosing a different path. In my opinion, I never succumbed to my risk factors as they had to theirs, but my behaviours and choices were puzzling to them and therefore alarming.

So, after my father died, I had free reign. I no longer had a curfew, and in 1975, my mother was aware that I smoked pot and had, for the most part, given me permission to do that. I never was able to outwardly lie about my behaviours and would choose to simply avoid detection. That was all about flying under the radar and being cool. I spent a lot of time explaining to my mother that pot
smoking was not that bad and I was not going to become a "drug addict". She believed me, I guess, or perhaps she did not know what to do to change it. I was allowed to have my friends over as much as I wished even though by grade eleven, my three closest friends were no longer in school. Two of them had dropped out and one of them had already graduated from grade twelve, but was not working full time and not doing much that was productive. In a journal entry from that time, spelling errors included, I say:

I really get bummed out easy now. All my close friends don’t go to school. Mona and Carol both work and Billie has settled in Rockton until her money runs out. Mary, well her parents sent her off to a girls college in North Bay. Its runned by nuns. Mary is really bumping out there but she’s not bombing out. She is getting fairly good grades. At school it’s boring and I’m usually by myself. I don’t mind it really though because these days sometimes I can’t even stand to be around people. This last summer, I changed a lot. Maybe I grew up I don’t know but the whole thing was a bummer. I use that word a lot. It’s number one in my vocabulary. Sixteen years old and I’ve experienced too much. I’ve put too much living in the last 2 years. Too much.

That is such a clear insight to my feelings, attitudes, and a desire to get through school, and a growing discontent with the life I was living. I must admit that when I came across that journal a few years ago, I was quite shocked by the toughness and abrasiveness of my younger self. I was surprised at the edginess of that younger me. I saw a lot of bravado and puffed-upness, lack of genuineness and a great deal of drama in that excerpt. It was not a pleasing persona to me and it gave me an insight into what I might have been projecting to teachers and other adults. At that time, I did not understand the façade I was presenting to others. I felt somewhat confused and without direction and not able to connect all parts of my inner self to the life I was living.

By the time I wrote that, during the summer I was sixteen, I was beginning to question my life and choices more and more. I began to question the friendships I had. I was growing weary of my lifestyle. Eventually I lost interest in those friendships except for the new relationship I had with Kevin, a boy I had been a friend with for a few years and now was in an intimate relationship with. We were both readying ourselves to leave our family, home and friends and so we isolated
ourselves from everything and everyone except each other. I still read incessantly, and listened to
music that could speak the feelings and emotions that I was not able to express. Neil Young’s
music and lyrics continued to be a voice for me and now is still a window to who I was then. A line
from Young’s A Man Needs a Maid (1972) perfectly describes my sixteen year old self: “My life is
changing in so many ways/ I don’t know who to trust anymore/ There’s a shadow running through
my dreams/ like a beggar going from door to door”. Those lines became a mantra that I spoke
over and over in my head. I believed those words on a very deep level. When I hear that song,
and those lines, I can pull up those emotions and remember how I was feeling then. Those
memories are still acute.

I watched as some of my friends’ lives unravelled or became stalled. The last summer I was
in Rockton, seven boys my age were killed in four different car accidents. That affected me deeply.
One boy we knew lost his whole peer group and wandered around town sad and flattened by the
experience where once he had been a funny, lively boy. I felt worn down by the predictability and
tedium of what life had to offer there. My mind was on fire with the possibility of leaving that town and
striking out in the world.

Once I was with Kevin, I did less “hanging out” with my girlfriends and spent more time with
another couple, Lorrannne and Jeff who I had known since childhood. While we continued to indulge in
substances, it was on a much lighter scale as we were also working part-time and starting to set our
sights on getting out of Rockton, at least Kevin and I were. Kevin was not as much of a drug and
alcohol “for the sake of the thrill” person as I had was, as he had a fear of developing an addiction.
Both his parents were non-functioning alcoholics. In any case, as our relationship became more
intense, I found I was not comfortable doing drugs with him. Unlike with Karen, Kevin did not become
philosophical and analytical when high, and as time went on, that is what any kind of drug did to me. I
would want to get into a highly verbal and intellectually stimulating conversation. Kevin, Lorraine and
Jeff would respond, puzzled and agitated at my demands to converse about topics they had no
interest in or understanding of. They would often respond to some tangent I had been on with a
“huh?” That was very frustrating to me and oftentimes I would feel agitated myself and certainly
misunderstood.
That became a common theme, as I grew older. Drugs, even marijuana caused me to be hyper-stimulated. I wanted to talk about things, analyze, dissect, explore, investigate, discuss and debate in a frenetic way, and I would intimidate my friends with my intensity. Everyone else wanted to smoke a joint, “kick back” and listen to some music. It was for that reason that I eventually stopped doing drugs, along with growing physical difficulties like accelerated heartbeat, general hyperactivity and increasing paranoia. Being high, particularly after moving from Rockton to Toronto, over stimulated me and made me fearful and anxious. Unlike the days with Karen, my friends and I could not go lie on a picnic table and look at the spectacular night sky with no worry for our safety. In Toronto, there was an element of keeping one’s self safe, travelling the buses and subways and getting home alone I could not manage all that while high. The city was stimulating enough for me all on its own. Later on, when I temporarily tried pot again in an attempt to experience some of the “fun” I had as a younger person, I realized the physical effects were much more dramatic and uncomfortable, and not much fun at all. By the time I was thirty, I was no longer using any kind of drug and only drank moderately and very rarely. I had even stopped smoking cigarettes. To this day though, the most stimulating and interesting time I can have is all intellectually based. I enjoy intense one-to-one conversations far more than light group interactions. Being engaged in some topic that requires the stretching of the mind and philosophizing leaves me a state of almost pure joy. If I cannot have that, I prefer to be alone.

Kevin was a good influence on me in some ways. He was very ambitious and had big plans for himself that would take him out of Rockton as soon as he had graduated from grade twelve. He was two months younger than me; my birthday was in December and his in January and so I finished high school a year ahead of him. I worked for a year as a long-distance telephone operator while he finished grade twelve and then we moved to Toronto together. I was eighteen years old the summer I left home. That was devastating to my mother who told me shortly after that my leaving home was worse for her than my when my father died. I knew how difficult it was for her at the time, and I carried an incredible amount of guilt about leaving, but the guilt did not outweigh my desire to escape that town, that life, and to strike out on my own. I felt smothered by the squashing boredom of life in
Rockton and living with my unwell mother. As always, I sought the “experience” and was willing to take risks to have those experiences. Rockton had nothing left to offer me.

That willingness to move on and change everything in my life has revealed itself to be a lifelong pattern. When something like my job, my apartment or my relationship stopped being of interest to me or seemed like it was “going nowhere”, I had no qualms about abruptly switching direction and heading off into the unknown. It was worrisome to those around me, I believe, as I often left a part of my life behind to forge a new life. I had almost no fear of change or turning my life upside down in my quest for—well, I did not really know what it was I wanted. Most of my decisions to move on were about a growing awareness of what I did not want but, often, not knowing what I did want. As a result my life has often felt “directionless”. The unknown, directionlessness, what the future might hold, the risks—none of those unsureties have ever outweighed the conviction that I must, and need, to make a change in my current situation. Getting out of this has, for a large part of my life, been my motivation to move forward, not what I might find at the end of that journey. Walking away without a backward glance, and no knowledge of what lies ahead has dictated many shifts in direction in my life. Surprisingly, being in that state of limbo has caused little fear. I always had faith that I would find my way.

10. Years Between High School and Beginning the Master of Education

Kevin and I adapted very well to city life. After a few weeks of severe culture shock and feeling overwhelmed by all the people in the big city, whom I thought were all looking at me (as in small towns everyone does look at everyone else) I grew to love Toronto. Once I became aware that, because there were so many people in the city I was almost invisible, I felt a great sense of freedom to be who I wanted to be. I felt comfortable in the anonymity of a big city. I enjoyed going unnoticed. I began to see that in some situations, my tough girl persona was out of place and that’s when those two aspects of my personality started to split. I found friends that provided me with as much intellectual stimulation as I could want and in that new life, a different kind of me started to emerge although I would revert to my Rockton persona when with my family or Rockton friends and particularly when I went back up north and stayed for a few weeks.
As mentioned earlier, while it was vital to get out of Rockton, I had no ambition or clear goals for my new life in Toronto in spite of all the big dreams Karen and I had talked about. Those aspirations seemed far out of reach. I had just turned nineteen, had only a grade twelve diploma, and no special skills except having worked for a short time as store clerk, waitress and switchboard operator, all minimum wage jobs in Rockton. I started a seven-year pattern of working at low skilled jobs for a few months, quitting, and trying to find something else before the next month’s rent was due. I would find another unsatisfying, low-paying, low-skilled, minimum wage job work for a few more months and repeat the pattern.

During that time I continued to hang out with many friends and acquaintances from Rockton, who like me, had made their way to the big cities, Ottawa, and Toronto. Kevin and I broke up about a year after arriving in Toronto, although we continued to be friends and see each other occasionally. I took courses here and there to try to improve my skills to get a better paying job. For example, I took a typing course at a business college to build up my typing speed. My poor performance in high school typing was impeding my ability to get secretarial jobs that paid better than the non-skilled jobs I was performing. I also took personal interest courses like weaving and self-defence through the public school board or YMCA. I continued to be a voracious reader, particularly enjoying fantasy and science fiction. I read Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1934) and *Lord of the Rings* (1954) trilogy, but also started to read the classics, not really realizing that they were “classics.” I spent what little extra money I made buying music and books and knew that if I got a book with a little penguin on it, it would probably be a good. I read the Brontes, Dickens, Austen, Thomas Hardy, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Maupassant, Kafka and Flaubert. Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* (1915) spoke to me. Here was a hero that thought so little of himself that he loved a woman unworthy of him; and that woman who did not love him back, was so self-absorbed and hard, that she did not recognize his pure heart. I believed that was an example of the risk and pitfalls of love. It represented people at their most vulnerable and their most destructive. No one in my family had the kind of life or the kind of love I wished to find for myself. Again, having no role models, I looked to music, poetry and literature to teach me about myself and to help me form and speak my truths.
Through my reading, I also began to understand the principles of “class” and “privilege” and desire to change one’s lot in life. I understood Flaubert’s character, *Madam Bovary* (1857) and her obsession with finding a way to flee the boredom and restrictions her life and felt empathy for the character in Maupassant’s *The Necklace* (1884) who ruins her life in trying to elevate her position. I grew to love the “flavour” of a book and unable to afford to travel, books took me to places I wished to see and satisfied the always present need for new experiences. The books I was reading and the diversity and intellectual and artistic bounty of the city, touched and nurtured a part of my spirit that had long lay in stasis, sleeping, and unexpressed.

I also read a great deal of non-fiction and feminist literature. *The Cinderella Complex*, (1981) by Colette Dowling was hugely influential, along with the writing of Gloria Steinem. I became what some men, particularly the men in my family called a “women’s libber” and while I was angry about the unfair treatment of woman in history and society, I was also not accepting of limitations others might try to put on me. In my edgy, young woman way, I strongly stated “I do not need to be ‘liberated’ because I have never been ‘oppressed!’” In some ways that was true. I did not have the same goals and desires as many young women did then in the late 1970’s. I did not expect that I would marry a nice, loving man who would care for our children and me. I did not think anyone except me would care for me. Feminist writing was helping me clarify some deep philosophical beliefs about relationships, having children, and being independent. It was not conducive to a happy love life though. My abrasiveness and verbally aggressive form of feminism did not impress the young men I was meeting and with whom I was having what always turned out to be short, sexual and unfulfilling relationships. On one level I did not care if those relationships were successful however on another level, I felt lonely and, as always, different from those around me.

I also continued to read great female fiction authors I had been introduced to in high school like Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence. Those female writers were giving voice to my growing understanding and awareness of myself as a woman at that time in our culture. *The Woman’s Room* (1977) by Marilyn French fell into my hands, and I began to identify with those seeking, exploring, desire-to-be-independent-at-any-cost women characters.
In regard to the development of my philosophies and identity, what was missing in my life, I found in books, as I always had. I did not have the opportunity to discuss those books and emerging personal philosophies with anyone else as none of my friends read as I did or seemed to have thoughts about feminism, classism, or anything else for that matter. I did not have any real-life female role models except perhaps an older girl who was the daughter of my mother’s closest friend. She lived just a few blocks away from me in the west end of Toronto. She had gone to university, and now worked as a dental hygienist and made an incredible eighty dollars a day! At my best paying job, I was making one-hundred twenty-five dollars a week. But she had four years of university and at that time, I saw no way that I could manage that financially or in fact on any level.

After several years in Toronto, my friend Mary and I decided to try travelling out West, and possibly continue to live there if we found a place we liked and jobs that paid well. I once again quit the minimum wage job I was working at, put what little furniture I had in storage, loaded up a backpack, and headed West. Mary and I travelled around Alberta and picked up jobs as chambermaids in Banff. Our boss there, a somewhat unstable young man, developed a crush on Mary. When he had to lay us off for the fall season, he promised that if we came back after Christmas he would hire us for the winter skiing season. In the meantime, Mary and I headed out to Vancouver to see her brother and Mary decided to stay there to live.

I headed back to Banff alone with the intention of continuing to live and work there. Our former boss was dismayed to see that only I had returned, but begrudgingly, gave me the promised job. Unfortunately, he also fired me two days later after I had made some cleaning mistakes, like briskly sweeping the concrete walkway outside of the rooms while the doors of the rooms were wide open. Later on the same day, I was told to mop down the front ceramic tiled lobby, and so I filled a bucket with hot soapy water and mopped that floor within an inch of its life stripping the layers of wax and creating a horrible, blotchy mess. The final straw, as far as my boss was concerned, was catching me sticking out my tongue at him after he had given me “heck” for some other problem I had caused.

I was fired on the spot, and told I had to be out of the staff house immediately. It was about five p.m. on a January afternoon. I had my backpack but very little money, and no place to sleep. I
walked around the town of Banff with my heavy pack on my back trying to think of what to do. I had about twenty-five dollars in my pocket and it was getting dark and it was cold and I needed to find shelter for the night. That was not enough money to rent a room and I began to feel desperate. I decided to try to find a girl named Sylvie from Quebec whom I had met before Christmas. I liked her and she was still working in Banff at another hotel. I went to that hotel and found out where she lived and at about ten p.m. that night knocked on the door of her staff house and asked if I could sleep there. She looked somewhat dismayed that I had put her on the spot, and stated firmly that I could only stay for one night or she would get in trouble. She found me a place to sleep in the third floor attic space. It was a cold, dirty, empty room with a filthy, stained mattress on the floor. She managed to find an equally filthy sleeping bag, and that night I slept on that mattress, with that stinking sleeping bag over me, homeless, alone, almost penniless, and a long, long way from any of my friends or family. No Charles Dickens or Jane Austen character could be in a worse predicament. Nothing had prepared me for where I found myself at that moment. I believe it was one of the lowest points in my life.

I had an epiphany that night, however. As I lay there, feeling as low as I had ever felt, I believe what emerged was the earlier choice of would I be a victim or would I accept my failure. I suppose I could have lay there feeling like a failure but that is not quite what failure really meant to me. It occurred to me that I had made the choices that found me where I was at that moment. For years I had been skipping from one low-paying job to another and there I was, no job, no place to live, no way to support myself, and no prospects for the future. I was twenty-two years old, much too old I thought, to find myself in such a position. I could clearly see at that moment, why I was there and I realized I had failed myself. I had done very little to further myself or to better my life. I knew I had much more potential than the place I found myself at age twenty-two. Finally, I was honest with myself at that moment as I lay there cold and afraid and said to myself, “What the hell are you doing? You’re too old for this, and you can do a lot better. Get back to Toronto. Go back to school. Get a good job. Get a life. ENOUGH!” To this day, I still have a recurring dream where I am out in Banff, penniless, aimless, trying to get back to Toronto and get my life on track. When I wake up from the dream I am
immensely relieved to find myself in my current life, which came not as result of my willingness to accept my failure but a result of an unwillingness to accept that I was a victim.

The next morning I called Mary in Vancouver “collect”. She had been working for a few months and so I asked her to lend me the one hundred dollars that it cost to take a “sky bus” which was a cheap promotional flight that connected Toronto and Edmonton. I called my Rockton friends, Lorranne and Jeff, who were now living in Toronto and I explained I was in a bad circumstance and could I come and stay with them for a week or two until I got on my feet? They agreed to help me. I spent my last bit of money on a bus ticket to Edmonton. From the Toronto airport I took a bus and the subway to where Lorranne and Jeff had a small one-bedroom apartment. I slept on a mattress in their living room for two weeks and then I moved to another friend’s place for another month, found a job, borrowed some money from yet another friend and paid first and last months’ rent on a room in a condemned building at Bloor and Spadina.

At first opportunity, I enrolled in the University of Toronto’s Woodsworth College. Woodsworth had developed a program (now called the Millie Rotman Shime Academic Bridging Program) to help mature students streamline into university studies. One only had to pass one pre-university course with a B average and could then be accepted to the University of Toronto. Prospective students could choose a pre-university course from several areas such as English, Math, History or Science. Of course, I chose English.

Over the next year, I did my pre-university course, and worked as a receptionist at a high-end car dealership that paid slightly over minimum wage. The job was on only two blocks away from my room on Spadina Avenue and within walking distance to the university. I borrowed some work clothes from Lorranne, managed to pay Mary back and passed the English pre-university course. After a about six months, I was able to leave the room I had rented in a run-down Victorian house, and within less than two years of returning to Toronto, was in university as a full-time student and had secured a very small flat in the High Park area of Toronto. I received a grant and a loan to help pay for living expenses, and partially support me while in school.

For the next four years I worked part-time and sometimes full-time as a switchboard operator, usually on evening or overnight shifts. I struggled with the academic and social aspects of university
while also moving away from my own peer group. I coped with poverty, unhappy relationships with several young men with whom I had nothing in common, and struggled to maintain old friendships with people from Rockton living in Toronto. As time went on and school and work became the focus of my life, I grew further and further apart from them.

The years in university and trying to support myself financially and emotionally were taxing. I felt so incredibly lonely and out of place in the university environment. I met a few people here and there with whom I could identify, but did not find anyone to bond with. I was living a different kind of life than most of my friends, and to them and my family, it must have seemed like I was torturing myself and choosing to make my life even more difficult than it already was. I could not really articulate why I needed to be in university or why I continued on when it was such an incredible struggle. I could not even explain it to myself. It was just another example of knowing what I did not want but not being sure of what I did want. The epiphany I had on the bare mattress in Banff drove me on. My belief that I needed to make changes to better my life did not leave me. Many times though, a lack of a future goal created a loss of momentum and excitement about what I had decided for myself, which at that point was to just finish university. Even that short term goal was difficult to keep in the forefront of my thoughts because I was not fully clear on what would happen after that. What would a degree get me? What kind of life would I have?

What drove me on in those years was a directive that was purely on a sub-conscious level. I had no support from friends or family. Nobody in my world seemed to understand or value what I was doing. Nobody ever asked how school was going, what courses I was taking or even where I was in my studies. When I graduated, no one was aware of it and the event came and went with no acknowledgement or congratulations from my family. Surprisingly, I did not expect that from them either. I myself did not really acknowledge my accomplishment or completion of my B.A.

I think that people in my life were used to me doing what I wanted to do and had stopped asking me “Why?” or “How?” At twenty-five years old, while not always making good decisions about my life, I was autonomous and had been for many, many years. I simply did not consider asking anyone about his or her opinion of what I must do with my life. No one ever asked me to explain, in any great depth, my plans or rationale for the any direction I had chosen. So often I just felt like I was
stumbling along, moving in a direction that was not fully clear to me. I did things, including returning to school, without understanding how that decision was connected to my future. As mentioned, I simply knew I could not continue as I was.

I disliked the school environment as much as I ever had. Unlike elementary and high school though, I did not make a ripple in the classroom. I am sure not one student or one professor or one teacher’s assistant has any recollection of me. I was almost invisible there. Being at the University of Toronto and feeling how I felt about myself inside was a huge disconnect, surreal and dreamlike. There were moments however, that grabbed me and connected me to my deeper self and that were challenging and intellectually stimulating. A few professors took note of some small accomplishment I had made like the professor who seemed genuinely gratified that at least one student in his class knew that the book cover of the novel we were reading was a picture of Botticelli’s Birth of Venus and that I understood the connection between the picture and the tile of the book. I also had a professor who happened to be the leader of the tutorial group I was in and she noted my ability to write a good paper but I was one of two or three hundred students she had in her elective history course and the connection I made with her was only through comments she made on my essays. I had to work harder academically than I ever had before to get passing grades. But unfortunately, my old academic habits still governed my efforts. I only worked hard enough, never putting as much effort into my studies as I could have and never being fully engaged in the classroom. That was very familiar to me and it distressed me and caused more difficulty for me in university than it ever had before. Unlike high school, I wished to do well but had not yet managed to change my study habits. I was also working at two part-time jobs and was stressed physically, emotionally and always, financially.

Just before completing the last year of university, I found a full-time job as a child and youth worker in a group home in [Redacted], in west end Toronto where I still lived. I met my future husband, we moved in together, and for the first time in my life I had some excess cash and could have a decent apartment (no cockroaches), buy some new furniture, and indulge in a few nice prints for the walls. I felt like I was wealthy. For the first time since moving to Toronto, I had some nice clothes, good quality food, money to pay all the bills and a little money to have fun with and to do a bit of travelling. I had a job that I liked and a new husband and within the year, a university degree.
My husband and I left Toronto in 1988, moved to central Ontario, and bought a house. Over the next few years, I worked at a good paying job, but was not really invested in my career. I worked to pay the bills, but did not love the work I did. My marriage began to unravel fairly quickly after leaving Toronto and my husband’s architectural design business collapsed, as did many businesses in the economic recession of the late 1980’s. He struggled to find other work, and I found myself supporting both of us and trying to pay all the bills and credit card debt we had accumulated. After six years we separated and divorced and I stayed there, while he returned to Toronto. I again found myself financially struggling, feeling unfulfilled in a good paying but “soul-sucking” job. I had yet to feel that I was living the life that was a true reflection of the inner “me”. I still was unclear about what I wanted but as always was completely clear on what I did not want.

While not skipping from job to job as I had when I was younger, I felt that I could not continue to live the life I was currently in. My job was mildly interesting but not my vocational calling. I was lonely, empty and reminiscent of earlier times in my life, feeling confused, directionless, trapped and puzzled as to what I should do next. I continued to take courses here and there through the local community college hoping to increase my skills and hoping to find something that would speak to me and give me a direction in life. In the late 1990’s, now in my late thirties, the organization I worked for was downsizing and we were offered exit packages if we chose to leave. Much to the horror of my family and friends, I once again made an abrupt turn, took an incredible risk, and quit my good paying job, trusting that the next step would become apparent to me. Although that behaviour was part of my pattern, I was not quite as fearless as I had been in my earlier days. I realized that I was taking a big risk, but also knew that staying in an unsatisfying job because of fear had never been an option for me. I was very tired with the job I had been at for seven years and was ready for a change. Boredom had always outweighed prudence in weighing “risk” and then making choices and decisions.

The next step came as an offer from the Human Resource Development Canada (HRDC) office. They had a request from a new organization that wished to work in partnership with HRDC to create a position for a “Youth Coordinator”. HRDC would provide employment insurance benefits for one year to that individual who would work for the organization. The goal of that government program was to create jobs. It was expected that the qualifying organization would find funds to pay the
individual’s (my) wages after the year of insurance benefits. I would be earning half the wages I had been earning in my most recent job. I became the director of the youth organization and the manager of the newly created youth drop-in centre. I worked there for five and a half years.

It was during that time that I started working towards a certificate in “Teaching and Training Adults” through the local community college and had an opportunity to teach a family sociology class. I realized immediately that I had finally found something that truly spoke to me and was my vocational calling. It was teaching. While I enjoyed my front-line and administration job in the child and youth work field, teaching fulfilled me like nothing I had ever done before. It is an understatement to say that I found it surprising and ironic. I had never imagined myself in a classroom again, let alone as teacher. I set my sights on working full-time at the college and for the first time in my life, set a clear and defined goal and began to work towards it rather than working away from what I did not want. That goal included obtaining a masters degree because without a masters of “something”, my chances of full-time employment with the college were non-existent.

And so I embarked on the most recent leg of my journey, very inspired by my goal of teaching full-time. Enrolling in another education program was only to fulfill that end goal. At that point, further education was a means to my chosen vocation. I really was not very interested in the educational experience itself. I had not critically examined my struggles throughout my educational evolution and so was not prepared for how working towards a Master of Education would affect me on all levels of my being.

While I was considering further education myself, I was teaching sociology and criminology at the college. As I began to give examples to explain sociological and criminological concepts, I found myself using examples from my own life, both personal examples and experiences of my friends and family. Many of my experiences began to be filtered through that much wider perspective and be closely examined through a sociological, criminological, psychological and cognitive development lenses. As a result, my past experiences began to take on new meaning and became more understandable to me, as I stepped back from their emotional impact, and began to look at them objectively and with the knowledge of those various disciplines.
It was the combination of teaching and being a master’s student that allowed me to step back from my experiences in one respect, but in another, to fully explore those same experiences. In truth, my experiences, defining them, processing them, exploring them, and considering the knowledge I might attain as a result of that, “grabbed” me intellectually. For the first time in my life, I became fully engaged as a student and fully engaged in the process of redefining my educational experiences through my own teacher’s eyes. Along with that shift, I was becoming more engrossed in risk and resilience research as I continued to work at the youth centre with at risk youth. I was at a place where several aspects of my life and experiences converged. I was working with at risk youth, teaching about the societal, familial and individual characteristics that saw individuals “failing” or “succeeding” and was also a student, in a classroom learning about education and the education system from an educator’s perspective. Most importantly, I was an adult who had been a child and youth at risk.

Initially, as I began to analyze my experiences, I tried to categorize my own risk and resiliency characteristics through accepted educational and social definitions and paradigms. I came to understand that while yes, I had some very standard and accepted risk factors in my life as a child and youth, some of what were “accepted” risk factors and even perhaps seen as negative qualities were in fact essential qualities that had helped me survive. I also noted that for me, what was “risk” and what was “resilience” was directly related to the situation, my age, my resources, and other complex variables. The definitions of risk and resilience shifted and were subjective depending on those variables. That subjectivity and interplay of variables in determining risk and resilience became a key focus as I wrote my story and unravelled my personal and educational experiences.

In Chapter Five I will consider my own personal story within the themes identified in the literature review (chapter two). Does my story corroborate those findings? Does my story bring to light other aspects of risk and resilience and the interplay between them in determining academic outcomes? In the summary I will discuss what this process of writing my thesis as a self-study has meant to me. Where do I find my self at the end of this part of my educational journey?
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Discussion of Five Emerging Themes – Does My Story Corroborate Them?

At the beginning of this chapter, I will examine the five themes that emerged in the literature review and determine whether or not my story corroborates the findings in relationship to those themes. In the last half of the chapter, I will examine my own risk and resilience factors with regard to the current literature. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research with children and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes and what this thesis journey has meant to me.

Theme #1- Parental views of education and the degree to which the parent values education will have an effect on academic outcomes. If parents, for whatever reason, are not participating in their child’s education they are unable to provide guidance and direction or establish expectations. When the family places little value on education, children are less motivated to concentrate on school.

I believe my story supports this finding. My parents’ values and family culture did not support the encouragement of children in school or continuing in post secondary education. My parents were essentially simple working class people. It is clear to me that the world they were from and the world I was growing up in were perhaps as far apart as two worlds can be in one lifetime. By the time I was in grade three in 1966 and 1967, my parents, [redacted] and [redacted], had not been in school themselves since the 1930s. They grew up without electricity, telephones or televisions. I was the first of my siblings to be exposed to television from an early age. The world in which I lived and attended school compared to that of my parents was vastly different. My father attended school in a one-room prairie schoolhouse. My mother attended whatever school she lived closest to, as her family moved from place to place in the Hamilton area. My mother was a “Steel Town” street urchin. My father lived on an isolated farm in a remote part of central Saskatchewan. They had met and come together as a result of an economic depression and world war. My life must have seemed pretty good to them, and I must have seemed like a lucky girl with a blessed childhood compared to the childhoods they had experienced.
In regard to my maternal grandmother throwing my mother’s school books out the door and into the back yard, the explanation for that reprehensible act that I heard from my mother and her sisters was that my grandmother was bitter about her own circumstances and lack of opportunity. She had hoped for more in life. Her education had done very little for her, and in her opinion education would do little for her daughters. My mother seemed to take all of that in stride. My mother’s regret was not that she had not gotten more education, but that she had not had more independence and been able to continue working as a single woman. My mother often said that working before she got married was one of the happiest times in her life. School was not important to her, and she never pressured me to do better and later on she did not encourage me to set my sights on college or university. However, there was also no pressure to marry or have children either. Compared to her mother, my mother’s attitude about school and my future was benign. While not encouraging me to set lofty goals, she allowed me my independence and to make my own choices and decisions.

My parents saw that I had many more opportunities in life than they had had and would have seen themselves as much more supportive of me than their parents had been of them. They also would have seen school as a better place than it had been when they were children. Both my parents had spoken of being physically harmed by teachers on a regular basis. My mother had been hit on her knuckles repeatedly and often with a yard stick because she wrote with her left hand.

“The School” was a symbol of authority that people like my parents rarely challenged. It was acknowledged in our household that the law expected you send your children to school and that a truancy officer could come by your home and enforce that law. School was a larger force in my world than it ever had been in theirs. They would have also seen themselves as much more involved in my school life than their parents had ever been with theirs. They would have seen that I was not being harmed at school. I went to school each day and came home in one piece. I passed and got what for them must have been acceptable marks. As home was their business, school was the school’s business, and except for some rather dramatic exceptions, they left that aspect of my life to the educators. Only when my mother chose to let my father know what was
going on in the classroom and they saw what they perceived as some miscarriage of justice and my resulting trauma from a school experience, did they then intervene. And that intervention was not carried out to ensure I did well in school but to stop me from being picked on or treated unfairly. That kind of intervention was carried out by my father and happened only twice, in grade three and five. The reason he intervened was because my mother told him about Mrs. White singling me out in regard to not participating in Centennial year celebrations and Mr. Tucker not allowing me into the grade five choir. Although my father must have known about me getting the strap, he did not intervene because of that. He probably believed I deserved it. Neither of my parents ever approached the school or a teacher because of my grades.

Due to the fact that my siblings were twelve and fifteen years older, they were important examples of how I might be at their age. They were representative of a “possible” young adult life I might aspire to. When I was just starting school, my brother was dropping out of school. My sister was in the process of trying to complete high school but was struggling academically. She failed grade ten and grade twelve before she managed to get her diploma. She never considered university but attended one year of nurses’ college in Hamilton, did very poorly, and stopped attending school after that. She believes she was not given a fair opportunity to get an education. Based on stories told by both my mother and brother and some recollections I have myself of this time in the family’s life, her going to college did seem to cause a great deal of strife. Much later, my mother stated that it was very difficult financially to help pay for her schooling. I believe that my parent’s lack of support for her was also because she insisted on stepping out of what my parents believed were acceptable boundaries for a woman her age. Along with the financial burden on my parents, I suspect that my very traditional father wanted my sister to settle down and get married. My sister stated that my mother was also pressuring her to take a more traditional route but that story contradicts my mother’s own joy in being a working girl. Perhaps my parents were weary of being responsible for my sister and financially supporting her. She was well past the age that they likely expected to have to provide her with financial support. In any case, when my sister dropped out of college it was accompanied by a “There see, we told you “attitude from my parents that still
permeated our family’s attitude towards my sister, [name], almost two decades later when I first heard the details of that time.

I do not think my parents would have thought it necessary to encourage or spend energy or time on a child in school who was passing. It may be that I was doing fine by their standards. From their perspective I continued to do “fine” up until high school. By the time I really started to flounder academically, my father had died and my mother was mourning and adjusting to her new life as a widow and single mother. All through school, for various reasons, my academic performance seemed to be of little concern to anyone, except perhaps some of my teachers.

My parents did believe in hard work if it was about survival and supporting yourself and your family. That was more important than good grades. Once I was old enough to work during the summer, the expectations were clear: “You’re getting a job” my mother told me bluntly and I did get my first non-babysitting type job when I was fifteen. When I got my first full-time job at seventeen, I paid thirty-five dollars a week for room and board and was expected to help out with household needs. For example, my mother insisted that my Aunt [name] (who came back to live with us after my father died) and I pay seventy-five dollars each toward a clothes dryer. My mother was much clearer on how I was to behave as a working person than she had ever been when I was a student. It was surprising that she had such explicit expectations of me as a working person when there were no expectations of me as a student. I believe she understood the working world much better than the world of a student.

My parents’ aspirations for their children never reached the level of a college or university education but were much more basic and about “putting food on the table and a roof over your head” and not “being a bum”. There is no doubt in my mind that my father also believed a woman’s place was in the home. His belief about women was apparent based on his treatment of both my mother and older sister. My future was never discussed. Elementary school, high school, college or university were never discussed. He would have been horrified and then puzzled at the choices I made and the direction I took in my life. Later, I realized that I had had much more freedom to make choices because my father had died. He would never have allowed me to do some of the things I did, specifically, leaving my small hometown at eighteen and moving to
Toronto with my boyfriend. From my perspective, the choice to leave Rockton was one of the best I ever made for myself. I believe he would have found that unacceptable.

My family’s culture in regard to education was that education was important to learn the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. In retrospect, my parents had good foundational skills in these areas considering their low education levels. There was plenty of work around, so when my brother dropped out of school but immediately got a good paying job, they felt that was an acceptable course of action. My sister seems to have pursued schooling long after they wanted her to, being in high school for seven years and then wanting to go to college when clearly they wanted her to settle down, get a job and work until she married. No one ever suggested I had to work hard in school or that I had to stay in school. Had I dropped out but gotten a job, I believe, as with my brother before me, my parents would have been accepting of that.

As documented in Chapter Two, the literature supports that there is a link between low socio-economic class of the family and poor academic outcomes, and my family would appear outwardly to corroborate those findings (Audas & Willms, 2001). As noted by Archangelo (2003) some parents who have little education themselves feel a deep ambivalence towards education and/or hope their children will do better academically than they had. My parents were in no way ashamed of their educational levels. They likely wanted me to do better than they had financially, but did not seem to connect high-income status with higher education. Their lack of encouragement of my academic progress went further than ambivalence and was a reflection of their personal philosophy and work ethic. They had a disregard for the importance of education and exemplified the blue-collar work ethic. My parents were proud of their hard work and what it had given them. Perhaps they were dismissive of the higher class with higher levels of education. I believe that the reality of the life you could lead with a higher paying job that resulted from higher education was an abstract concept to them. As I was growing up, they had no personal examples of what a good education for a person from our class could do for a family, and therefore did not have educational aspirations for us. There was an underlying philosophy that school was not very important except for basic skills. Working hard and bringing home a wage was far more noble.
Looking back, that seems very short sighted on my parents’ part. My parents seemed to live in the moment. My father would happily buy new fishing gear and seem unfazed during a rainstorm when drips from the ceiling filled up several kitchen pots and bowls. When my father died, there were no savings, very little insurance and no money set aside to help my mother finish raising me even though he knew for at least two years prior to his own death that he had a severe heart condition. I believe he would consider me capable of taking care of myself at that age and, in fact, I was. However, after my father died, my mother, who was only fifty years old but without basic job skills, was unemployable except for babysitting. She lived in poverty until she became eligible for government assistance and was able to qualify for subsidized seniors housing.

**Theme #2- There is a well-documented phenomenon of underachieving and lack of motivation in children who have intellectual ability to do well academically. Underachieving in intellectually capable students has been attributed to disengagement, lack of expectations for that child and lowered sense of self-efficacy. Parental involvement and school environment are the most significant predictors of self-efficacy.**

After having thought deeply about my own risk and resilience factors, I question this finding. I do not believe that underachieving and lack of motivation are always about lowered sense of self-efficacy. Does lack of parental involvement also lower self-efficacy? The literature revealed that how a parent interacts with the school would affect the teachers’ view of that child and that children are disadvantaged when the school and their family hold different values (Housser-Cram, et al., 2003). As noted by Levpuscek (2001), lack of involvement and parents’ disconnection from their child’s academic performance may influence that child’s motivational levels. My story corroborates elements of these findings; however, within that understanding of connection between parental involvement and student motivation, lie other interesting possibilities.

It is my contention that not many children would work harder than necessary if there were no reward for doing well and no punishment for doing poorly. In my case, I was only expected to be “good enough” and that is as high a standard as I set for myself and, ultimately I was successful at what I set out to do. What must be noted is that, if I chose to, I could do better and sometimes I did make that choice and then I would set the bar higher. That must have been
detrimental to how I appeared in regard to my level of motivation in the classroom. But setting one’s own bar, whether it is high or low, and reaching a goal one has set for one’s self, is incredibly empowering.

Based on how I was socialized in my family and my family’s attitudes toward education, it is likely the school would view me as an underachiever. I would seem never to be trying hard enough or never reaching my full potential and that would be seen as lack of motivation, laziness, resistance or lack of ability. That belief would be enhanced by my ability to be successful in the areas that were of interest to me. There was often a discrepancy between my highest marks and lowest marks. So, while second, third and fourth grades saw me winning prizes at the town’s autumn fall fairs for best drawn pictures or writing stories that were praised by the teacher, I was failing spelling tests because I had not taken my reader home to practice spelling the words. I was a wizard at fractions but did not have a strong grasp on the multiplication tables because I had not bothered to practise and memorize them.

Academic self-efficacy has been shown to influence academic motivation and learning. The need to be encouraged to do well in school, particularly for girls, was noted by Davey and Jamieson (2003). Parental involvement was found to be the key predictor of academic self-efficacy (Adyemo & Akinlolu, 2005). It is evident that parental encouragement and involvement were lacking in my school life and that affected my academic success from a teacher’s perspective, yet I was never viewed as academically unsuccessful from my parents’ point of view. I never saw myself as academically unsuccessful either because I always did well when I chose to.

It would seem that without parental involvement it was very difficult for me to gauge academic success or failure without extreme indicators; for example, being at the top of the class or a failing grade. If, as in my case, I continued to pass and go on to the next grade it was not until there was a dramatic change in marks in grade three, that I became aware that I was not doing well enough to avoid detection by my teacher or my parents. It was through plummeting grades that I myself became aware of where I stood in my academic performance, and that poor performance was intricately entwined with my poor relationship with my teacher. I believe it was in
that rather difficult grade three year that I began to associate positive and negative academic outcomes with positive or negative relationships with my teachers.

My father calling my teacher to complain about her treatment of me was a very traumatic and perception altering experience for me. I was horrified by what he had done and devastated by the treatment from my teacher. I wanted both to stop. It was with great relief when grade three was finished and in grade four I was promptly moved (without parental intervention) to the advanced grade five reading class. Even at that age I marvelled at how it was possible that I had gone from the bottom of grade three to beyond grade four reading in only a few months. I sensed an “untruth”. I blamed my grade three teacher for putting me at the bottom of the class and attributed my triumphant return to the higher reading level to my grade four teacher. For the most part, I still believe that to be true. I really did not believe my grades had anything to do with those decisions. It was because Mrs. White did not like me and Mrs. Shirley did. Even now, I cannot divorce myself from that conviction.

I believe my grades three and four experiences firmly instilled a rather anti-academic attitude in me as well. I had lost a great deal of trust in my teacher and the fairness of the classroom and had been sent to the bottom of the class in grade three and back to the top in grade four without much effort or changes in how I did work. I had learned two things: it was neither necessary to work hard or wise to not work hard enough. As a result of having gotten too much attention from parents and teachers in grade three, I believe I then made a conscious decision to “fly under the radar”. The literature supports that “underachievers often exhibit low self-concept or low self-perceptions” (McCoach & Siegle, 2001, p. 6). There is an underlying implication that low self-concept is a pre-existing condition that children bring with them to the classroom. If indeed there was an element of that involved in my less than stellar academic performance of grade three, I hold to the belief that it was a result of what had happened to me in school, not something I brought to school with me.

From both a family and school perspective there was simply no reason to work to my full potential or overachieve. Flock and Repetti (2005) state, “Children who are secure and confident in their ability to succeed are likely to put forth the effort to master schoolwork”. My performance
contradicts that statement. I already knew that if I put full effort into any academic activity, I could get a highly successful return. But I believe in order for a child to do that of her own free will, there has to be some reason for that effort. Getting a good mark is highly rewarding for some people. I see that in my college classrooms and any teacher would confirm that to be true. Some students must get good marks and are only satisfied with the very best mark. Learning the material is for the purpose of getting the high mark. They answer questions on tests with every word memorized from their textbook or notes. Those students are not necessarily the happiest or most secure or most autonomous students in the class. They can be anxious perfectionists, wanting affirmation from the teacher. For a number of reasons, academic perfection is their reward. So it must be noted that, while getting a good mark was “ok” for me and even sometimes gratifying, more often I would be surprised at a high mark. A good mark did not feed me or devastate me on deeper levels. Therefore, only rarely did I make an effort to do my best simply to be rewarded with an “A” on my work. My parents were not watching. I would not be rewarded or punished for a mediocre mark. It simply was of no importance to my family or me that I was not a top student. That is a good example of a clash of values between school and family. Those differing values become even more ominous if the school system does not understand or acknowledge the child’s values (Cohen, 1955). In that case, the school assumes the child and the child’s family hold the same values as the school. Whether the child adheres to those values or is made to adhere to those values by their parents becomes the school’s gauge by which to measure a child’s self efficacy, self-concept and academic success. Ultimately, it is my belief that dramatic errors are made in regard to that child’s self-efficacy and self-concept and the child’s desire to “succeed” academically.

If educators assume that children who are not putting forth the effort to master school work are insecure and lacking confidence or, more alarmingly, possess other personality characteristics attributed to underachievers like “unable to persevere”, “laziness”, and “perpetually off task” (Dixon, 1993, p.2), then the true reasons why students are not meeting school expectations are overlooked. Not caring about school or not caring enough is seen as a character flaw or some indicator of dysfunction in both the child and possibly the child’s family. There may
be an assumption that the child understands the importance of school, yet still chooses not to put forth a good effort. There also may be an assumption that the parents see their children doing badly in school and simply do not care. I would suggest that it is important for an educator to check such assumptions and consider whether in fact there is a core belief that a children know why they should be trying their best, or in fact, what it means to try their best. It is also important to determine if the child would value an outcome such as a high mark, if he or she did indeed put forth such effort. There is a paradigm that not putting forth a good effort in school means they are not going to put forth effort in other parts of their lives. Potentially, they will be lazy and off task forever. Aside from my own experiences as a student in the classroom, I have worked with young people who have taken all the labels like “unmotivated” and “underachiever” with them into their adult lives. Those are harsh labels that stick to an individual for a long time. In a small school and a small community, children and their families can get a reputation for not being in line with the school’s expectations. There is further damage done if the child internalizes those labels; then they can truly be self-fulfilling prophecies. Understanding a child’s motivation levels within the context of that child’s life is crucial to helping a child reach full potential. For example, an in-depth discussion with me about what I valued, where I thought it important to put my energy and what truly motivated me to get even passing grades would have revealed a great deal to any adult who might have been interested in enhancing my school performance. Such a discussion never occurred.

Theme #3- Other emotional and psychological problems occurring at home and in the classroom will affect a child’s well being and so will affect academic outcomes. Negative home and school environments due to the psychological health of parents and teachers affect the relationships the child will have with these important adults and potentially decrease academic performance. Next to a positive family environment, a positive school environment is highly important to positive academic outcomes.

As mentioned, there was a concentration of stress and conflict for me both at home and in the classroom in the years 1966 and 1967, the years I was in grade three. As defined by Archangelo (2003) a “social rupture” can occur brought on by a number of stress factors in a
family. While I have stated in earlier chapters there was not a “rupture” or one great event or turning point, grade three did mark a change in my attitude about school and an awareness of negative feelings about school. While my world did not “rupture”, some of its supporting structures crumbled during that time and I created other structures to support myself. In the classroom, my feelings of safety and acceptance had been eroded. That period in my life was the first time I felt uncomfortable, wary, and worried about school. It was the first time I felt disliked by the teacher. It was also the first time that I had been openly shunned by a parent and forbidden to play with her child. The fact that that parent was also my teacher was troubling. My confidence was shaken and my reverence for and trust of my teacher shattered. My trust of other important adult figures in my life was also shaken. The adults around me were angry, violent, emotionally ill or breaching important boundaries with me. I was not being protected by them and in many ways was being harmed by them. Independently, without guidance or nurturance, I was forced to find methods to manage all those issues.

In retrospect, I believe that Mrs. White may have been at a low point in her life too. It could not have been easy being a divorced mother of four in 1966 and 1967. I often wondered how she felt when my father called her on the phone while he was ranting, raving and explosively angry. She was so subdued after that incident. Perhaps that year was the worst one she ever experienced in the classroom as well. I also often wonder why, until grade eight, not one teacher ever sat down with me in a one-on-one conversation and asked what was going on in my life. Did they already know and not have to ask? Did they not care? Was their lack of interest and connection with me a reflection of the times and was it not part of the school culture to talk to students in that way? Was I always “just good enough” and not “bad enough” for a more serious intervention? I suspect that is the answer. I was not unique in any way. I was never the best kid nor the worst, the smartest or in the words we used as children, “the dumbest”. It is apparent to me now, however, that I was caught in the crossfire of adult problems and anxieties combined with a void of adult interventions and support.

With those eroding supports and beliefs, the years 1966 and 1967 encapsulate the most obvious risk factors existing in my life and, in my opinion, also see the emergence of the strongest
resiliency factors because I engineered new supports of my own and took on different attitudes in my effort to cope. All the difficulties that my family had experienced and continued to experience to varying degrees and at different times in our history, culminated in that fairly short span of time. While the risk factors that had existed previously influenced, and continued to influence family life over the years, they peaked both in occurrences and intensity in that period of time. My mother was physically and emotionally unwell and was in the hospital twice during that time for several weeks. My father was highly stressed, aggressive, at times violent, and explosively angry. Both of my siblings were in downward spirals. My brother was drinking and getting in trouble with the police and verbally fighting with my father. My sister was also in constant conflict with my father. She had gone through a few difficult years herself, failing at college and then becoming pregnant and giving up a child for adoption in a time when that had a huge impact on families and was thought to be scandalous and shameful. In my school and social life, I was struggling with a difficult relationship with my teacher, often getting into trouble for my behaviour, getting the strap, struggling academically, and trying to cope with being harassed by a boy I believed would kill me if given the chance. I had been sexually interfered with and left to deal with that on my own. While no one incident was monumental on its own, the culmination of all these factors marks a significant line in time, and my view of school is forever separated into that “before” and “after” year. If I also had to pick a time that marked the transition from naive childhood where one believes the world to be a completely safe place to a stance of wariness and watching one’s own back, it would also be that grade three year. I would suggest that my own coping abilities were also changed. After that period of time, it became my job to look after myself. Some coping skills and personality characteristics that already existed were enhanced by this period of difficulty, and some new resiliency factors emerged at this time as well.

**Themes #4 and #5 – Risk and Resiliency Emerging**

The other two themes that emerged from the literature review relate to risk and resiliency and it is through that perspective that I will continue to discuss my personal and academic experiences. Key issues that emerged from themes 4 and 5 are summarized below:
• Even though many early school leavers have experienced many of the factors that place them at risk for dropping out of school or not reaching their full potential in school, many do eventually return to school due to confidence gained outside the school system. Emotional intelligence would seem to play a role in the development of that confidence (Low & Nelson, 2004).

• Although common risk factors such as low-economic status, inadequate parenting, lack of parental involvement, low academic expectations and aspirations and a peer group with low academic aspirations figure predominately in the literature as reasons for early school leaving, it is also noted that young people who cut their academic career short are not necessarily leading problematic lives (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005).

• There are a multitude of reasons why an early school leaver might choose to leave and then return to school (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005).

• Statistically, women from working-class backgrounds do not often rise to professional levels and particularly in the academy and there are social and emotional repercussions in becoming professionals and leaving their blue-collar status behind them (Miller & Kastberg, 1995).

• The literature reveals that there are many barriers and combination of circumstances that create obstacles to education

  From that premise, understanding those barriers and combination of circumstances is possible through a risk and resiliency lens. However, I wish to again emphasize that the terms “risk” and “resiliency” are wrought with pre-conceived notions and definitions that are culturally influenced. When discussing risk and resiliency in regard to the classroom, the scope of definition becomes much narrower and “resiliency” often falls into what is considered “acceptable” or “conforming” classroom behaviour, and “risk” becomes what can sometimes be defined as “non-conforming” or “unacceptable” behaviour.

  The literature reveals some commonalities in what various disciplines have defined as risk and resiliency factors. As noted in the literature review, it is important to critically view data gathered and theory developed on children and youth at risk, since much of the research
conducted started from largely unchallenged views of what “normal”, “healthy”, “acceptable” and “desirable” were. And from that accepted and unchallenged criteria, come unchallenged and accepted definitions of risk, resiliency, success, failure, and positive and negative outcomes.

An example of unchallenged views occurs previously in this discussion. My family culture did not instill in me a desire to do my best in school. Doing my best would not have rewarded me in a way that had value for me. At most, I would have done only what was required to avoid failing because failing was of concern to me. My academic pattern reveals that if I was engaged and interested in the topic or project, I would complete it with enthusiasm, which would then result in a positive academic outcome. However, I would not work diligently on an assignment only to get a “good” mark, as a good mark had no intrinsic value to me. While the literature did not reveal a direct connection between good marks and poor marks and risk and resiliency factors, it is my understanding that risk or success in the classroom is largely determined by academic performance. I would have been labelled according to the educator’s belief of what my marks indicated and that might have varied from teacher to teacher. One teacher might see my poor performance as lack of ability. Another might see it as lack of motivation and effort. But to truly understand what my performance was about, an educator would have to understand my perception of it. Was it truly a lack of effort or some prioritization system that was working well for me? Was it understandable, given what I considered important or not important? If my performance was filtered through socially created definitions of risk and resiliency, I might not be faring well in the teacher’s view. If it was viewed within the context of my life and my perceptions, I might be considered a success in what I set out to accomplish, which was to cope and pass.

I believe that is a noteworthy point in the risk and resiliency discussion and one that is corroborated by my story. It is important to ask, what presenting risk factors of any child/youth could be viewed differently if more closely examined within the context of that individual’s life? What does the manifesting behaviour mean in concert with a child’s socialization, values, coping strategies and that child’s desired outcome? What does negative behaviour mean to a teacher in relationship to what that negative behaviour means to the student or how that student uses that behaviour to cope in other parts of his or her life?
**Reframing the Risk and Resiliency Paradigm**

In the early stages of my review of the literature, I explored what intrinsic and extrinsic factors may have existed to see me as a child and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes. In later stages of the literature review, I explored the concepts of risk and resiliency and how they played out in my experiences in school and home. Initially, I was averse to filtering my story through the risk/resiliency paradigm for several reasons. On a very deep level, the explanation I had arrived at for me “succeeding” in spite of all the risk factors presenting in my life left some elements of my experience unexamined and unexplained. Weighing of risk and resiliency factors in my life could possibly explain how I went on to complete post-secondary education; however, it required me to take an “at-risk victim of circumstance” perspective regarding my own experiences. Even though the literature supported that I was at risk for poor academic outcomes due to several intrinsic and extrinsic factors, including, to some degree, an education system that did not recognize its potential to intervene on my behalf, my feeling never was, “I was at-risk and you didn’t help me”. Rather it was “You did not acknowledge the strengths I possessed and accept me”.

In an initial thesis proposal I entitled it “Dark Horse- Being at Risk for Poor Academic Outcomes and Overcoming the Odds”. That title reflected an earlier view I had of my education experience. According to the literature, I had been a child and youth at risk who overcame the odds (or risk factors) and succeeded. I was quite taken with the metaphor and was resistant to giving up that perspective. However, as I began an indepth review of risk and resilience literature, it began to become obvious to me that I was not fully accepting of the definitions of risk and resilience I was finding in that research. For example, aspects of my personality, my behaviour, my attitude, my choices and my outcomes that were considered “risky” or detrimental to my success, I valued. Some of the qualities I possessed or behaviours I exhibited as a child under the risk category were now, as an adult, contributing to my success! If I were to accept those risk and resiliency definitions, I would be forced to squeeze parts of my story into that small box.

The literature review for *Dark Horse* very neatly categorized good and bad, vulnerable and resilient, protective and destructive factors in accepted categories but it did not completely ring
true for who I was, why I did what I did, how I felt about what was supposed to be the good, bad and ugly aspects of my personality and my experiences in my life. While all of what I learned from the five emerging themes examined in that research effort was valid, in relationship to my story, the information I had gathered was incomplete and failed to explain some important experiences and how they truly affected me. There was more to my story than a child and youth with a list of identified and well-researched risk and resiliency factors whose positive resiliency factors outweighed the risk and therefore were now responsible for a positive outcome.

According to a large body of the literature, risk increased my potential to lose, and resiliency increased my chance of “winning”. What created a discord for me is that, at the times risk and resiliency theory would have seen me losing, I did not feel that way about myself. Getting to a place (i.e., writing a master’s thesis) where I now was engaging in behaviour that would be considered positive and winning had nothing to do with my desire to be a winner in the conventional view of winning. Yes, I was a “Dark Horse”, not expected to reach the finish line (what finish line?) and come out ahead (compared to who?) and to all outward appearances, I had unexpectedly won the race. Being a dark horse was an interesting concept and a creative metaphor but it failed to fully explain my experience, or as I have stated earlier, reflect my experiences in the context of my life.

In seeking to understand my own risk and resiliency factors, I initially turned to accepted theories about why my behaviour might be considered negative. As mentioned, it is not difficult to find a massive amount of literature that speaks of socio-economic status, negative parental attitudes, association with negative peers, poor academic aptitude and performance, and negative student/teacher relationships as factors contributing to poor academic outcomes and early school leaving. What I began to understand was that if I was to embrace the accepted factors that contribute to risk and resiliency I would have to dismiss elements of my own success and failure. Parts of my history would have no explanation or would not or could not be acknowledged. While the dark horse perspective made sense from the accepted risk and resiliency definitions perspective, for me that perspective no longer rang true. Quite frankly, I now find it shocking that I tried to squeeze my experience into those established parameters. But I believe that is part of the
price one pays for “success” as we define it culturally or through a risk and resiliency paradigm. Success is very much about conformity and social acceptance. Our ideas of success and what we believe we must do to be successful are socially constructed.

How can I use the social definition of success to describe myself now and not also explain my past experiences in the context of the accepted social definitions of deviant, negative, or risky? That conundrum is easily explained by simply examining the socialization process and our societal hierarchy. The voice of youth at risk (and youth in general) and their perceptions of their lives are for the most part often unheard, or not taken seriously. It is my opinion that the voices of non-conforming, marginalized, and what are viewed as deviant and outcast adults (criminals, or the mentally ill for example), are also largely unheard and their perspectives unacknowledged, underrepresented and misrepresented. As adults, we forget our own youthful attitudes and perceptions and view all our experiences through our adult eyes. “What we define as deviance is a product of our time and the way we think about youth” (Foucault, as cited in Ungar, 2002, p. 27). That is true in regard to any youth/adult continuum. The discrepancies in definitions and ability to tell a true story of childhood and adolescence may become more difficult in a youth at-risk/adult continuum; hence, the need to challenge accepted definitions of risk and resiliency as well as success and failure. “Context” and “construct” become important elements in further research into risk and resiliency.

Reframing My Risk and Resiliency Factors – A Personal Perspective

I wish to simplify the direction I have taken in the analysis of my story by categorizing the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that existed in my life from a traditional view of what risk and resiliency are. I then wish to critically examine how those factors actually manifested in my life. I have included factors existing in adolescent and teen years, as these later-presenting risk and resiliency factors will be also be discussed in this chapter.

Risk Factors

- Family low socio-economic status
- Family attitudes toward education
- Psychological health of mother (substance abuse)
- Family stress/dysfunction
- Lack of parental involvement in my schooling
- Lack of parenting/protection
- Sexual interference
- Negative relationship with teachers
- Missing large number of days of school
- Personality characteristics and behaviours that included lack of motivation, talkativeness, disruptiveness, easily bored, restlessness, underachieving, lack of effort, unwillingness to do homework, lack of respect/disdain for teachers, disrespect for authority
- Risk taking
- Use of alcohol and drugs
- Risky sexual behaviour
- Peer group’s attitudes towards school
- Lack of opportunity for further education

**Resiliency Factors**

- Good reading and language skills
- Voracious reader
- Intelligent
- Good social skills
- Independent
- Confident
- Understanding boundaries and limits (understanding of how to “conform”)
- Desire to pass each grade
- Ability to pass each grade with little effort
- Peer group attitudes towards education
- Tenacity
- Watcher, recorder, analyzer of surroundings
- Self-analytical
Able to take care of self

**Family Low-Socioeconomic Status and Attitudes Towards Education**

I do not believe my family's economic status put me at risk. As a stand-alone risk factor, it is too general a description to be considered in regard to risk factors facing children and youth and in fact lends to the stereotype that *low income* is one and the same as *low functioning* of the family. Abject poverty will have an effect on a child's outcome, but my family was not abjectly poor and, therefore, I do not see my family's income level as having an effect on my risk and resiliency factors. In fact, my blue-collar work ethic, which I consider a resiliency factor, comes from that financial status. It is significant that a family strength, the blue-collar work ethic, may have contributed to the family devaluing education. On one hand I was taught to work hard to put food on the table and a roof over my head but working hard in school was not important because in my whole extended family, there were no examples of individuals supporting themselves through a higher education pathway.

**Psychological Health of Mother, Lack of Parenting, Family Stress, Family Dynamics**

My mother's psychological health undoubtedly affected her ability to parent. In numerous discussions with my siblings, it has become apparent to me that my parents were in much different places in their lives when I was a child than when my brother and sister were children. In some ways my parents were more actively involved in my siblings' lives because they all lived on a farm together and worked, played, ate and even attended school in a much smaller realm. The family was more tightly knit and dependent on each other. My father transported all the farm kids to the one room schoolhouse. My siblings worked with both my parents to keep the farm running. My family actually experienced its own small urbanization phenomenon, going from a mutually dependent farm family to a traditional post-industrial family with the father away at work and the mother completely in charge of the child rearing. I believe going from a farm family to a traditional urban family had a negative impact on all of them (McDaniel, 2000).

My understanding is that my father was an intimidating influence in my siblings' lives. My brother and sister still talk of my father as a violent and a person to be feared. My brother talks of numerous beatings my father gave the farm animals and, in fact, he punched my brother as a way
to try to control his later behaviours. My sister remembers him as raging and is still very sensitive to angry voices, becoming fearful and timid. My father was not as influential in my life and I saw those explosions of violence only a few times. They were never directed at me. By the time I was in school, we were living in town, my father was working a day job and all the parenting was left to my mother. Even in her decreasing mental health, she spent much more time in a nurturing role with me than she had with my siblings (and without my father’s influence). I do believe she read to me as much as she later told me she did because she had the time and, when she was emotionally present, I was really the centre of her world. Although at times she was not protecting me in the way she should have, I was always secure in her love and adoration of me. I believe that this combination of unconditional love with times of severe lack of parenting fostered a very strong independence in me. My mother’s poor physical and psychological health often left me on my own, but that combined with my security in her acceptance of me, was, in my opinion, a perfect mix to produce a very confident and independent child. I do not disagree that in many cases, had the lack of parenting been any more acute or prolonged, it could have resulted in some very serious repercussions for my emotional health. However, I believe that there was a precarious balance of neglect and love that created personality traits that ultimately kept me safe.

What has become apparent to me in my research is that some unique combinations of events and factors created new resilience in me. My parents’ lack of involvement in aspects of my life or lack of parenting, in fact, created an opportunity for me to develop independence. All the stress, chaos and dysfunction in the family, clear examples of risk factors, created coping abilities that served me well at the time and later in life. In reviewing the literature, there did not seem to be an emphasis that resiliency can be created by trying to cope with risk but rather that a child/youth already has resiliency characteristics; i.e., a trait or ability that counterbalances the effects of risk when the risk manifests in the individual’s life. It is my contention that, in my case, those high-risk circumstances and factors enhanced elements of my resiliency and in some cases, gave birth to resiliency characteristics. Another aspect of that dynamic is that characteristics that would not have been seen as strength or resiliency, by teachers or parents, in fact were protective factors lending me strength in times of difficulty.
**Can Risk Create Resiliency?**

It would be counterproductive and potentially harmful to a child/youth with many risk factors in their life to view risk as the fertile ground in which to develop resilience. Risk factors are inherently negative and traumatic for a child but may still be the source of the emergence of resiliency traits. Currently, as a teacher of risk and resiliency concepts, I talk about the need to separate the risk from the resilience and help children and youth “reframe” their experiences (McWhirter, et al., 2004). The strengths that resilient children possess are strengths that belong to *them* but may have developed as a result of having to deal with difficult circumstances. In my opinion, there are likely some basic characteristics that resilient children possesses such as problem solving ability, but with that basic trait, children can grow their own crop of coping behaviours and attitudes. In order to identify and foster resilience in children and youth, we may be forced to look beyond the negative behaviour and attitude (risk) to determine what positive result (resilience) it reaps for the individual (Ungar, 2002).

One of the incidences I experienced with my friend’s grandfather, Bobo, could have potentially been very damaging had he been more aggressive and hurtful or had I been less confident and feisty. Fortunately, the incident was within my child ability to handle, and I believe instilled a belief (perhaps mistakenly so) that at age seven or eight I was protecting myself. While it may not have been true at the time, there was no further trauma to shake the belief that I was capable of standing up for myself and, in fact, as I grew older, I truly was able to stand up for myself. I believe that Bobo was likely sexually abusing my friend Shelly and her sister Carol and perhaps had even abused his own daughter, the almost invisible alcoholic mother of the girls.

I must admit that, for many years, the thought of my mother not taking immediate action against that man and also asking me not to tell my father infuriated me. But, as mentioned earlier, that incident rather than traumatizing me and making me feel victimized and ashamed, as is often the case in sexual interference and molestation, empowered me. By her lack of involvement and unwillingness to involve anyone else, it left protecting myself up to me. I do not know if she really had complete confidence that I would be successful in stopping him from molesting me. Could she have been so sure? She was so overprotective of me in other ways, but she allowed me to go
back into a house with an adult who was sexual with little girls. That is an example of how lax her parenting could be at times. Yet she told me what to say to him and gave me permission to not be nice, and it worked. Who knows exactly why he chose not to interfere with me again but in my child mind, I had taken matters into my own hands, and I believed I had succeeded in controlling that adult. As mentioned, believing that it was true, made it become true. I never doubted my ability to take care of myself. That rather horrifying event enhanced an already strong sense of self-efficacy.

Another incident that occurred around the same time was me threatening Shelly’s older sister Carol with my umbrella. Again, out of pure fear and an unwillingness to be grabbed from behind, I intimidated a bullying girl who was at least a foot taller than me, and somehow managed to convince her that I truly would stab her with my umbrella. I have no idea how I could muster that much bravery because I was very frightened at the time. I suppose, at a very basic level of “fight” or “flight” also known as the “acute stress response” (Canon, 1927), I was a fighter. Is that another trait that prevails in resilient children? Is it possible that the foundational traits of resilient children are primal, psychological and perhaps biochemical responses to stress? That is another consideration for further research.

The third incident that I believe defined how I would behave in threatening and/or stressful situations occurred with the boy Johnny of the Four Mean J’s. He terrorized me for an entire school year and, finally, on the day he caught me, all I got was a little punch in the arm, a much less horrible fate than I had anticipated which was being beaten to a bloody pulp. I realized that the bluster and aggression that was being displayed by him might not be coming from a truly angry, violent place. In those three events I learned that how you behaved could protect you and deflect danger away from you. It could make people afraid of you (as I was of Johnny) and you could make someone believe you meant something you truly, deep inside, did not really feel.

In later years when I felt disliked or even threatened by teachers, I believe it was those lessons that, while initially creating a resilient coping ability at the time they occurred, began to be viewed as a risk factor by my teachers and the school. Defying adults, not letting them see they affected me, not backing down from their challenges and insults, did not elevate me in the
classroom. I found myself labelled as a “problem student” even though I never wanted to be disliked by my teachers. I simply did not want to be oppressed by them. I think I now understand how they must have viewed me when I pretended I did not care what they thought of me. As I perceived their dislike of me, my façade of nonchalant disinterest or mildly belligerent disdain further increased and, of course, so did their dislike of me. That increased my wariness and negative reactions toward them. It was a pattern that destroyed many relationships with teachers. I would not back down from the growing tension. Had I backed down, it would have been the same as continuing to run with Carol’s hand ready to clamp down on my shoulder. It was better to stand and fight. That is one example of how differing events, perceptions and attitudes can change what defines risk and resiliency. Risk fostered the resiliency, and then that resiliency again manifested as risk. In my case, it seems the definitions of and lines between the two concepts were ever changing and shifting.

I do not believe that those shifting, blurry boundaries of risk and resiliency are true for everyone who has been at risk and displayed characteristics of resiliency. I do not wish to convey that good comes out of difficulty or that children or youth at risk would, or should, become strong and capable as a result of such difficulty existing in their lives. It is my opinion that there is always scarring and other negative effects from negative experiences. However, a coping mechanism is a buffer between the negative experience and the negative outcome. I do carry psychological scars from some of the experiences I have described, which I mitigate intellectually. I do have strengths as a result of those difficult events. What I have come to understand is that what protected me at one point in my life created difficulty at another. The “toughness” or “belligerence” with which I stood up to Bobo, and therefore protected myself, had an opposite effect in the classroom. I was, in fact, behaving inappropriately for a classroom environment. The goal of any adult wishing to foster resiliency in children and youth should be to try to see those negative attitudes and behaviours the child or youth is displaying as possible strengths. Educators must make an effort to consider not just positive qualities and traits when determining a child’s strength. Strength and resilience might be found in the toughness and belligerence.
**Risk, Resiliency and Relationships With Teachers**

Bonnie Benard (1997) discussed the possibility that we can all be “turnaround” teachers and that there are ways that a teacher can “tip the scale from risk to resilience” (p. 2). In my educational life, I refer to “oasis” teachers who, while not necessarily turning my life around certainly gave me a safe, restorative place to be for a period of time. I do believe it is possible for a teacher to have a profound effect on a child, both positively and negatively. Benard lists resilience skills as being “the ability to form relationships (social competence), to problem-solve (metacognition), to develop a sense of identity (autonomy), and to plan and hope (a sense of purpose and future)” (p. 1). I wish to restate that it is important to look for such skills in the negative and non-conforming behaviour of the problem student. For example, the gang leader may have excellent social skills and leadership abilities within his peer group. Although he is part of a youth gang, and perhaps anti-social in a conventional sense, he is a leader nevertheless.

In regard to my ongoing struggles with teachers and the relationships I had with them, at times I had to reject their opinion of me in order to sustain a strong inner core, my sense of self-worth and my confidence. As an adolescent and teen, I was caught in a pattern that was pulling me further and further away from an educational path. However, much of that behaviour and that tough, mocking, disrupting brattiness was a façade. In retrospect, I believe that façade was protecting me from a terrible conflict that was occurring internally. While I may not have respected good grades, my teachers, the school culture, or the education system, I realize now I had a deep respect for knowledge and knew on some level knowledge, and ultimately an education, was my ticket out of that life, that persona and the world of Chip. I believe that I was as much of an impostor then as I later felt when I was a university and graduate student. As a youth, I wanted to be intelligent. I wanted to be educated. I do not believe I ever would have chosen to be a student disliked by her teachers. The only connection I had to believing I had a place in the classroom was through my relationships with my teachers. It had always been that way, and as that connection grew more tenuous, so did my sense of “place” in that environment. Finally, I could not be in a classroom at all and my place there was lost on an emotional and psychological level.
That is what I was grappling with when my thirst for knowledge and a desire to be educated thrust me back into a classroom where, again, I felt threatened and like an alien, as if I did not belong. It makes sense that Chip then emerged to toughen me up “belligerent-ize” me if you will, and get me through it. At the beginning of the writing of this thesis, I never would have believed that my teachers were so important to me or that their opinion of me was vital to my ability to be in a classroom. It is my opinion that the relationship young people have with their teacher is paramount in cases like mine, when the teacher may be the only educated adult the child knows and the only reflection children have of themselves as a student.

My oasis teachers created a place where I could, for the duration of the school year, relax and feel safe. Such teachers did not have to do anything outwardly helpful; they simply had to refrain from making me aware of negative feelings they might have towards me or that I needed to defend myself. Giving me the impression they might like me went a long, long way with me. In my particular case, my grade three experience and the realization that my teacher did not like me threatened the resiliency factors I was using to help me deal with all the other issues occurring in my life. Students’ relationships with their teachers occur on an emotional level. Sadness and sickness of heart results from someone you hold in high esteem letting it be known that she dislikes you. It can potentially be the most devastating thing a child can experience even as they float in a sea of other negative experiences and feelings. A teacher can become a resiliency factor in a child’s or youth’s life.

**Emotional Intelligence as Resilience**

It is at this juncture that I wish to speculate as to why I did finish high school and go on to post-secondary education. I believe, at some point, I was able to separate “school” from “learning” even though I had not yet truly come to understand how much I valued knowledge and obtaining an education. That is a realization that has occurred only in the last few years. I had done a great deal of learning through my life experiences and through the books I chose to read. In fact, I would argue that life and literature, art and music were my true educators and that I found a love of learning and had a thirst for knowledge in spite of my school experiences.
As the literature suggests, emotional intelligence plays an important part in success outside the school environment. As stated in chapter two, it is my opinion that emotional intelligence is what also allows an early school leaver to return for further education. As Davey and Jamison’s 2005 study revealed, a growing self-confidence and self-efficacy gained outside the education system tended to change the study’s participants’ view of their ability to succeed in secondary education. I believe my story supports this finding.

In his book, *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), Daniel Goleman began his book with a quote from Aristotle that Goleman then incorporated into his definition of emotional intelligence: “Anyone can become angry –that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way –this is not easy” (Aristotle as cited by Goleman, p. ix). While I may have doubted my intelligence quotient (I. Q) often in my life, I have never doubted or failed to appreciate my emotional intelligence, (E. Q) even in an environment like school where I. Q is highly valued. I believe I always understood the difference between I.Q. and E. Q. and knew instinctively that classmates, while successful academically, might struggle socially. If I had had to choose, I would have chosen academic struggle over social struggle. In fact I did choose that. While getting good grades were not important to me then, getting along with others was always a highly important part of my life.

Goleman indicated E.Q. was not as highly valued in the education system as I.Q. and Howard Gardner introduced us to the notion that there were different kinds of intelligences but some were more highly regarded than others. In his 1983 book *Frames of Mind*, Gardner suggested that educators must value all kinds of intelligence and knowing. He urged the field of education to consider other ways that children could be successful aside from excelling in the field of education itself. He stated,

…we subject everyone to an education where, if you succeed, you will be best suited to be a college professor. And we evaluate everyone along the way according to whether they meet that narrow standard of success…There are hundreds and hundreds of ways to succeed, and many, many different abilities that will help you get there. (p. 37)

In spite of what teachers may have expected of me academically, my
feelings of worthiness and success came from social and interpersonal activities as well as creative, intrapersonal pursuits. Goleman refers to Solvay and Mayer’s categorization and definition of emotional intelligence.

1. **Knowing one’s emotions.** Self-awareness — recognizing a feeling as it happens — is the keystone of emotional intelligence.

2. **Managing emotions.** Handling feelings so they are appropriate is an ability that builds on self-awareness.

3. **Motivating oneself.** Emotional self-control — delaying gratification and stifling impulsiveness — underlies accomplishments of every sort.

4. **Recognizing emotions in others.** Empathy, another ability that builds on emotional self-awareness, is the fundamental “people skill.”

5. **Handling relationships.** The art of relationships is, in large part, skill in managing emotions in others (p. 43.)

In one respect, my parents’ lack of encouragement and expectations regarding my progress in school saw me doing as little as possible to get by, aside from avoiding the most severe repercussion that, even at a young age, I knew should be avoided; i.e., failing my grade and not advancing with my peer group. In another respect, their parenting of me was also about lack of pressure and lack of expectation about what I could or could not do. I had total freedom to choose my own future, pursue my own passions, make mistakes and pick up the pieces of my life afterward. In my opinion, that environment void of parental influence was ripe for the development of emotional intelligence and independence. Again, what I refer to here is self-efficacy and in my opinion, it was self-efficacy and my emotional intelligence that motivated me to return to school.

Once there, what I had learned about motivation between high school and beginning university helped me to get to school, read the books, and write the papers. I will admit that even in university, I only mustered up enough motivation to get by academically, but it was enough to graduate. In the fifteen years between university and beginning graduate studies, I learned a great deal more about motivation, as my blue collar work ethic, while never present in the elementary
and high school classroom, had exerted itself in my professional life and served me well in graduate school.

I considered myself well equipped to complete the Master of Education program even if I was somewhat fearful about my intellectual ability. That anxiety was alleviated when I started to receive good marks on papers and assignments. I discovered fairly quickly that marks had become very important to me! So while I had the motivation and intellect to do the work required for a master’s degree, once I got there, shockingly, it was emotional and psychological issues that threatened my success. After the long and challenging road to get to that stage, how could something like anxiety and anger thwart my educational goal? I was absolutely astounded that my success had nothing to do with ability or willingness but with my sense of place, or rather lack of place, in the classroom.

**The Truth of Being an Impostor**

About half way through the program in a research methods course there was a pivotal moment when I was working with a group of fellow students on an exercise in understanding ethnography. One particularly socially conscious classmate commented that it would be difficult for us to determine what issues might be occurring with the participants in the story we were looking at (The Three Little Pigs) as we were analyzing everything through our white middle or upper-middle class perspectives. I thought that was partly true, because I am white, but I realized that might be where the similarity ended. While I could consciously change my lens, for the most part, my blue-collar background largely influenced the way in which I viewed the world.

Through all my courses at the master’s level, I had been observing teachers speaking candidly about their perspectives, their experiences and their attitudes toward education and their students. I had at least become conscious of what I called the blue-collar chip that sat on my shoulder and had learned to challenge my anger and resentment towards the group that was, I believed, very representative of the teachers I had had as a child and youth. I confided to a woman who I worked with and who was also working towards her masters in education at Nipissing that I felt like a spy, an outside observer, an impostor and that I did not belong there and never would! Being a good friend and a good teacher, she challenged my perception and as a
proclaimed closet anthropologist and part-time sociologist, I too begin to challenge my perspective of myself as a master’s student. As the article by Miller & Kastberg (1995) reveals, that is a common pattern for women who have come from a blue-collar background and are now involved and employed in higher education.

In regard to feeling like an impostor or outsider in the academy, I refer back to my discussion about creating a “place” where future potential lives in a child’s or youth’s mind. Again, recognized risk factors, i.e., parental low education, low expectations of me and lack of encouragement to continue on in post-secondary education while contributing to difficulties in elementary and high school, were only a part of why I struggled so much in university and again in the masters program. The struggle at those higher levels of education was about my sense of my place in those environments.

I believe there was opportunity in elementary and high school for creating the idea of future education for me even though I presented as an individual who might not even make it through high school. I believe that my intelligence level was high enough that I would have seemed capable of going on to post-secondary education albeit, my behaviours and performance might make that seem unlikely. It the 1950’s and 1960’s when I was in my formative years and in the education system, one can assume that although blue-collar kids did go on to post-secondary education, the evidence that they would be doing so would be in their academic performance. They would be the kids for whom college or university was not affordable for their family but they were so strong academically and were so clear in their own intent to go to on to post-secondary education that their breaking away from their lower economic class was anticipated. They had already announced their intentions by the amount of time and work they were putting into their studies. Perhaps these children did get encouragement from teachers to look to the future and more education for themselves.

However, a child and youth such as myself, from a blue collar environment, not putting much effort into school, and as I reached adolescence, disdainful of the teachers and the system, might be thought to be taking the same path as my parents before me –minimally educated and minimally skilled in the job force and perhaps not having an interest in doing anything else. To my
teachers, it may have been apparent that I did not care about school or education and therefore never would. Perhaps that is why a teacher or guidance counsellor never spoke to me about it. Once I was past high school, I simply had no place created in my mind to hold an idea that I could be a post-secondary student. And so, when I arrived there, I could not find my place in that classroom psychologically or emotionally. I believe that as a way of coping with that discomfort and disappointment, Chip took the wheel and allowed me to perceive some threat, oppression, or judgement to explain why I did not fit in.

There were few experiences that occurred in elementary and high school that facilitated my returning to university to do an undergraduate degree at the age of twenty-five. One teacher had indicated through a paper I had written for my boyfriend that I had good writing skills. Another teacher commented several years after I had graduated from high school that it was a pity I had not gone on to university because I was “brilliant”. While some children have a place in their psyche to consider going on to post-secondary education, i.e., their parents talk about it, plan for it, expect it of their children, or their teachers remind them that they are capable of more than what they are producing, there was no such place made for me by my parents, older siblings, teachers or the education system.

When I returned to university for my undergraduate degree, I believed I was in fact going against the grain, and even in earlier parts of this thesis talk about how contrary such a move was to who I really was. Rather than seeing the belligerent underachiever as the impostor and as a façade, I believed the university student was the impostor! I went to university fighting and kicking and truly acting like an alien that did not belong there. All of that negative energy was poor fuel to carry me through that huge undertaking. By the time I was finished university, I truly was finished – all that fuel that still manifested as anger and disdain had been burned and I just wanted to get on with my life, which I did, “qualified” with my “piece of paper” to start doing the interesting kinds of jobs that fed my mind and spirit.

Summary

In looking back now at the beginning of my post-graduate education journey, I realize that, compared to starting my undergraduate studies, I was somewhat better prepared for the post-
graduate experience, particularly from a motivation and work ethic point of view. However, I had
not identified and certainly had not resolved the deeper and more relevant issues that contributed
to my academic difficulties in the past. When I walked into my first Master of Education course, I
was full of hope and anticipation. I became distressed when, once again, I felt like an outsider.

Now I have told the story and here I am, back to the beginning of my journey when I
decided to pursue a Master of Education. In the writing of this story and in the analysis of it, I have
changed and am not at the same place as when I began. A great deal has shifted in the
processing and dissection of my educational experiences. I am no longer angry with my parents
for not encouraging me in school or for not planning for my future education. I understand how
much they did do, given their own educational experiences in combination with their parenting
abilities. I have not completely resolved issues with my siblings who are blasé in regard to what I
am attempting to accomplish. On the other hand, I recognize there likely will never be anyone in
my family who, to my satisfaction, acknowledges where I am and what I have done academically
and I must embrace the concept of “context” and what it means to others in my family in the
context of their lives. And for the final part of my journey, I must come to the full realization that
this journey is one I was meant to walk alone. At the end of it is still just me, as it always has been.

In the beginning of writing about my educational experiences, I wanted the thesis to be
about questioning my struggles in the academy and ultimately finding my place there but
something else has happened as a result of choosing this topic, methodology and through the
research I have conducted on risk and resiliency. I no longer feel as if I do not belong. However,
rather than feeling I do belong, I have arrived at a place where “belonging” has lost meaning. It
was never about belonging in the classroom or in the academy. It was about calling out Chip, who
truly was the impostor. On a deep, profound level, Chip was not who I was or ever had been. She
was an angry and fearful girl who did not understand her place in this world. My role and Chip’s
have been reversed. She no longer has to protect me from a perceived threat. Furthermore, I will
embrace her and protect her as she is my younger, wounded self. The two voices with which I
spoke of this experience, the blue-collar girl and the member of the academy, have become one.
Recommendations for Future Research

Study of risk, resiliency, social constructs and context would further our understanding of the subtleties and complexity of internal and external factors and how they interact and interconnect in a child’s or youth’s life. How risk and resiliency manifest in personal lives as opposed to the classroom also warrants further study as it is my contention that, in my case, what was resiliency in my personal life was at times, labelled as risk in the classroom and that, in essence factors that were considered risky were, in some cases, the foundations of my resilience.

I would be hesitant to interview children and youth who have internalized the label of being problematic students, as they have not yet developed the cognitive abilities to critically examine the labels and whether they have been impacted by those labels. It would be enlightening to develop a questionnaire that could list an abundance of traits and how they manifest in the family, peer group, and classroom and determine if some traits that are positive in one realm are seen as negative in another. For example, how do independence, self-advocacy, motivation, focus, verbal abilities, conformity, non-conformity manifest in those various settings? Does being a leader in some peer groups also manifest as challenging authority in the classroom and so become seen as positive in one respect and negative in another, for example?

Interviewing adults who may have been early school leavers as a result of a number of risk factors may provide a deeper insight as to how they may have changed those risk factors or reframed them so that what were once risk factors became strengths and resources that supported them as adult learners. Essentially, we do not change who we are, but in fact may find ways as we grow older to harness intrinsic and extrinsic factors to better suit our needs and goals. In such cases, we may have to reframe key elements of our character and personality to live as functioning adults. If we have set goals for ourselves outside of expectations (our own and others’), that reframing and redefining might be a very complex process but necessary to see us achieving what we desire. Lastly, is reaching “full potential” simply about making a “place” for the child in their psyche that allows them at some later time in their lives to move to that place of potential? Could relationships and connection with a teacher enhance the creation of that place?
Is there room in our elementary and high school systems to teach the meaning of potential and to
identify strengths and abilities outside of academic expectations that might someday be the path to that individual's success?

In regard to the methodology of self-study and personal history, I believe that the more stories we tell and hear, the more we increase our chances of understanding a phenomenon that transcends individual experiences. The experiences of children who fall through the cracks in our education system must be heard. Individually they tell a story of one. Collectively, they explain an element of our society and, in particular, flaws that exist in our education system. A collective voice is the catalyst for social change. So we must bring the voices together. When the volume of stories continues to grow and overlap and substantiate each other, other truths are allowed to emerge.

**Where Has This Journey Taken Me?**

Aside from the internal processes that have occurred and, most importantly, the integration of my two internal voices, where has this journey taken me? What does it mean for my own teacher practice? A few weeks ago, my colleague asked me to take his research methods course, as he had to be away. We talked about what I could do to bring something interesting to the child and youth worker students about research and we decided I would bring in my methodology chapter and talk about self-study. I raised points about self-study and personal narratives, that were pertinent to child and youth work, emphasising the issues I discussed in the previous paragraph; that is, the need to hear the stories of children and youth at risk, making an effort as child and youth workers in the classroom to foster resiliency, and to create a place for future goals for a child and youth at risk who may seem like they have no future. I talked about my oasis teachers and that child and youth workers can be an oasis for a child/youth struggling in all aspects of life. I told them about how odd it felt to me sometimes when I thought about the student I was and the teacher I now am. I told them sometimes I still could not believe it was true. Later that day, I received this email:

> hey Kathleen,

Your message today really hit home for me today in class. I was slower learning to read when I was young, and I was labelled as learning disabled. My mom fought for me to be taught the same curriculum as the other students. I was made to feel that I wasn't capable of succeeding in school. I finished high school with a 51 average so I passed by the skin
of my teeth. I think mainly in part to the fact that no teacher really showed any confidence in me.

So I guess I struggle also with this discrepancy between how I do in school and how I feel I am doing, or where I want to go with my life. I was looking at Ryerson last night and I couldn't believe that I was actually considering University.

But thank you so much for sharing that, and I can tell you and many agree that you are an "Oasis teacher" to a lot of us.

Ian

What more is there to say? That student could not possibly know how much meaning that email had for me. I read it, and thought about what it meant. A few days later, I read it again. At that second reading of those words, a final shift and settling occurred for me on emotional, psychological and spiritual levels. In those words I saw my past and my present in one big picture. It gave my experiences meaning and ended this leg of my journey. I have arrived at exactly the place I wanted to be. I have become someone’s oasis teacher and because of that, have healed my past.
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