THE [RE]CONSTRUCTION OF A LEARNER SELF: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY WITH YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS POSTINVOLVEMENT IN CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

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by
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Rhonda LaVonne Nelson, candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education, has presented a thesis titled, *The [Re]Construction of a Learner Self: A Phenomenological Study with Youth and Young Adults Postinvolvement in Criminal Behaviour*, in an oral examination held on March 14, 2012. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological research study had as its focus the concept of ‘self as learner’ as an internal, complex process of self-discovery within human experience. It sought to illuminate, firstly, the meanings youth and young adults who had engaged in criminal behaviour and been unsuccessful in the K – 12 system had drawn from being part of the schooling experience and their perception of ‘self as a learner’; and secondly, the meanings they had drawn from their current experiences of being learners after involvement in the development of a portfolio that represented in a concrete way their own personal knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Transformative learning (Meziow, 1991) and the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska, 2008) were complementary theoretical frameworks used to guide the study development. Congruent with the conception of how learning facilitates transformative change and the stages individuals go through within a change process as presented by the theories, each of the study participants had been faced with a disorienting dilemma surrounding an at risk lifestyle. Each demonstrated an openness to personal change by voluntary involvement in a community agency program utilizing the portfolio learning process involving self-evaluation, introspection, analysis, and synthesis concurrently with life skills programming. Through the reflective process that is part of the portfolio learning process, the participants [re]constructed their sense of themselves as learners through their personal meaning-making of their formal schooling experience and the evidence of their informal learning, in ways that support their positive engagement in ongoing learning.
Five major distinctions in thematic content meanings emerged from the descriptions offered by the participants related to what it was like for them as a learner:

1. The school environment had a critical role in encouraging either success or failure.
2. The curricula, in its focus and scope, had a critical role in either maintaining exclusion through contextual disadvantage or facilitating social bonding and inclusion.
3. The personal relationships teachers either developed or avoided had a critical role in facilitating or derailing engagement with learning.
4. The substitution of peer influence for parental guidance and support had a critical role in introducing substance use and delinquent behaviours.
5. Emotion played a critical role in determining the extent to which factors either suppressed or encouraged the learner in learning.

In addition, three fundamental findings concerning the broader context in which the lived experiences of the study participants emerged were identified as being congruent with the themes established in the literature review: (a) the role of systemic disadvantage in precluding learning of how society works; (b) the role of racism and prejudice in sustaining a perception of fear of youth who are perceived to not belong, even though those youth may themselves fear not belonging; (c) the role of learning environments that provide contextual and academic learning in lessening the effects of individual blame for lack of success as a learner.
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I am privileged to have had Dr. Heather Ryan both as a professor and as my supervisor. The opportunity to serve as a graduate teaching assistant for her was a delight. She has never wavered in her confidence in me and generously gave of her wisdom and expertise while employing amazing patience. I am so very grateful for her guidance, counsel, and constant encouragement. Her ability to place what is known into the category of potential contradiction through a well-placed question never failed to provoke my curiosity and always led to yet another understanding which has been of enormous benefit to me and this study.

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My sincere thanks to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for the financial support I was provided over the years of my program that came in the form of five Graduate Scholarships and four Teaching Assistantships.
DEDICATION

To my mother, Gladys Robertson, who instilled in me, from the earliest age, a compelling love of learning and praised my persistent pursuit of it.

To my husband, Dr. Dwight Nelson, who never wavered in his belief that I could do this.

I would like to thank the study participants – the six young people known in the study as Jeremy, Mark, Desiree, Lee, Raylene, and Alicia – who took a risk to trust me. For sharing the very painful retrospectives of their lives, as well as the processes of realigning their lives, they have my highest admiration. We were all very much learners and partners in this collective venture. They taught me acceptance and hope from a perspective that was personally very meaningful and for which I am especially grateful. Their generosity of spirit and openness of heart will always remain with me.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It has become commonplace in Canada to have prime news reported in newspapers, magazines, television and radio focus on criminal activity on the part of individuals who act alone or in concert with others. The criminal activity may threaten public safety (gang-related violence, random acts of assault on person or property), involve drug-related misdeeds, or be comprised of some other wrongdoing. Both youth and adults who are involved in crime incite in the general public feelings of anxiety and fear. With both, governmental control through the criminal justice system is perceived as being needed. With youth, however, the additional aspect of blame enters into the discussion.

There is reason in Canada for the widespread belief that government ultimately must step in and control the activities and freedom of young people who are defined as juvenile delinquents as demonstrated by their criminal offences or incorrigible behaviours. The parens patriae framework, an early prerogative of the British Crown imported to British colonies, provided government with the power to act as the ‘guardian of children’ who were not legally able to take proper care of themselves and their property (Reitsma-Street, 1989). Parens patriae evolved to include in the early years of our nationhood not only the protection of property and personhood but also the promotion of the best interests of young persons, with or without property.

The principles of the parens patriae framework within the Canadian context, as described by Reitsma-Street (1989), were enacted legislatively in Canada in An Act for the Prevention of Cruelty to and Better Protection of Children (PCPC) of 1893 and the 1908 Juvenile Delinquents Act (JDA) to authorize provisions that assumed some sharing
of responsibility for young people between family groups and state representatives. The state absorbed some of the parents’ traditional authority to protect and control young people by limiting their environments and directing their opportunities and activities. *Parens patriae* remains within the expression of policies for delinquent youth through legislative amendments that draw on its doctrine into the 21st century, resulting in the consolidation of discretionary powers of state representatives and the expansion of an array of services to meet the perceived needs and services required to deal with youth who are troublesome in society.

Societal institutions, such as schools, social services, and corrections with their legislated powers form part of the array of services. Each exerts a measure of control over the lives of youth dependent on the degree to which those youth conform to the broader expectations of society. Conformity to societal standards of behaviour, by its very nature, demands both access to resources and knowledge of what is expected. It is heavily influenced by current socialization standards found within a given society. In Canada, with the belief that childhood is a distinct period of life upon which the foundation is laid for outcomes in the adult years, resources are invested in social, educational and justice systems with a goal of facilitating healthy development.

Education has been noted as a critical aspect in the lives of youth who transgress societal standards of behaviour through engagement in criminal behaviour (Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth & Jang, 1991). Interventions that have been found to have a significant effect on recidivism are those focused on structured learning, encouragement of school achievement, and the acquisition of job skills (Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, & Havel, 2002; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998).
Achieving success through experiencing success, while appearing to be a critical component, does not form the experience of some youth. For individuals disaffected from society, it is a complicated process of redirectional exchange (Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004). To experience success as a learner and gain the knowledge and skills valued in society, a change in relationship between the youth and his or her experience of schooling appears required. That change in relationship may be predicated upon a concurrent change in how the youth perceives him- or herself in relation to the experience of schooling and how his or her self as a learner is constructed.

**Statement of the Problem**

The number of youth charged and sentenced according to the *Criminal Code* is not small. Statistics Canada (n.d.) issued a report that outlined in the calendar year of 2006, nearly 180,000 youth were implicated in some violation of the *Criminal Code* in Canada (excluding traffic offences). In that same year, almost 18,000 of those youth were accused of *Criminal Code* incidents in Saskatchewan.

Excluding policing or court costs, the expenditure on correctional services in Canada totalled almost $3 billion dollars in 2005-2006, which was an increase of 2% over the previous year. Closed custody accounted for 71% of the cost (Juristat, 2008). While the cost of crime has an impact on the wallet of taxpayers, for the youth who engage in criminal behaviour the cost has an impact on their lives. “In short, the life course of antisocial youths is replete with problems that place them at increased risk for later adult crime, adult unemployment, early death, suicide, and imprisonment” (Wright, Tibbetts & Daigle, 2008, p. 36). Frontline human-service providers and youth embroiled in criminal behaviour struggle for the clues to how to make real life changes.
Homelessness, teenage pregnancy, suicide, dropping out of school, gang involvement, drug and alcohol use, and incarceration – all are among the potential human costs for individuals who perceive they do not fit and who do not, or cannot, meet the accompanying expectations of society (Centre for Research on Youth at Risk, n.d.). For those individuals whose internal perceptions are marked by disengagement, confusion and detachment, the odds of educational success and the ability to enjoy the accompanying opportunities are slim. Youth and young adults are bound by their own histories. They interpret life through ways of seeing and understanding that they have acquired through their lives. These unique histories will have an integral role in informing how each individual experiences his/her life which in turn is regarded as having a significant role in influencing how one understands him- or herself in relation to that learning.

Despite the desire to effect change for youth who offend or reoffend, efforts can encounter resistance. The poor, the homeless, and those who are marginalized do not typically have organizational support or political clout. Their issues and needs are not the same as those of the majority. In their differentness they lose importance. They gain attention when their actions and needs impinge on the persons, activities or ownership of the majority. Youth in trouble with the law have not, historically, had their voices heard.

This phenomenological research study sought the voices of such youth and young adults. It had as its focus the concept of ‘self as learner’ as an internal, complex process of self-discovery within human experience. It sought to illuminate, firstly, the meanings youth and young adults had drawn from being part of the schooling experience, dropping out and being drawn into criminal behaviour, and their perception of self as a learner; and
secondly, the meanings they had drawn from their current experiences of being learners after engaging in the development of a portfolio that represented in a concrete way their own personal knowledge, skills and attitudes.

**The Significance of the Research**

If individuals can indeed transform their world views, exchange negative behaviours for positive ones as they reinterpret their experiences from a different perspective, and create a new existence, then the possibility exists to facilitate the process with youth and young adults. Through an exploration of a portion of a selected and ample literature base, it is clear that the behaviour of human beings is far more complicated than just an expression of our biology, our environment or our psychology. Rather, our behaviour is the result of a complex interaction of factors within us and outside of us blended with human will that makes accurate future predictions of human conduct difficult.

However, there remains much to learn about how individuals engage in a transformative process from crime to socially acceptable activity. “Few phenomena in criminology are as widely acknowledged and as poorly understood as desistance from crime” (Maruna, 1999, p. 1). Internal change manifested as external behavioural change illustrates a significant unfolding of a new sense of identity. According to McAdams (1985, 1998), identity is the extent to which a person can create and internalise an integrative life narrative that blends the past, the perceived present, and the anticipated future. Identity is constructed through internalised life stories that make sense of life to the self and others. Perhaps, in the potential for youth or young adults to understand
themselves and the messages they have received, there may also be the potential to construct a different life path.

**The Context Drawn From the Literature**

The desire to understand why youth become disengaged from their society and its norms and values and engage in delinquent and criminal activity has propelled much inquiry. Research into criminal behaviour has provided a variety of causal interpretations. These causal interpretations identify factors *internal* and *external* to the individual as critical in determining outcomes. Biological/genetic, psychological, sociocultural, and demographic explanations have been correlated with a heightened vulnerability to engagement in criminal behaviour (Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Schmalleger & Volk, 2006; Walsh & Beaver, 2009; Winterdyk, 2006; Wolfgang, Thornberry, & Figlio, 1987). There is diversity and complexity that influences negative human behaviour. However, it is not the causes that are of interest. They are but the backdrop against which individuals experience phenomena. In this study the focus is on how positive behavioural change may be influenced.

**Youth in Canadian Society**

From the earliest beginnings of a Canadian national culture within a constructed nation, there has been the adoption of norms and values alien to those who inhabited this geographic space prior to the arrival of those from European countries. Similar to other countries which experienced such arrivals, in Canada today, there is a continuation of the attitudes, beliefs and actions of those *in* power regarding those over whom these attitudes,
beliefs and actions *hold* power. Being different from those in power, then, as now, lays an individual open to scrutiny.

Our laws, policies, and practices emerged from a focus of what it meant to be a nation in those early years and, in concert with politics and institutions, have directed that meaning over the intervening decades to the present. The laws were constructed to serve as constraints on our collective behaviours and ensure penalties for those who cannot, or do not, observe those behavioural boundaries. The social morality of Canadian citizens is judged upon how closely each individual adheres to the constraints. Should an individual not operate within the framework, agencies exist whose work it is to move him or her to a closer approximation, thereby underlining the perceived difference that exists within and without that individual.

Some members of our society, concentrating only on the observable present, may ask why this would be a problem. After all, in order for human beings to live among each other without harm, rules and expectations are needed. And, they would perhaps say, there is an accompanying need to help those who run up against the rules. Canada is known for its expressions of charity both inside and outside of its borders. Such charity may be seen less as a strength than as a tool of consistency.

Any attempt to ‘soften’ the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their ‘generosity,’ the oppressors must perpetrate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this ‘generosity’ which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source. (Freire, 1970, p. 45)

It is clear through our history that there was established a Canadian way that did not particularly include ways of Aboriginal peoples, immigrants, women, and
adolescents. Adolescents have been held within the netherworld of space between childhood and adulthood legally and socially until national need in terms of workforce or military gave them a ‘pass’ into adult responsibilities. They are pressed to become their own version of what it is to be Canadian, unless they are perhaps Aboriginal or an immigrant from a country less favoured in which case they need to be managed. In the early infantilization of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and in the exclusion of immigrants, behaviour persists. Those who were in power remain in power through generations and so continue to create a Canada much related to its beginnings.

There is a significant relationship between self-esteem, the development of identity and ethnicity. “Along with awareness of being part of a minority, those from ethnic minority backgrounds often have to cope with economic disadvantages, prejudice and discrimination” (McMahan, 2009, p. 364). What is defined by the dominant culture as valuable generally favours its own characteristics which can lead to a devaluation of minority groups (Jones, 1999). Self-esteem is closely linked to a person’s sense of ethnic identity, a connection that has been found within many different ethnic groups. For individuals from minority groups, the relationship between close identification with their ethnic group and positive feelings about themselves has been documented (Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007; Umana-Taylor & Fine, 2004; Umana-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006). The overrepresentation in official crime statistics of adolescents and young adults of racial or ethnic minorities indicate stark differences in rates of arrest and incarceration (Piquero & Brame, 2008).

For youth and young adults who are of First Nations heritage, historical and current societal power structures have predisposed them not only to pervasive
disadvantage but to a suppression and repression of personal value. This shows itself across many contexts, one of which is the experience of schooling.

[Individuals’] experience of school varies greatly according to a two-pronged set of factors. First, personal characteristics including gender, social class, religious creed or ethnicity affect pupils’ objective chances of academic success as well as having more subjective effects on their attitudes to school. Second, education systems differ according to the national context and culture in which they are rooted. (Raveaud, 2005, p. 460)

The current focus on Aboriginal youth as gang members, Asian youth as gang members, female Aboriginal youth as prostitutes, and youth from other nationalities that are out of favour who engage in a range of behaviour that does not fit with our nationhood, serves to distil the essence of these youth down to their culture, their skin colour, their family socioeconomic background, their neighbourhood - the risk factors that assist in identifying those who are not part of the approved. Then, through spawning an industry of human-service agencies whose mandate it is to help, assist, govern, and control those not approved, the cycle renews itself with increasing jeopardy to both the approved and the disapproved. For youth who have and perceive few options, the effects make themselves felt through the behaviour that accompanies frustration, isolation, fear, and debilitating poverty. The laws that hold them to a standard of expectation they are unable to meet then is used to punish for their lapses.

The public has a collective vulnerability to messages around an issue of concern, such as ‘youth at risk’, that are frequent, loud, frightening, and appear to come from ‘experts’ portrayed in the media. When messages create an escalating perception of danger, such as those around criminal behaviour, perceptions can lead to actions based on fear.
Our notions of crime are developed through our experiences, as well as through our interactions with our family, friends and other people. We also derive our notions of crime from sources such as newspapers, television, radio, books and films... which in turn help shape our perception of what should and should not be criminalized. (Law Commission of Canada, 2003, p. 12)

Recognition of the responsibility the various media play in maintaining and promoting a fear-based approach to dealing with individuals involved in criminal activity should not be underestimated. “[T]he mass media play an important role in cultivating support for punitive solutions by enhancing fears of criminality through the representation of violent crimes” (Law Commission of Canada, 2003, p. 13). Through that representation, a composite image of who is responsible for harm in a society is built and maintained within the consciousness of its citizens.

Criminologists stress the major role that situational factors play in explaining the involvement of individuals in criminal behaviour that are most often not part of the media attention. Individuals who describe the crimes they have committed tell a story about their crimes in which they explain why they engaged in those crimes. These storylines include reasons such as a desperate need for money; an unresolved dispute; involvement with another individual or group that reinforces crime, models crime, or pressures or entices the individual to engage in crime; a brief and tempting opportunity for crime during which the person considers the costs of crime as low and the benefits as high over a period of time; and the person initiates or is subject to a break, even a temporary one, with conventional others and institutions (Agnew, 2009). It is the interactive effects of background factors, storylines, and situational variables creating a mix that predisposes the individual to crime which Agnew uses to explain both between- and within-individual difference in offending.
There are no practical benefits of incarcerating youth who are already marginalized without providing them with the supports needed to assist them in making a change in their lives (Fass & Pi, 2002). As Maruna et al. (2004) indicate, “rewarding positive achievements is rare in the criminal justice system, which is most comfortable with the role of detecting and punishing offences” (p. 274). Labelling, without intervention, is generally very damaging. The youth who are stigmatised and segregated are left with limited opportunity to build self-respect and affiliation with the mainstream of society (Maruna, et al.). Instead, they find themselves recruited by gangs and experiencing a sense of belonging in being welcomed among these sub-cultural groups of similarly socially stigmatised individuals who support themselves through criminal activities and establish their own brand of respectability through violence.

The act of exploring the meaning of youth, of risk, of crime and of punishment as it propels discussions, public attitudes, policy and legislation is linked to how we see ourselves and each other. In this view of self and Other, within the same society, there are legacies of thought, beliefs, actions and reactions, all heavily embedded in meaning, that have come from our collected past to exert significant influence on the present. Gender, age, behaviour, economic realities and legislative rights have all had, and continue to have, a weighty presence in the creation of the Canadian cultural landscape. One such right, to attend school up to a certain age (depending on provincial legislation), is connected to the economic well-being of our nation.

**Social Importance of the Learner**

_School_, as we know it, is a structural, societal institution through which educational services are provided to children and youth. That it is considered critical for
all children and youth is a relatively new development – one that has only occurred within Canada’s short history. The importance attached to schooling has shifted and changed according to societal conditions and priorities. Dropping out of high school was, in the early part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century in Canada, of little consequence as manual labour was obtainable and the range of occupational options was more limited. In less than one hundred years, the complexity of the workforce has increased significantly and the availability of simple manual labour has given way to the need for a more integrated learner.

The majority of school dropouts in Canada are young men.

Young men were less likely to be engaged in school than young women and were more likely to report wanting to work/earn money as a reason for dropping out of high school. In contrast, teenage pregnancy plays a larger role in the decision to drop out of high school for young women. (Statistics Canada, 2005, n.p.)

While reasons for being an early leaver may vary with youth and their life circumstances, a commonality remains: they become disengaged from the school system and do not, therefore, acquire the skills needed to enter the workforce as contributing citizens. Many will require social maintenance, incurring for the society in which they feel out of place, additional social costs as efforts are made to take care of them.

In Canada, a study conducted by the C.D. Howe Institute (Richards, 2011) indicated that although the overall numbers of youth leaving school has declined somewhat in recent years, the “male share of the dropout population has continued to rise, with five males now dropping out for every three females” (p. 2). The study identified the high school completion rates for youth who are Aboriginal and other Canadian youth as the “most serious education gap” in Canada. In the news, the dropout rates for both on- and off-reserve Indian/First Nation youth was described as “disastrous,”
and Saskatchewan was noted to have some of the lowest graduation rates in the country for youth who are Aboriginal (StarPhoenix, 2008).

Schools have an interesting place within the life experience of all individuals within Canadian society. Children and youth are to have access to the public K to 12 learning services as a ‘mandatory right’. The benchmark of Grade 12 has within it a constellation of knowledge, skills and abilities that imply a minimum marker of success. Literacy, the ability to read and write, has become a “marker of superiority” (Episkenew, 2009).

When what has been required at an age specified to be the norm for leaving educational structures is achieved, an individual will be well-versed in what it means at a personal and collective level to be part of the culture. Then, through the various interactions experienced during the course of days, weeks, months, years and lives, successful graduates serve as ambassadors of the educational pedagogy - as it was known while being absorbed in it, and again, as it is being lived. “Youths attached and committed to school, are highly involved in school, and have positive beliefs or aspirations towards school and school achievement are much less likely to become seriously involved in delinquency and drug use” (Sprott, 2004, p. 554).

The rewarding of compliance and acceptance is celebrated in education. The attainment of the benchmarks related to school-based learning becomes a measure of personal value. Awards, scholarships, entry criteria, certificates, degrees - all are badges of compliance distributed by the education system that classify not only those who receive them but just as importantly, those who do not. Through the use of benchmarks to determine the level of knowledge and skills students should achieve at particular points in
their education, the definition of what constitutes ‘normal progress’ is part of how we define children’s learning (Gore, 1995). Such practices become part of the understanding of what it means to become educated (Keeley, 2006).

Failure in attainment marks the experience of school-based learning for some youth. They disengage with the school structures to go to what they know and to be where they are accepted (Pollard & Pollard, 2001). For them, socialization into the norms of the dominant culture is fraught with contradictions, exclusions and shame. “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (Brown, 2004, p. 15). In experiencing the need for correctness in the attainment of curricular content and falling short of providing the desired level of correctness, marginalized students can feel a need to further distance themselves from schooling as their frustrations increase. The relevance of learning becomes associated with school and diminishes in importance.

There is a desire to assist youth who are marginalized and stigmatised to find a place within a society from the educational sector. Alternate educational programs have been developed for youth who have not been able to succeed in the regular school environment. As of the writing of this study, in Saskatchewan there are over 100 specially developed secondary programs known as storefront or alternate schools (Storefront and Alternate Schools of Saskatchewan [SASS], 2011) that are most often located away from the regular high school. SASS is a special subject council of the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation dedicated to working with youth at risk of succeeding in school and/or everyday life. However, despite the efforts, graduation statistics, incarceration rates, and gang recruitment tell a story of limited success.
If efforts to alter the educational environment have met with limited success for some youth, it is perhaps to the potential for personal change that attention needs to shift. Risk factors and the role they play in the lives of some youth are not discounted. There is recognition that a negative outcome such as criminality is not predetermined and that the readiness for change must exist. However, if, in seeing oneself within the context of how one is seen, the possibility of change may be nurtured and the potential of a different life may be grasped, a different emphasis in the educational programming needed may emerge. It is the understanding of how individuals shift their perception of themselves to include that of a continuous learner, one who is able to conceive of and take action to make significant life change that holds promise.

The Research Question

The general research question, therefore, is as follows: What happens when a youth or young adult who had been unsuccessful in the regular education system and involved in criminal behaviour experiences being a learner through a portfolio learning process?

There has been a focus in the literature on causality of crime, characteristics of those who get involved in criminality, on the success or failure of interventions, and the identification of educational needs of youth involved in criminal activities. There are studies that look at the problem of youth coming out of custody from the perspective of those youth (Mazzotta, 2004) or consider the societal perceptions of race, class and gender engendering inadvertent bias towards students who are at risk (Crenshaw, 2005). Rarer are studies that seek to understand through the voices
of youth and young adults how they perceive themselves as learners within the socially-constructed experience of schooling (Duke, 1977) and how a change or shift in one’s self-perception as learner may be facilitated. How a sense of ‘self as learner’ could potentially be enhanced through recognition of past experiences and the learning that has resulted from them appears to be under explored. It is within that gap this study is poised to contribute.

**Key Terms**

In the research question:

- *Youth and young adults* refer to the participants who will be drawn from individuals who are of adult status and who self-identify that they have been involved in criminal behaviour during adolescence. They would be individuals who have become involved with a community-based organization that provides a range of individual and group learning opportunities that focus on skills development as well as educational, recreational and direct service programs to facilitate personal growth and change.

- *Learner* refers to the learner identity an individual constructs in relation to their understanding of knowledge, skills and abilities. It is understood not as a fixed property, but as part of the lived complexity of a person’s accumulated experience (Clegg, 2008).

- *Portfolio learning* refers to the organized collection of materials that records and verifies learning achievements while relating them to the requirements of an education or training program (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005); “process” refers to the involvement of participants in analysing, understanding and explaining to others what they know and can do, as well as what they still need to learn. The process of
portfolio development provides a structured opportunity for learners to review and evaluate their past experiences and the learning that has resulted from them.

- **Portfolio learning process** is therefore defined as a method of collection and representation of knowledge and skills identified through reflection and affirmation that an individual recognizes and names as being part of their life and experience (Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment [CAPLA], 2009).

**Conceptual Framework**

Two theories have guided this research study and have contributed to its conceptual framework: *transformative learning* and the *transtheoretical model of behaviour change*. While each theory will be described in more detail in Chapter 3, it is relevant to the current discussion of the conceptual framework to highlight the influence each has within how the [re]construction of the self as learner is conceived.

*Transformative learning* (Mezirow, 1991) is said to occur when an individual critically reassesses his or her current perspective in order to determine whether how she or he is doing things is personally effective. Engaging in critical self-reflection, the individual looks at things in new and different ways, which then promotes action based on the new assumptions. Decisions that are important in the individual’s life, and influenced by these new assumptions, are then made. New perspectives are achieved which necessarily invoke a noticeable change in how a person acts and thinks. Transformative learning “shapes people”. They are different in ways they and others recognize (Christopher, Dunnagan, Duncan, & Paul, 2001).

In order to be ready to engage in such transformative learning, individuals must be willing to consider a behaviour change. The transtheoretical model of behaviour
change (Prochaska, 2008) describes stages of change that, as a process, unfold over time and involve a progression through a series of stages. There is recognition that when an individual is within a particular stage it is not an absolute lock-step journey to the next stage. Rather, the individual could get stuck, experience a relapse in behaviour, or perhaps leave the change process itself.

The conceptual model (see Figure 1) was developed to guide the research and considers the formation of identity as self as learner as an evolving process, established through time, that responds to the interactions one has with one’s environment as well as with oneself. As individuals become aware of how they construct knowledge, recognize the sources of their ideas and become more adept at reconstructing knowledge based on new experiences and reflection, they begin to see themselves not only through the lenses of their prior experiences but through reflection on those experiences. How an individual sees him- or herself will be integrally interwoven within the lives they live. For those youth and young adults who are willing to engage in a change process, learning is considered to play a major role in facilitating that change. Within the context of the research, the exploration of the understandings of the participants as learners is reached through the overlap of the processes of meaning making and learning, all within the context of the lived experience, both past and current.

While the conceptual model is intended to portray the evolving nature of change and its significant altering effect on the self-perception of an individual, the diagram is
not intended to convey a stopping or end point. Rather, this study was designed to capture the essence of the life experiences of individuals at a particular definable moment – that time period immediately following their construction of a tangible portrayal of themselves as learners in the most broad and personal way. There is, however, recognition that the process is one that is continual.
Nature of the Study

With the desire to capture the essence of the lived experience, this study involved conducting transcendental phenomenological research which focused on the topic of youth at risk [re]constructing their personal identity as a learner. The aim of using a qualitative method was to understand the experiences those participants had had and the meaning they ascribed to their experiences rather than to gather answers to questions or to test a hypothesis. Procedures for transcendental phenomenological data collection, analysis and interpretation offered by Moustakas (1994) were used with additional and clarifying suggestions drawn from Creswell (2009).

To explore the meaning making, learning and understanding of the self as learner, qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals who had voluntarily sought involvement in a local community nonprofit agency dedicated to supporting individuals who would be considered at risk and which offered the portfolio learning process as part of their employment-readiness program. The participants were not chosen but rather self-identified their interest in participating in the study. They were representative of the population with whom the agency works in terms of gender and ethnicity. Common to all the participants were the experiential criteria of lack of success within the regular education system, being early leavers in high school, having been charged and sentenced for a criminal offence and being ready to make a change in their lives as demonstrated through their involvement with the agency.

Two interviews were conducted with each participant. The first interview explored the life experiences of each participant that had been influential in forming how he or she was as a student within the regular school system and the phenomenon of being
The second interview focused on how the participant saw ‘self’, ‘learning’, and ‘personal capacity to learn’ differently after engaging in the portfolio learning process, and the personal meaning that was drawn from that experience. Conversational threads of personal satisfaction or dissatisfaction, learning, evaluation of self-worth, and self-efficacy (within this study, meaning participants’ belief in their own capacity to effect an intended event or to perform a task) were pursued during the interview process to understand the cognitive and emotional results of achieving a [re]constructed identity as a learner.

The interviews were conducted within a week after each participant, working independently, had completed the construction of their portfolio through a learning process within the programming of the agency. The immediacy of the interviews to tap into the experience of self-revelation involved in the portfolio learning process did incur a trade-off of the visible effects of the achievement of such understanding over time. The research relied on the intensity of the immediacy of the experience to capture the learning and understanding that occurred while it could still be contrasted against previously held constructions.

Adhering to suggestions by Moustakas (1994) and Sokolowski (2000), a central goal for the interviews with participants was to maintain each interview as an informal, interactive process. Open-ended comments and queries were used to invite the participants to answer questions through reconstruction more than memory.

All interviews were coded and analysed using a coding system developed to identify commonalities and differences in the participants’ stories. Themes, meanings (important factors inherent in the outcomes of the event or events described), disparities,
and understandings (related to the personal significance that was derived by the participant from the event or events described) that emerged through the responses of the participants were grouped for analysis.

**Assumptions**

A major assumption was that the construction of a learning portfolio constituted a life-changing event, one in which meaning making and learning take place to produce a new understanding of self (Brown, 2002; Nunavut Arctic College, 2007). That may, indeed, not be the case which in turn may be of significance in evaluating the usefulness of portfolio learning processes in stimulating change.

Another assumption was that the participants were, by virtue of their willingness to participate, open to engage in self-examination, to explore other options in their lives and be part of a potential change process. In addition, as the participants in the study were young adults, it was assumed that the concepts noted by Knowles (1981, pp. 43-44), considered to underlay the process of learning for adults, could be applied as key understandings to the portfolio learning process and further guide the research:

- **Concept of the learner.** There is recognition of movement from dependency to increasing self-directedness. Adults have a deep psychological need to be generally self-directing even though in a particular temporary situation they may be dependent.
- **Role of the learner’s experience.** As an individual grows and develops, an ever-increasing background of experience becomes a rich resource for learning for both the individual and for others.
- **Readiness to learn.** An individual becomes ready to learn something when they experience a need to learn it in order to cope better with real-life tasks or problems.
• **Orientation to learning.** Education is seen as a process of acquiring increasing competencies directed toward fulfilment of full potential. The individual has a desire to apply the knowledge and skill gained today in order to live more effectively tomorrow.

The philosophy of adult learning (the nurturing and affirming of what an individual knows and what they can do as a basis for additional learning) was embedded within the portfolio learning process.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The research design resulted in several limitations which consisted of, but were not limited to, the following.

• **Qualitative research method.** As qualitative research “refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things” (Berg, 2009, p. 3), it yields results that cannot be duplicated or that may not be replicated in the broader population. **Social processes,** rather than measurable data, are described with meaning, interpretation and context being key. While qualitative data may be considered appealing due to a holistic nature and a tangible sense of importance, as well as be representative of a reflection of reality, they must also be dealt with carefully due to the reliance on interpretation. A limitation of this study pertains to the application or interpretation of the results of this research as descriptive or inferential conclusions may not be drawn from what is presented.

• **Lack of differentiation among the levels of severity of criminal involvement as an adolescent, the frequency or the length of the period(s) of incarceration.** The experience of the consequences of being charged and sentenced with a criminal
offence was not explored further on the part of the researcher due to the limitations concerning such disclosure as found within the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*. If the participants disclosed information concerning their experiences with legal consequences, the researcher did not discourage it, pursue further details, or eliminate it from the interview information offered.

- **Lack of differentiation as to number of years spent within the regular education system or method of instruction/curricular expectations/achievement assessment strategies while within the regular education system.** As the achievement of Grade 12 is considered a benchmark for entry into postsecondary institutions, as well as for some levels of employment, the non-acquisition of that benchmark was considered enough to indicate a lack of success within the regular education system once past the age of 22 within Saskatchewan. Discussion of lack of success was found through the personal stories shared by the participants and not through the pursuit of details related to the content of the education system.

- **Lack of differentiation in recruitment of participants of a specific ethnicity.** The agency provides services to participants of any racial or ethnic background, however the pool of potential participants was limited to the characteristics of those who were within the program offered by the agency at the time of the research study. Ethnicity was not a criterion for participation in the research study.

  This study was *delimited* to individuals who:

- **Self-selected within the preset criteria for participation in the research study from a program offered within one nongovernment local community-based agency.** While there are other local agencies that also provide support to client groups who may have
fit the criteria for the research study, only the one agency was used due to its usage of the portfolio learning process.

- **Had completed the portfolio learning process.** Completion of the portfolio learning process assured an experiential baseline among participants that was necessary in the consideration of the experience of personal change. The portfolio learning process was to assist individuals to become aware of how they constructed knowledge; to become aware of the sources of their ideas; and to become more adept at reconstructing knowledge based on new experiences and reflection. An expected outcome was that they would be able to see themselves not only through the lenses of their prior experiences but through reflection on those experiences. The ability to verbalize those personal reflections on their experiences was a key ingredient to the research study.

- **Were willing to participate in an initial and a follow-up interview 1 week later.** As the study was designed to describe distinct experiences of the phenomenon of self as learner experienced prior to engaging in the portfolio learning process as well as after its completion, individuals who had had such an experience were sought. Although there was not a fixed number of participants that would be required to conduct a phenomenological study (O’Leary, 2004), a large enough sample was desired to ensure variation or lead to saturation. Considering the criteria to be part of the study, it was considered very successful to have six individuals (out of seven who met the criteria) indicate they would be willing to participate and carry through to completion. Each participant received the same introductory information to the study and interview process at the start of the initial interview (see Appendix E).
• *Were willing to have their interviews privately recorded.* Initial interviews varied in length from a minimum of an hour to a maximum of an hour and a half. The participants noted how difficult it was to talk about themselves, particularly in finding the words to express what they felt. When interview fatigue was noted in the participants, some final questions were asked and then the interviews were ended (see Appendix F). With the follow-up interviews, questions were developed and asked that were influenced by the content of the initial interviews. The length of the follow-up interviews ranged from half an hour to an hour, with the same interview fatigue in evidence and a similar final questioning used (see Appendix G). References to individuals that were made through the data and in its analysis, interpretation or reporting was done through either attribution by first name only, by a pseudonym chosen by the participant or by simply the common term *participant.*

• *Were willing to have the researcher present as an observer during the portfolio learning process.* The portfolio learning process took place in the classroom within the agency. Participants sat at tables that provided enough room to give privacy but allowed for conversation if desired. On the two separate occasions that the researcher observed the portfolio learning process, the researcher sat at one of the tables with a participant. Any reference in the observation notes made by the researcher to the participants or their documents was done in such a manner as to completely obscure attribution.
Summary

Chapter 1 has covered the background and statement of the problem, along with an overview of key research areas, that guided the development of the phenomenological study of the [Re]Construction of a Learner Self.

In Chapter 2, a more thorough review of the relevant literature is represented, covering the following key areas:

1. *The construction of youth at risk*: how youth are defined both internally and externally; how they are blamed through their biology, their psychology, their failure to meet societal expectations, and the attribution through law; how they are acted upon through education, social agencies, and the legal system; how they are restricted through educational, economic, and socio-cultural conventions and institutions; and the results experienced in their self-worth and self-efficacy.

2. *The impetus and process of personal change*: theories of how internal personal change occurs and how such change facilitated through learning can transform lives.

3. *The potential for personal [re]construction*: the change that occurs with a redefinition of self and identity through understanding of self and understanding of society; the basis for self-determined action with a change in locus of control (referring in this study to a set of beliefs about what causes events to occur); the effects of artefacts of history in valuing of people; and the process of change in valuing of self.

Chapter 3, detailing the research methodology, focuses on the transcendental phenomenological research approach (Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000; Van Manen,
It is the function of transcendental phenomenology with its emphasis on personal knowledge, self-discovery and the achievement of identity, that made the research with the target group of participants possible.

In Chapter 4 the results of the data collection and analysis are presented, while Chapter 5 contains the conclusions and recommendations drawn from the rich data and insights into the limited body of knowledge concerning how these youth and young adults experienced internal change through a process of broader learning recognition that affirms their identity. With this information, human-service practitioners will be better able to assist youth for whom learning and education has lost its personal relevancy.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Human beings, in their complexity, engage in a range of behaviours. Some of that behaviour may be contrary to prevailing laws that have been designed to ensure order within the society and involve deeper, ethical values concerning the value of life, the right of property or safety of others. Behaviour that transgresses those laws and the values they embody demands penalty and stirs emotion against those who engage in it.

While there may be physical or psychological conditions, either alone or in combination, that influence the likelihood of such behaviour on the part of individuals, socio-cultural factors also have a significant role. Biological and genetic factors within individuals found to be co-morbid with engagement in crime continue to prompt research exploration. Psychological and behavioural bases for criminal behaviour within an individual’s psyche have been implicated in a range of theories posited by thoughtful researchers in psychology, sociology, and criminology. With these directions of inquiry there is a focus on the individual as the site of anomaly that gave rise to deviant behaviour. While outside influences that contribute to the condition being investigated are not discounted, the individual retains ownership of the problems that gave rise to criminal behaviour. Society is perceived as the injured party and not as part of the equation of the development of criminal behaviour. Justice is extracted from the individual. There is public comfort in the knowledge that someone was held accountable for egregious behaviour that is perceived to be theirs alone.

There is more discomfort, perhaps, with a focus on the social and cultural factors that provide an environment in which deviant behaviour can be grown. From this perspective the individual has been subject to inequities, injustices and damaging
influences from their position in society that create, inculcate and/or exacerbate criminal behaviour. Responsibility for criminal behaviour rests not only on the individual but on those who develop, nurture or maintain societal structures that make criminal behaviour a viable means of satisfying personal needs. Criminal behaviour can then be considered co-constructed with the broader society. The assignment of blame is difficult, the desire for change is fractured, and the need to refocus attention on the individual is elevated.

**Conceptual Overview**

The focus of this study is on the lived experience of a group of youth and young adults living in one city in Saskatchewan. These youth and young adults who have had criminal involvement have made a personal decision to [re]engage with legitimate society. Within their stories lies a broader history of anger, grief, and shame as well as a desire for acceptance. Factors that predisposed them to entry into the arena of criminal activity also made it difficult for them to exit that same arena. Their current efforts to achieve within the normative standards of acceptance are enacted despite the extraordinary odds stacked against them in becoming part of mainstream society.

With youth, those odds exist due to a history that extends back to the formative years of our nation and involves the past and present relationships between education and law, acceptance and exclusion, compliance and noncompliance. Powering this complex interplay of attitudes and beliefs to action is an undercurrent of anxiety and fear that existed in our past and continues into our present exercising overt and, at times, covert means of control through personal attribution. With youth who commit criminal offences, the fear *of* them, the need to *control* them and the laying of blame *on* them come sharply
into focus. It becomes essential for them to move beyond a negative personal and collective perception of themselves.

This chapter reviews themes of fear, control and blame and the variables that construct them in a manner that is consistent with the nature of the study itself: the exploration of lived experience. Breadth is necessary in understanding not only the context in which young people can become involved in criminal behaviour, but also the context in which a change may be facilitated that allows for positive engagement with society. An overview of the elements explored within the literature review is found within Figure 2.

Two key societal instruments, the judicial system and education, figure large as they have had their own impetus for development rooted in fear, control and blame when concerned with youth who do not maintain the behaviours and attitudes of the dominant group. How each institution responds to youth in trouble with the law has significant impacts upon their life circumstances. The legal judicial system has limited ability to effect life changes prior to legal consequences or after completion of those consequences.

It is through education, broadly, that there is potential to:

- mitigate either entry or re-entry into the correctional system for some youth should it consider whom it educates and recognize the ‘intra-curriculum’ in addition to what has been normatively approved as essential learning content and
- shift the historical legacy that continues to construct a society that marginalizes the youth of significant portions of its population, making them vulnerable to

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1 Those internal knowledges, skills, and experiences that students bring to the experience of school learning and is contextual to their integration of the established curriculum as well as the social milieu of ‘school.’
- involvement in illegal activities, either as a way of meeting their own needs or as an expression of frustration and hopelessness.

*Figure 2. Youth engaging in criminal actions.*
Such potential may appear to be a tall order for one socially constructed institution of society.

It is, therefore, recognized that motivations and aspirations are individual even while embedded within a social context. The success of educational efforts depends not only on the facilitator of learning but also on the learner. For some, particular influences may serve as limiters in and of themselves, prompting efforts on the part of youth and young adults to address the conditions and circumstances so as to make a change, with education playing a significant role. For others, such influences may not prove to be as much of an obstacle as the structures of society itself, with education deepening the sense of disenfranchisement while it also offers opportunity. Finally, there may be those firmly committed to a path in direct contravention to societal norms and for whom education may retain its lack of relevance. For the purposes of this study, of interest were those individuals who demonstrated a willingness to use education as a tool of advancement and integration. Within their experiences an understanding of the fit, or lack of fit, of the schooling experience may be described.

While the educational system may have responded with a range of programming options for youth who do not fit within the normative group, the form and function is arguably parallel to the system with which those youth had difficulties in the first place. External changes to location, curricular content, pacing of instruction or instructional strategies do not necessarily promote a change in how such youth respond to educational efforts. For many, their internal past portrait of failed learner remains with predictable negative results. They may have the will, but not the way, of [re]constructing themselves as learners. The benefits to society of disenfranchised youth accessing a pathway to
reconnection and contribution make efforts to explore and incorporate supports for facilitating internal change urgent.

Chapter 2 explores aspects related to self that exert an influence over how youth who are labelled at risk: (a) are defined and how they come to define themselves; (b) are blamed through their biology, psychology, and circumstances of their environment; (c) are acted upon by societal institutions and agencies; (d) are restricted through both external and internal factors, serving as a potent combination that is, for many, a limiter of potential for life success. In addition, the potential for [re]construction of one’s self-definition and the subsequent changes in perception of identity and self-understanding, as well as understanding of one’s environment and society, will be assisted by two complementary theories, transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska & Di Clemente, 1982), chosen to explain how the process of change within an individual happens and how change that is facilitated through learning transforms individuals.

**Fear**

*Residue of the Past*

Fear plays a significant role in human interactions. There is a marked difference between fear that has concrete grounds, such as actually being physically attacked, and a perceived fear, such as thinking about the threat of being attacked. Real fear has action that would logically flow from the situation such as run, call for help, fight back, among others. Perceived fear does not necessarily have a clear-cut call to action. Individuals alone, or collectively within a like-minded group, perceive the element of risk. The feeling of fear (being uncertain and lacking situational control) will increase how much
risk individuals may feel and the emotion of anger (being certain about the cause and seeking situational control) will be enlisted to soothe them (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small & Fischhoff, 2003; Lerner, Small & Loewenstein, 2004; Slovic & Peters, 2006).

Fear of an imagined threat to self, and by extension, one’s nationhood, is a theme that has been active through Canadian history. Nineteenth century colonials, along with the policies, laws, and institutions they produced, had absolute belief in the supremacy of imperial White, Protestant, bourgeois and masculine values, ideals and ways of living. Their sense of moral responsibility was used to justify efforts of the education system, penal system, health and mental health systems, immigration system and Christian churches to produce Canada as a nation and a citizenry that was White, middle class, English speaking and protestant living (Boock, 2009; Christie, 2000; Comeau, 2005). Canada and Canadian citizens were to be protected from the threat of degeneracy posed by racialized, classed and gendered Others who were considered unassimilable (Comeau). A mindset of seeking differences, leading to a perception of fear of Others, took root and influenced the behaviour of Euro-Canadians.

Negative actions toward people not of the same culture, religion, race or social class has most often been described from the ‘inside-out perspective’. One person perceives another to be unpalatable due to specific characteristics which prompt consistent responses - most often to the disadvantage of the individual being perceived to bear those characteristics. Interestingly, research has begun to explore the origin of those negative behaviours from the perspective of those who demonstrate them, not those who have markers that appear to stimulate them. What we fear in other people so different
from ourselves, whether it be race, religion, culture or age group, may be transmitted, it turns out, through us collectively within our society, stemming back to the set of fears developed by those who claimed the country that would be Canada.

Bargh and Williams (2006) in their research on collective behaviour describe the meaning of the word *automaticity* as the control that is exercised over one’s own internal psychological processes by external stimuli and events in the immediate surroundings, all occurring without the person being aware of such control. The automatic influences on social life – other people, their characteristic features, the groups they belong to, the social roles they fill, and whether or not the observer has a close personal relationship with them – trigger important psychological and behavioural processes that can result in stereotypes. Stereotypes influence behaviour through emotions.

Emotions such as anger, guilt and happiness stimulate judgements and behaviours in people that can carry over into unrelated contexts, influencing decisions and choices (Lerner et al., 2004). This automatic encoding that occurs in human beings in their social relations with each other bears important mention when discussing minority group stereotypes activated by such features as skin colour. The concept of automaticity makes it much easier to understand how the dominant group within a society such as Canada may use words of *equality, importance* and *value* when referring to minority group members even while there is maintenance of stereotypes that serve to sustain the divisions in society. It also makes it easier to understand the place of youth in Canadian society and the fear that underlies the emotional response to those who engage in criminal behaviour.
**Creation of a Focus: Youth**

In contrast to the more holistic conceptual framework of nurturing parenting practices of the First Nations inhabitants of the country that would be Canada (Keung, 2010), the Europeans who came to claim the territory brought with them their attitudes and beliefs concerning children, whom they saw as parental property, having no basic rights beyond not being killed, maimed, or deprived of absolute necessities (Howe & Covell, 1999; Rodham, 1973). European parents had absolute control over their offspring, ‘unfettered by the state’ (Allen & Worrell Allen, 2009). If a child became orphaned, was abused or was taken away, he or she would have been indentured into the service of a new parent-master (Department of Justice, 2009). Older children in a family were essential to the functioning of their household, not only through chores but through the contribution to the family’s total household income. They functioned as adults, having room to exert control over their lives (Allen & Worrell Allen). It was at the turn of the twentieth century that a coming together of circumstances provided the base upon which a constellation of beliefs, descriptors, boundaries and freedoms of adolescence were built by, and within, the dominant White society that continues to influence how adolescents are viewed today.

Mackie (1920) describes the influence of the American psychiatrist Stanley G. Hall who, in 1904, wrote a two-volume work entitled *Adolescence*, in which he portrayed a new category of human beings – *adolescents* – as victims of their biology and being out of control. His observations, in the late 1800s, saw the effects of the industrial revolution influencing adolescents to leave their agrarian roots and move into small and large urban areas seeking employment. When not securing employment, they ended up roaming the
streets in unruly and frightening gangs. Hall cast adolescents as living through a period he termed storm and stress and contended that they required careful monitoring. This perspective struck a chord of fear with the public, particularly the developing dominant middle class, and had significant impact on psychology, child study, education, social work and juvenile justice (Allen & Worrell Allen, 2009). Science was in “an ascendancy” as authority and the adult population was ready to accept scientific theories that would explain the social ills of the time and provide suggestions as to how to address them (Comacchio, 2006). The linkage of causality between biology and deviance took hold.

Discussions about adolescence in Canada focused around worries – about manhood, masculinity, dominance – which were used as euphemisms by the nation-building Europeans for ‘civilization’ and the ‘future of the race’ (Christie, 2000). The concept of the adolescent was linked to nationhood, and a “composite portrait of urban laggards” that portrayed sullen, non-virile males who smoked cigarettes, masturbated and lived in unhealthy conditions was used to communicate a threat to the further evolution of the race and the material growth of the nation (Lesko, 2002). Such discussion of adolescence was mainly focused on boys, even though defining masculinity and manhood required the difference from and distance from manliness that girls provided.

Girls’ bodies did have importance to the nation in both the 1800s and into the 1900s as they were expected to save themselves for marriage and children and in doing so support White racial progress and patriarchy (Christie, 2000). Public anxiety revolved around the morality of young – White – women and it intensified during the early decades of the 1900s as rapid urban and industrial growth was thought to promote promiscuous girls (Lesko, 2002). The opportunities now available to females of the
dominant society in the first decades of the new century in Canada converged to construct ‘modern girls’. These young women differed greatly from their mothers. They had the vote, had access to more education than their mothers, entered a widening range of jobs, engaged in new courtship patterns (dating), and entertained a different view of what their proper place in society would be (Belisle, 2006; Christie; Comacchio, 1999). This was not necessarily regarded as progress to the dominant society as these modern girls represented a threat to middle-class domestic ideals. Warning bells were set off about the ‘decline of womanliness’ and the normative domestic roles that went with it (Belisle; Comacchio). The perceived accompanying revolution in morals was seen to reflect disastrous times for the family – the base upon which the new Dominion was to be built.

The need to maintain the proper development of the nation prompted the rise of social reformers, to whom the concept of ‘adolescent’ necessarily called for traditional values and a reordering of social institutions such as juvenile justice and education (Bell, 2007; Lesko, 2002). Riding on middle-class anxieties about the disintegration of the family and the subsequent degeneration of children (Belisle, 2006) were the churches. At the turn of the century, Protestant and Roman Catholic churches initiated evangelical, educational and medical missions targeting immigrant and working-class neighbourhoods in settlements across Canada.

The ‘scientific benevolence’ movement that grew from the late 1800s and heavily influenced the decades of the 20th century saw politicians, missionaries and social justice organizations focused on the negative results of poverty and the disparity of economic advantage (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2007). There was a desire to understand social concepts and discover solutions to social problems through science and
technology. Adolescents were considered just such a social problem and a threat to appropriate society. Training and education of individuals working with at risk children and their families developed and went on to shape the socially approved work of providing for children into a regulated practice designed to improve conditions for children and youth (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2007).

An emerging group of modern experts, with the attitudes and beliefs that were prevalent in those first decades of the 20th century, put forward explanations and theories about the concepts of childhood and adolescence that in turn had a significant effect on public policy that was designed to manage (Comacchio, 2006). The need to exert control led to an acceptance of the technology of control which included managing sexuality, segregation of girls’ and boys’ curricular areas in an increasing number of years of compulsory schooling, and separate juvenile justice facilities for delinquents. All served to create particular types of people within particular kinds of social arrangements (Lesko, 2002).

Science and government were in alliance through emerging social agencies, family courts and government supported initiatives. The dominant class established the norm and regulated and punished those who deviated (Comacchio, 2006; Comeau, 2005). Deviant or problem families were measured against the ideals of maternalism, and policy was made reflecting the dominant perspective. The new experts advised governments who directed efforts in “health, education and social welfare that were intended to supervise, regulate and educate families into modern citizenship” (Comacchio, 1999, pp. 153-4). Youth proved to be problematic to these efforts.
There was a strengthening of young people as a market force in the early 20th century as products and services were developed that suited them. The already-entrenched public perception of adolescence as a distinct stage of life, one with its own unique culture, was enhanced (Comacchio, 1999). The media played a role then, as now. Magazines of the time assisted in reinforcing those dominant norms while at the same time encouraging consumerism with the quickly expanding array of merchandise, services and experiences becoming available (Belisle, 2006). Youth were caught in the space, then as now, between childhood and adulthood, yet they wielded significant influence.

Emanating from the war years in Canada was the perception of youth as blatantly and deliberately contravening social constraints that in current times appear more like conventions. Youth were criticized in newspapers, professional journals, and popular magazines for what they wore, how they styled their hair, how they laced their language with slang and rejected the accepted standard of manners (Comacchio, 1999). However, it was their participation in what was at that time considered lewd pastimes that garnered them significant attention. It was their families, with their perceived lack of authority over their adolescents who engaged in “youthful, mixed-sex pursuit of commercial amusements,” that were seen to be the origin of the crisis (Comacchio).

While it first gained a foothold over the course of the early 1900s, the view that youth were a distinct group continued throughout the successive decades. There was a lengthening of youth dependency (Comacchio, 2006) that differed markedly from the imported European perception of youth as miniature adults prevalent in the previous centuries. The end point of adolescence crept upward. Schooling, while only available to
all since the early years of the 20th century, came to potentially extend many years beyond Grade 12, dependent on financial resources of parents. The financial dependence on parents came to last longer, and exposure to sustained employment was often delayed (Allen & Worrell Allen, 2009). Into this mix for youth emerged the importance of peers as a significant developmental force.

While the opportunity to be within a group of peers was offered by industrialization, the importance of the peer group became pathologized between 1920 and 1950 as the notion of the gang as a breeding ground for criminal activity took hold. “Fixation on the gang menace frequently revolved around its distinctly non-middle-class ideal of manliness, the typical street gang usually consisting of urban working-class boys, often of immigrant background or otherwise racialized” (Comacchio, 2006, p. 35). Even though there were efforts to diffuse the perception of increasing threat, the view of modern youth as a problem remained. “Sustaining the theories about youth and gangs was the idea that class, gender, and even race, while contributory, were now being superseded by age as a factor in delinquency” (p. 35). By the very fact they were within the age range defined by society as problematic meant adolescents were problematic.

The perception of a youth problem has not dissipated with the advancement to the 21st century. There is simply a broader selection of issues within the same overall categories of deviant behaviour that can either involve youth or which can be attributed to youth.

Some of the issues facing contemporary adolescents, especially those concerning drug abuse, casual sex, peer violence and the weakening of family ties and parental authority, are more real for this generation than for any preceding one. Yet, twenty-first-century teenagers are also, on the whole, the best-fed, best-schooled, most legally protected, best-informed,
most affluent, and healthiest young Canadians of any times. (Comacchio, 2006, p. 216)

Anxiety past and present related to the fear of youth is partnered with an anger that has been and continues to be expressed through the need for their control.

Control

Law as Regulator and Intervention

In the early years of the nation that would be Canada, children and adolescents faced the same physical demands as adults in a primitive and struggling society. They were expected to pull their weight in the struggle of survival. As their importance was attached to a need for hands to do the many tasks necessary simply to subsist, the day to day behaviour of children was governed by adult standards which also applied in matters of crime (Bagnell, 2001). A juvenile delinquent was considered simply a miniature criminal. These and other beliefs and attitudes were carried to the new world by the arriving immigrants giving rise to laws containing strict standards that governed many aspects of children’s lives (Department of Justice, 2009) that were in stark contrast to those of the First Nations people who used ridicule, teasing, shaming and avoidance to discipline (Canadian Criminal Justice Association [CCJA], n.d.).

According to a Department of Justice (2009) retrospective, children were put in jails and prisons across the country in the 1800s. As the population grew and the number of villages and towns increased, so did the occurrences of youth crime. It became clear that punishment in the form of imprisonment did not turn young offenders away from such behaviour. Rather, they returned to society to go on to more serious offences and most often ended up back in jail.
Punishments for juvenile offenders in both English and French Canada at that time were a mixture of harsh laws, severe retribution and justice moderated with mercy (Department of Justice, 2009). There were guidelines but they were not always observed nor uniformly applied. The application of ‘justice’ was irregular. Corporal punishment (whipping publicly) was the preferred choice by public officials as it meant no expenditure of public funds to house an offender in a jail. In 1835 the first prison was constructed in Upper Canada in Kingston and no distinction was made between juveniles and adults in either the male or female sections of the prison.

The 20th century has seen the development of a different way of regulating both crime and those who commit it within Canadian legislation. There have been notable shifts in perspective regarding how young people involved in criminal behaviour should be treated: first, the removal of the offending young person from society; next, to disciplinary measures being applied for both the good of the youth and of society; then, a move to a more formal judicial process being established; and finally, for better or worse, to an emphasis on accountability and rigor (Department of Justice, 2009).

Table A1 (see Appendix A) outlines the progression of perception of worth, fear of threat to dominance and authority, and the legal response concerning youth demonstrating deviant behaviour in Canada. The development of each subsequent piece of legislation exposed the societal priorities of the time and arose from the legacy of the political, philosophical and legal history that had been developed and moulded over time to reflect the unique social, political and cultural institutions (Eisler & Schissel, 2008).

As the late 20th century faded and the 21st began, the penal system became conceived of as a mechanism of exclusion and control, as a ‘quarantine zone,’ holding
dangerous individuals segregated from the public. The return to the moral authority characteristic of the colonials is evident in a *Globe and Mail* article outlining the zeal with which the Canadian Federal government has pursued a crime agenda.

Tough, uncompromising and characteristically in high dudgeon, federal Justice Minister Rob Nicholson makes a powerful salesman for a government sworn to stop mollycoddling criminals ... Mr. Nicholson pounds a steady drumbeat for the merits of ever-more-punitive laws, for which he cites overwhelming public support. (Makin, 2009, n.p.)

The focus of the legal judicial system has become increasingly on the victim, who is seen as requiring information, support and consultation prior to, and after, the conviction of the offender. The perception of the offender has assumed more of an abstract stereotypical and projected image rather than that of a person who is a product of multiple influences. The interests of convicted offenders are considered to be directly opposed to those of the public, with compassion and concern directed to the victim (Beck, 2004).

Much as with the first decades of the 20th century, new specialists appeared in the first decade of the 21st – crime prevention advisors, coordinators, interagency workers, systems officers, risk managers, crime auditors, community police officers – that are of increasing significance even though they may be small in number (Garland, 2001). The problem of criminal behaviour was seen to become governable through organizations that are part of the governing elite (Foucault, 1994). “To the extent that the government succeeds in organizing, augmenting, and directing the social control capacities of citizens, corporations, and communities, it simultaneously extends its governmental reach and transforms its mode of exerting control” (Garland, p. 171).
“The implicit logic is that if the alternative measures provisions of the Youth Criminal Justice System cannot do the job, then the jails and the courts can and this appears to be the case, both historically and contemporarily” (Eisler & Schissel, 2008, p. 173). Focusing on the social problem of crime itself may be, in effect, easier than addressing the social problems from which it emerges, such as the marginalization of people on economic and racial grounds. In Canada, of those who are sentenced to custody, there is an overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in prisons.

**School: Control of Enclosure**

In the late 1880s and 1890s, efforts and resources were directed to providing Canadian children with a basic education focused on reading and writing (Gaffield, 2011). With industrialization and new child welfare laws, schools were viewed as a vehicle for improvement for individuals and society (Lupart, 2000) as well as a partial solution to what had been strongly noted as the youth problem (Comacchio, 2006).

While there are others who pull the threads of involvement that education has had in shaping not only adolescents but also the country, two writer-researchers in particular, Comacchio (2006) and Christie (2000), in their independent explorations of youth within the past and present social structure of Canada, highlight more specifically the role that education played. Through their historical tracings of school are the various usages this societal institution had for supervision through location, social structure perpetuation and maintenance of the state of adulthood as privileged. The tools for dealing with the troublesome group of adolescents focused heavily on the need to have control: command over sexuality, separating girls’ and boys’ curricular areas into ‘appropriate’ areas of focus, and an increasing number of years of compulsory schooling to ensure containment.
Such efforts were expended in order to create particular types of people within particular kinds of social arrangements that fit the new society (Comacchio, 1999).

Even though secondary schools were a product of the 1800s, it was in the 1920s that, for the first time, more Canadian youth entered high school and stayed there longer than any other cohort (Comacchio, 2006). While the ability to attend school had been restricted to children of those with money, with the advent of public education the identification of age became the primary characteristic. Canadian schools began to replicate the differences found in the broader society. Schools perpetuated the social hierarchies, values and goals of the dominant social class, while incorporating into their walls children and adolescents representative of the broad range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Lund, 2009). Schools taught what was expected in the new society (Comacchio; O’Connor, 2001).

While it brought education to an increasing number of young people as the decades of the 20th century progressed, the high school also brought forward a heightened consciousness of generational issues. Two factors contributed to a greater distancing from the adults in their lives: the youth within the school environment were all within an identified age range; and they were kept apart from the adult world through their location within the school (Christie, 2000). This reinforced an evolving culture of youth, complete with styles that seemed necessarily to contradict those of the older generation. The fact that attendance at high school was considered universal further encouraged the emergence of “generational cohesion” among a group that was feeling its way into a much-changed world (Doob & Cesaroni, 2004).
The high school of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century reinforced class, ethnic and gender distinctions by drawing attention to the contrast between high school culture and the outside lives of less favoured students.

The peer society at the basis of the extracurriculum contributed to the construction of a behavioural code: it disciplined, usually by exclusion, those who did not conform to recognized standards. This allowed for a status hierarchy of in and out, good and bad .... Those who did not, or could not fit in, either reconstructed a group identity among others like themselves, suffered alone, or left. (Comacchio, 2006, p. 125)

The peer group retained its status as the chief agent of adolescent socialization and schools came to play a critical role in the process.

The concept of youth or adolescence as a distinct stage between childhood and adulthood also became part of the societal fabric of beliefs in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Youth themselves began to identify with and be identified by school and leisure, as greater and greater importance was attached to the experience of attending high school during the time period from 1920 to 1950 (Comacchio, 2006). The structure, curricular content and social opportunities “reflected and projected the new social meanings ascribed to adolescence and consequently to the high school as the key formative institution in the lives of young Canadians” (Comacchio, p. 128). Attendance in high school became a standard for adolescents except during the war years, as active duty was required for males and the job market required the females.

It was in the 1940s that adolescents of first-generation Canadians continued on to secondary schools (Comacchio, 2006). While a cause for celebration within the families, the experience was marred, however, by the continuation of the beliefs about who was, and was not, accepted as part of Canadian society. For those youth from immigrant
families who did successfully complete high school, the majority found prejudice and discrimination dashing hopes of higher paying jobs (Comacchio).

School: Gatekeeper to Access

There has long been a relationship between education and social stratification, which refers to both a process and a condition (Kerckhoff, 2001). As a condition, it categorizes members of a population into levels, or strata, based on characteristics that differentiate them from others within the population. As a process, it refers to the ways in which members of a population become stratified. Education, as a societal institution, has been viewed as a major contributor to the process that differentiates populations within a society into strata through academic performance (O’Connor, 2001).

For much of the 20th century, the responsibility for learning disruptions or school failure was placed on the child or youth or his or her cultural background. The predominant view was the existence of deficit in the learner (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). For many youth, the ‘containment of the masses’ that characterized schools and classrooms did not result in the learning required. Significant numbers of youth became disenfranchised with the process. As the 20th century closed, the experiences youth had of being denied early status as adults, not being an accepted part of the community, not being financial contributors to their family well-being and drifting away from attachment to family and community were markedly different from their predecessors a century earlier. Gone were the cultural markers of success of previous generations. While success for youth came to be coupled with the completion of school, school continued to provide abstract feedback that adolescents were not certain they cared about weeks or months down the road when they got their report card (Allen & Worrell Allen, 2009).
The prevailing perception of learning success is linked to long-term outcomes: high school completion, continued formal learning, and employment. While more diverse versions of success would acknowledge students’ lived experiences (Wishart, Taylor & Schultz, 2006), approved ‘student outcomes’ are the focus of educational attention (Ministry of Education, 2010). The identification of the outcomes to be achieved and the measure of their subsequent achievement reflect an intention to prepare youth for the yet-not-known future within the currently known context of Canadian society. To not achieve those outcomes places youth in a position of risk for their future success.

**The Perception of Risk**

The term *risk* is said to have first appeared in usage in the Middle Ages with the advent of maritime insurance for merchant ships and the goods they carried. In the 19th century there was the belief that universal laws of nature drove the behaviour of society and allowed for the consideration of chance, or risk, as having a role in the formation of social reality (Wilkinson, 2001). Although the concept of risk was used to highlight chances and opportunities, more often, the general public in the 20th, and now into the 21st, century would identify the term as a synonym for danger.

Within the human-services sector, the term at risk has come to be associated with young people who are considered to be “on a trajectory toward a myriad of problems that threaten their present and future adjustment” (Schonert-Reichl, 2000, p. 3). Prior to the term at risk the word *disadvantaged* was used to describe factors that were considered to play a critical role in placing young people in jeopardy: poverty, ethnic minority status, community or family characteristics (i.e., single-parent family), parents’ education, inadequate housing, child abuse, home-school breakdown, inadequate knowledge of the
country’s official language(s), and the type and geographic location of schools
(Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).

While the meaning of at risk appears to take multiple forms and have inconsistent
applications, the term itself has come to represent “a set of presumed cause-and-effect
dynamics that place the child or adolescent in danger of negative future events”
(McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter & McWhirter, 1998, p. 7). These dynamics could be
found in a variety of areas such as learning difficulties, poverty, social relationships, and
family and school contexts. Youth who are described as at risk are those who may be
experiencing one or more of life conditions such as lack of basic needs, abuse, death of a
parent, school failure, teenage pregnancy and juvenile delinquency (Schonert-Reichl,
2000; Volpe, 2000). While the very conception of the term at risk rests on the premise of
deficit, various interpretations of what comprises that deficit exist.

**Constructing ‘Criminal’ Youth**

We are familiar with youth crime, with dropouts and with the costs inherent in
segregating criminal youth from the public in a need to protect the many from the few.
Our familiarization comes largely through the media which we invite into our homes,
cars and public places with its print, voice and images. Through those efforts the public is
kept informed of the crimes committed by youth, often in graphic detail when offences
are against people and property. The growth or, perhaps arguably, maintenance of a
generalized fear of youth and an exaggeration of the number of youth engaging in such
behaviours promote a heightened desire to do two things: (a) stop those youth from
committing such crimes, and (b) isolate them to protect others against the negative effects
of their behaviour. It does not promote a look at how those youth may see themselves
within a society in which the rest of us are comfortable. It also does not necessarily facilitate efforts to assist them in becoming part of that society.

A faceless, nameless entity identified as a *youth criminal* emerges from the building blocks of the language that amplifies both the incidence of such criminal behaviour and the demonic characteristics ascribed to those youth who commit the crimes. It is these choices of possible interpretations of negative events and the subsequent construction of a dominant point of view concerning them that assure the public has a generalized acceptance of systematic misinterpretations (McCormick, 2010). It is the *number* of youth who engage in violent, property, drug-related or other types of crimes that is the focus. Accurate information is neglected about the needs of these youth that are resulting in their criminal behaviour and how they may be assisted to disengage from such activity.

The influence the media has in shaping and influencing identities through stories linked to themes that foster public concern contributes to the construction of myths about particular groups of people – youth who have engaged in criminal behaviour being one. Such myths serve to marginalize such youth within society even further (Waymer, 2009). Whose story is told and what is told colour not only public perception, but the perception the youth have about themselves. Seen as flawed human beings or products of degenerate environments to be held accountable for their own personal circumstances as well as for their actions that place others, and themselves, at risk, youth who feel outside of normative society can assume the identity they are given and present with actions that are part of a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Construction of Moral Panic

Bremmer (1997) describes three sectors that each have a significant role in maintaining a moral panic: (a) corporations that specialize in the construction of prisons or the retail sales of products and services providing either surveillance or personal safety items benefit from the creation of a moral panic about youth crime and crime in general, (b) police who must strike a balance between curbing youth crime and the increased need for police and policing, and (c) politicians who capitalize on the public’s fear of crime to bolster their campaigns for re-election.

While the overall youth crime rate in Canada has been dropping (Brennan & Dauvergne, 2011), the perception of an increase in criminal activity has been rising and with it anxiety not based on fact. “We have become a ‘risk society,’ fixated on how to reduce the ‘imminent’ potential of criminal behaviour” (Law Commission of Canada, 2003, p. 13).

The vocal approval of an increase in a punitive response to crime appears to be directed primarily at the level of street crime – the crimes that involve violence against property and persons. These are also the crimes that tend to be perpetrated by those who are marginalized (Reiman, 2007) most often against others who are marginalized. White-collar crime is not subjected to the same level of the ‘get tough’ discourse in Canada, which is portrayed as being soft on white-collar crime (Gray, 2007). The risk of ‘imminent danger’ from white-collar crime does not appear to rank as high a concern. This may be due to a definition of ‘harm’ from white-collar crime as being perceived as more diffuse, less easy to describe and at arm’s length. It is also most often committed by those of the dominant group within a society (Reiman).
Public interest in individuals involved in crime and justice has not faltered. An industry of societal introspection facilitated by the media is evidenced by the crime-related television shows, movies and books that are so popular (Maruna & Matravers, 2007). “It is an interesting paradox that the more humans become ‘civilized’ the more they appear to be preoccupied by violence” (Tremblay, 2000, p. 129).

**Risk and the Prediction of Outcome**

According to Reppucci, Fried and Schmidt (2002), three levels of analysis are reportedly used to predict violence. The first level of analysis involves the individual’s biological, cognitive and emotional variables. In the second level it is the systems that immediately surround the individual such as family, peers, school and neighbourhood. In the third level it is the broader cultural and societal influences such as poverty, racism, media portrayals of violence, the accessibility of firearms and the prevalence and acceptance of societal drug and alcohol use that are considered. Although some risk factors do appear to carry more weight in influencing negative outcomes, it is thought to be the accumulation of risk factors, each influencing the other, that is presumed to increase the likelihood of violence or aggression.

Determining a direct one-to-one relationship is difficult. A significant research base exists that has sought to establish a definite correspondence between risk and behaviour. “Although risk factors may help to figure out which youth are most likely in need of preventive intervention, they cannot pinpoint which individual children will become serious or violent offenders” (Reppucci et al., 2002, p. 4). Out of the in-depth exploration of risk factors, Schonert-Reichl (2000) noted six themes that have emerged around the concept of risk:
• Risk status should be viewed as being along a continuum.

• Risk factors are multidimensional and interactive. Risk status is dynamic and context-dependent, varying across time, circumstances, and contexts.

• The at risk label assumes prediction. It points to outward signs of failure and distress, such as truancy, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, depression and suicide.

• Risk is multiplicative. Youth who have two or more risk factors active in their life are considered to be four times more likely to experience unfavourable outcomes than those with only one risk factor. For youth who have four or more risk factors, the likelihood of unfavourable outcomes increases to ten times greater.

• The nature and timing of risk factors may differentially affect outcomes based on the developmental stage of growth and the point of exposure to risk factors.

• A predisposition toward risk is heightened during periods of transition. Transitions and transition-linked turning points produce vulnerability as they provide opportunities for the exploration of new behaviours.

While it is generally agreed that there are particular aspects of a child’s environment that are virtually universal in being detrimental to optimum development - such as poverty, exposure to toxins or diseases while in the womb, abusive or neglectful parenting, and exposure to violence – the actual degree to which the individual experiences negative outcomes has been found to vary greatly (Burak, Blidner, Flores & Fitch, 2007). Through some combination of individual personality, intellectual, emotional and environmental influences, some individuals appear to be resilient. The past does not, for all, equal the future on a personal level. The stakes are high in moving out of range of
the factors that endanger. For many, the stakes are too high without systemic networks of support.

**Labelling and the Educational Category of Youth at Risk**

The educational interpretation of risk emerged 200 years ago when schools were created for impoverished families because of the negative outcomes those students would face if not for public intervention. Those students were considered at risk not of a failure to thrive but, rather, because of the financial strain and drain they potentially posed for the broader society (Cuban, 1989). It was the fear of increased spending that may be needed for public assistance (welfare) and penitentiaries that provided the necessary momentum needed to establish public schools and the laws that made attendance compulsory. Society, it was thought, had to take control in order to avoid substantial future costs. The at risk term appears “to be simply a new label for phenomena which are as old as public school itself” (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989, p. 3).

The practice of identifying youth as being at risk places them in a position of critical differentiation from the rest of society and creates a stigmatisation even while it provides opportunities to get their needs met through various community services (Wishart et al., 2006). There is the assumption that sorting students into different academic programs and, in some cases, environments will allow teachers to be able to more effectively meet students’ needs. Enrolment for some youth in lower course streams can decrease opportunities which lead to early school leaving. Students from historically disadvantaged groups tend to be disproportionately represented in those streams that are
associated with lower status and fewer opportunities (Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992).

**Assigning of Blame**

There is a wealth of what *could* go wrong in the lives of young people. Something is assumed to *be* wrong when deviant behaviour is demonstrated. Through the existence of risk factors found within their genetic inheritance or biological makeup, ‘patterns of mind’ or environment, further assumptions are made as to who the youth are that deviate from the norms of behaviour in Canadian society. Even though risk factors are based on correlational data, assumptions in the public sphere translate correlations to ‘fact.’ Efforts are then considered necessary in order to alter physical imbalances, change ways of thinking, change understandings or change the familial-peer associations of the youth. A society deals with youth engaged in criminality according to how those youth are viewed. Perspective matters.

Establishing the *why* is, however, fraught with contradictions. According to Tubman, Gil, and Wagner (2004), a significant controversy exists regarding what singular influence initiates, and what blend of processes maintains, specific adolescent problem behaviours. Even though social programs and interventions have been designed and implemented to attempt to lessen the effect or prevent the occurrence of predisposing factors, there still exists a portion of any given cohort age group that will engage in violent or criminal activity – regardless.

[Despite the cultural and social aspects of antisocial behaviour, there are individuals who, given the best social opportunities, still are violent and aggressive, while others under poor social conditions do not reveal delinquent or criminal behaviour. Therefore, aside from the need to understand and explain the social and cultural forces that foster criminal behaviour, there is need for a theory]
of individual behaviour that can account for individual differences and the ways in which individuals interpret and respond to social forces. (Shore, 1971, p. 456)

One way some researchers use to account for such individual differences is through biological explanations of risk.

**Biological Risk**

The medical interpretation configures risk as being comprised of factors that accentuate disease or deficiency states and the processes that underlie them. It is believed that if those antecedents or determinants of risk can be found, effective preventative efforts can then be implemented (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984). In current times, the technological advances in various areas of medicine, biology, molecular genetics, neurochemistry and neurobiology have provided the groundwork for the emergence of biological criminology in a new form. Researchers report mounting scientific evidence that our basic human makeup has a direct influence on our cognition and behaviour (Ellis, 2005; Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Plomin, 1989; Plomin & Nesselroade, 1990). Table B2 (see Appendix B) provides a summary of the biological anomalies that have been noted in medical research having a correlation with criminal behaviour. From this biological perspective it is what we each are given through heredity and genetics as a human being that can exert an influence throughout the lifespan.

There is an assumption of personal culpability for criminal behaviour that permeates the genetic and biological explanations: as a person is, therefore a person acts. When behaviour is considered part of a medical problem, the interventions chosen will necessarily reflect a medical orientation through drugs, operations or other clinical methods on the premise of fixing a physical ill. In a manner not so dissimilar from our
predecessors, there remains an eagerness to attribute causality based on scientific inquiry. The faith placed in medical interventions that save lives is generalized to the potential for interventions that can cure social ills. The media is quick to respond. Publicising research pointing towards the possibility of a way of fixing an issue of public concern such as the involvement of youth in criminal behaviour is newsworthy.

In The Telegraph (Alleyne, 2011), results of a study published in the American Journal of Psychiatry were interpreted for the reading public. It was noted briefly that researchers had found two areas of the brain, the amygdala and the insula, to be smaller in youth with antisocial behaviour and conduct disorder which were linked with a higher risk for mental health problems, substance abuse and criminality. The researchers were reported to have indicated a significant amount of further research was needed in order to determine whether the smaller size of the brain areas noted was the cause or the consequence of antisocial behaviour or conduct disorder. However, linkages were made to potential medical interventions as a way to ‘cure’ the youth and thus save substantial costs to society.

Much of the behaviour characterizing adolescence is rooted in biology; however, it is intertwined with environmental influences that prompt youth to engage in conflict with their parents, take more risks and experience wider swings in emotion. Along with a physical immaturity that exists within the adolescent brain, there is an urgency of a “supercharged physiology” that facilitates faulty attributions to situations and intentions of others. Increasing the complexity, these attributions are influenced by a need for higher levels of novelty and stimulation in order to achieve the same feelings of pleasure that adults experience (Walsh, 2009). The biological shift that naturally occurs within
adolescents due to their maturing bodies has the potential to provide rich exploratory territory for cause-effect speculation.

**Disabilities with Biological Origins**

An expectation of the education system is to identify and provide support for children and youth who have difficulty learning. The diagnosis of a disability, if physically based, falls to those trained within the medical-oriented professions. Should the disability be psychological in nature, the diagnosis falls to the psychological or mental health related professions unless the school division has personnel so qualified. However, regardless of the source of label naming the disability, it is the education system that sees its effect on learning.

Two disabilities identified to have biological origins have been noted in research as having a connection with deviant behaviour. Learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have been noted in the literature as being highly correlated with criminal activity (Weiss, 2008). While they may be in evidence independent of each other, they often occur together.

**Learning disabilities.**

Being able to read and write are critical skills in current day society, and poor academic achievement and various disabilities have been identified as significantly predisposing a child and youth to antisocial and criminal behaviour (Einat & Einat, 2008). Learning disabilities are defined by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) (2002) as a “number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These
disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning” (n.p.).

Through neuro-imaging technology, it has been found that individuals with LD have a difference in their brain structure that has been attributed to significant learning difficulties. In a study involving 110 inmates from two prison facilities, Bryant, Scott, Golden and Tori (1984) reported significant neuropsychological differences between violent and nonviolent offenders when they were administered norm-referenced psychoeducational assessment instruments. The hypothesis was that it may be learning difficulties that predispose some individuals to criminal behaviour.

The effects of such learning difficulties are far-reaching. Smith et al. (2009), describe learning disabilities (LD) as severely hindering the acquisition and use of oral language, reading, written language and mathematics. The discrepancy between ability and achievement begins to surface in the elementary school years as academic achievement becomes more difficult. Along with the academic deficits, social skill deficiencies can occur in individuals with learning disabilities. This can involve difficulties in resolving conflict, managing frustration, initiating or joining a conversation or recreation activity, listening, demonstrating empathy, maintaining a friendship and working in groups (Smith et al.). Over time, the experience of academic problems and the existence of social deficits can also contribute to school failure leading to frustration and confusion (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004). Aggressive behaviour can result.

**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).**

ADHD is described as a “serious public health problem” due to its high prevalence, the significant impact it has on school performance and socialization, the
limited effectiveness of current intervention and the inability to show that intervention leads to positive long term outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Smith et al., 2009; Weiss, 2008). The principle symptoms are inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. However, different symptoms may emerge in different settings, depending on what demands on the individual’s self-control exist (Mental Health Canada, n.d.).

It does not come as a surprise that studies conducted on prison populations have found significant overrepresentation of individuals with LD and ADHD. The data not only recognize both conditions as high level risk factors for criminality, they also suggest a potential causal relationship (Einat & Einat, 2008).

**Caution Regarding Emphasis**

While inheritance and biology can have an effect on an individual’s experience or context, and medical intervention may provide some relief from physical illness or the symptoms of a condition, there is general agreement they cannot alone explain criminal behaviour. Social, psychological, cultural and situational factors have an important role in predisposing individuals to violence (Raine, Buchsbaum, & LaCasse, 1997; Turner, Hartman, & Bishop, 2007; Winterdyk, 2006).

The neural processes underlying violence are complex and cannot be simplistically reduced to single brain mechanisms causing violence in a direct causal fashion. Instead, violent behaviour probably involves disruption of a network of multiply interacting brain mechanisms that predispose to violence in the presence of other social, environmental, and psychological predispositions. (Raine et al., p. 503)

While what is both inherited and biological exert an influence, evidence exists that factors after the birth of an individual can help to mitigate negative aspects that have been inherited or imposed during fetal development (Rose, 2000).
Psychological Risk

Throughout history there has been an association between evil and criminal behaviour, with the meaning of evil shifting and changing over time. Belief in demonic possession as an explanation for aberrant behaviour does not belong only in the past. In our current day there are religious groups that still adhere to the belief in demonic possession although there has never been demonstrable proof over the centuries that spirits or demons could have been the cause of criminal behaviour. Psychological theories developed as one way of trying to explain and predict human behaviour using scientific methods (Winterdyk, 2006).

The psychological perspective considers how individuals perceive who they are, how they understand their personal experience, the meanings they place on that experience within the context of their lives and how valued they feel as a person (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). With so much inferred rather than explicitly seen, the vulnerabilities of the psychological health of an individual remain real yet invisible. Underlining the vulnerability that can exist in adolescence, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (2005) indicated that “half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14, and that despite effective treatments, there are long delays – sometimes decades – between first onset of symptoms and when people seek and receive treatment” (n.p.).

Psychologists use theories to construct answers to the same collectively pursued question of why an individual becomes involved in criminal behaviour. Rather than search for physical anomalies, however, psychological theories attempt to describe processes that occur within that individual which are not visible to the observer other than
through implication and interpretation\textsuperscript{2}. Which theory is ascribed to will depend on the goodness of fit between the particular theory and the personal worldview and perspective of the individual employing it.

Like the biological perspective, psychological explanations are also seated within the individual as deviant behaviour is considered to be evidence of disrupted, corrupted or deranged thought patterns or understandings of self and the world. Interventions then focus on expanding the knowledge base of the individual and retraining the cognitive thoughts that give rise to deviant behaviour. As psychological theories seek to explain how individuals change their behaviour and change their lives, emphasis is placed on the requirement of personal initiative to effect such a change.

A range of theories exists that illustrate how features of personality may be used to explain deviant and criminal actions. Summarized in Table C3 (see Appendix C), these theories collectively have value in providing a platform upon which to understand how an individual may come to act in a manner unacceptable within his/her society. However, not all speak to the involvement of youth in crime, nor do they all take into account cultural differences among youth. While well-known and respected theorists within the psychoanalytic (e.g., Adler, Fromm, Jung), humanist (e.g., Rogers, Maslow), cognitive (e.g., Vygotsky), bioecological (notably Bronfenbrenner) and behavioural approaches (such as Bandura) are not included, as they do not specifically address deviance, underlying constructs of their theories may be found incorporated into the theories of others who are described.

\textsuperscript{2} Psychological theories chosen to inform the proposed research, \textit{Transformative Learning} and the \textit{Transtheoretical Model of Change} that are discussed later on in this chapter are drawn from \textit{learning theories} and seek to answer not so much the \textit{why} but rather the \textit{how} of personal change.
Criminological psychology is concerned with using psychology to explain criminal behaviour and to apply psychological theory and investigation to the understanding and attempts to change criminal behaviour. As criminological theories have been developed and presented, they have incorporated what was known at the time about genetics, intelligence and psychic functioning (Hollin, 2007). As with psychological theories, however, the focus was on the individual.

An exception was The Chicago School of Criminology which shifted the study of crime away from the individual (the focus of psychology) toward the study of the social structure (sociology), arguing that a richer understanding of criminal behaviour could be found in the social structures that shaped, influenced and defined the social ecology (Beirne, 2005). Hollin (2007) summarized the significant understandings that emerged, which included:

- The development of delinquent behaviour was associated with social deprivation, disorganization, and disadvantage.
- Delinquency was transmitted across generations through the weakening and loosening of social controls.
- The social forces that bind society (such as church, family, education) weaken, leaving youth free to act in delinquent ways.
- Weak social bonds create conditions for delinquency.
- Association with delinquent peers provides the stimulus for persistent offending.
- Environmental, not just individual, change, is required to reduce crime, and
- Social policies aimed at poverty and disadvantage are critical.
Criminal behaviour was seen as the consequence of interactions between the individual, social, cultural and legal variables that act to dispose the person towards an offence.

In contrast, Schmalleger and Volk (2006) summarized the primary assumptions of most psychological theories of the roots of criminal behaviour: (a) the focus is on the individual; (b) personality is the “major motivational element within individuals, because it is the seat of drives and the source of motives” (p. 196); (c) crime represents the outcomes of abnormal, dysfunctional or inappropriate mental processes within the personality; (d) while criminal behaviour may be abhorred by the general population of a society, it may serve to satisfy particular needs of the person perpetrating the behaviour and, therefore, may be determined to be inappropriate because it contravenes what that society has established as appropriate; (e) what is considered normal is constructed through agreement by the majority within any particular social group; (f) “defective, or abnormal, mental processes” may stem from a number of causes which may include “a diseased mind, inappropriate learning or improper conditioning, the emulation of inappropriate role models, and adjustment to inner conflicts” (p. 198).

With adolescents, a critical factor is the maturation process. While evident in physiological development, it is also at play in psycho-social maturity. Ash (2006) describes an argument about immaturity as it relates to adolescents and involvement in criminal activity: if the decision to commit a crime can be shown to come from judgements that can be meaningfully distinguished from adult judgment, then adolescent culpability is reduced. However, if adolescent capacity cannot be meaningfully distinguished from that of an adult, then differential blame is not warranted. Also related to maturation is research that has indicated a relationship between a developmental delay
in moral reasoning and criminal activity in adolescents (Chen & Howitt, 2007). A youth’s level of psychosocial maturity has been demonstrated to be more important than his or her age in making socially responsible choices and avoiding risk behaviour (Ash).

**Socio-cultural Factors**

Antisocial behaviour, especially in its most severe form, is associated with demographic variables such as poverty, race, and neighbourhoods that have a sense of physical and social disorder which exerts harmful consequences on an individual’s social, physical, and psychological health (Farrington, 2007; Kuo & Sullivan, 2001; Parker & Reckdenwald, 2008; Reyes et al., 2008). As a child learns and becomes socialized into the family, neighbourhood and community, his or her conduct is structured by external rules and sanctions. As the socialization process proceeds, individuals adopt moral standards that serve as internal guides and as the basis for self-sanctions regarding moral conduct. Individuals monitor their own behaviour and the conditions under which it occurs, judge it in relation to their own moral standards and perceived circumstances and regulate their actions by consequences they apply to themselves. The adults within a child’s life and their behaviour play a significant role in the socialization process.

**Attachment**

“One of the most important influences in young children’s lives is their family environment and the bond they establish with their parents – a bond closely affected by parenting practices” (Stevenson, 1999, p. 2). Bowlby’s attachment theory has been referred to by researchers emphasizing the critical role early experience has in shaping the expectations and beliefs that a child constructs concerning the responsiveness and
trustworthiness of others (Fraley, 2002; Ooi, Ang, Fung, Wong , & Cai, 2006). An infant is born with a predisposition to become attached to his/her caregivers in order to ensure the infant’s safety and survival; this attachment relationship is thought to be a central basis for the development of a child in other areas (Karrass & Braungart-Rieker, 2004; Slade, 2000; Van IJzendoorn, 1997).

When there are disruptions in the attachment relationship, a vulnerability can be created in the child’s sense of self and others, as well as in his/her capacity to regulate, contain and modulate affective experience (Karrass & Braungart-Rieker, 2004; Ooi et al., 2006; Slade, 2000) that can seriously affect how he or she sees the world and interprets events. Over time the child can develop patterns of behaviour based on the ways of responding that have been found to be successful with the caregivers. As these responses are internalized, they become representations that determine what thoughts, feelings and memories the child will access in how he or she perceives attachment. These representations then become neurologically based structures that regulate the child’s affect and an internal sense of knowing (Ooi et al.). While the type of attachment a child experiences with his or her caregiver is considered essential so, too, is how that child is parented.

The Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (Willms, 2002) found parenting style to have the strongest association with aggressive behaviour. Frequency of use of a parenting style appeared to make the difference. “Parents who employed ineffective, aversive, inconsistent or negative disciplining most of the time were significantly more likely to have children with behaviour problems than parents who utilized these approaches infrequently” (Stevenson, 1999, p. 3). Children with one or
both parents absent or children with parents who were ineffective and were without another adult who played a significant role, are very likely to have a disjointed experience in developing a personal, meaningful relationship with the society within which they are citizens. These factors have been demonstrated by researchers to facilitate a descent of young people into delinquency (Timor, 2001).

The issue of family violence also has been noted as playing a significant role. “The violence to which a child is exposed during the period of his growth when imitation and identification are important cause him to model himself after the aggressor” (Shore, 1971, p. 463). The role adults play in introducing, modelling and reinforcing certain types of behaviour in shaping the actions of children and youth is of great importance from the perspective of aggression as a learned behaviour (Tremblay, 2000). When there is an absence of adult role models, there is tendency for youth to join gangs in an effort to attain the role models, integrate values on their own and establish an identity (Campbell, 1975; Shore; Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008). The need for a role model is further emphasized by studies that demonstrate “negatively valued acts” performed on television result in those viewing those acts performing them at a higher rate than those who had not viewed them (Hogben, 1998, p. 220).

While research on poor family functioning has identified it as a risk factor for delinquency, especially in younger children (Dembo, Wareham, Poythress, Meyers & Schmeidler, 2008), there are cautions. As with the biological and psychological perspectives of risk factors, there can be multiple origins of contextual risk that may influence a child’s development and facilitate the subsequent development of juvenile delinquency and violence (Kellermann, Fuqua-Whitley, Rivara, & Mercy, 1998).
**Antisocial Parents and Grandparents**

A high degree of intergenerational similarity has been noted in terms of antisocial behaviour (Bolen, 2000; Breheny & Stephens, 2008; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989; Ryan, 2005). It has been shown across generations that, for a child who has a parent who has an antisocial personality, the risk of that child developing that same personality disorder is very high (Patterson et al.). Relating back to both attachment and parenting style, one factor is the intergenerational transmission of parental discipline practices. “[T]he parent’s early attachment experience influences his or her own responsiveness to the child’s attachment signals, which, in turn, influences the child’s attachment pattern. In this manner, attachment is assumed to be intergenerational” (Bolen, p. 136).

Individuals learn from how they are parented and, in turn, parent their children in the same manner. Parental care may not only mediate the effects of stressors on a child’s development but it may also serve as the basis for the intergenerational transmission of variations in parental behaviour (Champagne & Meaney, 2006, p. 1227). Antisocial parents have been shown to be at significant risk for ineffective discipline practices when they have a limited repertoire of family management skills or are faced with acute or prolonged stress. As a result, a child could be at risk for adjustment problems (Patterson et al., 1989).

Another factor is direct training for delinquency. Timor (2001) found through interviews with incarcerated juveniles that the direct influence of parents was very strong. While some of the young offenders reported their parents encouraged the delinquent
behaviour, others indicated their parents were also engaging in criminal behaviour and, in some cases, involving their children in that behaviour.

**Substance Abuse**

Drugs and alcohol use have become a known hazard to the well-being of adolescents. Health Canada (2010) reported the results of the Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey (CADUMS) in which at least 10,000 Canadian households were randomly contacted by telephone. Residents aged 15 years and older were engaged in interviews to find out how many Canadians use alcohol, drugs and other substances and how many Canadians are affected by the use of these substances even if they are not actually using them. The survey results reported that the

[d]rug use by youth 15-24 years of age remains much higher than that reported by adults 25 years and older; three times higher for cannabis use … and almost nine times higher for past-year use of any drug excluding cannabis. (Health Canada, n.p.)

and the

[p]revalence of heavy frequent drinking among youth 15 to 24 years of age was approximately three times higher than the rate for adults 25 years and older (9.4% versus 3.3%). (Health Canada, n.p.)

The households contacted were not identified as being at risk and the youth and young adults who responded were not part of the criminal justice system.

The use of alcohol has a significant role in the discussion of violence and has been determined to decrease cognitive functioning, thereby allowing individuals to engage in violence without consideration of the consequences. It has also been argued alcohol interferes with self-awareness, increases arousal and
lowers anxiety or hesitancy about using violence (Felson, Savolainen, Aaltonen, & Moustgaard, 2008; Felson, Teasdale, & Burchfield, 2008).

Delinquent youth are noted as being more substance-involved and using substances at earlier ages. Those delinquents with greater substance involvement then demonstrate higher rates of offending, more violent offences and a higher risk for persistent antisocial behaviour than delinquents with less substance involvement (Bennett & Holloway, 2005; Tubman et al., 2004).

**Lifestyle**

In Canada, as well as other countries, the past two decades have seen youth becoming the fastest growing segment of the homeless population (Kelly & Caputo, 2007). It has been estimated that each day there are 150,000 youth living on the streets in Canada (DeMatteo et al., 1999). Family problems such as interpersonal conflict, physical or sexual abuse, neglect, parental drug abuse, domestic violence and family breakdown all have been cited as reasons for adolescents heading to the streets. For many, the streets serve as the best of several poor options for them. Once there, the lack of food, shelter and money are influences effecting criminal behaviour (Chen, Thrane, Whitbeck, Johnson, & Hoyt, 2007; Kelly & Caputo, 2007).

The Public Health Agency of Canada (2006) conducted a survey of Canadian street youth from 1999 to 2004 and, among other key findings, reported that twice as many males as females live on the streets; 15% of street youth reported their families were homeless; conflict with parents was the main reason most street youth left home; more than 25% had welfare as their main source of income; more than half had been subjected to emotional abuse or neglect; approximately 80% smoke daily; approximately
40% reported recent alcohol intoxication; 95% reported using non-injecting drugs while nearly 20% reported having used injecting drugs; and more than half reported they had been in jail, a youth detention centre, a prison or a detention facility overnight or longer. Street youth are emotionally and physically vulnerable, more likely to report having had sexual intercourse before the age of 13 (95% report they are sexually active) and are at a higher risk for many sexually transmitted diseases (rates of chlamydia and gonorrhoea for street youth is more than 10 times those in the general youth population).

There is a “high prevalence of disruptive behaviour, crime, and street victimization, as well as structural and situational risk factors that lead to antisocial behaviour among homeless and runaway adolescents” (Chen et al., 2007, p. 1174). Aboriginal youth are overrepresented in the numbers of street youth in urban centres (Bell, 2007; Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette, 2007; Kelly & Caputo, 2007) in Canada and experience the range of negative effects that come from such a lifestyle, including criminal activity.

**Gang Identity**

Gangs are tangible expressions of *identity*. Considering the importance attached to the development of self-identity in adolescence, it does not come as a surprise that vulnerable youth would gravitate towards such involvement. Gangs have been described as “visible, hardcore groups that come together for profit-driven criminal activity and severe violence” (BC Crime Prevention Association [BCCPA], n.d., p. 1). Findings from research indicate that youth gang members *are* more likely to engage in criminal behaviour and are also more likely to offend more frequently than their non-gang peers.
(Taylor et al., 2008). In Canada, gangs are primarily made up of males; however, female participation is increasing (Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP], 2006).

The results of the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs (RCMP, 2006) approximated the number of youth gangs in Canada to be around 434 and estimated a total membership at 7,000. Out of all the Canadian provinces, three were highlighted as having the highest percentage of jurisdictions reporting active youth gangs: Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia. Saskatchewan has also been identified as having the largest concentration of gang members of all ages, not just those involving youth (Totten, 2008).

It may be argued that gang violence occurs within a wider context of social marginalization and exclusion based upon ethnicity. In Canada, African Canadian, Aboriginal and Caucasian youth form the largest percentages of gang members (RCMP, 2006). Caucasian/White youth gang members were distributed throughout Canada, except in Saskatchewan and Alberta. Aboriginal youth gang members were primarily found in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta. “Over one-third of gangs in Canada are composed of two or more ethno-racial groups (hybrid gangs)” (Totten, 2008, p. 3), with the most diversity found in Ontario, British Columbia and Manitoba (RCMP).

For some youth recruited into gangs, ethnic loyalty may be a factor. *Ethnic loyalty* (Wall, Power, & Arbona, 1993) refers to a person’s feelings and attitudes toward affiliation with one’s own socially-ascribed ethnic group as opposed to the dominant majority group. It has been proposed that Aboriginal gangs are simply a reflection of the overwhelming challenges Aboriginal people have in trying to survive ‘as Canadians’ (Mercredi, 2000) and are one of the outcomes of a long history of marginalization. The
reality is that the identification of a gang problem in Saskatchewan has induced fear and
the perception of a threat to social control that mirrors other jurisdictions.

Antagonisms on the street – between groups of ethnic minority youth and
authority figures such as the police, and between diverse groups of young
people – are constantly reinforced by negative stereotyping, media-induced
moral panics and the day-to-day racism experienced by such young people.
(White, 2008, p. 155)

**Poverty**

With affluence, people are able to live in safer neighbourhoods. Their children
can access both high quality education and higher education. They can afford to enjoy
better nutrition that in turn affects their level of health. Those who have more disposable
income can avail themselves of a huge array of goods and services. For this class of
citizens, Canada is perceived as an affluent country. “In terms of the welfare of its
citizens Canada is one of the world’s most progressive nations. The combination of a
thriving economy and generous social benefits gives Canada one of the highest living
standards in the world” (Encyclopedia of the Nations, n.d., Paragraph 1).

Those on the other end of the spectrum, who have very low or poverty level
incomes, have limited access to all these resources.

Families do not operate in a social vacuum; rather, they are part of a more
elaborate social context . . . Most studies have examined the family with little
regard for how its effects may vary according to features of the social context.
(Hay, Fortson, Hollist, Altheimer & Schaible, 2006, p. 345)

For many individuals the choices are limited. If individuals of particular racial or ethnic
groups are found to live “where crime is high, perhaps it is because they must reside in
such places” (Watts & Watts, 1981, p. 426).

The American Academy of Pediatrics (Schor, 2003) highlighted the elevated risk
experienced by children from educationally and economically deprived backgrounds.
Poverty plays a major role in restricting a child’s access to developmental supports and threatens the present and the future. “Poverty occurring early in childhood (or prenatally) may cause developmental damage that affects its victims for years to come” (Aber, Bennett, Conley, & Li, 1997, p. 478). However, disadvantage not only affects the infant but also the young child and the adolescent.

The high level of violence within high-poverty, inner-city neighbourhoods poses significant hurdles for adolescents growing up in a dangerous environment (Liddle, Rowe, Dakof, & Lyke, 1998; Spano, Rivera, Vazsonyi, & Bolland, 2008). Isolation and lack of a social support network due to lack of monies exacerbate the risk. “[P]overty can lead to social exclusion” (Weyers et al., 2008, p. 14). In some countries and some cultures, poverty forms the day-to-day reality of minority populations. Canada is no exception.

The Canadian response to poverty considers scarcity to be an individual problem resting with the person rather than to be a result of social and structural factors. A common Canadian perception is that anyone can rise to the top in any situation despite ethnicity, colour, national origin, gender, ability, age, sexual orientation or religion. In actuality, Canada has been described as a highly stratified society (Nakhaie, 2000). Income is extremely unevenly divided, and there is a hierarchical arrangement of large social groups on the basis of their control over basic resources (Human Resources Skills Development Canada [HRSDC], 2011). The gap between the rich and the poor is described as being wider than it has been in decades as policies and practices of governments cater to business interests (Eisler & Schissel, 2008). “These concerns are compounded for women and other marginalized groups, specifically Aboriginals. The
particular construction of risk and criminogenic needs far too often ignores the social, historical, and cultural realities of those less privileged” (Maurutto & Hannah-Moffat, 2007, p. 486).

Temporary assistance may be offered, but on the whole Canada is viewed as moving more and more towards similarity with the United States in social policies, cost-cutting measures and cutbacks to social services and programs (Kendall, Nygaard & Thompson, 2008; Olsen, 2002). The vast majority of poor people in Canada are women and children. Foreign-born Canadians have a higher risk of poverty than Canadian-born individuals of any race or ethnic background (National Council of Welfare of Canada, 2007), but it is not foreign-born Canadians who are found to be overrepresented in Canadian prisons. Immigrants to Canada are actually less likely to be involved in criminal offences (Polczynski Olson, Laurikka, Huff-Corzine & Corzine, 2009). They are, however, more likely to have encountered the shadier side of the ‘accepted establishment’ of Canadian society (Kazemipur & Halli, 2001) through exposure to Canadian employers who use immigrants to fill jobs that are typified by instability, low pay, limited benefits and unpleasant or hazardous working conditions.

All great social questions, on careful analysis, resolves themselves, in a more or less degree, into some phase of what we call the labour question, and certainly the causes of crime, in a sociological sense, cannot be studied without considering the status of man in the prevailing industrial order, for among all the causes for criminal action, or for the existence of the criminal class, we find that economic conditions contribute in some degree to their existence. (Wright, 1893, p. 98)

**Youth of Aboriginal Heritage**

Youth behaviour is best understood in the context of youth cultures/subcultures, and the same is true for Aboriginal youth who have run afoul of “the law.” The behaviours that bring them into the justice system and the negative impact that this contact and experience has on them needs to be viewed in the context of the
status of Aboriginal peoples and the status of youth in Aboriginal communities and Canadian cities. (Bell, 2007, p. 339)

In the past, racial degeneracy was used to explain non-White European immigrants’ and Aboriginal peoples’ inability to ‘live properly’. Now culture has replaced race as a determining quality in Canada. Contemporary discourses of cultural deficiency blame poor and Aboriginal victims for their poverty and social marginalization. Culture is framed as at risk or dysfunctional and hence problematic to the mainstream (Comeau, 2005).

The long history of structural disenfranchisement of Aboriginal people in Canada has resulted in significant barriers to prosperity. In a report on urban homelessness in Ontario, it was found that Aboriginal persons’ experiences of living in urban centres involved inadequate housing, limited education, lack of cultural awareness, unemployment, alcohol abuse and discrimination (Wente, 2000). Uludag, Colvin, Hussey and Eng (2009) point out that, in research that has used official crime data, a significant positive association has been found between crime rates and levels of inequality.

While Aboriginal people are 2.7% of the Canadian population, they form 16.7% of the federal prison population and 21% of the admissions to provincial/territorial sentenced custody (Correctional Service of Canada, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2006). In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal people make up 80% of those who were admitted to provincial sentenced custody, while they represent only 10% of the adult population of the province (Statistics Canada).

Aboriginal and poor children in the 20th and now 21st century, continue to be constructed as endangered, now by their cultures – or lack thereof – rather than their race, and as threats to the well-being of Canadian society as a whole. (Comeau, 2005, p. 20)
Little appears to have changed today from the racialized, class-conscious notions of the past. “[T]he research on complex societies identifies measures of social inequality and indicators of social disorganization, such as population growth and social change, as important predictors of violent crime” (Rosenfeld & Messner, 1991, p. 52).

**Youth and Cumulative Effects**

Individuals search for opportunities to maintain, enhance and protect their self-esteem by seeking to attain success and evade failure in areas in which their self-worth has been staked (Crocker, 2002). For youth who have found school difficult, or for whom school has been an emotionally negative experience, feelings of self-worth may not be associated with what they know to be school (Bell, 2007). “Self-esteem depends on perceived success or failure in those domains on which self-worth is contingent” (Crocker, p. 393). For some youth and young adults, their self-worth may be dependent on areas more clearly associated with family and friends as within those spheres they may have a high, or higher, sense of competence. They may not accept, or see the relevance of, the content, process or markers of success that the structure of schools is designed to convey. The level of compliance they may demonstrate with the societal expectations of adolescents may, in turn, be low.

Students who base their self-esteem on their academic accomplishments typically have self-validation goals in this domain, viewing their schoolwork as an opportunity to demonstrate their intelligence. Because failure in domains of contingency threatens self-esteem, people try to avoid failure by increasing effort; if they are still uncertain of success, they may abandon their self-validation goal and become unmotivated, or prepare excuses that will soften the blow to self-esteem in case they fail. (Crocker & Knight, 2005, p. 200)

For some youth and young adults, even achieving the most basic accomplishments in the classroom can be a revelation (Maruna, 2001).
The rewarding of compliance and acceptance that is celebrated in education falls under the category of reinforcement. The evaluation that occurs in order to award the accompanying badges (awards, scholarships, entry criteria, certificates, degrees) of compliance may not only be contrary to how a youth constructs his or her self-worth, but may also promote lower performance. A review of literature by Deci and Ryan (2000) indicated that rewards and evaluations were found to decrease creativity, complex problem solving and deep conceptual processing of information because of the lack of autonomy that learners experienced within such a structure. Instead, to stimulate intrinsic motivation, the provision of choice and the acknowledgement of feelings in the learning process were needed.

The benchmarks used to define normal progress in the process of becoming educated are also culturally-determined. When the various goals of education that are determined and valued by the dominant society do not validate the abilities and qualities that an individual values and considers to be part of their worth, a disconnect occurs. Goals, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, will not necessarily have the same meaning or function in different cultures. The attainment of such goals may or may not be part of how an individual construes his/her self-worth.

For youth who are considered at risk, as well as for those who would not be assigned such a label, early experiences will have influenced how they construct their self-esteem and perception of self-worth. They may or may not perceive themselves as being a part of the mainstream society and engage in transforming socially-approved norms into personally endorsed values and self-regulations (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The self-system is a motivated meaning system insofar as the self-relevant meanings and values that are acquired in the course of its development (or self-
construction) inform, constrain, and guide the interpretation of experience, goal pursuits, self-regulatory efforts, and interpersonal strategies. (Mischel & Morf, 2003, p. 29)

The differences that may exist between the values of the dominant group and the minority group(s) would be visible through the decisions and behaviours of individuals within each group; these decisions and behaviours could have an impact on opportunities.

The fact that some youth do not see the relevancy of education in its structure and content does not erase the fact that there is the educational standard of the high school diploma that is critical to gaining entry into postsecondary education or acquiring employment. According to Statistics Canada (2005) the unemployment rate is very high among dropouts. In 2004-05, the rate was 19.4%.

Educational performance depends on many factors, including the education, income, and cultural expectations of academic success of the student’s family and the quality of the school the student attends. Three groups in particular – some immigrant communities, those living in rural areas, and Aboriginals – exhibit a worrisome lack of educational attainment compared with the Canadian average. (Richards, 2011)

For youth who have not experienced success in the regular education system, have had involvement with criminal behaviour and who have experienced marginalization due to socioeconomic factors and ethnicity, the odds appear extremely high against them reengaging in a learning process.

Youth Who are Ready to Engage

For youth and young adults who have been outside both the education system and the norms of society, there is the need to experience some level of personal success in regular society. They need to be able to see themselves within common environments of straight society, such as additional schooling or employment, before they regain some
sense of personal agency. They are then able to add to their sense of self-worth the attainment of educational credentials or a job. There is a need to be introduced to options.

Employment can be a draw for youth or young adults as an interim step, a chance to practice being outside their former limits. “Work can be found punishing and work can be found rewarding. If it is found rewarding, then it seems likely to help desistance” (Maruna, 2001, p. 128). In order to obtain employment or enhance further education efforts, many times, youth or young adults who are ex-offenders will get a first taste of success in integration programs run by either charities or non-profit groups (Bell, 2007). Those who seek the support of such organizations want to change but lack the knowledge of any other sort of life besides what they have been experiencing. The reintegration programs are often the only avenue such youth or young adults have to gain exposure to and experience productive activities (Maruna).

Engaging in programs that offer a base of skills that can assist with entry into the workplace necessitates personal ownership of the process. There is commitment involved. There is also recognition of personal responsibility. Although it may be therapeutic for a person to locate the roots of his or her problem in the social environment (disadvantage, inequality, victimization), successfully desisting people seem to internalize complete responsibility for overcoming these obstacles (Maruna, 2001).

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Efforts to portray an individual’s sense of meaning are vulnerable to being interpreted through the interpreter’s frames of reference. It may not be possible to know what another person is thinking or feeling at any given time, nor may it be possible to understand how particular situations or conditions in a person’s life have affected who
they are in the current moment as compared to times previous. Determining what appears to be evidence of change is dependent, too, on what is valued. Then, a further layer of complexity to a full understanding of an individual comes with differences in socioeconomic level, educational attainment, language usage, racial and cultural background, gender and experiential background that may exist between the person to be understood and the person creating the understanding.

For a White, educated, middle-class female researcher to approach the life narratives of individuals who are potentially marginalized, poor, part of a racial minority, of the opposite gender with either disrupted or limited educational background, more than interest or empathy is required in order to respectfully and accurately reflect their experiences. A framework for understanding, for moving past language to intent, is required and may be found through theoretical constructs aimed at explaining how individuals encounter and embrace transformative change even while experiencing any number of the risk factors at a physical, psychological or social level. Through the use of such theoretical frameworks, data from the research conducted was considered from a common base.

**How Change Happens Within Us: The Transtheoretical Model**

Prochaska and associates developed the transtheoretical model, also known as the stages of change, in the early 1980s (Littell & Girvin, 2002) with the intent of integrating principles and processes of change that were drawn from leading theories of psychotherapy and behaviour change. It is based upon the understanding of behaviour change as one that unfolds over time and involves successful movement through a series of stages (Prochaska, 2008).
Six stages of change are identified: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation/determination, action, maintenance, and termination. Each one represents a meaningful step in a process to achieve successful, persistent behaviour change. When an individual is within a particular stage it is not an absolute lock-step journey to the next stage. It is possible the individual could get “stuck,” experience a relapse in behaviour or even leave the change process itself (Prochaska, 2008). Within this dynamic process an individual could be addressing several problems at the same time and be in a different stage of change for each of them (Moore, 2005).

Prochaska and Norcross (2001) consider precontemplation as the first stage. An individual would be in precontemplation if he or she had no intention of changing and displayed resistance or ambivalence to recognizing or modifying the problem behaviour. If an individual does change his/her behaviour due to pressure, either perceived or real, there is a reverting back to the original behaviour once the pressure is off. For an individual to move from precontemplation to the next stage, contemplation, there would be motivation that could come from some kind of biophysical dysfunction in one or more of the areas of medical/health, marital/familial, vocational/educational, financial/legal, social/leisure/recreational, spiritual/religious, cognitive/emotive. Similar in function to the disorienting dilemma of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), the biophysical dysfunction prompts the individual to consider the problem and how it affects him or her. Prochaska (2008) emphasizes that “twice as much emphasis should be placed on helping [individuals] appreciate the pros of changing than on decreasing the cons because the pros have to increase twice as much as the cons decrease” (p. 848) in order for an individual to move from the precontemplation to the contemplation stage.
In the contemplation stage, however, while there would be an increasing awareness of the negative outcome of such behaviour there would be no commitment to changing it. The individual would weigh the perceived benefits of making such a change to the perceived costs or barriers. As the decisional balance (Moore, 2005) moves toward the perceived benefits, the individual experiences an increase in self-efficacy.

It is during the *preparation/determination stage* that the individual is actually focused on pursuing a change of behaviour. It is at this stage that he or she is ready for such a change. As intention is combined with behavioural criteria for what must change, the individual experiences further increases in self-efficacy and commitment as a lead up to action.

In the *action stage*, the individual makes modifications to his or her behaviour and to what he or she experiences and/or the environment. Over a timeframe of approximately 6 months, sufficient lifestyle changes that may be cognitive, emotional or behavioural in nature are achieved. The individual appears to be noticeably different to others.

Once the person reaches the *maintenance stage*, efforts are expended to prevent regression or relapse, similar to Mezirow’s (1991) term of *backsliding*. As the individual continues to experience gains, he or she consistently demonstrates a new behaviour that is inconsistent with their former behaviour. For some individuals whose problematic behaviours involve addictions, the *maintenance* stage may be necessary for the rest of their lives.

The final stage is *termination*. This stage is reached when the negative, self-defeating behaviour has been replaced with a more desirable, self-affirming behaviour.
and the person is able to maintain the changed lifestyle with no temptation to revert back to the former behaviour. It is at this point the individual exits the change process.

**How Learning Can Change Us: Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning is a process that starts with what Mezirow (1991) termed a *disorienting dilemma* – a life event or incident experienced by a person as a crisis that he or she is not able to solve by employing current problem solving strategies. This experience may be in response to a number of dilemmas that causes the person to experience an accumulation of alterations in meaning perspectives. The person could experience a significant change in perspective due to an externally imposed, life-changing dilemma such as death, illness, separation or divorce, children leaving home, being passed over for a promotion or gaining a promotion, failing an important examination or retirement. Regardless, the disorienting dilemma experience can be unpleasant and laden with emotion.

Having experienced the first phase of perspective transformation through the disorienting dilemma, the individual then engages in *self-examination* that precipitates feelings of guilt or shame. This leads to an awareness of how and why his/her assumptions have come to restrict how he/she perceives, understands and feels about the world. As the individual engages in *critical self-reflection*, a revision occurs in the person’s belief system that allows for the integration of a more inclusive perspective. The individual experiences his or her own unhappiness and recognizes that he or she is not alone in the process – others have undergone something similar. As the process continues, the individual explores other options for roles and relationships and moves to *plan the actions* that will assist the change to occur. There is then the *acquisition of the*
knowledge and skills that are necessary to put the plan into action. The person engages in a provisional trying out of new roles that are consistent with his/her changed perspective. With practice comes increased competence and self-confidence as well as a comfort in the new roles and relationships. Finally, the individual operates within his/her life, making decisions and taking action, according to the new perspective (Mezirow, 1991).

Transformative learning theory lends itself to helping to explain the kind of internal change that would be necessary for an individual to make the transition from criminal to legitimate enterprise. An empowered sense of self, greater self-confidence in newly adopted roles and relationships, fundamental changes in the way an individual sees him/herself and life assumptions, use of more functional strategies for taking action and gaining control over life, increased connection with and compassion for others all have been noted in the literature as outcomes of transformative learning (Christopher et al., 2001).

Perspective transformation is, in essence, a social process. “Although we are encouraged to become increasingly self-directed in our learning as we grow older, the learning provided by our particular culture and by the idiosyncratic requirements of parents or parent surrogates is the learning that is rewarded” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 1). Mezirow describes the limits to our future learning as being “approved ways of seeing and understanding” (p. 1) that are all shaped by the language, the culture and the personal experience to which we are exposed. As an individual experiences change in self-perception and ways of interacting with the world, a feeling of empowerment emerges that, along with the previously mentioned outcomes, includes a willingness to try new skills and to teach others what has been learned (Christopher et al., 2001).
Once on the journey of transformative learning and when there has been a perspective transformation that is complete, the individual experiences a state that is irreversible (Mezirow, 1991). Until the time comes, however, that the journey toward perspective transformation is final, backsliding can occur. Individuals could repeat earlier phases or slip back and restart the process, sometimes with a further problem that provides another source of difficulty. It is a process that has to engender frustration, doubt and fear. The issue of recidivism in criminal behaviour appears to have a connection to the notion of backsliding noted in transformative learning theory. For some individuals, leaving behind a life of criminal activity may constitute a series of approximations.

**Summary**

The literature review contained within this Chapter 2 provided the Canadian historical context for the constructed identities of the subset of youth who engage in criminal behaviour. It highlighted how those identities have been impacted through the societal interpretations of fear, control, and blame through the evolution of Canada as a country. The roles of both the legal judicial and education systems in socializing Canadian youth for entry into the broader society were considered from the perspective of youth who face marginalization, racism and attitudinal suspicion as well as the risk factors that contribute to their experience of each. Finally, the two theoretical frameworks that guide the study in considering the phenomenon of change in the self-perceived identities of these youth in self as learner were explored.

Chapter 3 will detail the researcher’s use of a phenomenological research design that involves observation and interviews to investigate changes in perception of self as
learner through the lived experience of youth and young adults who had experienced lack of success in the regular education system, engagement in criminal activity, and participation in a portfolio learning process. Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological method is described in its use by the researcher to illustrate, analyse, and interpret the experiences of the youth and young adults. A description of the portfolio learning process and its usage within the study is also provided.
CHAPTER 3: NATURE OF THE STUDY

Overview

This phenomenological study sought to illuminate the meanings and understandings of the self as learner with youth and young adults who had engaged in a reconstruction of personal knowledge based on new experiences and reflection. While these individuals had experienced lack of success in the regular education system and engagement in criminal activity in the past, in the present they had experienced increased awareness of how they constructed knowledge and the source of their ideas, facilitated by the portfolio learning process. Through the personal lived experience of each of the study participants that focused on the phenomena of self as learner the understandings experienced were examined.

As this study sought to shed light on how individuals see themselves as learners, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology; it offered an approach to understanding an internal, complex process of self-discovery within human experience that is indecipherable to a traditional scientific method. Language plays a critical role in this research, as it allows the participants to recreate their experiences so they may be reviewed. It is through language that the researcher is allowed to participate, both in its coming forth and in the study of what it contains.

Qualitative Research

This human-science study employs qualitative research in eliciting lived experience of individuals.

[T]he difference between natural science and human science resides in what it studies: natural science studies “objects of nature,” “things,” “natural events,” and “the way that objects behave.” Human science, in contrast, studies “persons,” or
beings that have “consciousness” and that “act purposefully” in and on the world by creating objects of “meaning” that are “expressions” of how human beings exist in the world. (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 3-4)

Qualitative research, in employing various methods and processes, offers the opportunity for understanding human life through human experience. While the methods and processes differ from those in the pure sciences, there remains a demand for rigor. Shank and Villella (2004) identified four criteria that can be applied to qualitative studies:

- **Investigative depth** (something new has been uncovered that was not known or believed in relation to the issue being researched; the new understandings are “important and central” to understanding the issue being researched)

- **Interpretative adequacy** (insight has been given into the issue being researched through a “richer, more complex, yet understandable picture”)

- **Illuminative fertility** (measured through the “degree of divergences, subtlety, and nuanced insight” that is provided through the issue being researched by being approached in a new way), and

- **Participatory accountability** (the partnership that the researcher enters into with the study participants is marked by ethical practices; how the study was conducted is clear and understandable to readers of the study).

Through the words and emotions of the participants in this qualitative study, the essential nature of the self as learner is explored within a phenomenological approach with the goal of adherence to the criteria.
The Phenomenological Approach

Within the perspective of phenomenology, knowledge is what we each know, given to us through our conscious perception of things and through which we use language to bring it into our awareness. Not just a memory, a description of a phenomenon as experienced is a part of oneself, but from the perspective that exists through perception. It will be unique and individual for each person, even though the same phenomenon may have been experienced. Meaning, therefore, is critical. It is the essential interpretation offered by the consciousness of the individual. “[I]n the phenomenological tradition, phenomenology ... address[es] the meaning things have in our experience, notably, the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others, as these things arise and are experience in our ‘life world’” (Smith, 2008, n.p.).

Events, objects, things do not exist for humans aside from their interpretation of them within lived experience. A phenomenon is a named concept that comes to life through life, through lived experience. “It means the presence of any given precisely as it is given or experienced” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 2). To bring that life into life is to describe it, to place upon it the meanings that give it real-ness to the individual. How a person interprets his/her interaction with a thing or a situation is dependent on his/her conscious engagement with it. It is a self-affirming process of attachment to one’s own experience.

Phenomenology, then, is a process of making known the hidden through the description offered by those individuals who have a lived experience of a phenomenon. It centres on people, not on the objects or situations, but rather how humans interact with those objects or situations in a relationship of ‘relation to’. It is a bringing to view what it
is to be human within the experience of a phenomenon – a reflection of life through the mirror of experience.

Doing phenomenological research entails unravelling the internal structures of meanings, not to proving or demonstrating. There are no hypotheses that guide the work and which demand support. There are no truths to be confirmed. Phenomenological research begins with lived experience, the concreteness of life, and the unique. It is the essence which is explored. (Jurema, Pimentel, Cordeiro, & Nepomuceno, 2006, p. 7).

Moran (2000) describes phenomenology as a practice rather than a system, one that emphasizes getting to the truth of matters. It involves describing phenomena in the broadest sense – whatever appears in the manner in which it appears and it “manifests itself to consciousness” to the individual experiencing it. “This approach involves the practice of taking a fresh, unprejudiced look ... at the fundamental and essential feature of human experience in and of the world” (Moran, p. 1).

Moustakas (1994) describes the phenomenological approach as involving a “return to experience” where comprehensive descriptions are obtained that provide a basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience. The researcher gathers the original data through open-ended questions and dialogue and then describes the underlying structures of an experience based on reflective analysis and interpretation of the research participants’ descriptions of a situation in which the experience occurs. The intention is to ascertain what an experience means for those individuals who had it and who were able to provide a thorough description of it.

[Phenomenological research is phenomenological when it involves both rich description of the lifeworld or lived experience, and where the researcher has adopted a special, open phenomenological attitude which, at least initially, refrains from importing external frameworks and sets aside judgments about the realness of the phenomenon. (Finlay, 2009, p. 8)
In summary, within phenomenology, human beings are seen as intentional beings, with each individual actively constructing meaning as the world and objects are perceived. This does not mean that the physical world exists independent of perception but rather that the way in which such things exist to individuals is through the meanings they are given. The meaning for a phenomenon, then, is a result of the ways an individual has come to make sense of a particular aspect of the world. Within this study, it was the meaning of self as learner, based on lived experience that was sought.

**Research Design**

*The Phenomenon of [Re]Development*

Individuals participating in this study were youth or young adults who had been unsuccessful in the regular education system, had not achieved the credential of a Grade 12 certificate, and who had been involved with criminal behaviour. The phenomenon within this study was not the experience of success or failure, independent of each other, within the regular education system or, even, in the desistance from criminal behaviour. Rather, it was about the experience of transformative change occurring within an individual’s experience of self as learner through a process that broadened the personal meaning of success. This experience was premised upon how an individual perceives the world as it is influenced by how that individual perceives him- or herself. For youth who deviate from the norm, there is the potential that their thoughts about themselves, their understanding of the society in which they live and the experiences they have had within their families and neighbourhoods have contributed to a self-portrait that is limiting and self-destructive.
The role of education in its broadest sense is a core premise within this study yet the need for and value of education credentials is not discounted. Rather, it is the complementary melding of both the formal and the informal learnings that individuals accrue that is considered essential in how they perceive their own abilities, capabilities and achievements. These personal perceptions in turn influence further perceptions of self-efficacy and self-esteem. For youth who lack the formal learning and discount, or at best are unaware of, their informal learning, the results can be a renewing and repeating cycle of failure.

One tool that can be used to bring into awareness and affirm the informal learning an individual has achieved and that can open the doors to aspirations for formal learning is the portfolio learning process. This process has been, for the most part, confined in usage to Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition (PLAR). While this study had as one criterion for participant inclusion the completion of a portfolio learning process, it was used not for postsecondary credits but instead in an employment readiness program for individuals who had not completed high school. In a highly credentialed society, high school dropouts are at increasing risk of becoming marginalized in various ways. Informal learning has been found to play a “compensatory role” for individuals who want to participate in formal education and training but who face barriers that prevent that participation (Livingstone, Raykov & Turner, 2005).

The first step for recognizing all of someone’s learning is to think about the many experiences people have had in their lives: at home, at work, at school and in the community. The next step is to identify what has been learned through those experiences. The following step is to begin to collect or create samples that show what you have learned. (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 1)
Life experience is central to the process, and it is life experience that young adults have begun to accrue.

Through a process of identifying, assessing and recognizing “the full range of an individual’s skills, knowledge and capabilities irrespective of how and where they have been acquired” (Hill, 2002, p. 2), there is an opportunity for individuals to organize where they came from and where they are going. Participants can discover what is important in their lives; with that discovery comes the potential for a values shift and a change of direction.

An advantage of the portfolio learning process is that it “can take various forms and the outcomes can be used for a large number of purposes relevant to the goals of individuals, the labour market partners and society at large” (CAPLA, 1999, n.p.). Suited for individuals who are in a state of flux and who need the opportunity and support to conduct a comprehensive educational and work self-assessment, the portfolio learning process can help manage the challenges that come with change. It can provide a framework through which individuals can update their skills and knowledge over their lifetimes in a self-directed manner and help in the taking stock so as to make informed choices about personal goals. The individual, rather than being aside from the process, has an essential role in identifying and substantiating learning that is to be included in the portfolio; this then represents a comprehensive collection of information that documents that learning (Hill, 2002; Romaniuk & Snart, 2000).

**The Process of Recognizing Learning**

Within the portfolio development process there is recognition of formal learning as occurring within the context of an educational institution and is, therefore, designed,
structured and predetermined. Informal learning, in contrast, is recognized as occurring within the context of everyday life. It can be either consciously directed by the learner, or it may be encountered through day-to-day activities. With its lack of structure, informal learning is considered the most difficult to identify (Van Kleef, 2006).

It becomes challenging to describe what type of knowing is sought and how that may be expressed in the development of a portfolio. Equally challenging is the formulation of a description of how these various bits of knowing fit together and contribute to an individual’s understanding of the context from which he/she came.

Learning in general is understood as all the processes leading to permanent capacity change, whether it is physical, cognitive, emotional or social in nature, and which do not exclusively have to do with biological maturation. This means that the learning concept also spans such functions as personal development, socialization and qualification, as the difference between these terms mainly concern the perspective that is adopted…these functions can only be separated analytically and not in reality. (Illeris, 2003, p. 359)

Although PLAR, with its portfolio development process, has been used in countries for forty-plus years, there was little research done during that time that focused on its development and characteristics (Thomas, Collins & Plett, 2001). Today, PLAR has made “only limited inroads into the day-to-day practices of many postsecondary education institutions” (Van Kleef, 2006, p. 1) due to concerns of postsecondary educators around academic integrity, relevance of prior learning to postsecondary program learning requirements, and the potential for erosion of academic standards.

CAPLA has been in existence since 1994 and began this country’s exploration of PLAR, its applicability and usage, along with the portfolio learning process. While the usage of the portfolio process within PLAR has been focused on the knowledge, skills and attitudes that would facilitate the accrediting of informal learning, in Canada two
programs (Nunavut Arctic College, Nunavut; and First Nations Technical Institute [FNTI], in Ontario) using PLAR direct their usage intentionally toward personal transformation.

The use of portfolios is not confined to one group or to reflect one purpose. Saskatchewan Learning (2005) notes a range of applications of the portfolio process:

- Artists, students and teachers (highlighting achievements, demonstrating progress, and exploring career options)

- Professionals in the health field, such as nurses, pharmacists and doctors (recording professional development and ongoing learning) and

- Unemployed or underemployed individuals (serving as a process through which they can identify knowledge, skills and attitudes to create options for the future).

Across these various usages, it is the accompanying support the portfolio process gives to the enhancement of self-esteem that is so necessary to the building of careers (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005) and, one could argue, a life within legitimate society.

**The Portfolio Learning Process and the Assumptions of Andragogy**

The study was designed to invite the participation of youth and young adults who had been, or are, described as at risk. They would have reached the age of consent within the province of Saskatchewan and would have indicated through their association with a helping community agency both their understanding of the need to take steps to change their lives and their openness to reconsider themselves in terms of learning. These individuals would have the desire for more targeted learning that would provide them with what they would need to move toward a goal.
Christopher et al. (2001) describe learning within the adult education field as a process of using what has previously been understood to make a new interpretation of what has been experienced, and then using that new interpretation to guide future action. They indicate this involves a separation from formative influences and functions as well as the creation of new perspectives, all resulting in the achievement of a greater degree of self-determination.

Learning in adulthood, according to Illeris (2003), has some fundamental characteristics: first, adults will learn not what they have been told they must but, rather, what they want to learn based on what is meaningful to them; second, in engaging in that learning, adults will bring in the resources they already have in their learning; and third, adults will take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take.

Knowles (1981) outlines the assumptions underlying the process of learning for adults that are congruent with the portfolio learning process:

- **Concept of the learner.** There needs to be encouragement and nurturance of the movement from dependency to increasing self-directedness as adults have a deep psychological need to be self-directing even though in particular temporary situations they may be dependent.

- **Role of the learner’s experience.** An individual’s continually expanding background of experience becomes a rich resource for learning for both that individual and for others. An adult attaches more meaning to learning that is gained from experience than to learning that is passively received. The most effective techniques to facilitate learning for adults are experiential (for example, laboratory experiments, discussion, problem-solving cases, simulation exercises, field experience).

- **Readiness to learn.** An individual becomes ready to learn something when they experience a need to learn it in order to cope better with real-life tasks or problems. Conditions need to be created and access needs to be provided to the tools and procedures in order to discover a need to know. Learning programs organized around life-application categories in a sequence that recognizes the individual’s readiness to learn are essential.
- **Orientation to learning.** *Education* is seen as a process of acquiring increasing competencies that move an individual toward reaching full potential. The individual has a desire to apply the knowledge and skill gained in the present so he or she can live more effectively in the future. Learning experiences are developed to focus on competency-development categories that take advantage of the performance orientation to learning of an adult. (pp. 43–44)

The portfolio learning process incorporates each of these assumptions underlying the philosophy of adult learning that nurtures and affirms what an individual knows and what he/she can do as the basis for additional learning.

“A portfolio is a concept, process and a product” (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 2). Described as *learning documentaries*, portfolios are in essence formal documents that represent in a concrete way the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the individuals who construct them. The portfolio development process involves self-evaluation, introspection, analysis and synthesis. It is purposeful. The materials that are gathered and summarized validate the individual by highlighting his or her personal learning, interests and goals (Hill, 2004; Saskatchewan Learning). Considered works in progress, portfolios are intended to change over time in order to portray and represent the individuals as they themselves change and grow. While a valuable product is produced, the process of development itself assists individuals in analysing, understanding and explaining to others what they know, what they can do, and what they still need to learn (CAPLA, 2009).

If the intent of the portfolio is to be a record to demonstrate an individuals’ competency, it may contain the following (Hill, 2002; 2004):
• A personal profile (this may be in the form of a narrative that describes critical or pivotal events in the individual’s life and how those events have shaped the individual’s personal and occupational situation at the current time)

• Evidence of competencies drawn from day-to-day experiences

• Details of work on specific projects or initiatives

• Records and samples of previous learning.

Alternatively, if the portfolio is to represent a record of an individual’s learning and development over time, it may include (Hill, 2002; 2004):

• A personal profile (this may be in the form of a narrative that describes critical or pivotal events in the individual’s life and how those events have shaped the individual’s personal and occupational situation at the current time)

• A listing of personal, occupational and educational goals

• Evidence of competencies related to specific competencies and learning outcomes (this may consist of descriptions and/or documents that relate to specific competencies that the individual may have developed through work or experience).

Within the context of this study, this second usage of the portfolio is the one of import.

In the development phase, there are three basic steps to the construction of a portfolio (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). In Step 1, evidence, both of a specific and general nature, is collected by the individual constructing the portfolio that will demonstrate what he or she knows and can do across the various aspects that comprise his or her life. Each of the pieces of evidence is organized in a meaningful way in to some mode of collection, such as a binder, a CD, or a web page. In Step 2, the individual reflects on the meaning and relevance of the evidence that he or she has collected to his
or her life, and in Step 3, evidence is selected by the individual that most clearly represents the desired learning in relation to a desired goal (e.g., self-awareness, employment, accreditation, training).

Respecting the ongoing developmental nature of the portfolio, the breadth and depth of evidence contained is then reviewed and renewed on a regular basis so new pieces may be added, other pieces removed, or still others revised or adapted.

**Observations of the Portfolio Learning Process**

For this study, arrangements were made for observation sessions in which *all* the individuals within the Road to Employment program were actively engaged in constructing their portfolios. Within that overall group were those who would become the study participants. While engaging in observation of the portfolio learning process with all the participants in the Road to Employment program, the researcher was not aware who among the individuals within the program had expressed an interest in participating in the study.

The facilitators of the Road to Employment program presented the nature of the study to the group of potential participants using the information that had been agreed upon. Those who did express an interest were invited by the facilitators to complete an Informed Consent form (see Appendix G). The facilitators collected the completed forms and gave them to the researcher after the observation sessions had been conducted and prior to the scheduling of the first interview. Through the delay in finding out who had agreed to participate, the researcher was able to focus on the portfolio learning process
itself rather than centering observations on particular individuals during the observation sessions.

Details about the portfolio learning process were gathered by the researcher during the observation sessions as questions were asked and assistance was given. Individuals also spontaneously shared information with the group at large or the researcher in particular. A description of the portfolio learning process and the effect it had on those who participated was constructed through an analysis of the notes recorded during the observation sessions. The analysis of those observational notes reflected three interrelated areas of focus: (a) centering learning in relation to self, (b) reflection and reinterpretation, and (c) reframing as part of the [re]construction of self.

**Centring Learning in Relation to Self**

The Road to Employment program was comprised of a number of individual, yet related, workshops focused on life skills. The portfolio learning process was used to teach reflective thinking skills and document the individuals’ strengths and achievements through the life facets of family, education, work, interests/hobbies and volunteering. The portfolio held the summative representations of those strengths and achievements as well as the markers of successful completion, the certificates. In addition, a resume, drawing on each of the areas explored, was featured prominently at the beginning of the portfolio.

The portfolio represented for the participants a focus on oneself. It was a concrete illustration of the people, institutions, experiences that had meaning for the person who constructed it. Each one began with the same raw materials: a white binder, plastic protective sleeves, learning summary sheets, colour pens for the mind maps, blank sheets of paper, and the certificates earned thus far. It took time to assemble the individual
pieces takes time. A block of time, 1 to 2 hours once per week, was reserved to give individuals time to think and reflect.

**Reflection and Reinterpretation**

The reflection process is regarded as critical to the whole exercise and was taught gradually over time as the participants progressed through the Road to Employment series of workshops, using the content of each workshop as a springboard for discussion and thought. The portfolio came to represent the participants’ learning through the construction of the mind maps and learning summaries that were built and included in the appropriate sections of the portfolio. The facilitators used their own personal stories to illustrate or provide examples of circumstances, ideas or meanings for the individuals and encouraged them to relate the discussion to their own lives.

As the sections of the portfolio were independent of the Road to Employment workshops, individuals constructing their portfolios were given choice as to which section of the portfolio they felt comfortable working on at any given time. With the exception of the resume, each section followed a similar process, providing multiple opportunities for individuals to practice reflective thinking. For example, within the section ‘Family’, the individual constructed a mind map that identified people who had had a positive or negative effect (considered family) in his or her life. Then, the individual identified experiences that had involved those people in which something had been learned. The individuals learned as they proceeded that it was not just the words that promoted understanding in themselves or other people. It was the meaning of the experiences that the words expressed. It was the mind maps and the learning summaries
contained the words that conveyed the meaning the experiences had had for the individual.

The resume was constructed using a professional template within a software program on laptop computers brought in for individuals to use. Additions to each resume were based on what the individual had identified from working within a particular section. A significant amount of discussion occurred between the facilitators and the individuals. Questions that were posed related to the sequencing and formatting of the sections or the inclusion or exclusion of particular items. Queries also focused on the wording of certain pieces for clarity and understanding and on what prospective employers may be looking for in a portfolio.

Reframing as Part of the [Re]Construction of Self

Individuals were actively engaged in a process of revelation through the portfolio learning process. They used words, pictures and other items such as certificates earned to build a description of the journey that had brought them to that moment. Through the weeks and months, each individual at varying times gained the insight that self-understanding cannot be forced or mandated but rather discovered. Through that insight the individuals found their own sense of purpose behind the thoughts, ideas, perceptions and events that had guided their lives thus far.

Through a new perspective, individuals experienced a sense of being freed from the things in their past that they wished perhaps had been different. They had a new view of themselves that, in a sense, began their life story again. The starting point of the rest of their lives was in the present, although the past was not forgotten or denied. It served as a backdrop against which the forward movement was set.
Each individual gradually became aware of his or her own personal mission over the course of constructing the portfolio. Each was encouraged to see the ‘how’ of his/her contribution to the broader context of society. Through the development of their portfolios and the discussions that allowed for a rediscovery of their own essence, the individuals were encouraged to see themselves moving in the direction guided by their passion and purpose. Possibilities were to take the place of obstacles.

At times, individuals found a section of their portfolios difficult to complete. Memories that were painful caused delays. The inability to identify positive personal attributes that were part of their negative experiences prompted requests for help from the facilitators. It was when the experiences were considered for their value in providing learnings and those particular learnings were identified that the individuals moved on to examples of how they either currently demonstrated those learnings or could demonstrate them in life. The shape of past experiences shifted for the individuals. They came to understand at a personal level the often repeated statement that “everyone should have the ability to change.” Their portfolios were meant to be added to over time, incorporating more and more of who they were becoming. All the individuals understood this self-renewing aspect of their portfolio with increasing clarity as they returned, again and again, to its development after the completion of each workshop and the attainment of yet another goal.

**Role of the Environment in Influencing Change**

Because of the highly personal nature of the portfolio development process, the environment in which it is constructed needs to be one that fosters trust, openness, mutual respect and collaboration. All individuals participating must be able to feel safe and
comfortable exploring a range of life issues, experiences and feelings. The learning garnered through the portfolio development process is, by its nature, emotional.

The skill of the facilitator in modelling how to be present, supportive and encouraging is essential to the experience of the portfolio learning process (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). That individual must have an understanding of the markers or observable signs that occur when adult learners engage in a transformative personal journey. These markers are recognized through a process of affirming and reflecting what is felt by the individual engaging in the process. Language in oral and printed form has an essential role in the process in bringing into being the learnings that exist, but are unexpressed. The facilitator’s skills are essential in the encouragement of consideration of other angles or perspectives that may allow for additional insight.

An understanding of what occurs, and what needs to occur, when adults engage in a process of reflection and reinterpretation focused on the self to effect a [re]construction of the self may be assisted by Taylor (2000) who describes five Dimensions of Development. The first dimension, *toward knowing as a dialogical process* focuses on how knowing is constructed. The facilitator would centre learners in engaging the internal skills that seek, question, reframe, critique, synthesize, associate, and reflect. The second dimension, *toward a dialogical relationship to oneself*, focuses on how one’s knowing is made relevant to the self. The facilitator would engage learners in cognitive actions made visible through descriptions that address the internal discomfort that accompanies the loss of what was known when one is challenged by new knowing and how that change is accommodated within one’s meaning structure. The third dimension, *toward being a continuous learner*, focuses on how one opens the self to a continuous process of new
knowing. The facilitator guides the learners through an exploration of an internal openness to new learning, a process of assessment that considers what is needed based on that learning and the formation of intention to engage in the actions that will bring one closer to what is desired. The fourth dimension, *toward self-agency and self-authority*, focuses on the role one has in one’s own life. The facilitator would assist learners to see their lives as the result of choices made through their capacity as human beings influenced by culture and society. There would be encouragement to see past choices and future choices as part of a continuum of growth. Finally, the fifth dimension, *toward connection with others*, focuses on positive interdependency and the ability to effect change in others as one works at change in one’s self. The facilitator would assist the learners in seeing themselves and their actions as part of a bigger whole in which their actions had an influence on the way life is led.

Using the Five Dimensions of Development, the actions of a skilled facilitator within a supportive environment can encourage adult learners to expand the horizons of their perceptions through dialogue with themselves (internal) and others (external). This process is remarkably congruent with the goals of the portfolio learning process set within the life skills programming offered through the Road to Employment program. *How* the portfolio learning process could have a transformative effect on the participants becomes clearer through the tapping into the power of language within internal as well as external dialogue. The description of an evolving, growing self who can engage with the world of ideas and learn from experience; who can examine and challenge assumptions; who can, through self-reflection, arrive at thoughtfully considered commitments; and who relates to others from a place of mutual enhancement rather than need (Taylor, 2000, p. 159)
fits with the outcomes of the portfolio learning process. Taylor noted that while the elements are placed within a category they are not exclusive to that category. Necessarily, there is overlap and interdependence among them; an individual’s experience of the dimensions is not lock-step, but rather is fluid. This also is congruent with the learnings accrued through the portfolio learning process. Through the skilled guidance of the facilitator, the portfolio learning process is more than a tool; it becomes a catalyst for, and an expression of, personal change.

Others have noted the rewarding nature of the construction of a personal portfolio; it rests on a new awareness of what one knows and has learned outside of the formal education system and the accompanying gratification of having that learning taken seriously and affirmed as valuable (Thomas et al., 2001). For individuals who have completed portfolios, it is often reported that they find they are now able to reflect upon and evaluate the performances of others as well as their own. With this increased sensitivity and self-confidence, they are able to recognize competence in action and to acknowledge it more quickly and accurately (Hill, 2004).

**The Researcher Role**

The researcher was fully aware that through the implementation of the design of the proposed research study and the collection of data, she would become significantly more aware of the role those who are White, middle-class, and educated had had in perpetuating the oppressive attitudes, beliefs, policies and practices that have significantly disadvantaged those who may consent to be part of the study. It was also recognized that such awareness may, as Freire (1970) indicates, “cause considerable anguish.” As an educator, who has a career focus on children and youth with disabilities,
the researcher necessarily was cognizant of the responsibility that accompanies such awareness as may be gained through this study.

To allow the research to lead, the researcher closely examined her own bases of prior knowledge, training, experience and perspective in an effort to set aside her own preconceived expectations and judgments. The goal was to enter each interview session with new eyes and the intention of listening to what was presented through the words and behaviour of the study participants. The researcher affirmed, and reaffirmed, to herself prior to each interview the commitment to allowing the participants to tell their stories of their lives and experiences without researcher bias or influence.

The researcher recognized that the portfolio learning process has the potential to facilitate transformative learning which prompted the choice of it as a process tool. The researcher also recognized that the potential for the actual occurrence of transformative learning rested on both the openness of the individuals within the Road to Employment program to engage in the portfolio learning process and the skill level of the facilitator guiding the process. However, each of these elements was beyond the control of the researcher.

**Potential Outcomes for the Individuals Participating**

Should the study participants fully engage with a skilled facilitator, the researcher considered the possibility that a range of outcomes may be experienced as drawn from CAPLA (1999; 2010), Brown (2002), Hill (2002), and Saskatchewan Learning (2005):

- Out of engagement with the portfolio learning process, the study participants may emerge with a concrete representation of their personal lived experience that has, or will continue to, influence their personal perception of themselves as learners.
• They may have engaged in their own process of interpretation using the collection of evidence of their knowledge, skills, resources, supports, hopes, goals and passions.

• Through the time period in which they engaged with the development of their portfolio, they may have become aware of the meanings they themselves ascribe to their life experiences and see what shapes their world through their own expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes and judgments.

• They may identify which of their own beliefs are problematic to them within their lives.

• They may learn to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions (Freire, 1970) active in their own lives that have been delimiters and in that recognition they may be able to move to making informed and reflective decisions to act based on their reflective insight.

• Through the naming of their personal experiences, they may become acquainted with their voice and become aware of how they learn.

For the participants, the portfolio learning process has the potential to be a form of assessment, an affirmation of progress and a stimulus for action through which the participating individuals come to perceive themselves differently as learners, influencing their personal life choices. It would be the hope that such choices would move them in a direction away from any potential re-involvement with the criminal justice system.

**Explication of the Data**

Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological method has within it four processes: (a) epoche, (b) phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) synthesis. *Epoche* (a Greek term meaning open-mindedness) involves suspension – the
neutralizing of natural intentions. In epoche, prejudgments, biases and preconceived ideas on the part of the researcher are set aside. “The phenomenological epoche does not eliminate everything, does not deny the reality of everything, does not doubt everything – only the natural attitude, the biases of everyday knowledge, as a basis for truth and reality” (p. 85).

The second process, *phenomenological reduction*, involves description using textural language “just what one sees.” This is in terms of both the external (the object)/internal (the act of consciousness) and the relationship that is between the phenomenon and the self. “The qualities of the experience become the focus; the filling in or completion of the nature and meaning of the experience becomes the challenge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Moustakas describes phenomenological reduction as assuming the character of “graded pre-reflection,” “reflection” and “reduction” with focused efforts directed at illuminating the essential nature of the phenomenon. This may include perceiving, thinking, remembering, imagining, judging, all in an effort to extract content. “Phenomenological Reduction is not only a way of seeing, but a way of listening with a conscious and deliberate intention of opening ourselves to phenomena as phenomena, in their own right, with their own textures and meanings” (p. 92).

The third process, *imaginative variation*, involves the researcher inferring a range of possible meanings for what has come through the interview. “In Imaginative Variation the world disappears, existence is no longer central, anything whatever becomes possible” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). It is not facts and “measurable entities” that are of interest but rather meanings and essences. Moustakas outlines four steps the researcher takes in imaginative variation:
• systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings
• recognition of the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon
• consideration of the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others
• search for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomena. (p. 99)

The fourth process recommended by Moustakas (1994) is that of *synthesis of meanings and essences*, which results in a unified description of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon. Looking at the phenomenon from a holistic perspective, the researcher seeks the meaning that was ascribed to the experience.

The application of these processes, which are abstract in nature, requires concrete tasks. Moustakas (1994) outlines four phases to the conduction of human-science research: (a) preparation, (b) collection of data, (c) organizing/presenting/analysing the data, and (d) summary/implications/outcomes. Within each are tasks that fulfil the purpose of the phase.

1. In the *preparation* phase, the researcher:
   • chooses a topic, formulates the research question (that is steeped in autobiographical meanings and values as well as social meanings and significance) and defines the key words within it to clarify both the intent and the purpose of the research efforts
   • reviews the relevant literature connected to the research question and identifies the gap in the literature which the study will address
   • develops criteria for the location and selection of the research participants and makes contact with them to obtain informed consent, provide assurance of
confidentiality, make arrangements for a time and place for the interviews, and receives each participant’s permission to record the interview and use the data in a published document

- constructs instructions and questions or topics for the interview process designed to generate data for the analysis.

2. During the collection of data phase, the researcher,

- engages in the epoche process prior to the interview to create climate and rapport for the interview
- brackets the question so that no position is taken either for or against the topic
- guides the interview process to draw out the descriptions of the experience.

3. The third task of organizing/presenting/analysing the data, requires the researcher to:

- consider each statement for significance in the description of the experience
- record relevant statements
- derive meaning or meaning units through the listing of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements
- cluster the meaning units into common categories or themes
- describe the textures of the experience (developed through a synthesis of the meaning units and themes with verbatim examples)
- construct the researcher’s description of structures of her own experience (through imaginative variation)
- construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience
construct a textural-structural description for each research participant of the meanings and essences of the experience

construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole from the individual textural-structural descriptions of all participants’ experiences.

4. The final phase in which there is the development of summary/implications/outcomes, Moustakas (1994) recommends the researcher:

- summarize the entire study and consider potential limitations
- distinguish the findings of the study from prior research and outline a future research project that would further advance knowledge on the topic, and,
- provide a discussion of the results of the study in terms of social meanings and implications as well as personal and professional values.

Research Procedures

After approval was granted by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board for this qualitative study (see Appendix H), the Executive Director of Rainbow Youth Centre located in Regina, Saskatchewan, was contacted by the researcher to determine whether there was interest in being the cooperating agency for the study. The researcher made the choice to approach Rainbow Youth for a number of reasons: it offers a number of services to individuals between the ages of 19 and 25, the age span associated with youth and young adults; youth released from the custody facility in Regina are frequently referred to Rainbow Youth to access the offered programming; attainment of a General
Education Diploma (G.E.D.) was one of the outcomes of the programming; and the portfolio learning process had been incorporated into one of the programs offered.

The researcher was aware of Rainbow Youth prior to contacting the agency but had not been in the facility. One of the facilitators was known to the researcher because of attending a common training session on implementing the portfolio learning process. None of the individuals accessing the services of Rainbow Youth were known to the researcher. The researcher made contact with the facilitator with whom she had acquaintance to inquire about the usage of the portfolio learning process within the agency and received information about the Road to Employment program that incorporated its usage. Further contact was made with the Executive Director to determine potential interest in facilitating the study. When an indication of interest was given preparations for the study were begun.

**Preparation Phase**

An information sheet concerning the research study (see Appendix I) was provided to the Executive Director to facilitate internal discussions. After an initial meeting with the Executive Director, and a further meeting with the program facilitators, the organizational details of the invitation to participate, informed consent forms and the procedures for the interviews and observations were collaboratively developed.

The program facilitators presented the factual details about the study, outlined the criteria to be involved in it, and provided the letter of invitation to participate to all 18 of the individuals that were currently enrolled in the agency program Road to Employment (see Appendix J). As the program facilitators had discussed the study in depth with the researcher, they responded to initial questions that emerged in the group discussion. The
facilitators made clear that the agency was facilitating the research study, but involvement in it was voluntary.

The researcher was introduced to the Road to Employment clients during a class session and was invited to sit in to observe for the remainder of the morning. A second observation occurred the following week over the same time period. During each of the observation sessions, the researcher sat quietly, but did interact with individuals when contact was initiated. Observations were recorded by the researcher to be part of the data for the study.

Individuals within the program interested in participating in the study self-identified, by indicating their interest to the facilitator of their choice. The facilitators were aware of the backgrounds of the clientele and confirmed that the potential study participants were over the age of 18. Those who indicated an interest in the study were provided an Informed Consent form (see Appendix H). Six individuals indicated interest and completed the consent forms. Once completed, the original forms were given to the researcher and copies were placed in the agency’s client files. Each individual was told they were to choose a facilitator to support them during the interview.

**Collection of Data Phase**

The interviews took place over the months of March and April, 2011. All interviews were held within the Rainbow Youth facility since the agency is considered a safe place for the clientele, is accessible to them in terms of transportation options and would not interfere with their attendance in the Road to Employment program. The interviews were held away from the classroom area in a private room that held a table and chairs. The researcher arrived at Rainbow Youth 15 minutes prior to the scheduled
interview times to set up; at the scheduled interview time the facilitator would come with the scheduled study participant.

The study participant sat with the researcher at the table, while the facilitator sat on the sofa a distance away. All interviews were taped. Each interview followed the same format with the researcher following a schedule of introductory comments to ensure consistency (see Appendix E).

A list of potential questions, with accompanying potential prompts and exploratory clarifying comments, was developed by the researcher to guide the interview process in eliciting qualitative data without scripting or manipulating responses (see Appendix F). The questions were formulated so as to have the characteristics noted by Moustakas (1994) as essential for human science. They were to: (a) seek to reveal essences and meanings of human experience, (b) seek to uncover qualitative factors in behaviour and experience, (c) engage the “total self” of the study participant in personal and passionate involvement, (d) avoid predicting or determining causal relationships, and (e) illuminate through careful, comprehensive descriptions rather than measurements, ratings or scores. The questions were also worded in a manner that was both understandable to the study participants and reflective of the focus of the study.

The process of question usage was informal. Only those questions that assisted in the data collection were used. Other questions that followed the flow of conversation were formulated by the researcher during the interview process. The researcher made detailed notes after each interview, recording observed behaviours of the participants and personal reflections of the participants’ demeanour and presentations.
The interviews were ended when the study participants exhibited interview exhaustion evidenced by repetition of previous statements, restlessness, and difficulty maintaining focus. At the conclusion of the interview, the participants were given a Walmart gift card for the amount of $50 as a thank you for their participation. None of the participants had been told about the gift card prior to its presentation to the first participant.

A follow-up interview was scheduled with each participant one week after the first interview. Additional open-ended questions had been prepared by the researcher (see Appendix G) for the follow-up interview that flowed from the content of the first interview. These questions were either used or not used as appropriate within the course of the conversations in the follow-up interviews. During the follow-up interviews participants were provided a written transcript of their initial interviews. All participants had the opportunity to add or clarify information as they read through the data they had provided.

At the conclusion of the follow-up interview, each participant received a gift card for Tim Hortons in the amount of $20 as a thank you for continued participation. As before, none of the participants had been told about the gift card prior to its presentation to the first participant. However, over the course of the data collection, the study participants had communicated with each other and the subsequent presentation of the gift card was known to each after the first follow-up interview.

After each follow-up interview, the researcher made further detailed notes of observed behaviours of the participants and the researcher’s own personal reflections of
the participants’ demeanour and presentation. All six of the participants completed both interviews.

**Organizing/Presenting/Analysing the Data Phase**

All interview sound files were numbered and sent to a bonded transcription service later on in the same day each interview was conducted. Each interview was transcribed to a Word file and returned to the researcher by e-mail attachment. The researcher renamed each sound file and transcript using only the single name the study participant had given the researcher permission to use.

The researcher proceeded to engage in the process of analysis of the data according to the suggested process offered by Moustakas (1994) and noted earlier in this chapter. The researcher sought to determine generalities from the specific and particular information the interviews had provided.

**Summary/Implications/Outcomes Phase**

The researcher worked to arrive at synthesis, with the achievement of “intuitive integration” as the goal. She strove to realize “composite textural and composite structural descriptions to develop a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon experienced” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 181). This study answered the question: *What happens when a youth or young adult who had been unsuccessful in the regular education system and involved in criminal behaviour experiences being a learner through a portfolio learning process?*
Summary

Chapter 3 detailed the researcher’s use of a phenomenological research design involving observation and interviews to investigate changes in perception of self as learner through the lived experience of youth and young adults who had experienced lack of success in the regular education system, engagement in criminal activity and participation in a portfolio learning process. Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological method was described in its use by the researcher to illustrate, analyse and interpret the experiences of the youth and young adults. A description of the portfolio learning process and its usage within the study was provided.

To ensure compliance with the University of Regina Research Ethics Board, informed consent guidelines and to model effective practice in human-subject research, study participants were assured their participation was voluntary and were provided with verbal and written explanations of the purpose of the research study, how their information would be used and how the confidentiality of their participation would be safeguarded. Prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all study participants regarding the process, content and use of the interview materials.

Chapter 4 will provide a detailed description of the stories of the lived experience that were drawn from interviews. From the analysis of the stories of lived experience the researcher will: (a) describe what happens when a youth or young adult who had been unsuccessful in the regular education system and involved in criminal behaviour experiences being a learner through a portfolio learning process, (b) explore the meanings associated with the experiences of the participant, and (c) outline the major distinctions in thematic content meanings emerged. The relevance of the concepts found within the
literature presented in Chapter 2 will be considered and the applicability of
transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) and the transtheoretical model of change
(Prochaska & Di Clemente, 1982) to the results will be discussed.
CHAPTER 4: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected from each of two interviews with six participants who had engaged in a portfolio learning process within the Road to Employment program offered through Rainbow Youth, a local, non-profit organization providing services to youth and young adults. This study engaged participants who had experiential similarities in three areas: (a) their lack of success in the regular education system, (b) their significant encounters with the legal system, and (c) their demonstrated willingness to engage in a change process. These participants were engaged in order to provide insight into the research question: What happens when a youth or young adult who had been unsuccessful in the regular education system and involved in criminal behaviour experiences being a learner through a portfolio learning process?

To allow for a full description of the experience of self as learner after engagement in a portfolio learning process, the researcher asked questions that invited the participants to compare and contrast their past and present perceptions of their learning experiences that contributed to their sense of ‘learner self’. This chapter, therefore, presents the findings that arose from both their recollections and present perceptions and the themes that emerged. In addition, it provides descriptive information concerning the commonalities and differences among participants and limitations that pertain to the data collected and interpreted.

Description of Participants

Six individuals who were part of the Road to Employment program consented to be participants in the study. Two participants were male; four were female. At the time of the interviews, the participants ranged from 19 to 25 years of age (i.e., five were from 19
to 22 years of age; one was 25). The descriptive information about the participants that follows emerged through the interview process and was offered by the participants as part of their reconstructed description of their experiences of being a learner.

**Provincial Jurisdiction for Education**

All participants had been within the Saskatchewan K to 12 education system, although one had moved away and received 1 year of elementary education in rural British Columbia before returning to Saskatchewan.

**Urban/Rural**

Although Regina had been the home city for all the participants, one had attended school for a period of time on a First Nations reserve, and two others had spent some time within rural high school settings.

**Separate/Public School Division Affiliation**

Two participants had attended Catholic schools for a length of time at the elementary and high school level, but one of the two had moved back and forth between the public school division and the Catholic school division. The remaining four had received their education consistently within the public school system.

**Effect of Regular High School**

All participants spoke of the unsuitability of the regular high school structure and its physical environment for their learning needs. For each of the participants who had experienced success in an alternative program setting, the return to regular high school,
after a school-division determined length of time, was the final demise of their experience in the regular education system.

**Educational Level**

None of the participants had a Grade 12 diploma, although one had completed Grades 10 and 11 and was two credits short of a full Grade 12. Over the course of the Road to Employment program, four of the participants had gained a General Education Diploma (G.E.D.). None had returned to complete a regular Grade 12.

**Regular or Alternative**

Of the six participants, one had entered a regular high school with no specialized programming for youth at risk as a student. The remaining five had been initially registered in high schools that had specialized programming that complemented the regular high school offerings, was structured to facilitate the learning needs of Aboriginal youth or offered modified academic programming complemented by an emphasis on vocational training for youth not able to succeed in the regular course offerings.

While all the participants had been registered in alternative programs (settings offering regular, modified or qualitatively different curricular options), three discontinued shortly after entry, while three continued on within that placement with some measure of success for a limited period of time. Of the three experiencing success within an alternative program, two were placed back into a regular high school setting; the third chose to leave the program and not return.

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3 Specific descriptions of the alternative programs attended by the participants have not been included within the study due to the high potential that the programs and the facilitating school divisions would be identified.
For the two participants who had been placed back into a high school setting, there was a reengagement with troublesome behaviours and both dropped out shortly after entry.

**Identified Disabilities**

Although all the participants identified they had experienced learning difficulties in school, one reported having been diagnosed with a learning disability. A further participant self-identified as having bipolar disorder, a mental health condition. Participants who found the learning of the academic content difficult within the structure of the school setting faced a further source of messages of deficiency. This occurred primarily through the additional labelling that arose through the diagnosis of the learning disability or the mental-health condition and the subsequent separation from peers in order to receive specialized programming in special education outside the regular classroom. In the process of segregating with the intent to make a positive difference, the effect was to further emphasize difference(s) about the participants as perceived by other students and the teachers. This, in turn, contributed to an escalating internalisation by the participants of the message that education was inaccessible to students like them.

**Academic Gaps**

All the participants were clearly aware that their movement from grade to grade involved what they termed a ‘social pass’. The isolated times in certain grade levels when they felt effective as learners stood out in stark relief against their overall perceptions of being sent on to the next grade. They knew they had educational gaps. They knew these gaps became wider and wider with time. The movement on to the next grade with their
peers did not make them feel included. Rather, the feeling of exclusion was fed by the lack of proficiency that had grown over time and was, by now, obvious.

**Need for Connection with Teachers**

The need for connection with teachers was common to all the participants. To be included - seen, recognized and valued as an individual - was strongly expressed. Communication was the key element they attributed to that connection. All the participants spoke of their latent desire to talk with a teacher, to be understood, and to be cared for within the context of being educated. It was during the elementary years that this need was most acute and, during which, was identified as missing. As elementary school formed the base of the majority of schooling experienced by the participants, the absence of meaningful communication coloured their memories.

**Critical Incident with Teachers**

All but one of the participants identified painful associations with schooling and teachers. Critical memories were attached to reactions teachers had had to them as young children in elementary level education. Elements contained within the memories were associated with one or more of the following: ethnicity, school-to-school transiency, challenging behaviour, presence of learning difficulties, challenging family circumstances, and low academic achievement.

It is imperative to note that while the actions and words of teachers took on hurtful significance to the participants, not all teachers displayed behaviour and attitudes that were destructive. Some participants recalled circumstances in which a particular teacher made attempts to reach out and support; however, it was clear that there was
cumulative damage to their perceptions of themselves, built on consistent messages of deficiency, which rendered such efforts ineffective.

**Transiency**

The serial attending of multiple schools was common among all the participants. It was linked to experiences of exclusion and disinivation as well as educational gaps resulting in low academic achievement. For one participant exclusion provided a welcomed escape from being bullied and physically threatened. Even though this ‘educational transiency’ was at times related to family or personal circumstances, it most often was part of a repetitive cycle of determined deficiency. The participants’ own behavioural reactions to that determination of deficiency most often incited a move to a new location where the same patterns reoccurred.

**Sporadic Attendance**

All participants had been actively engaged in skipping school. The majority started that behaviour in late elementary school. High school saw significant increases in skipping school and was, for the majority of participants, accompanied by substance use.

**Substance Use**

There were two ways in which substance use figured largely in the peer groups that the participants entered: either the participants, already using substances, gravitated toward peers who were also using substances or the participants used substances as a consequence of entry into the peer group well-established in a substance-use subculture. Either way, the participants were using substances to a degree that placed their cognitive and physical selves in danger.
The role of substance use in the lives of the participants was extensive. While the feelings of being lesser were dulled by drugs and/or alcohol, so was the ability to absorb the content of classes in school. While in regular high school settings, the participants attended classes high or left school in order to get high. They identified the distractive and limiting nature of trying to fulfil the learning and work requirements while under the influence of one or more substances. All participants were clean at the time of the interview and had been that way for varying lengths of time prior to beginning the Road to employment program.

**Self-Harm Activities**

Self-harm activities were not only restricted to substance use for one participant. Cutting, making scratches or cuts on one’s body deep enough to break the skin and make it bleed, is a form of self-injury. While more common with girls than boys, and younger teens than adults, for all, it is a way of coping with the difficulties of strong emotions, intense pressure or unsettling relationship problems. For the one participant, the visible scars are a clear reminder of the feelings that appeared, at the time, to be too difficult to bear.

**Dropping Out**

All six of the participants had dropped out of high school: four had dropped out in Grade 9; one had dropped out in Grade 10; one had completed Grade 11, but dropped out in Grade 12.
Ethnicity

All but one of the participants self-identified through their interviews that they were Aboriginal. Ethnicity emerged as both a self-knowledge of being different and being treated as different. While the participants were themselves aware they were of a different ethnic group than their peers within the regular classroom setting, they perceived their own lives within the cultural and circumstantial immediate environment to be ‘normal.’ It was what they knew and how they formed the basis of their worldview. They did not have the same perceptions of themselves as those who were part of a different, majority ethnic grouping. A disconnect between who they saw themselves to be and who they were perceived to be, based on how they were perceived, caused considerable angst.

Family Characteristics

Five of the participants identified through their interview data that they were from single parent homes at some period of their school lives. One participant would not mention family even though invited to through questioning. Of the five who spoke of their families, all were from lone-parent families headed by a female. One of the participants identified a supportive male in a living relationship with the parent. One of the participants identified long periods of time in foster care.

Siblings

Four of the participants identified having younger or older siblings. The remaining two participants would not speak of siblings although invited through questioning.
**Family Support for Education**

Family support for the need to go to school was evident and clear to the majority of participants. The ability of their families to engage in interactive support for them with the school was challenged by various circumstances – parental absence because of work responsibilities; participants’ extended separation from family because of moving into foster care, moving in with other family members, or spending time in a youth facility; or family members’ own anxieties, negative experiences, or disconnections with school. While there were a range of family issues that made collaboration with the school difficult for the family members themselves, the effect of that difficulty was further entrenchment of negative perceptions, both perceived and felt, by the participants.

**Progression to Aggressive Behaviour With Peers**

Participants described their external behaviour in elementary school as being problematic, due to overt social involvement with peers, or quiet and withdrawn in response to internal anxiety about their lack of fit. However, all, by middle to late elementary school, eventually engaged in behaviour that was either emotionally or physically aggressive toward others. For the males, aggressive behaviour was related to issues of self-protection. For the females, it was related to retribution for bullying or victimization they had experienced. For both genders, such behaviour served to increase the already significant perceptions of them as being outside while still physically present inside the school environment. They were aware they did not belong.
Attachment to Own Peer Group

Through the perception of not belonging came a strengthened need to belong that would leave them open to acceptance within a peer group made up of others in like circumstances. All the participants described their inclusion in a peer group that propelled them into risky behaviours while it allowed them a sense of connection. All the participants got involved with substance use through peers. Finally, all participants engaged in externalising behaviours – such as drug use, violence, skipping school, illegal activities – prompted by peers that had significant, negative effects on their lives.

Self in Parental Role

Three of the six participants had had children of their own. Of those three, two were active in the role of parenting. Another participant was pregnant with her first child at the time of the interview.

Employment Experience

Two of the six participants identified themselves as having entry-level employed work experience.

The Lived Experience of Learners

All the participants were candid and forthcoming. Each story of experiences is presented with quotes from individual transcripts. In the few instances where there are words substituted for those of the participant, brackets appear around the substituted words which serve to clarify intent and remove names or identifiers. Material determined to be extraneous or redundant was not included. Full transcripts of the interviews are not included because of confidentiality agreements with the participants. In addition, any
reference to names of school divisions, schools, teachers or any other individual has been removed to ensure the focus remains on the learning experience itself.

The researcher, in keeping with the principles of phenomenology, attempted to set aside preconceived notions and expectations. The goal was to listen to what the participants shared with new eyes, giving the space in which their stories could be told without researcher bias or influence. To clearly illuminate the meanings drawn from the interviews participant quotes are used. Quotations were chosen based on: (a) their existence within the transcribed interview with the participants, and (b) their representation of the meaning identified.

Jeremy

Learning and Learner Experiences From the Past

For Jeremy, the experience of being a learner as an elementary student was characterized by transiency. For him, making social connections with his peers was challenging:

I moved from schools lots, I guess, so I wasn’t exactly in school very long ... I still passed and I didn’t do nothing ... I don’t know, normal, I guess. Just another school. I think that’s probably why I don’t like to make friends because you never stay long enough to keep them and get comfortable enough to actually keep in contact with them.

His experience was different from his older siblings. His eldest brother lived with his grandparents while his next two brothers went to residential school. The separation from his siblings during those years did not, however, diminish his sense of connectedness.

I didn’t like seeing them go and come back every year for 2 months and then leave again for the full year. I was still pretty close to them when they did

Note. Participant quotes are presented in block-quote format and are italicized.
come back, like even though they were gone for a long period of time, I’m not going to forget they’re my brothers.

He experienced his own separation from family because of being in a series of foster care arrangements. His relationships with the foster parents with whom he was placed were filled with angst. His sense of bewilderment at unknown rules and of hurt left deep memories.

They were supposed to be Christians but they were just mean people. I went to school one day ... I got dressed that morning and went to school. All of a sudden the teacher was taking me home because I put on the wrong outfit ... [the foster parent] had called the school. I remember walking down the street and I could hear her [the teacher] being mad because she had to walk me home, just because I didn’t put on the right outfit. That’s all I remember from that school, being walked home because I didn’t put on the clothes the foster mom wanted me to .... I don’t know. I just didn’t see any difference in the outfit I picked and the one she picked. I don’t know. She was just a mean woman.

The experience of foster care carried over to his perceptions of himself within the school. The level of emotion influenced the level of cognitive engagement.

I was in foster homes a long time. With other families. At [name of school]. I didn’t like going there because I was in a foster home with my brother and I just felt bad....I think I was there for a year but during that time I don’t remember school. I know I went to school but the only thing I remember about school is leaving school and how mean those people were. We were foster kids but we were still kids.

The loneliness lay under the surface as Jeremy struggled to come to a sense of who he was and what his options were.

I had friends but I didn’t really connect with a lot because I didn’t want to hear “come be this ... do that with us” like getting in trouble. I didn’t want to be part of the bad life.

Learning, to him, seemed to be narrowly focused, belonging in the school environment and had little to do with his own life, his own worries, and his own needs.

Even though Jeremy went to school each day in his elementary years he lacked the
knowledge or the self-regulation skills of what was required as appropriate school behaviour.

*I guess I was talking out in class and ... I was just fooling around with the other students and I guess I caused more problems than the other students.*

Causing problems for the teachers is a recurring description of Jeremy’s elementary school years. The majority of the teachers he had were not able to see past the behaviour and he felt the disconnect. Much of his early learning experiences were characterized by being isolated in a time-out room for the length of his school day every day he attended.

*I was in a room. They would give me the work and I would just sit there and not do it because I was always in that room, never had a break from that room. I would go to school and it was straight to the time-out room. I just slept in there and didn’t do nothing. I still passed and I don’t understand how that happens. I don’t remember getting recess or breaks. I’d have lunch but after lunch I would go back to the room.*

During the time of isolation he was provided the curricular materials but not the instruction.

*No, I just got the work given to me and was expected to do them alone. I was in maybe Grade 4 or 5.*

Jeremy did not understand the relevance of what he was supposed to learn in relation to his life context nor did he have an understanding of the expectations of him as a student. Home-school communication was reserved for disciplinary discussions.

The connection to, or lack of connection with, teachers provoked significant and emotional memories for Jeremy. One memory in particular still had the ability to change his pace of breathing, cause his voice to lower to almost a whisper and make his hands tremble in the telling. He described how, as a young child, he had one teacher with whom he would joke and who appeared to be able to handle his in-class behaviour. What meant
the most for Jeremy was that she responded to him in the same way that she responded to other children. To him, that indicated she cared.

_She would just do what a teacher does, I guess. Tell me to listen, sit down, and pay attention._

He remembers that she had to leave her position due to an illness in the mid-fall. A substitute teacher was hired, but that teacher, as others, was unable to see beyond the goofing around behaviours. Jeremy had been spending time in a room beside the principal’s office during the school day. One day the teacher who had left due to illness came back to the school in the afternoon.

_I don’t think my actual teacher even cared because she came back for a concert or something that the school was having and she didn’t even come to check on me. I still remember that because we were close before she left and I figured she’d ask about me or even come to see me in the office because I was just like around the corner from the front desk._

Jeremy waited but the teacher never came.

As the years passed, Jeremy experienced multiple changes in living arrangements and school placements. While external situations and conditions were in flux for him, internally his perceptions and emotions connected to schooling and learning remained constant. Living on his own at 16 with a friend, Jeremy continued to experience loneliness and anxiety but now it was within the regular high school setting. The stratification of students within the environment was obvious to him and, rather than face the pain of rejection, he chose nonparticipation.

_I guess it was the environment ... I wasn’t really comfortable enough to be around the people because people choose their little groups I guess and I didn’t like being in a group or anything._

The lack of connection with teachers felt during his elementary schooling years influenced his behaviour as a learner in high school.
If I didn’t understand something I didn’t ask. That’s something with me in high school... I never asked and I knew that teachers were there to help me but it just bothered me to ask. I just felt dumb. I don’t know why but I just did. Teachers always told me to ask for help and I never did. I think that’s partly why I goofed off and joked around.

As with elementary school, Jeremy did have a memory of connection with a teacher who taught him subject matter at a high-school level. This time the descriptions are tinged with the wistfulness that comes with self-knowledge.

Yeah, my English teacher. We got along well. We could laugh with each other and I would talk to her and tell stories and stuff. I even did that when doing my work, like, she wouldn’t get mad and be like, “Do your work” and whatever. We’d have our talks and discussion and I’d get back to my own work and she’d go back to her work. She would help me and that’s why I did ask for help. But most of the other teachers... I didn’t. I tried to do it on my own or I never did it.

The need to be seen for who he was and for what he could become by those who were his teacher was paramount for Jeremy. The few experiences of connection with a teacher could not compensate for the significant lack of the same.

For Jeremy, the road to a seemingly irrelevant goal, the Grade 12 certificate, appeared too long. Having experienced only rare occasions of effectiveness as a learner, he saw few options for himself.

There’s only one thing to look forward to – just Grade 12 and not much other things.

Jeremy was well-aware of the breadth of the gaps in his academic skills and the impact those gaps had for him as a learner. The ‘patchwork quilt’ that formed his schooling experience had many holes and pieces missing.

I’m trying to figure out a word for it [pause] because I do like math [pause] I just don’t understand most of it.

As a result, Jeremy’s experience of high school was short-lived. He faded from attendance to engage in self-directed activities with peers who were also drifting away.
The people I guess I was comfortable with started leaving … [There was] no reason to be there if everyone else was leaving.

Out of school, Jeremy fell into a range of negative activities. The members of his peer group who also saw school and learning as irrelevant to the context of their lives exerted significant influence on Jeremy. His need to be part of something and belong within a group, along with his awareness that acceptance into regular peer groups was not possible, propelled his behaviour.

I would hear come be this … do that with us. I never said ‘no’ either.

He got into trouble. Now, with time and some other experiences separating him from his involvement, Jeremy feels some discomfort about that period of his life.

I didn’t want to be part of the bad life. I guess I wanted to be one of the White people and not be in a gang and cause trouble.

Learning and Learner Experiences From the Present Post-portfolio Learning Process

Jeremy did discover areas of interest as he entered emerging adulthood, although his knowledge of how to gain entry into those areas was limited. Becoming part of the Road to Employment program at Rainbow Youth allowed him to gain a perspective of what would be needed to pursue his goal. He now has a context within which to place the experience of being a learner and what can be gained from schooling.

I knew I had to go to school to be an interior designer, get the education for that, but I only just knew it’d take a long time. I’m 25 now. It’s been a long time. If I had stayed in school and thought more about school … I know school has meaning now … coming here has really helped like big time.

Since being within the program Jeremy has experienced schooling differently. He has a feeling of connection to a place of learning, of being valued, and being held
accountable. His portfolio, which is developed concurrently with the modular program elements that are addressed, grows as he grows. Through its development he has come to find value and contribution within his own life that had never been named.

*I'm just glad we got to put these together. I guess it helps understand more about me.*

Through the identification of the learnings he has gained from his life experiences, the composite of the self that he perceives has changed and his perception of learning has altered. Within his portfolio are learning summaries. While each one features a part of his life that he has come to recognize, he dwells on the one dedicated to *Family*. The meaning of family’ within the summary is broad. Not simply limited to those of family of origin, it details all the people who are most important to him and what he has learned from each of them. As he speaks his hand strokes the plastic sleeve in which the summary is encased.

*I mean, I just put their names and see what ‘ve learned from them, or write what I learned from them. But, there’s so much stuff it just crams my head! That’s what happens when I’m thinking of Kara [girlfriend] and I want to write it down. But there’s only so much space.*

The portfolio learning summaries, in reflecting back to him the whole of what he knows, can do and values, gives Jeremy a basis for comparison in speaking about his own needs as a learner and as someone of value. It affirms him. The emotional impact it has had is clear. While he speaks, one hand is ever-present on his portfolio. When asked if it may be looked at, he moved closer to the researcher rather than let go of the portfolio.

The process of reflection that is a critical part of the portfolio learning process provided him with a way of thinking through his past learning experiences and those in which he is now currently engaged. He is able to identify the critical differences in his
experiences as a learner within the K to 12 regular education system and currently as part of the portfolio learning process within the Road to Employment program. A key difference for Jeremy is his feeling of connection with others. The words he uses to describe the importance of his current experiences to him are spoken quickly, are filled with enthusiasm and are punctuated with gestures from the hand not in contact with his portfolio.

_You get help. I’m not in a classroom and doing the work on my own. I do ask for help now. Everybody is involved here. In high school and elementary I know there’s one teacher and like 20 or 25 kids and not all of us can get our one-on-one. But here, there’s three teachers [for a group of 20] and we are able to get one-on-one, even if it is “hello” in the morning and just a little chat and whatever. Like, we talk and share during circle time. We never did that in high school and elementary. We get to know each other here. There’s a lot of communication and we didn’t have enough of that when I was in school. I get phone calls that I can’t answer because of my minutes [not being able to afford more cell time]. They do call and ask me “What’s wrong” and “Why wasn’t I in school?” and that makes me feel good because I don’t remember them calling me in elementary or high school. They communicate with us and that’s what motivates me._

Jeremy was anxious in the second interview to make a point about the importance of learning what one _needs_ to be successful in life and receiving recognition for that learning. He was concerned that the three areas that are used as success markers in the broader society (getting a Grade 12 certificate, getting a driver’s licence, and getting a job) were being regarded as the _only_ learnings of importance.

_I know that Rainbow [Youth] is focusing on, like, G.E.D. [General Education Diploma] and licensing [driver’s license] or the workplace and that’s fine, but there’s more to it than just those three things. You see, just like I told my brothers and my girlfriend, it’s not just about those. It’s what everyone is saying and I hear it a lot. But, it’s really about life skills and ... well, like certificates. It needs to be talked about. I talk to my family about it lots. I show them my portfolio and love hearing them say they’re proud of me for getting that and everything. But, no one talks about those things. Where does all that work go? Like we are doing our G.E.D. and licensing and work placements, but everything else is just unknown I guess._
The life learning – life skills that Jeremy asserts are of great importance to him – rest on transferability into his life. There is relevance and purpose to the learning for him. It has opened both his mind and his heart to possibilities for himself that he never thought were possible.

*It’s like, just being here is, I don’t know, it’s helping a lot, like, I know more. And I do stuff at home from here. It seems different because I fall back on these certificates and the dream that we have.*

Through the portfolio learning process, Jeremy has explored the interdependency and interconnectedness of himself, what he learns and the expectations of him as a participating member in society. His certificates not only mark success, they constitute proof of his ability to learn and be a learner.

*I don’t see them as just paper. I see them as my achievements and I’m proud of that.*

He sees himself as connected to the society in which he lives. This connection was both not visible and not emphasized to him at the personal level in the past. This sense of connection has had an effect not only on him but also on his immediate family as he interacts with them differently based on a sense of identity and confidence in that identity. The personal sense of well-being that he experiences in seeing himself and his life differently influences his current behaviour. In searching for an example to illustrate the influence, he focuses on his interaction with his children.

*I love it because even getting toys, we’re doing something together. It’s not me getting in the car and going to get them toys.*

Jeremy’s shift in perspective with regard to the value of learning and education has also had an effect on his actions in the type of toys he gets for his children.
It's a lot of learning things. They're not just toys. Half of them are toys that teach the A-B-Cs and 1-2-3s.

Jeremy has gained a forward-looking perspective to his life. He greatly values his family. The bonds of attachment he has with his children are strong. However, he not only sees himself in the nurturing role of father, but also in a role of responsibility within that capacity. That responsibility is intertwined with his new focus on goals and further achievement. His family now provides him with the motivation to move forward with his efforts in learning.

Yeah, it all has to do with my family. It's why I'm here. They're the ones. I want to be able to support them because I'm not going anywhere and they know it. I would do anything for my family.

He underscores the importance of his family in supporting the efforts he is making and the changes that have already occurred in his life.

If it wasn’t for them I wouldn’t ... uh ... I probably would have been gone longer. Like yeah, if I wasn’t with them I probably wouldn’t be in this program because then I would ... uh ... Because I chose my family and got back on track.

Jeremy describes himself now as being in a very good place emotionally and cognitively. He sees the challenges that he has as learning opportunities within an atmosphere of acceptance.

I’m happy - happy I’m going to school. I have my family support and see my classmates’ support. I know they care. And the teachers care. I get support from the other students here too. I said I guessed on a few questions on my G.E.D. and my classmates gave me shit for that. Like, “don’t guess!” Okay! Sorry! But even that kind of support makes me feel good. I know when I go do my G.E.D. again I know not to guess! I always think about that now.

The portfolio learning process, which is an integral part of the Road to Employment program, has provided Jeremy with a tangible representation of how far he has come. The various certificates awarded as part of the progression through the
program provide him with intense enjoyment. They hold not only the achievement of the present, but within them appears to be embedded a shadow of the longed-for achievement of the past.

*There’s a lot done here in school. We’re getting two [certificates] this week.*

The programming elements represented in the portfolio by the certificates are, to Jeremy, a critical component to how motivated he is to come and engage in the program.

*I liked putting it together. I now have something I can look at and say “Wow! I’ve done all that!”*

The content of the life skills program also features significantly in how Jeremy has come to see himself. The elements of life he now has within his grasp are not simply the curricular items included on the G.E.D., although he aspires to conquer the effects of the gaps he has. What he so highly values is the learning he has done that helps him in *living* his life. He feels like he knows some of the rules to being effective and accepted. Closely tied to those feelings of self-effectiveness and acceptance from others is his sense of well-being.

*I’m going to be happier and provide for my family. I see myself working just being happy with my family. I love them.*

Jeremy appears wistful in his retrospective of his experience of schooling. His fingers again stroke pages in his portfolio as he thinks back.

*I say I wish they had something like that in high school. I’d have something to look forward to in school other than my Grade 12. Like sure, to have Grade 12, then you’re getting your education. But, having a few certificates in between wouldn’t hurt. If I had certificates like these ones during high school, then it would have made a big difference for me.*

When Jeremy was asked about what he now knows about himself that he didn’t know before, he responded in a subdued voice “that I’d be able to do all this.” While he
has not lost sight of the difficulties he has experienced in his life, he doesn’t dwell on past mistakes and problems. He has shifted his focus.

*I try to keep it separate, because I don’t want it to interfere. I guess they [his past and his present] are going to have to work together but I try to keep it separate because I want to get my school work done and I want to get my education. I can’t stop.*

When describing how he sees the role of learning in his life now, having constructed the representation of his learning through the portfolio learning process, Jeremy paused and searched for words. He then described it as a beginning.

*I wonder more. I kept all the things I got from the learning for the certificates because I’ll be able to read up on them. I felt when it was the end of training, like “Was that it?” Like, I wanted to go on and on. I have to read more and I have to find, I guess, search for more answers.*

The personal change that has come to Jeremy has been hard won. He protects it. As he has grown in awareness of the various factors that have had a positive impact on his life, he has also grown to understand better those factors that could endanger all that he has gained.

*I don’t have friends. Except the ones here [in the Rainbow Youth class]. I don’t want to deal with “Come here! Let’s do this and let’s go get in a game here.” That’s how it always was.*

Jeremy experienced another major milestone by the second interview. He had passed his G.E.D. With that next achievement he indicated a willingness to dream higher.

*I passed. Look at that. Look at that! No more math. I finally overcame that barrier. I hated math. But if I was to go to [a postsecondary institution] . . .*

In the past, Jeremy perceived learning as punitive: His self as learner was categorized, minimized, and suppressed. The curricular elements that were part of the regular education system were disconnected and inaccessible to him. His perception of self as learner was, for the most part, absent or had atrophied during his late elementary
and early high school years. Jeremy was not attached to formalized learning and had not the mechanism to recognize his own, informal learning let alone value it.

The portfolio learning process connected him to the experience of learning as a series of participatory events that he enjoyed and internalized as needed, worthwhile, and meaningful. He shifted to looking at learning as equipping him for his life and in turn, he felt strengthened in his ability to live his life. Jeremy engaged in his own reflective process with passion as he described his evolving sense of self, place, and self-efficacy. Now reflecting hope and trust, he actively practiced his life learnings outside of the agency in which he learned them, knowing his modelling of those learnings would be a legacy for his children. The intensity of the feelings that were evoked by the learning that assisted him in living his life rather than teaching him about life was an indication that his perception of his self as learner had, in basic terms, been saved.

Mark

Learning and Learner Experiences From the Past

Mark’s elementary years had a significant impact on his perception of himself as different due to his ethnicity. His entry into elementary school coincided with his first encounter with those who openly made their biases known. One was his teacher. While his words described the event, Mark’s physical reaction to the memories described the emotional import those memories had. His voice barely above a whisper, his lips trembling and his hands clenched, he haltingly offered his experiences as a learner.

As soon as I got to Grade 1, I had a teacher who was kind of prejudiced towards natives. I’d notice it was, like, I’d fall behind and she wouldn’t help or say anything. She said some pretty mean stuff to me. I wasn’t able to understand. I didn’t understand prejudice because I was never really taught it. I failed that
grade, yeah. I was even telling my parents that I was trying real hard, but I barely got any help and that was pretty much my first school that I went to.

He withdrew and became more subdued so as to lessen the probability of more such reaction. Those first experiences influenced his perceptions of other teachers. He approached the environment of the classroom with caution.

I was so used to that teacher I kind of thought that towards the next teacher so I was just a little bit more quiet than most kids.

Mark’s family moved to British Columbia when he was in his mid-elementary years. He was enrolled in an elementary school in the community where they lived and had a very positive experience. However, the time period during which he felt an enjoyment of school and success as a learner, although memorable, was to be short.

I got along with everyone and I mean everyone – my teachers, my principal, even the other teachers from the other classes. It made me feel happier and I opened up more. Even my parents noticed I was a lot happier there. But, we ended up moving back here after 1 year there. I came to school here [in Regina] and I noticed the same thing happened all over, except it was in a different school.

Academic gaps began to open up in Mark’s education yet each year he was promoted to the following grade level.

I just kept missing out on stuff. I’d just slowly fall back. Say, if you don’t know how to divide, but you still pass and move on, you’re still riding behind the other stuff.

As his lack of success met more lack of success, he moved from school to school. With the transiency went the academic achievement gaps.

I would start to fail again. I jumped through a lot of schools. I think I went to about seven, eight different schools here in the city.

Although he felt he tried hard, he just did not like being within the school environment. By the time Mark reached his middle elementary school years, he began to experience social problems with other students along with the academic challenges.
It was kind of hard to want to go to school, you know, so it kind of set me back from passing. I just didn’t want to be around those people, because I would usually get into fights.

Yet, Mark’s attendance at school was very high. He rarely missed because, due to his family dynamics, absence was not an option for him. There was one time where he came close to being recognized in school for an achievement that was focused on attendance.

You became part of the Terrific Kid group. It was for attendance. I remember that back then. I almost got one. I was proud of the ‘almost’ part.

Mark had missed the recognition because he had missed a day due to illness.

In middle elementary Mark began to experience conflict with his peers as his ethnicity was continually highlighted. He would get into fights over the taunts and insults. As the difficulties with his peers escalated they provided an additional distraction that further hampered his learning.

I never skipped school. I just didn’t want to go there. I didn’t have the will to want to work because I was thinking about, “okay, is this guy going to fight me today?” I don’t know, stuff like that.

Interactions with the teachers he had through his elementary years were limited. He experienced neither a feeling of connection nor a feeling of being heard should he seek support.

It was like a sight from the past, all the way back to Grade 1. I had a teacher that told me, like, say someone was bugging me at school or something and I’d tell her [about it]. She’d tell me don’t be a tattle-tale. I used to say, “Okay, what am I supposed to do if this guy’s bugging me and I can’t do my work?” And, she’d said that to me, “Don’t be a tattle-tale.” Yes, that just kind of stuck with me throughout the school years. Yes, I just kind of stuck to myself and did my work. Or, tried to do my best without help.

The nature of Mark’s difficulties with peers shifted somewhat when he got into high school. After years of being rejected by his peers for his ethnicity, he found
acceptance in a peer group that introduced him to substance use. The need to belong took on a stronger pull after the years of being a target of peer aggression.

*When you get to know everyone and get along, then that’s when the bad influences start happening, like taking drugs and partying and all that. That’s what made me really crash in high school – drugs and partying and getting into a wrong crowd.*

As Mark’s academics faltered further, he kept a distance from teachers.

*If I’d gotten like a little more interactive with the teachers and what not, gotten into the programs, I think that would probably be one of the things that would have helped me.*

The high school setting made access to drugs simple, and as Mark’s substance use grew to abuse, his attendance, although stellar an elementary student, became more and more sporadic. He began a process of disconnection from school and faltered in his sense of himself as a learner.

*They were kind of going the same way I was. Yeah, same thing with attendance, like the beginning of the year we’d be all good then towards halfway .... Just a few of my friends actually went to school. They tried to get me to go to school but I don’t know. I was too much of a stoner then. I got high just about every day, even in class.*

Eventually, the school administration responded to Mark’s substance use and poor attendance.

*That was one of the main problems with going to high school was that I got into smoking pot and that was when I started smoking [cigarettes]. It kind of all came at once, but I wasn’t a drinker though. I never drank until I got to my third year, before they finally kicked me out and told me to go to [certain high school].* 

While Mark enrolled in the suggested high school, his time there was not long. The cumulative effects of the substance use, the educational gaps, and his involvement with a negative peer group led to a series of exits from the regular high school setting. Learning and school still retained some, but limited, relevance in his life.
Well, my very first year there, I didn’t even last the whole year. I lasted, like a quarter there. I was still into the whole partying thing. I still remember that last day. I’d smoked quite a bit of weed before or after break and I just didn’t want to go back because I was so tired. The next year I at least made it halfway. I didn’t have the motivation. But, I had more motivation the third year I went to [high school]. I actually almost made it all the way. I was doing good, passing. I was actually paying attention but at the same time I was still into the drugs and I was high every single day. But I still learned stuff. I wanted to get my schooling but at the same time I didn’t want to drop my drugs. In my third year at [high school] I was into drinking, doing pills, even coke.

Mark had been working while going to high school and partying. The demands on him physically and mentally reached a breaking point. He made a choice.

Yeah, that was pretty much the last time I went to school because I was working. I couldn’t keep up with working, going to school, partying, the drug habit and alcohol habit that I had.

The significant adults who had showed an interest in Mark and had had an influence on him were not within the schools he attended, but rather in the work environments of which he had been part. One individual in particular shared his own life experiences and disappointments with Mark in hopes of giving him guidance.

This one guy that I used to work with doing the shipping and receiving. I was lifting boxes, those big pallets. He’d talk to me and say “You don’t want to be doing this for the rest of your life, do you?” He got me to have some goals. He was telling me a story about when he was my age he had big goals and wanted to finish high school. And all this stuff happened to him. I don’t know. His story just kind of changed me just a little bit and I started thinking.

Mark began to entertain thoughts of doing things differently. He sought out information and moved into a state of readiness to make a change in his life.

I started thinking about school...That was when I started thinking about completely dropping all the drugs and alcohol. I went to different schools and programs to see what kind of programs you could take and what you couldn’t.

Mark then made a personal decision and took the action he needed to take.
I just completely dropped everything because I knew if I dropped all my partying habits I’ll have at least a little bit more motivation than I did before to complete what I needed. But, at the same time I didn’t know where I was wanting to go.

Mark had experienced a shift in how he perceived himself. His sense of who he was at the current time did not match with who he wanted to be. In addition, he knew first-hand the consequences of the lifestyle he was living.

I did a lot of reflecting. I’d seen a lot of crap and I’d seen junkies. I’d seen I was kind of slowly turning into one. I just couldn’t stand seeing that image every day, even when I went to sleep. It’s not too much of a good life. I was thinking I can get something better than what I have now. I took a break for, like, a few months.

With the personal decision making came commitment. Mark had tapped into an internal sense of strength. On his own he kicked his drug dependency.

No rehabilitation. If I want something I remove stuff that is in my way. I was just like, drugs are in the way, okay, I’ve got to quit. Obstacle gone. Now I can continue on.

With the conquering of his substance use came a confidence in himself. He recognized the impact of the changes he had made by making the choice to get off drugs. He felt a sense of freedom to pursue a different course for himself.

When I was in elementary I used to care about what people thought of me. Now I don’t really care what people think. When I want something or do something, I’m going to get there.

Learning and Learner Experiences From the Present Post-portfolio Learning Process

Mark entered the Road to Employment program but had no idea about what he was about to learn. Based on what he knew about what was valued about education, he had relatively low expectations. The portfolio learning process caught him by surprise.

I knew I wanted to go to school but where after that? I remember my worker told me about this program. He told me it would help me. I didn’t really think it was going to be, like, really helpful. I just hoped I’d get my G.E.D., my driver’s
[license], and a job. I don’t know, I got a lot more than I expected. I wasn’t expecting a portfolio with all this stuff here.

Even though the life skills modules and the portfolio learning process have changed his perspective and future outlook, there have been challenges for Mark as he has moved forward on his new path. Those challenges have come from the peers who had facilitated his entry into the substance use spiral. He has, however, maintained his resolve.

*I still have friends that ask me, “Come and drink with us, let’s do something.” I just say that’s boring now. I know if I start into drugs I know how that eases your chance of just jumping back into it again. I think the hardest to quit was my pills but I managed to do that. I was like, SCHOOL, and no more of that stuff.*

Setting goals and priorities are skills Mark has learned through the Road to Employment program and through the portfolio learning process. Through these skills he has come to see the future he wants more clearly.

*Before, I didn’t have any goals so it’s a pretty big change in setting a goal. I actually didn’t know where I wanted to go.*

At the same time, the portfolio learning process provided a retrospective that gave Mark a sense of how far he had come. He now can see that both the positive and the negative experiences he has had have taught him and strengthened him. Rather than judging himself, he appreciates his survivor abilities.

*I like going through all of this. Most of this stuff, like my mind mapping and all that, made me look back and see some of the stuff I accomplished. I had to think really hard. If I was doing this on my own, I didn’t think I’d think of all this stuff without a little bit of help. When I look at that [pointing] summary, it’s just like man, I didn’t know I could do all that! Go through all that! Some of my skills too, I didn’t know they were useful. After finishing all this, I don’t know, I feel kind of proud of myself.*

Through the reflective process, Mark has also become aware of the effect his own actions have had on those he cares about. With some surprise he finds himself acting as a
role model to others in his family. His struggles and his successes now have additional meaning through the influence they have on others.

I’m happy that I’m helping my [relative]. She quit drinking and all that. It seems like it’s causing a chain reaction in within my family. I notice some of my relatives, they used to be into bad stuff and all that. They’re trying to do good now because they see I’m doing good. I noticed my [relative], she wants to do stuff even though she kind of has some physical disabilities but she still wants to. Like, “I’m not old, I can still do this.” Yeah, I’m just kind of happy that it’s going good now.

There have been other ripple effects of Mark’s personal decision making and his sense of purpose. The ripples of change he has started by changing himself have already had significant effects on his family configuration. It strengthens his resolve further.

I’m happy that my family’s slowly coming together. My [relative] is happy that my little sister’s around. At least one of my younger siblings are around. I helped her to quit drinking. I said “You just keep doing that because you want my little brother and sister back, just think about that and get your mind over drinking. That’s an obstacle in your way.” And, she quit drinking.

To Mark, the portfolio reflects back to him an image of himself that is professional. He no longer thinks of himself in terms of being inferior or deficient in terms of learning. Even though he had believed those things about himself, he now embraces the newly discovered strengths, abilities and learnings that make up who he is. From inside this new self, he exudes a quiet confidence and steely determination.

I’ve got something to show now. I know what to do. Instead of going in there and not having anything and not dressing appropriately. I’m more prepared and ready.

Mark is fully aware he has more to learn and that he will need to go through the necessary steps to move toward what he wants to achieve. For right now, he just savours the fact he knows the steps. The role of education and his role as a learner have become clear. The how of becoming who he can be is no longer a frustrating mystery.
I knew what I wanted to do but I didn’t know how to get there. I never thought film school would be a place I’d need to go to get to where I want to go. I want to do sound design for video games. I didn’t know I had to go to film school. I never thought of that.

Mark’s portfolio has caused him some surprise in what it has shown him about himself. It has expanded his perception of the skills and abilities he has. He has an appreciation now for what he can do that he did not have before.

One I never really thought of was dealing with certain problem solving. I’m good at that. Certain things I can make more faster and more efficient. There was a lot of times on other jobs when I made some of the workplaces a lot faster but I didn’t know I was good at that. Like, I didn’t see it but it was right in front of me.

The certificates that fill an entire section of his portfolio have particular meaning for Mark. While his words described his certificates as “quite nice” his fingers grasped them as a collection. He held on to them and smiled. Calling them his accomplishments, Mark pauses briefly before adding more comments.

It makes me happy that I came here to get them. I am very happy.

The reflective process that is part of the portfolio learning process has prompted Mark to see himself differently. In contrast to his K to 12 learning experience, he now has an appreciation of himself as a learner.

I’ve been told I’m bright. A little bit quiet, determined. I’m a thinker. I like to think about everything that’s around me so I can use it to learn. You’ll see me quiet in class and most people will think that I’m a really shy guy but really I’m just thinking about stuff.

Learning, for Mark, is now highly relevant and his portfolio not only maps where he has been, but it holds the promise of where he is going. He understands and embraces his own personal responsibility for accessing opportunities. He knows he has a choice that is demonstrated through his actions.
It’s my learning and I want to get somewhere. Partying isn’t going to get me there.

There’s a sense of contentment in Mark, a sense of personal responsibility for his future, and an anticipation of good things that he recognizes as a new but welcome addition to his life.

I’m doing pretty good. Doing a lot better than I did, you know, and I kind of actually like what I’m doing right now. At least I’m going somewhere.

Desiree

Learning and Learner Experiences From the Past

Desiree’s elementary experience as a learner was characterized by lack of adult guidance and significant negative peer influence. School lacked importance to her. She did not feel connected with school, schooling or teachers. School was a place and schooling was what took place within the building. She did not see its relevance and regarded it as a less-preferred optional activity.

When I was younger I never took it that seriously. Like, sure I went but it wasn’t every day and I started skipping a lot. It even started in elementary, like I’d just skip school or show up late all the time.

Her peers had the most importance to Desiree and much of her avoidance of school rested on the actions of her peers. Sporadic attendance made continuity in learning subject content disjointed and further reduced her sense that it had any importance to her at all. With like-minded peers, behaviour that started as occasional soon became habitual. She began to skip school or show up late.

In school I was kind of trying to fit in with my friends and stuff and that had a big influence on what I did. Like if they wanted to go out and just go to the mall or something we’d always just skip a class and go hang out at the mall.
Although teachers reacted to her behaviour, disciplinary actions had little effect on Desiree. She saw the authority within the school as handing down a fixed set of rules that she was to obey. She did not understand why the rules existed or what kind of behaviour would demonstrate compliance to them.

*I got in trouble a lot.*

Desiree pushed back against authoritarian teaching styles. The lack of connection she experienced with her teachers only served to emphasize her lack of fit. One teacher in particular tipped the scales for Desiree.

*He’d always give us work and that’s the class I skipped the most because I didn’t like the teacher. He was kind of hard on his students. He worked at the correctional on weekends so he like always thought he was this big tough guy. I felt like he was hard on me because ... well ... I felt like if he’s going to do this then I don’t even need to be here.*

With this particular teacher she experienced feelings of being on the outside and devalued because of her ethnicity; this only heightened her avoidance.

*He’d say certain things that I didn’t like, not too much racist but I knew what he meant by them. There were only a couple of us natives that went there. I felt like it was kind of directed towards us.*

When Desiree did get recognition in school, it came in a predominantly negative form and focused on what was wrong rather than instances in which she displayed behaviour that would have been considered appropriate.

*They gave me an award for being late the most times in a year.*

As Desiree got older she began to express the feelings she had inside that were prompted by her experiences at school. Her displays of behaviour only served to exacerbate her disconnectedness from school.

*I’d get really mad and I’d do some things I wasn’t supposed to or say things that, you know, that was really bad and I’d get suspended for saying those things.*
By late elementary, whatever engagement with school she had had ebbed away as she sought approval and kinship exclusively from her peer group. Patterns of substance use took hold.

Although Desiree had a parent who tried to influence her behaviour toward learning and attending school she was already on a negative path.

*She always told me how important school was and that, you know, don’t follow in my footsteps because it took her a long time to go back to school. ... I didn’t see my mom as a role model – never went far in life ... But I kind of looked up to my sister, my older sister, and I was seeing what she was doing. She was always skipping and like running away and stuff. So I kind of followed in her footsteps.*

Circumstances dictated a move to a different part of the city, and into a different elementary school causing her once again to experience the feeling of not belonging. In the search *to* belong in the new school she found acceptance within a particular group of peers who were engaged in risky behaviours.

*That was a big change and part of that was changing schools and not wanting to be there and feeling out of place there because I’m pretty sure I didn’t start at the beginning of the year. I just kept to myself a lot and I guess I looked for ... I was kind of bad like in starting there. I used to smoke and smoke weed and stuff, so I guess I looked for those kinds of people that did the same things I did.*

The academic gaps were becoming pronounced for Desiree.

*Yes, I was falling behind in the schoolwork, the homework.*

In high school circumstances arose in which Desiree went to live with her older sister who was on her own. The patterns related to learning and school remained the same. She was aware of the gaps, but the magnitude of them further entrenched her belief schooling and learning was not for her.

*She let me do whatever I wanted so school wasn’t that big. I didn’t listen to her, like, and I was allowed to do whatever I wanted so skipping and that, it was like, all my friends were doing it so I just got caught up in it. And she told me when I moved in there I either had to get a job or go to school so I’d go to school but I*
wouldn’t be there, like, the full day. I’d leave the house and that to make it look like I went to school.

Desiree’s substance use prevented her from engaging during the times she was in school, severely limiting what she was able to absorb by simply being in the classroom.

_I was getting so far behind ... and my friends, the need to get high ... sometimes I’d just go back to class higher than a kite and couldn’t focus and that._

Desiree’s introduction to high school saw a continued experience of negative relationships with teachers that underlined her feeling of being on the outside.

_I guess the teachers always had something up like, “This is my rules, you’ve got to follow them”... The class I skipped the most [was] because I didn’t like the teacher. I felt he was hard on me. If I’d show up late he’d send me out in the hallway. Then I’d spend the whole period out in the hallway doing nothing. He wouldn’t even give me the work to do. Or else I’d get sent to the office and I’d have to sit [there] for the whole period and wait for him. If I was even a couple minutes late I wouldn’t even bother going because I knew I’d be in the hallway most of the time._

The teachers who coached the sports in the high school however saw a young woman of athletic promise. Efforts were made to involve her, but the commitment to sports involved a commitment to school. Based on her past and current experiences, she could not see the point of attending even though sports was a draw. She drifted further into risky behaviours and found herself getting into trouble at an escalating rate. While Desiree backed away from her teachers, they, in turn, found her less and less approachable.

_Sometimes you feel like “Oh the teachers just don’t understand!” and you know, you kind of feel like you’re being judged sometimes. I was so far behind it’s like “What’s the point of even going?” And the teachers didn’t really give me that push either._

The feeling of differentness escalated for Desiree and strengthened her feelings of ineffectiveness as a learner.
You feel like everyone’s always watching you. Not watching for the good things. Everyone always noticed the bad things. No one ever said, “Oh! You’re doing this good!”

Her need to belong amidst her perception of not belonging aligned her further with her group of like peers.

There were lots of cliques and like, you know, little groups and I’ve always felt out of place but I didn’t feel that so much because I was always in my little group of friends and stuff.

There were occasions, though limited, that she experienced acceptance within a structured setting. Desiree found herself in a smaller, more intimate programming option directed toward students with an identified need for treatment for substance abuse. It was within this program that she felt more at ease and accepted.

Like, even at drug class and stuff ... some of the classes would be during the morning and even just coming here and getting something in your stomach if you never ate and just sitting around talking about things that’s on your mind. That was a change for me to just, like, relax, and not feel so judged. I admit I didn’t like some of the people I went to school with so that was just a chance for me to, you know, talk to someone else about what was going on, I guess, and not let it drag on throughout the day, like “Oh this person’s bugging me.”

However, doors began to close for Desiree within the regular education system.

After I was probably 18 going to 19 I wasn’t allowed back in high school. I always thought, it’s not a big deal and I can always get it done another day kind of thing and it wasn’t a big deal at the time.

Desiree had some time in which to think about her life. She came to an understanding that if things were to be different, she would need to be different. She moved toward a more realistic appraisal of her future.

Because, from experience, needing a job and not having the education to get that job, you don’t make money and you don’t look forward to things like what you could have or even that you have and you need money to maintain, say a car, registering it and putting gas in it. That’s what really kind of put it in my head that I need to go back to school and that schooling is important.
Desiree moved back with her mother and began the process to finding where she could go to get what she needed to give herself a chance.

*I knew what I had to get done. It was just a matter of finding what suited me and what kept me interested and motivated. I guess, just finding the right program or something, a learning institution.*

**Learning and Learner Experiences From the Present Post-portfolio Learning Process**

Desiree found out about the Road to Employment program and attended an orientation. What she saw offered was, to her, directly relevant to her life.

*Everything sounded so good – the [driver’s] license, the G.E.D., the certificates. I knew if I had the chance to do that I wouldn’t turn it down.*

Having a focus, she made the personal decision to do what was necessary to apply to the program. This in itself was motivating and raised her confidence.

*I sent out and got a reference from [individual providing reference] and I took the steps I needed to apply and do the pretesting and stuff so I was pretty excited. Even just to complete the process of applying is like “I just applied!”*

Desiree was accepted into the Road to Employment program.

Concerned about her past lack of success in schooling and learning, Desiree longed to know others whose lives had paralleled hers and who had been able to succeed. She actively sought the stories of others who had followed the path she was about to travel. The knowing that it could be done was important to her.

*He had a real impact on me. He’s like, “I was in and out of the jail system” and he [did] his G.E.D. I thought, like, “Oh you’re one smarty.” For me, I thought, “You can’t go back to school” but he went back and did that. You know, totally showed me, like, you can do that - it’s never too late. Just to have that other person there, that’s been where you are or knows what you’re going through. That understands what your situation is.*

The needs Desiree had as a learner were being met by not only the structure of the Road to Employment programming, but also by the individuals in charge of it. She began
to experience a sense of connection with the other individuals in the program as well as with the teachers who facilitated it. The sense of acceptance and belonging was critical to her. She was able to look back with new eyes at her previous involvement in the regular education system and identify the difference.

*Everything, like the interaction. Every day you come here and you get to talk about where you’re at in life and how you feel about certain things. That didn’t happen in high school. Teachers didn’t ask you, like, we didn’t see them go around the room and see where everyone’s at right now.*

The experience of success in learning pushed Desiree on.

*Just accomplishing things. I never thought I could get my license or even just see my name on a certificate and feel “Yay, that’s what I did!” That makes you feel empowered. Even to get that feedback from the teachers like you’re DOING this and just that acknowledgement from them and other people… not only them but from family and friends that you’re doing good and that they’re proud of you. That makes me want to do good, better than I could before.*

The life skills that have assisted Desiree in seeing learning within the context of her own life have assumed significant importance to her. Through the reflective thinking that is part of the portfolio learning process she sees the relationship between the learning and the behaviour she demonstrates based upon it.

*Figuring out things, like problem solving. The different ways you could look at real life experiences. [The teachers within the program] help you find ways to get where you’re going, help you set goals, teach you values. Like, finding out what’s important to you, bringing that out, like something you’ve never thought of before. Even like boundaries and how to set boundaries, things you’ve never through of before. Like, for me, I’ve never really sat down and thought about, like boundaries and what I value in life. Things like that. They really bring it out.*

For Desiree, the successful progression through the elements of the Road to Employment program is a critical motivator, with the proof of her attainment evidenced in the certificates that occupy one of the categories of her portfolio.

*I don’t know. It’s just seeing it on paper. I can see putting it in front of someone and saying “This is what I have achieved!” You know, it feels good to see that.*
The portfolio learning process, by bringing together what she knows and what she has learned into a holistic representation of who she is, and who she is becoming, has altered how she feels about herself and her life. She is well able to see the effects of believing in, and investing in, herself.

*Confidence. I feel like I’m more able to do the things I want to do. Right now, I’m looking forward to the future kind of thing. It’s empowering, you know, you want to do better, you want to, like, it’s a drive. It pushes you to do better, do the best you can.*

The tangibles contained within her portfolio - the resume, the certificates, the summary of education, and the learnings she has acquired – for Desiree act like a mirror that holds some contradictions. She is in the process of gaining comfort with the reflection that demonstrates the significant changes in thinking that have occurred in her.

*I thought my life was, like, going out and having fun and stuff but now, right now, [learning] is a big part because I’m growing up and you know I need math skills to do everything – to shop, go grocery shopping, pay bills. I understand now that it’s really important that you need your education not just for, you know, to go further in life, but just all around. You know, you’re going to be using it every day.*

It is seeing the evidence of what she brings from the past mapped out in the learning summaries and mind maps of the portfolio learning process that has been the most difficult, in some ways, for Desiree. The qualities and learnings she acquired along her life path are there, represented through words in her learning summaries and within her mind maps. It is the overwhelming unfamiliar weight of the positives identified from her life to date that appears to be the most difficult for her to integrate at the present. Those retrospective positives are also the most difficult for her to capture in terms of what they mean to her. Feeling affirmed, valued and competent is so new. With her eyes resting on her portfolio sheets, she appears just a little uncomfortable.
On the right path. I don’t know, it’s hard to describe myself. I don’t like doing it.

Desiree understands the role personal responsibility plays in her potential future success and she can already identify changes in her own behaviour regarding responsibility. With those changes has come hope.

I’m more aware of what needs to be done. I want everything this program offers. In high school I didn’t see myself going this far, you know. I didn’t see myself where I am today or that I could ever amount to anything.

Prompted by her own learning process, Desiree also sees the changes in her family. She has a deepened sense of connection with those closest to her and sees evidence of her own efforts having an effect broader than just on her own life.

It’s even the family thing that’s been pushing me to want more, to do better. I can tell I’m influencing my sister because, like, her watching me going back to school, and like, achieving what I have, she’s been like “Oh, well, you should help me get in that program. When does it start up?” I can see that I am influencing her and my mom said to her “Well, you SHOULD go back to school!”

Desiree’s eyes rest on her portfolio in front of her. There is the beginning of a smile.

It feels good. It feels great.

Lee

Learning and Learner Experiences From the Past

For Lee, it was in middle elementary that she came to feel unaccepted and that she didn’t belong.

I was a quiet little nerdy girl in the corner. I was always teased and picked on by other kids that were in my class. The popular levels of kids. It wasn’t really good.

She did have cousins she could play with but that did little to help with the feelings of not being accepted within the school environment. Schooling was an anxiety-provoking experience for her.
My cousin – we were kind of in the same grade – I was left behind in Grade 2 so she was always ahead.

The fact that Lee found learning difficult in early elementary grades made things worse for her socially. She received special education programming that took her out of the regular classroom to work with a student support services teacher. This became an additional source of labelling and stigma.

I did have a learning disability when I was growing up and I would always have to go to the reading teacher twice every week. They’d [the students] would always make fun of me and stuff like that.

Lee struggled with her self-esteem. The support she was receiving from the student support services teacher appeared to be too little too infrequently for her to succeed academically. Yet, in terms of the feeling of exclusion she experienced, it was too much.

It felt like I had a hard enough time as it was reading on my own and then having all that [the bullying] on top. Well, school didn’t feel like it was worth it at the time. I felt like a big failure, like I couldn’t do my work.

This difference served to increase both the level of bullying behaviour directed toward her on the part of her peers and her perception of herself that she was not smart.

When Lee sought help from those in authority in the school, intervention was minimal and ineffective, further underlining her feelings of being unacceptable and unworthy.

With the teachers, like, some of them knew what was going on but they still kind of didn’t really do anything about it. They’d pull them [the other students] off to one side and stuff like that they’d tell them “you shouldn’t be saying this about Lee.” They basically got away with it.

The level of exclusion Lee experienced took a toll on her success in learning in school.
I didn’t want to go to school. I just wanted to stay at home because I felt safer at home than I felt at school. I felt more accepted being at home than I did at school. It affected [my learning] a lot because I wasn’t doing my homework or anything. I didn’t feel valuable enough I guess to actually think it made a difference. I didn’t feel smart or anything like that.

Lee’s own behaviour began to deteriorate and she acted out the level of hurt she was experiencing.

They picked on me so much ... I didn’t do anything about it until like Grade 8 and that’s when I started getting rebellious and angry and stuff like that.

She had a need for escape from the school environment and was starting to behaviourally express the escalating emotions she was feeling inside.

I was barely going to school in Grade 8. I barely passed. I think they just passed me. I was rebellious, angry, scared, sad, depressed. The way you feel inside yourself is worse. Getting called ‘stupid’ every day doesn’t make you feel smart.

Lee’s mother had made her go to school the last week of June which totalled the most number of days that she had been in class that month. Lee knew she had received a social pass.

The move to high school only served to further expose the academic gaps that she had. The patterns of escape repeated themselves.

What I experienced in high school wasn’t really good. I wasn’t really going to classes and stuff like that. I was at school but not in class.

Lee was on a negative spiral with both the academic and the social aspects of high school. She found desired acceptance and a sense of belonging within a group of students who also avoided classes and the work they entailed.

I had my own little friends and I’d always be with them. I was needy, wanting to be loved, you know, trying to find that love, boy-crazy, a little friendly but shy. Really shy. My friends at [regular high school] would ask me if I wanted to skip or like ... I always thought about what was going to happen that night, that day. I didn’t think about the future or anything like that. I never took it seriously.
A further instance of bullying behaviour was directed toward Lee in high school. It incited a high level of anger in her which resulted in violent retaliation toward the student engaging in the bullying. The consequences for Lee were significant.

*High school is when I actually lashed out. In Grade 9. Somebody was making fun of me and I made the wrong decision and attacked them on school property.*

When Lee was able to resume her high school education she was placed by the school division into a program outside of the regular high school.

*I got sent to [alternative program] and then I got my Grade 9 through there. I was actually doing better. It was a smaller classroom setting. I think there was like 20 kids that were going there.*

She adapted well to both the location and the staff. The difference between the smaller, more intimate educational setting and the regular high school became evident. She began to experience success.

*The teachers at [alternative program] were more open-minded and more understanding and they kind of like related to you. At the [regular] high school you’re on your own and you have your own friends and you’ve got your freedom and independence and when you’re a teenager you take full advantage. That’s what I did. But you still need that structure, that discipline structure. In the alternate program you had a goal set and you had to do certain things to reach that goal. I found it fun. It was more of a safer place and more accepting.*

Lee found her learning needs were being met to a much higher degree in the alternative program setting. The experience of success was not limited to academics, however. While she learned and accrued course credits she also experienced a level of acceptance among peers within the program that greatly influenced her.

*My friends at [alternative program] got me motivated because they’d always come and pick me up and stuff like that and take me to school.*
Lee’s time within the alternative program was limited. She completed the time she was allowed within it and once again found herself back in a large regular high school environment. Her stay was short.

_The reason why I didn’t finish high school was, I finished at [alternative program]. I thought I’d be good enough to move on to a different high school. So I went to [regular high school] and then from there I met my boyfriend and we ... I had a baby and I decided it was best to just take care of myself and the baby first and just try and get our housing and stuff like that all together._

It was within her role as a mother, first to one little boy and then to another, that the reality of her life and her circumstances became clear to Lee.

_Being on assistance and not having enough money and just, like, barely getting by and knowing the importance of actually earning the dollar. One of my mum’s co-workers was going through this program [the Road to Employment program] and she got a work placement at [Lee’s mother’s place of employment]. They were friends. She told my mum about this program. My mum told me and yes, I applied._

Her own mother supported her in her transition back into being a student.

_She’s like, one of the main reasons why I wanted to go back. She was focused on getting, like a business of her own opened up so her getting her business apprenticeship and stuff like that kind of made me more focused on doing things for my passion and doing things I want to do._

**Learning and Learner Experiences From the Present Post-portfolio Learning Process**

Being part of the Road to Employment program offered Lee the opportunity to get her driver’s license. It also gave her a G.E.D.

_I got my G.E.D. I did that on February 3, through this program. It made me feel proud. When I got my envelope, like my big brown envelope – because if you don’t pass the subjects then they give you a white envelope and if you get your G.E.D. you get the brown envelope – I was just, like jumping around. My little guy was like wondering what I was doing, because he was kind of scared but kind of laughing at me at the same time because I was like hopping up and down. Aaaah! I was like, I’VE GOT MY G.E.D.!! I was really motivated writing the test and stuff like that but really, honestly, I didn’t really think I was going to get it all in one shot and then I did! It was just, like, REALLY?? Yay!!!_
With that credential, Lee’s belief in herself opened up to the possibilities revealed by her portfolio. As she explored the skills she had in the various areas of her life, she looked differently at the experiences that have made up her life so far.

*With the portfolio, it’s like, a lot of thinking, a thinking process, like with the mind maps, jotting down the notes and stuff like that. But in the long run it’s a really good thing because it basically sums you up and tells all your experiences and what you’re able to do and stuff like that. And if you do want to add more you can always do that. In an interview you can use it, like you can always explain and tell then, like, yes, I know how to cook. You can always explain more in an interview but this! It sums it up and gives the basic outline of who you are.*

It has also helped to put into perspective some of the experiences that challenged her and place them within a context of her self in progression.

*I know in an interview someone’s going to ask why I hadn’t been in [regular high school] for very long but I had to put that on there because that was the next step for me to get to [alternative program]. But I can just explain to them that there’s something that came up and … I didn’t learn how to deal with it then but I know how to deal with it now and it’s kind of a learning process.*

The portfolio, in its very construction, is a visible reminder of who she is now and how she wishes others to see her.

*It looks professional. I barely had any certificates before and look. I think my resume looks good.*

The certificates displayed within the portfolio have great meaning to Lee. As she flips through the pages her hand smooths the plastic shields in which the certificates are encased.

*I have all these skills, but they’re the only ones that are on paper. I have more.*

It is the seeing them on paper that holds Lee’s fascination and signals special meaning for her.

*You actually see them. They’re actual, physical. And, you still feel it. You feel good about yourself. I am more of a hard learner so I need to see it for me to feel good. Well, not just to feel good to actually feel like I accomplished something.*
Having accomplished so much, Lee feels very comfortable in setting goals for herself. She no longer doubts the contribution she can make both in the present and the future.

*I want to work, like, find work in preferred resources for energy, like solar power and windmills and stuff like that. My goal is to make the planet better for my kids because I don’t want to leave my kids with an earth that you can barely breathe the air or water that you can’t drink. I want to actually make it better for my kids – and so my grandkids – so I can pass on those qualities to them.*

With great pride she looks at her mind map related to family and happily points to the qualities that she has that help to cancel out the years of feeling she had no value or worth. Her smiles come easily and her eyes convey the depth of feeling.

*I’m a good mum. Kind, open-minded. I think of others, I tend to be considerate. I don’t know, friendly, outgoing at times.*

With her portfolio tracing the evidence of her journey, she clearly sees the internal personal change in which she has been engaged as a life process.

*I’ve learned how to deal with some things. I wouldn’t say all of them but I’ve learned how to deal with some of them. I have more understanding of everything that goes around. I can still move forward and still keep on going and ... It’s just that I have to find different ways around my disability.*

She looks forward to what is to come based on the strength of what she sees she has already achieved, valuing not just the outcomes but the processes that led to them.

*It feels good because I feel empowered. I feel like I can do these things and the opportunities I hope they are arising. I want to take them.*

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*Raylene*

*Learning and Learner Experiences From the Past*

Trauma marks the educational experience of Raylene. From the first question posed by the researcher, “Tell me the story of your elementary schooling. What was it
like for you?” tears and silence accompanied her struggle to deal with memories and regain composure. Her responses many times consisted of one-word answers or short phrases. There was significant stress in remembering that was evidenced by her posture. She sat slumped, head down and arms wrapped around her, during the portions of the interview in which she described her experiences in the regular education system.

As a small child, she was withdrawn and shy in elementary school and was bullied by female peers. Although the schoolwork itself caused her no difficulties, the social difficulties with their accompanying emotional effects coloured her schooling experience. In the feeling of being diminished, she engaged in the same actions.

*Went through bullying. Been a bully, got bullied.*

For Raylene, going to school every day was hard and much of her attention was focused on the emotional struggles in which she was engaged. She was not alone in those struggles, however, as her brother, 2 years older, was experiencing the same thing.

Raylene was unaware that the school had ever made contact with her family about the bullying but she was aware her family knew it was occurring. She had limited knowledge of how her family felt about what the two children were experiencing.

*Hard, probably. I don’t know.*

The situation did not change when Raylene went to high school. Her sense of aloneness was reaffirmed by the very structure of the high school setting.

*They [the teachers] have too many students so they don’t really get to know them. And just never really care. They just want you to get the work done.*

Still shy and withdrawn, Raylene was feeling an anger that began to surface and which in turn influenced the length of her stay.
For 1 year and I dropped out. I just started to get in trouble and I never went back to school.

Even though a high school counsellor talked with Raylene about remaining in school, she didn’t want to stay.

I knew I shouldn’t be leaving but I didn’t like being there so I didn’t really see the point in staying.

Her family didn’t really say anything about her desire to leave the high school environment. She was, however, willing to try again when the school counsellor suggested an alternative school.

It was within the setting of the alternative program that Raylene felt a positive connection with other students and received affirmation of her worth as an individual. Her words, which had previously been few in number due to the emotion of the past, now were more numerous.

It was the best. Everybody knows each other and everybody got along and there was no little groups or cliques or anything. And we had like, I don’t know, kind of what we have here like circle check where everybody gets together and everyone just talks if anything’s bugging them. We all had lunch together every day. And schooling was easier cause if you needed one on one help you got it because there wasn’t that many people going there. It was just way better than regular high school.

The approach to learning was also different in the alternative program. Learning became fun and how she was taught fit with her own learning needs.

I guess it wasn’t all like just books or work straight from the book. They like sat with you and went over things and helped you understand it no matter how many times it took them. That helped a lot.

Raylene was within the alternative program for “3 years or 2½.” She passed her courses and accrued all but two high school credits. However, the length of time she had been in the alternative program was problematic for the school division.
*They told me I was there for way too long.*

She was moved into a culinary program to complete her credits. The smaller environment, under 20 people, that had been a learning experience that was fun for Raylene, was replaced with enrolment back in a high school setting. Just talking about the experience brought back the tension to Raylene’s voice, constrained her responses and renewed the tears.

The return to regular high school prompted the return of previous patterns of behaviour in the bullying she experienced and demonstrated but with a difference. Raylene now sought a way to blunt the experience. She began to start skipping school to go drink.

*I was doing that to get away from those problems and what was going on.*

The drinking was not occurring alone, however. She had found acceptance within a group of young people who were, like her, disaffected for one reason or another, and who were also disconnecting from the education system.

*Just got involved with the wrong people and not caring about school or anything.*

The students with whom she had formed positive relationships during her time in the alternative program made efforts to urge her away from involvement in behaviour that would lead to serious consequences, but to no avail.

*I didn’t really listen to anybody. It affected our relationships because of who I was starting to hang out with and what I was doing.*

A further attempt at reentry into the education system came with Raylene’s enrolment in another type of alternative program that was for youth who were coming back to school from various circumstances. While the environment did provide a smaller
setting and the ability to complete high school credits, Raylene had reached a point in her life where she had embarked along a different path.

*I went there but then this guy I was dating got out of jail and I dropped out. I just like, started skipping school.*

Over a period of time that was, in effect, a time out from negative behaviour, Raylene was provided with access to an addictions counsellor who still remains a support for her. Through such support she gained perspective on her addictive behaviour and on her need to return to school.

*I know it was the wrong decision cause I didn’t finish my Grade 12. I guess I just know how much I need it for what I want to do. I know it needs to be done. It feels like I had to hit rock bottom to realize what was important to me and to get my life back on track.*

She began to consider the needs she had for a more intimate learning environment that fostered interpersonal connection.

*I wanted to get back into school and I was looking for something where there wasn’t lots of people, like a big school. I wanted it to be how it was at [the alternative program], like the small environment and something close to home.*

*Learning and Learner Experiences From the Present Post-portfolio Learning Process*

Raylene found the Road to Employment program on the internet and went through the application process. She filled out the forms, gathered references, and went through the interview. Doing it alone, it was difficult for her.

*I guess I just know how much I needed it for what I want to do and I know it needs to be done.*

Through the portfolio learning process Raylene built her portfolio. She examined her life and focused on the learnings she had accrued. Seeing her strengths mapped out, Raylene gained self-appreciation.
Everything I’ve been through just makes me feel happier to be where I am now. And makes me way stronger. I feel stronger that I can go back and finish it.

The certificates she has earned through the life skills training offered in the Road to Employment program continue to give Raylene a big sense of accomplishment. They are a tangible representation of the increased understanding she has of her life and how to live life.

Raylene described the skills she had been taught as those “use[d] in like everyday life.” For her, academic schoolwork was not the concern. Rather, it was the social-emotional skills that allow successful interaction with others that were beyond her grasp. As she considered the various life skills that are detailed in her portfolio, her eyes returned repeatedly to the section holding her certificates. Her hand repetitively smoothed the surface of the plastic sleeve that held one that, to her, carried the most meaning – Active Listening and Communication.

Probably because if I had been able to go through something like that back then I would have, like, been able to communicate better to whoever needed to know.

What might have been causes Raylene to pause briefly and prompts the return of tears which she quickly shakes off and counters with a brief, small smile.

Raylene’s portfolio has given her confidence in her own ability.

The biggest thing would be the feeling that I can do it and all these things I did I accomplished on my own.

Her priorities are now school and keeping out of trouble. She has a goal “to go to university and take the youth care or youth worker course.” To get there she has a plan.

Just finish high school. Get my G.E.D.
Still missing the two credits she was short when she was placed back in the regular high school, she is not willing to risk going back into that setting again, even though her age allows her access to regular high school programming.

Raylene has gained perspective on her life thus far through the insights offered by the portfolio learning process and sees how she could in turn make a contribution to others as a youth worker. She has come to see the value in the learnings that arose from experiences that were so difficult to bear.

*I just think I’ve been through a lot and I would take the time to get to know whoever I was working with and I’d listen to them and give them advice and be there for them, however they needed me.*

Still describing herself as shy, she now sees a future for herself. She knows, however, that the future involves a series of steps. Her portfolio acts as a road map detailing both her journey to the present and the course she has set for herself in the future. She has her sights set on the first end point.

*I’m just excited to finish this program.*

She does not see herself alone in her excitement. Her sense of connection with others, although just emerging, is sufficiently present for her to talk about.

*Maybe some friends, maybe some family. The teachers [in the Road to Employment program].*

In reading through her own interview transcript, Raylene experienced a further degree of self-knowledge.

*It just looks weird reading it on paper, reading how I talk and you know, what I was talking about.*

Just as her portfolio holds the concrete representation of all she brings to her life as a learner, the transcript of her interview appeared to serve a similar function. Raylene
expressed some surprise at the path charted through her own words about her personal change process.

Like, how it first started out and how it is now and everything in-between. How when I first started high school and how much I hated it and now how much I like being here.

Having had the experience of seeing how words come to represent experience in the construction of her portfolio, Raylene demonstrated a sense of her life being recorded.

Pretty much everything in here describes it all.

**Alicia**

**Learning and Learner Experiences From the Past**

Alicia moved schools frequently during her elementary years within the regular education system, experiencing four or five different schools in various parts of the city. One move in particular, prompted by circumstances part way through her year in Grade 7, saw her living away from her family in another city. This move, prompted by circumstances, proved the most difficult.

I just didn’t know anybody. I felt really ... I felt like I didn’t belong there. Everyone had their own little groups and I just kept to myself all the time. Then I met this one girl and that’s how she just became my best friend.

Her discomfort in her new surroundings extended into her academics in the new school. The difference in expectations was extremely stressful.

Up there they were doing more essay stuff and talking in front of people and I didn’t like doing that. I just don’t like talking in front of people so I actually fainted at one point because they just stare at you.

Although the teachers in the elementary school in the new city attempted to reach out to Alicia she was not receptive.
I just didn’t feel welcome. I just withdrew into myself. So, I think I made it harder on them.

The push and pull of wanting attention but pushing positive attention away prompted the first step into what would become a cycle of self-destructive behaviour.

I got really depressed because I moved. I popped a bunch of pills at school. I had to get my stomach pumped.

The turbulent time away in the new city lasted just one school year. Alicia returned to her home city after school was over and reconnected with her friendship group.

It was really good. I just went back to my old school. I just started fresh with everyone else and it was a lot easier. Especially because I had a lot of my friends back too, who I could get help from. I graduated my Grade 8 with them so it was pretty good.

It was Alicia’s entry into high school that brought with it significant involvement in substance abuse and a broad range of destructive behaviour. Although one teacher tried to reach out to Alicia, her urge to self-harm prevented her from accepting help.

She was my Native Studies teacher and my English teacher. She just understood me more than anyone else. She was more outgoing and she was like the only one I could talk to. She knew I was having troubles. I kind of pushed her away. I should have took the help.

Alicia not only pushed away those who could and would help, she spiralled deeper into drug abuse and sexual behaviour. She had a number of encounters with authority and the legal system.

Like, I had, I come from a stable family and I had no business doing all that.

Finally, the escalation signalled the end of her time within the secondary school system. It also brought with it a loss.

I got involved with a guy 11 years older than me. I was 13. I got pregnant. I slacked a bit. I stayed in school while I was pregnant but I was doing drugs. So I dropped out of school altogether and I had my daughter. She was born cocaine-addicted. Social services took her away from me. I dropped out of school
completely then and went into treatment. They basically told me it would take a long time to get her back or they could just give her to my mom. So, I gave her to my mom.

Alicia’s 3-month stay in treatment was difficult not only for her; it was also difficult for her child.

*It was hard because I had really bad withdrawals and I guess when I was having withdrawals she was having withdrawals. We’re both clean.*

After being released from treatment, she found a further way to harm herself.

*I started cutting. It’s not fun because you’re scarred for life. Life throws you so many challenges, cutting’s not a way to overcome it.*

Alicia’s self-perception fell further after dropping out of high school when she saw friends of hers graduating, going to Europe, and moving on with their lives.

*I didn’t like leaving [high school], because I had a good thing going. But, I got caught up in doing my drugs and you know having this little girl then losing her. I just didn’t want to deal with it so I just gave up on everything. I just never felt motivated because I felt like I was such a screw-up and then I just went on welfare.*

Living on welfare was not easy for Alicia; she was financially dependent on others.

*Like because I didn’t have a job or anything my grandma would always be the one buying me like bus passes and drive me and my mom would always be right there.*

While Alicia appreciated the support of her family she longed for independence. Hearing about the Road to Employment program she went through the application steps of filling out the forms, gathering references and going through an interview.

*I just went to the interview and did whatever I needed to do. I didn’t want to be someone I was not but I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell them everything, like what happened to me in my life, but right in the interview I started opening up more about my life experiences. I got accepted!*
Learning and Learner Experiences From the Present Post-portfolio Learning Process

It was during the portfolio learning process that is part of the Road to Employment program that Alicia took beginning steps toward valuing what she knew and the new skills she was acquiring.

*It was eye opening, because I realized I had a lot of skills that I never thought would be useful. Like, I had jobs before and I didn’t think that would really impact anything but you know, having like, cash handling and knowing how to use a computer and stuff like that, it’s really good! Then, just getting my [driver’s] license, that’s something else I can put in there.*

Her portfolio contains the evidence of the positives about her. Reviewing it brings up emotions with which Alicia is not familiar. She has learned about herself while learning to accept herself.

*Just my portfolio – like, I know I have the skills but seeing it there – I just feel proud. I don’t think I’ve ever been this proud. It’s a shock.*

Reading the transcript of her first interview also brought an emotional reaction from Alicia. Like the contents of her portfolio, the transcript was a tangible representation of her life. Alicia’s face registered the shock. The flippancy with which she recounted her lived experience in the first interview was gone.

*Like I’ve told people, but like, reading that just makes you think like why I did that in the first place. I don’t know how to put it. Looking back, like now at this, you know, I did a lot of stupid things. It just makes me remember and realize all the things I’ve done and how far I really have come.*

The representation of what she has achieved in her life to date, collected and preserved in her portfolio, has practical purposes for her that extend into potential dreams for the future.

*I just feel like I can go to an interview and show them and be proud myself because I got a lot of great certificates and things I never thought I would ever have.*
The difference in how she perceives her past and her present comes through in the mind maps and learning summaries detailing the life of someone who, this time, has not quit.

*Now I have some confidence. I think I can really make it in my life. I think I’m a strong person, like, I came through a lot. I’m just proud of who I am, what I overcame.*

The past still maintained an effect on Alicia. In her first interview, Alicia had talked about the negativity she perceived around herself in Regina and how she was considering leaving the Road to Employment program and moving to another city. For her, the urge to escape had resurfaced. However, by the second interview, things had changed.

*I think I’m in a very good place. Talking with my facilitators and just going with my heart, I think it’d be better if I stayed and finished the program. I think I can benefit a lot more than just up and leaving here. So, I’m really proud of myself.*

The certificates affirming Alicia’s gradual acquisition of life skills represent a type of filling in of what she had been missing in terms of social and interpersonal skills as well as academic skills. She enjoys the feeling of being personally effective when she uses those skills on a day-to-day basis.

*Like, the basic communications and the problem solving skills and the active listening. I think those would have been really good for me to have earlier because you know how to deal with conflict and you know how to let everything out appropriately and with that you know how to talk to someone without getting mad. That’s what I’m learning how to do. Going through these workshops I actually like it. And, having the certificates, it’s just a big confirmation that I can do it.*

Through the learning summaries and the mind mapping, Alicia has developed a clearer understanding of learning as a process. She sees her past in terms of what it has
contributed to who she is today, even though she struggled at times to identify the learnings emanating from some of her life experiences.

*I’m still having to work on it but they really do open your eyes to a lot of things.*

Alicia’s perception of who she is and what she is capable of has been broadened through her reflective process. She has gained insight into some of her own behaviours, what purpose they served when she was engaging in them, and what behaviours she could substitute for them that would be more effective for her.

*I’m proud of myself. I feel confident about myself. I can do whatever I put myself, my mind, into. I think I shouldn’t be as mean verbally as I am towards people. I think I’m a good caring person.*

Her exploration of herself through the portfolio learning process has also had an effect on her relationship with her family. She credits the portfolio learning process with the increased insights she has gained that have helped her to respond more appropriately.

*I just think I grew to realize to care for myself and to care for my family – to care for my daughter.*

Alicia has goals for her daughter based on the learning she has accrued from her own life experience that were brought to the forefront by the portfolio learning process. She expressed the desire for an easier route for her daughter.

*I just want her to stay in [school] and stick out whatever life throws at her. I don’t want her to get involved with a guy. I want her to be a nun. I just don’t want her to get involved with boys, or drugs, or alcohol, or smoking but I know people will pressure her into doing things. I don’t want her to end up pregnant at 13. I know she can do it. She’s smart.*

Although she is certain of what she wants for her daughter, Alicia is more tentative about the possibilities she sees for herself in what life can potentially hold for her. So much is so new.
I don’t know. I don’t know what I really want. I just want to live it day by day. I just hope it’ll bring me good things. I just want it all to work out.

Of the role of learning in her life, however, she is certain.

I think it’s the door to a good life.

Alicia knows she is engaged in a change process that has benefits over the long term. She also knows, ultimately, it is up to her.

If you really want to change, you’ll change.

Major Themes

The study question was focused on what happens when a youth or young adult who had been unsuccessful in the regular education system and involved in criminal behaviour experiences being a learner through a portfolio learning process. The open-ended interview questions were constructed to provide participants with a starting point from which they could begin to reconstruct their individual experiences of being a learner in the past as well as the present. The themes that arose from the data were directly related to the research question, although not predetermined by the research question.

Moustakas (1994) has suggested that researchers use criteria to determine themes arising out of the data. The criteria used by this researcher to guide the analysis of the data identified thematic labels based on ideas, words or phrases that:

- were found to recur within the transcripts of all participants
- were assigned particular importance by the participants and
- received significant time or degree of attention in the descriptions by the participants.

Based on the criteria, the five major distinctions in thematic content meanings that emerged through the analysis of participants’ descriptions of the meaning they associated
with learning and their perception of self as learner in the past, and then in the present after completion of the portfolio learning process, were as follows:

1. The school environment had a critical role in encouraging either success or failure.

2. The curricula, in its focus and scope, had a critical role in either maintaining exclusion through contextual disadvantage or facilitating social bonding and inclusion.

3. The personal relationships teachers developed or avoided had a critical role in facilitating or derailing engagement with learning.

4. The substitution of peer influence for parental guidance and support had a critical role in introducing substance use and delinquent behaviours.

5. Emotion played a critical role in determining the extent to which factors either suppressed or encouraged the learner in learning.

The first two themes confirmed what had been demonstrated in the literature as external to the participants themselves: the school environment had a critical role in encouraging either success or failure, and the curricula, in its focus and scope, had a critical role in either maintaining exclusion through contextual disadvantage or facilitating social bonding and inclusion. These two themes involved attitudes, beliefs, systems, procedures, locations and materials emanating from the family, neighbourhood, school, community and society to which the participants were subjected which, subsequently, influenced how they thought about themselves as learners.

The third and fourth themes also were external to the participants but they had an internal component due to the influence relationships within the family, neighbourhood, school and community had on shaping how they saw themselves as learners: the personal
relationships teachers developed or avoided had a critical role in facilitating or derailing engagement with learning, and the substitution of peer influence for parental guidance and support had a critical role in introducing substance use and criminal behaviours which, in turn, affected any level of engagement with learning.

The fifth theme stood alone as being internal to the individuals themselves, but was directly influenced by the external nature of each of the previous four in the formation of a personal identity as a learner. Emotion played a critical role in determining the extent to which negative factors impacted or positive factors facilitated the learning of the learner.

Even though all the themes are interrelated, each will be discussed individually in the section that follows. Table K5 (see Appendix K) provides a summary of the common categories that arose from the identification of meaning units elicited from the interview transcripts, as well as the meanings and essences that were identified through the construction of a composite textural-structural description; this composite integrated all the individual textural-structural descriptions which provided a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole. As phenomenology is dedicated to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses, the descriptions offered through the themes keep the phenomenon of self as learner prior to and after involvement with the portfolio learning process “alive, illuminate its presence, accentuate its underlying meanings, enable the phenomenon to linger, retain its spirit, as near to its actual nature as possible” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). In addition, it is recognized that each theme is closely tied to each of the others due to the influence exerted by external factors.
within the immediate and more diffuse environment on the development of individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1968; Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003).

**Theme 1: The School Environment Had a Critical Role in Encouraging Either Success or Failure**

The influence of the school in transmitting societal attitudes and beliefs was readily evident in the life experiences of the participants. For each of them, the induction into the education system was very difficult. Elementary school was where those participants who were Aboriginal were introduced as small children to the sense of being different and somehow inferior: “She was kind of prejudiced toward natives. She said some pretty mean stuff to me” (Mark). It was also the location where patterns of emotional and physical aggression against them on the part of their dominant group peers developed and where they learned to respond in kind: “I was always teased and picked on” (Lee).

All five of the participants who were Aboriginal identified their elementary school experience of being targeted as being different as emanating from the persons making them feel that way. They did not communicate an awareness of systemic societal causes that would suggest the perpetuation of established social hierarchies, values and goals of the dominant class. While they were aware of racist intentions in the actions of others, they saw evidence of such only in the immediate, face-to-face interactions rather than the broader context of Canadian society: “There were only a couple of us natives that went there ... I felt like it was kind of, directed towards us” (Desiree). They focused on the hurt and showed a sense of bewilderment that they would have been treated in such a manner. The historical and ongoing nature of marginalization was not part of their understanding.
For the participant who did not self-identify as Aboriginal through the interview process, the elementary school experience also held a victimization process centred on individual difference, but which was not expressed by the participant as containing a racist inflection. However, the common elements of pain, humiliation, bewilderment and anger that accompanied the experience of devaluation were shared by all the participants, regardless of ethnic identity: “Hard. It hurt” (Raylene).

The structured, grade-by-grade experience of schooling was at odds with the educational transiency experienced by five of the six participants. Moving from school to school, whether caused by lifestyle or educational placement due to behaviour, did not allow for the continuity that is foundational to the way in which the schooling experience is currently structured: “I moved from schools lots” (Jeremy); “I’d show up for a week and see what happens next week” (Mark). Each of the participants was highly attuned to the gaps in their knowledge and skills that were becoming more and more visible: “It just felt like I had a hard enough time as it is, like reading on my own” (Lee). The education system had identified the participants as being at risk while seeking to find an educational placement for them within the structure. The participants themselves, however, did not express an understanding of the number or range of risk factors that were operative in their lives.

The school-to-school transiency occurred due to decision making on the part of adults. For some, it occurred due to caregivers who moved from place to place or the placement with caregivers in different locations. For all, a greater or lesser proportion of the transiency occurred due to decisions made by school and/or school division administration personnel and was based on a perceived appropriateness: “I got kicked out
of [high school name] ... they sent me to [alternative program name]” (Lee). The participants each demonstrated an acceptance of the degree of control exerted over their educational experiences by others that contributed to the development of academic gaps as outcomes of transiency. Knowledge that others in authority of some kind or another would have jurisdiction over their educational experience, and their success, provoked no anger or even mild annoyance. All the participants had incorporated the belief that it was they who were, at the end of the day, responsible for their transiency and therefore their deficits: “I caused more problems than the other students” (Jeremy).

Within the Road to Employment program, all the participants had had the experience of learning and themselves as learners in an environment that was suited to their own style of learning. They each were able, then, to define with clarity the differences between how they learned and how the school system was structured to help them: “[Alternative program teachers] sat with you and went over things and helped you understand it no matter how many times it took them” (Raylene); or discourage them from learning: “[teachers in high school] have too many students so they don’t really know them” (Raylene); “In high school the teacher gives you something and you’ve got to do it – they’ll tell you how to do it and you’ve got to do it but you don’t get help” (Mark).

Part of the seeming magic of the portfolio learning process for the participants was the insight they gained in seeing themselves as successful learners when the learning environment focused on their needs rather than the fiscal and organizational needs of the system. Interestingly enough, the efforts made within the structure of the current education system to meet the needs of special learners through special education failed in the case of the participants who were provided such services. Based on the medical
perspective, with a diagnosis of deficiency, the efforts to cure the demonstrated inability to learn within the regular education system only served to further entrench both the mismatch in learning opportunities and the perception of the learner as less capable: “I felt like a big failure, like, I couldn’t do my work and stuff like that” (Lee).

The singular end result of a Grade 12 diploma as the all or nothing outcome of their schooling experience held no attraction or appeal for the participants. All, as young people in the throes of finding their way in a structure foreign to their needs and personal context, found the prospect of receiving only that one marker of success at the end of years of unsuccessful involvement, overwhelming. Its purpose was intangible, as none of the participants had had successful academic experiences in the K to 12 regular education system: “There’s only one thing to look forward to you know, just Grade 12, and not much other things” (Jeremy). For the majority of the participants the reality of a social pass in elementary school made the prospect of the future achievement of a Grade 12 diploma inaccessible. They knew it, and that knowledge made them acutely aware of their limited life options. When the certificates gained through successful completion of modular workshops were collected and displayed through the portfolio learning process all the participants had an emotional reaction to both the recognition and the internal changes prompted by that recognition: “You see them – it’s like actual, physical” (Lee).

A continuation of the all-or-nothing nature of the structure of the education system was noticeable, too, in the comments of the participants regarding the importance placed upon physical plants of the schools themselves. The participants all expressed their understanding that school division administrators believed a placement, and the resultant learning, in any location other than the large, congregated setting of a school
was considered to be inferior. They had integrated the belief communicated to them that
time they spent within an alternative program was intended only as a stop-gap for them
en route to rejoining the larger pool of students: “They wanted to place me in the culinary
program ... Because I was there [in the alternative program] for way too long”
(Raylene). When they met with failure socially, emotionally and academically upon
return to the large catchment of the regular high school, that experience was internalized
as further proof of their individual inferiority: “I felt I was such a screw-up” (Alicia).

For two of the participants, the success they had experienced at the high school
level in a smaller, more intimate learning environment of an alternative program for
periods of time was talked about as a notable exception to the academic rule of their
learning experience. It was only after their personal reflection through the portfolio
learning process that the connection was made for them between their own needs as a
learner and the supportive nature of alternative program settings:

_With the portfolio – it’s a lot of thinking process – the mind maps, jotting the
notes down – but in the long run it’s a really good thing because it basically sums
you up and tells all your experiences and what you’re able to do” (Lee)._

It was remarkable that none of the participants held a grudge, or otherwise negative
emotion, towards the school divisions that had limited their time in an environment in
which their odds of success would have been significantly higher. They all had accepted
that high school was to be experienced by them, in their unfamiliarity with societal rules
and expectations, in the same way as it was to be experienced by those whose life
contexts had prepared them for it.
Theme 2: The Curricula, in Its Focus and Scope, Had a Critical Role in Either Maintaining Exclusion Through Contextual Disadvantage or Facilitating Social Bonding and Inclusion

All the participants experienced a disjointed learning experience beginning in elementary and continuing into high school, through which they gained only a piecemeal attainment of the knowledge and skills that are part of the province’s curricular outcomes. For five of the participants who had identified themselves as being Aboriginal, the social and personal context that formed their lives found no relevancy in the offerings of the regular education system: “I just felt dumb” (Jeremy). For the participant who had not self-identified as Aboriginal, there was a vague sense of relevancy of the content. However, for that participant, as was the case for the other five, regardless of perceived importance, it was not possible to access the essence of the knowledge and skills due to the complications posed by a lack of life skills: “If I’d had [life skills] in high school I would have accomplished a lot more” (Alicia).

All participants had become aware of their own constrained patterns of thinking and narrow range of options of adaptive behaviour. They came to understand through the life skills modules that are part of the Road to Employment program that they needed the underlying thinking and problem solving skills in order to engage in the required learning and to relate that learning to themselves for it to have meaning: “If I had been taught the skills to handle, or even stay away from the drama – don’t put myself in there – then school would have been better for me” (Desiree).

The life skills, learned within a social, supportive, and relevant context, were seen as important personal achievements by all the participants. The essential marking of their successes through certificates gave them not only personal satisfaction of attainment but
served to signal their transformation of the ‘what’ of the content of their learning into the ‘how’ of demonstration. The participants practiced and generalized the knowledge and skills outside of the agency and the environment in which they learned them, enhancing their depth of meaning: “The basic communication and the problem solving skills and active listening – you know how to deal with conflict and how to let everything out appropriately – you know how to talk to someone without getting mad” (Alicia).

For all of the participants, there was a surge in self-confidence as they gained the keys to how to: (a) reframe words and actions so as to respond with appropriate behaviour, (b) seek threads of applicability to their own lives in new knowledge and integrate it into their thoughts and actions, (c) organize for learning and the responsibilities in their lives, (d) seek out and consider various perspectives on an issue confronting them and engage in a problem-solving process to arrive at a course of action that would benefit them and others around them and (e) review their actions in light of their effects, not only on themselves, but on those around them or on those who would follow them. Without exception, the participants experienced the major understanding of themselves as a part of a greater whole: “Now I have some confidence. I think I can really make it in my life. I think I can, if I put my mind to it, I can do whatever I want to do” (Alicia). This understanding gained through both the life skills content and the reflective process of the portfolio learning process had the effect of shifting not only their understanding of the past but their actions in the present and their hopes for the future: “It’s my learning and I want to get somewhere” (Mark).
**Theme 3: The Personal Relationships Teachers Developed or Avoided Had a Critical Role in Facilitating or Derailing Engagement with Learning**

Essential to all the participants was the need for recognition of self, for a sense of connection. The base of angst for each of them, regardless of source or motivation, was the lack of being seen and heard and known within the schooling context. Not all the participants related stories of altercations or instances of being demeaned by teachers although some did. Some of the participants relayed stories of how a particular teacher had tried to help or intervene: “My Native Studies/English teacher – she just understood me more than anyone else ... she knew I was having troubles” (Alicia). There were no instances, however, in which any of the participants had had more than one situation or interaction with more than one teacher who had made efforts to reach out to them either instructionally or in a supportive emotional manner. Common to all the participants was the wish that they had had experiences of being of worth to the individual who instructed them. One participant in particular still carried the pain of having his belief dashed that, to one teacher, he mattered: “I think she came back for like a concert or something that the school was having and she didn’t even come check on me” (Jeremy).

A critical distinguishing factor in the Road to Employment program was the relationship that the participants experienced with the facilitators. They were not under an illusion that they mattered. They had proof through shared laughter, endless pursuit of other ways of explaining a concept until understanding was reached, regular follow-up to ensure “things were alright” and a gradual development of mutual trust: “Like we talk and share – we never did that in high school and elementary, and we got to know each other here. There’s a lot of communication and we didn’t have enough of that when I was in school” (Jeremy). While only some of the participants had experienced such a
relationship prior to the Road to Employment program, all the participants recognized the value of and their own personal need for such a relationship in facilitating their learning:

_They’re there for you – the [facilitators] are there to teach you but they really listen to what your needs are and, you know, help you find ways to get where you’re going, help you set goals, teach you, like, important values” (Desiree)._ 

On the basis of their awareness came their insight into the impersonal environment of the large high school and the role peers took in the absence of a caring and attentive adult in authority: “Teachers didn’t really stand out in high school” (Desiree).

**Theme 4: The Substitution of Peer Influence for Parental Guidance and Support Had a Critical Role in Introducing Substance Use and Criminal Behaviours Which Affected any Level of Engagement With Learning**

Some of the participants experienced an authoritarian parenting style from caregivers either within their family or within foster care. Other participants experienced an accepting but indifferent parenting style. Much of these same patterns of adult interaction were the base of their experience in school. All of the participants lacked an engaged, caring, consistently present and supportive adult in their lives to influence and guidance them. As a result, each of the participants expressed a strong need and desire to belong, to be included and to be accepted – a desire that found fulfilment through exposure to peers with similar needs within the regular high school setting who provided a strongly negative influence. Four of the six participants were introduced to substance use upon their entry into a peer group in high school: “That’s when the bad influences started happening, like taking drugs and partying and all that” (Mark). The other two participants had used substances prior to high school but as a solitary activity, designed for escape not camaraderie: “I got really depressed because I moved – I popped a bunch of pills in school. I had to get my stomach pumped” (Alicia); “To go drink” (Raylene).
However, all the participants found others with whom to engage in substance use with the result that both the frequency and the range of substances used increased.

This involvement within a peer group that served to introduce, maintain, and escalate substance abuse also afforded opportunities for involvement in criminal behaviour. Such peer group involvement was confined to the large high school environment, not alternative program settings: “I’d probably instinctively be doing the same things I was doing back in high school if I didn’t really come here” (Mark). Those participants who had experienced alternate program placements during their high school experience noted a significant difference when they had been removed from the high school setting in which the substance use had been occurring. The time in the alternate program offered each of those participants a type of window, or a glimpse, into what would be possible without such involvement. However, all the participants either had been placed initially in a larger high school, or were returned to one after some time either in an alternative program or outside the educational system: “Some of the other students that I was friends with [from the alternative program] ... [getting back into drinking] affected our relationships because of who I was starting to hang out with and what I was doing” (Raylene).

All the participants were clean at the time of the interviews and all had withdrawn from the peer groups to which they belonged during such involvement. In addition, all the participants had significantly narrowed their social interactions outside of those within Road to Employment program. The majority focused on family and one or two close friends who were also working to better themselves. Those who maintained contact with former associates did so only through the occasional text message or phone call. All of
the participants indicated they didn’t have much in common any longer with those individuals: “Through the program and the changes in my family and friends around me – it’s a lot different than before” (Mark).

Recognition of the importance of distancing of themselves from peers who had had a negative influence was highlighted through the reflective process within the learning portfolio process. As part of the mind mapping of those individuals who had had either a positive or a negative effect on their lives, each of the participants identified the learnings that came through association with those individuals and their influences. The portfolio learning process assisted the participants in reframing those experiences in terms of the learnings that had come from them; this reframing enabled them to make better decisions and predict negative outcomes for particular kinds of behaviour with and on the part of peers: “It took a lot of mistakes to actually figure that out but I know now ... I’m not in that type of environment any more” (Mark). The feelings of acceptance, support and belonging the participants felt with the others who were within the Road to Employment program also provided a basis of comparison. It had become easier for them to distinguish peers as support from peers as destructive influences. For those participants who had previously felt positive peer support through alternative programs, the current experience was further confirmation.

**Theme 5: Emotion Played a Critical Role in Determining the Extent to Which Negative Factors Impacted or Positive Factors Facilitated the Learning of the Learner**

For each one of the participants, emotions had played a major role in how they had reacted within the various educational environments in which they had been placed. The emotions, stirred by the actions of others, were still quite raw for some of the
participants. During the interviews, there were tears, despairing body language, anxious mannerisms and trembling lips as the memories were invoked and words were sought to describe them. While in the regular education system, the participants had had neither the range of words with which to express such emotions, nor the context in which to understand them. They also lacked the self-regulation skills to control them.

None of the participants had had individuals engaged in their personal lives who could have assisted them in gaining knowledge of the emotion, its source, its effect on them or alternate ways of dealing with it. They were alone with their emotions, and their resultant behaviours were directed by them. Each participant clearly identified actions of his/her own that were tied to an emotional response – a response that could have been different had he/she possessed the life skills that would have helped to interpret and understand the emotions that were felt: “I need to find my voice and to actually ask questions and not be scared to ask them and confront them in a good way – not to just yell at them and start going off” (Lee).

The life skills modules that focused on basic listening skills, basic communication skills and the effects of using communication in negative ways were identified as critical by the majority of the participants. They had learned to name the emotions of their past, describe the effects they had had and reframe them into their present enabling them to distinguish them from emotions that have a positive effect on their lives: “How you feel is going to lead to how you succeed in the environment” (Lee). The power of language that had been used against them was now theirs as they reclaimed a sense of their own emotional control: “There are always going to be hard times but you can’t let that stop you or push you back” (Desiree).
Application of Theoretical Constructs

The Transtheoretical Model of Change

All participants had demonstrated motivation to make a change in their lives and had demonstrated that motivation by involvement in the Road to Employment program. This was congruent with the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska & Di Clemente, 1982) stage of contemplation. For some of the participants the motivation came from the area of family or personal relationships: “My family. It all has to do with my family, why I’m here. I want to be able to support them” (Jeremy). For others, it came from a financial or legal area: “Being on assistance and not having enough money and just getting by” (Lee). For still others, the desire to change focused on a vocational or educational aspiration: “I knew what I wanted to do but I didn’t know how to get there” (Mark). Regardless, all the participants had engaged in this primary stage that holds significant importance in beginning the change process.

Through the life skills modules, all the participants were engaged in the preparation/determination stage of the change process. They were focused on pursuing changes in their own behaviour based on what they learned. They each professed a readiness to make changes they had come to understand needed to be made. Common to all were feelings of increased self-confidence and commitment: “My whole attitude changed on life ... I want to prove I can make it on my own” (Alicia); “I am wanting to go somewhere now instead of just the same old drunk partying and watching people fight” (Mark); “I have all these skills but they’re only the ones that are on paper – I have more” (Lee); “I’m more able to do thing things I want to do” (Desiree); “[have learned] a lot of
how to deal with people and how to communicate better” (Jeremy); “The feeling that I can do it and all these things I have done I did accomplish on my own” (Raylene).

Several of the participants described modifications in their own cognitive, emotional and behavioural capacities that had occurred to such a degree that individuals in their families and the Road to Employment program had noticed a significant change in them. “Most of them are proud of what I’m doing right now” (Mark); “I do try these [skills], I do practice these [skills] at home” (Jeremy); “That makes you feel empowered – just that acknowledgement from the [facilitators] and other people – from family and friends that you are doing good and they’re proud of you – that empowers me and makes me want to do good” (Desiree); “Me, myself, and I – and maybe some friends, maybe some family [are excited with her]” (Raylene). These individuals had progressed to the action stage. The remainder of the participants described themselves in terms that aligned with them having begun engagement with this stage: “[M]y aunt, with her I had a different look on life, and then I had a better boyfriend, one who never hit me. Well they kind of teamed up together and sent me here” (Alicia); “I’m thinking about my future now instead of thinking about what I’m going to do that evening” (Lee).

Two of the participants notably described efforts they had initiated to prevent regression or relapse to previous behaviours: “I don’t have friends ... except the ones here. I [don’t] want to deal with ‘Come here, let’s do this’ ... that’s how it always was” (Jeremy); “I just completely dropped all my partying habits ... I still have friends that ask me to come and drink. I just say ‘That’s boring now’” (Mark). They described their own behaviour in the present as being completely inconsistent with the behaviours of their past and simply stated that they did not entertain any thoughts of reengagement with that
behaviour. They both were, at the least, beginning the *maintenance* stage of their change process. The remaining participants did not voice perceptions of themselves that could have been attributed to this stage; however, any one of them could have moved on to it without it being recognized through their responses.

The final stage in the transtheoretical model of change is the *termination* stage in which the negative, self-defeating behaviour is now replaced with more desirable, affirming behaviour, and the individual has absolute self-efficacy in their ability to maintain their changed lifestyle. The researcher is cautious about ascribing the responses of the participants to this stage as all the participants had yet to actively engage in society at large without the supports of the Road to Employment program. Once on their own and meeting the challenges that would come, a better assessment of the permanent acquisition and demonstration of behaviour could be made.

*Transformative Learning*

All the participants had described a *disorienting dilemma* consistent with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) that had come through unpleasant emotional life experiences that, they came to understand, could not be solved with their current limited ability to problem solve. For each, it was this experience that had either prompted the application to the Road to Employment program or had made them willing to seek entry into it: “I just finished my Grade 9 and then I had my daughter ... Social Services took her away from me” (Alicia); “I chose my family and got back on track” (Jeremy); “I’d seen a lot of junkies and I saw I was almost kind of slowly turning into one. I couldn’t stand seeing that image every day, even when I go to sleep” (Mark); “*Needing a job and not having the education to get that job, and if you can’t get that job,*
you don’t make money and you don’t look forward to things … that’s what really kind of put it in my head that I need to go back to school and that schooling is important” (Desiree); “My youngest was born with club feet ... I had to take him to the hospital every month ... it was hard ... I was determined to get into this program and get my ... driver’s license and stuff like that” (Lee); “I had to hit rock bottom to realize what was important to me and to get my life back on track” (Raylene).

The portfolio learning process served to make the participants aware of how and why their own assumptions restricted how they perceived, understood and felt about the world and themselves. Through the exploration of self, they had made revisions to their own belief systems. They also began to explore other options for themselves in the roles they could assume, the relationships they were currently, or wished to be, involved in and plans for their future. Part of this examination brought up feelings of guilt or shame, openly expressed by some participants, for events in their past: “I know it was the wrong decision cause I didn’t finish ... my Grade 12” (Raylene); “If I could go back into time ... I’d straighten myself out” (Lee); “I always thought I knew everything but no, I don’t” (Desiree); “I wish I had stayed in high school, wish I had graduated” (Alicia). For all of the participants there was a sense of reconciliation both within themselves and with others, primarily their families. Common to all was a sense of renewal.

Also congruent with transformative learning theory was the day-to-day practicing of the behaviours and thought patterns contained within the new sense of self that each of the participants had formed. All described increased comfort with actions congruent with their new sense of self. Some used the word “empowered” while others described their sense of “self-confidence”. Many of them spoke of using much more functional and
effective strategies for gaining control over their lives, experiencing deep satisfaction of increased connection with those significant to them and feeling a heightened sense of compassion for others engaged in similar struggles:

Like with me, my one friend, her little sister was cutting and she wouldn’t talk to no one and I actually went to her house like a few months ago and I showed her my scars and I told her I’ve been through it all too, you know … we actually talked for about 3 hours (Alicia);

“I kind of helped her with that, to quit drinking” (Mark);

I can tell I’m influencing my sister because, like, her watching me going back to school and … achieving what I have, she’s been like, ‘Oh, well, you should help me get into that program, when does it start up again?’ (Desiree);

“Maybe I can bring some awareness” (Lee).

Mezirow (1991) indicates that when a perspective transformation is complete, it is irreversible. When that perspective transformation is incomplete, there can be backsliding, earlier phases may be repeated or the whole process may begin anew. With the participants, certainty of the completeness or incompleteness of the perspective transformation was not known. That each of the participants had active engagement with a perspective transformation was readily evident.

**Confirmation of the Literature**

Through the descriptions of life experience provided by the participants, many of the elements identified in the literature review in Chapter 2 were readily identified.

**Evidence of Control**

First, the role of the school and schooling in controlling the learning and formation of the perception of self as a learner were notable:
1. The school, beginning at the elementary level, perpetuated the social hierarchies, values, and goals of the dominant societal group(s) and had within it expectations not fully known or understood by those not of the dominant societal group(s).

2. The structure and functioning of the education experience was suited to the dominant societal groups which implicitly or explicitly prepared their offspring for engagement with that experience.

3. Curricular options were provided based on the assumption that the learners had knowledge of the expectations and preparation for engagement with the content.

4. Social stratification was linked to academic performance and affected educational options available through educational placements.

5. Feedback on learning and performance was abstract and had little meaning or effect.

The socio-cultural factors that were identified in the literature as being highly correlated with negative life outcomes were evident through the descriptions provided by the participants. Their presence in different combinations in the lives of the participants exerted a significant measure of control in the limiting of available opportunities and the capability of accessing those opportunities:

1. Poverty, or at the least a marginal income, and the struggles it caused due to the lack of basic needs served to limit the range of experiences and the depth of knowledge about society at large.

2. Belonging to an ethnic minority that was devalued significantly affected the perception of self.
3. Family characteristics, such as marital discord, foster care, demands of single parenting, and level of parental education heightened a sense of dislocation, separation, inaccessibility.

4. Life circumstances prompting homelessness, inadequate housing, or living in settings away from family afforded levels of stress that made concentration on learning opportunities difficult.

5. Association with negative or delinquent peers provided a sense of belonging and acceptance while it ensured lack of success within the large high school setting.

6. Teenage pregnancy was life-altering in both the change of living conditions and interruption of educational opportunities.

7. Substance use provided a means of escape from not only personal issues but from learning opportunities as well.

8. Dropping out of school was the outcome of the cumulative effects of various combinations of the previously noted elements.

**Evidence of Blame**

There were one or more characteristics that some of the participants demonstrated had contributed to them being unable to benefit to the same level and degree as other students within the regular education environments, prompting efforts to place, remediate and label them with the end goal of making them part of the regular system. One or more of each of the following emerged through the lived experiences of the participants as impacting their perceptions of themselves as learners: (a) low academic level with large gaps in basic concepts making overall achievement difficult, (b) learning disabilities,
(c) lack of self-regulation skills, and (d) complications due to identified mental-health conditions.

Blame, assigned more broadly, was also in evidence when illustrations of key concepts proposed within psychological theories that posed possible explanations for deviant behaviour were apparent in the life experiences of one or more of the participants:

1. Either a lack of or contradictory moral realities were passed on from caregivers.
   Part of the transformation of perspective involved a different view of former assumptions.

2. External stimuli prompted high levels of frustration which stimulated aggression.

3. Lower levels of psychosocial maturity resulted from the absence or limited exposure of caring and consistently supportive adults to provide the context for discussions related to responsibility and development.

4. Adherence to a level of moral reasoning in which conceptions of right and wrong were interpreted in terms of what consequences could arise from the actions or what power particular individuals or institutions had to enforce rules.

5. Learning of deviant behaviours through imitation of others was strengthened through social approval and maintained through conformity to the social group.

6. Lack of reinforcement for non-delinquent roles and values.

7. Perceiving self as undesirable resulted in frustration and aggressiveness prompting the seeking of inclusion in delinquent peer groups and subcultures.

8. Low self-control.
There was one key theoretical concept contained within a psychological explanation, the effect of operant conditioning, which showed up not as part of the past for the participants but rather as a critical part of their current positive experience. The powerful feeling of reward experienced by the participants at their receipt of certificates resulted in feelings of internal satisfaction that came with recognition of achievement and further spurred them on to pursue additional learning – and certificates.

**Evidence of Fear**

It may be tempting to consider the source of fear to be external, emanating from the school through actions generated by others or by institutions. There was no evidence that emerged from the life experiences of the participants that pointed to such an external source. Rather, the fear was located within them.

All participants had encountered a different perspective of themselves upon entry into the school system. Through enforced proximity with a large number of others who harboured beliefs and attitudes about the participants as being lesser than, an uncertainty as to who they were as individuals developed. They grew to be uncertain about what place they had in the society as well as the environment they knew as school. Based on their experiences, they had no knowledge of what price could be exacted for being who they were as opposed to who they were thought to be.

Each of the participants, during his/her experience as a learner in the past, experienced significant internal distress over having no option perceivable other than to be unsuccessful in a context foreign to him/her. Through the portfolio learning process they dealt with the fear by learning who they were reflected through their own context, not that of others. They each spoke of the process of finding out who they really were. All
participants expressed how they had been willing to give up who they had wished to become as the consequences of such exploration were unknown. Now, with a new sense of confidence, all participants were taking steps to explore the potential of who they could be. To varying degrees, they each were involved with letting go of the fear to be themselves.

**Outcomes for the Individuals Participating**

Outcomes of involvement in a portfolio learning process - drawn from Brown (2002), CAPLA (1999; 2010), Hill (2002), and Saskatchewan Learning (2005) - were proposed in Chapter 3 as possible results for participants. These results were clearly seen in the outcomes described by the study participants:

1. Out of engagement with the portfolio learning process, the study participants emerged with a concrete representation of their personal lived experience that significantly influenced their personal perception of themselves as learners.

2. The participants did engage in their own processes of interpretation using the collection of evidence of their knowledge, skills, resources, supports, hopes, goals and passions. They each made explicit the differences in how they saw themselves and their lives in the past and in the present after having completed the portfolio leaning process.

3. While the participants engaged in the development of their portfolio, they became aware of the changes that occurred in the meanings they themselves had ascribed to their life experiences and saw how their world was shaped through their own expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes and judgements.
4. The participants clearly identified which of their own beliefs had been problematic to them within their lives.

5. Through the naming of their personal experiences, they may become acquainted with their voice and become aware of how they learn.

   The one outcome that was not explicitly in evidence in the data was an enunciation of the participants’ perceptions of social, political, and economic contradictions (Freire, 1970) that were, and may have still been, active in their own lives that could have served as delimiters. However, the participants did clearly demonstrate they were able to move to making informed and reflective decisions to act based on the reflective insight into their lives and the personal circumstances that had shaped them.

**Composite Textural-Structural Description**

Following is the composite textural-structural description of the experience of learning and being a learner through a portfolio learning process. The invariant meanings and themes found within the individual description of each participant have been distilled into a composite description of those qualities that give an account of the “how” feelings and thoughts connected with learning and being a learner that were aroused after participation in the portfolio learning process. A natural progression within the experience was evident, as a different level or range of qualities ascribed to learning and being a learner became notable once the portfolio was complete.

**Learner as Defective**

Learning is acquisition of things one knows and things one can do. Lack of evidence of learning points to a deficit, a failing in *self*. There was remarkable
consistency in the experiences of the participants pertaining to this first theme of the
learner being considered defective. All individuals had very clear memories of situations,
people, actions, impressions within their experiences of being in school that instilled
within them the perception that there was something wrong with them. They each
described experiences that made them feel abandoned, excluded, devalued, displaced and
irrelevant within the classrooms in which they were placed.

The participants described a type of distress associated with what could be
explained as a fracturing of who they knew themselves to be. They experienced through
the words and actions of others perceptions of themselves that were found wanting.
While they entered the education system with a particular view of how they fit within the
life they knew, they were presented with a different look at themselves that served to
separate and isolate them based on reactions of others who were perceiving them. As time
went on, the alternate view of themselves not only remained, but grew in proportion to
their own sense of who they were, creating a distance from those within their own self-
same immediate environment just as surely as it created the distance from those outside
of it. Ultimately, at some point in late elementary, they all described circumstances that
gave rise to feelings of being minimized, rejected, discarded and demoralized. For many
of the participants, substance use provided one way of escaping those feelings.

The perception of self that is lost while another is externally constructed to be
internally accepted was a painful experience for some participants. Participants described
a feeling in adolescence that spoke of a lack of confidence that they could be or could do
anything of importance. Their heads had accepted what they were perceived to be; they
now identified it was their hearts that urged them on to be who they could be. While some
of the participants had independently sought to change their lives, others had received support from family members. All, however, had faced significant trepidation upon starting a change process as the fear of failure remained close.

Learner as Empowered

The participants all expressed hopefulness for the future that was focused not on what *might* happen based on a wishful potentiality, but, rather, on what *could* happen out of a range of concrete positive possibilities they had had a hand in creating. The successes they were experiencing engendered a desire for more. They each now carried a view of themselves as emerging into their lives.

Each individual understood he/she had been part of a self-reveal through the portfolio learning process. All used words, pictures and other items such as certificates earned, to build a description of the journey that had brought them to that moment. They described how, through the weeks and months, they personally gained the insight that self-understanding cannot be forced or mandated, but rather discovered. Through that insight they went on to find their own sense of purpose behind the thoughts, ideas, perceptions and events that have guided their lives thus far.

The self-directed nature of the portfolio development process provided the participants with a sense of input, of being able to portray the contents in a manner that reflected *who* they were rather than who they were told they were, without discussion of who they could be in broader society. There was a struggle to learn the contextual elements of successful participation in society at large, but there were the opportunities to observe the expected behaviours and copy them provided through the series of workshops on life skills. Not only did this enlarge limited repertoires of emotive reactions, altering
deep-seated automatic responses, but the vocabularies with which to describe them were enhanced.

There was a sense of self-trust, common among the participants, expressed in their own ability to continue to learn and improve their own life circumstances. Through their engagements in their own reflective processes, they passionately described their evolving senses of who they were and were becoming, their places within their families and community, and as a result, a developing sense of self-efficacy. Their acceptance of personal responsibility for the past was accompanied by the awareness of their own responsibility for their futures.

There was engagement in a different way of thinking about self and society that was enabled by the reflection process integral to both the workshop series and the portfolio development. Through a step-by-step personal clarification of understanding and meaning, learning was expanded to encompass much more than school-related deficits. Learning became personalized as fragments of past experience were held to the light of current perspective. The actions of the past were separated from the learnings and meanings ascribed to them in the present. In the reinterpretation, a reengagement with society and its norms, however new and fragile, was felt and tried on.

There was a gradual assumption of ownership of the learning process as both the workshops and the portfolio development evolved. Direction from the facilitator was welcomed and there was a connectedness and interdependence among those learning and those facilitating the learning. The supportive nature of the relationship allowed the participants to gradually move to a fledgling acceptance of independence in the direction they needed to take in learning.
A sense of personal agency, knowledge of having a personal role in the day-to-day quality of existence, was built alongside the portfolio. While it came many times as a surprise, awareness of it only further underscored an emerging sense of competency, of being able. Personal skills were documented and were therefore perceived as real.

Hopes and dreams were also allowed to surface. Participants talked of passions and interests that had not been evident to them prior to their engagement in the portfolio learning process. There was a tentative seeing of self within societal organizations and structures for the value he or she could bring: “If I do actually get to be able to work at the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) then I was thinking that maybe I can just bring awareness” (Lee); “[I want] to do sound design for video games” (Mark).

Each of the participants saw themselves very differently after the completion of the portfolio learning process in terms of self-image. The intensity of the experience of reconceptualising themselves was transformative for all the participants. The release that accompanied self-exploration and self-discovery opened them up to a joyfulness that was expressed by each individual through words, facial expressions, body movements and energy. As one participant said, with emotion making the formation of the words difficult, “I’m out of the box.”

**Learning as Externally-Directed**

The participants all had associated learning with school. The content of what they had to learn lacked a sense of relevance to them and their lives making the learning of that content all the more difficult. They perceived no direct connection between what was being learned and how that learning would, should, or could be used within the context in which they found themselves. As such, to the participants, in their late elementary and
high school years, the learning that was school-related had been easily relegated to the distant future, when it could be dealt with, if need be.

The multiple negative associations with school that had been formed over their elementary years and their experience of high school removed learning as applicable and accessible to them. Any sense of discovery, wonder or curiosity had long been abandoned. All the participants left the regular high school environment and efforts to return to school saw a resumption of former patterns. They all experienced a giving up. Their perception of themselves as unable overlaid the education label of disabled. The pain of self denied surfaced through the words, demeanour, and emotionality of the participants. Perceptions of self as learner were, for the most part, absent or had atrophied during late elementary and early high school years. None of the participants were attached to formalized learning and had not the mechanism to recognize their own informal learning, let alone value it.

The abrupt actual physical disconnection with school and learning was connected with Grade 8 or entry into high school in Grade 9. However, for all the participants, a gradual process of disconnection had been going on for a significant length of time prior to their final leave taking from the K to 12 education system. For the most part, all the participants maintained some, although minimal, level of engagement in school in their early to middle elementary grades despite their ever-increasing perception of themselves as being aside from its intended audience. The elongated process of disconnection was evidenced in the skipping of school, lack of completion of homework and withdrawal from interaction within the classroom. Although intermittent and spontaneous in the
beginning, for some participants one or all of these behaviours became a way of coping with the stress of not belonging and not succeeding.

**Learning as Internal Engagement**

Feeling one can learn is freeing. It is emotion-based. It wells up inside a person. All the participants had experienced a swelling of emotion as they felt themselves becoming more and more equipped for a positive, contributing future. While they understood there was much more they would need to learn as they moved into the role of a contributing and involved citizen, the demystifying of rules for what was expected was critical. They were acquiring the skills to seek out, integrate and use knowledge about themselves and their expanded world. By practicing those skills through the workshops and the portfolio learning process, they had incorporated them into their own thinking and behavioural repertoire. The awareness they had acquired of other ways to interpret and frame what they saw, felt and did, in turn, developed a broader range of responses from which they could now choose. They each knew that familiar patterns of thought and behaviour still existed within them, but they had gained an understanding *how* patterns are constructed. It was this connection that served as a basis for an increase in confidence in themselves.

The portfolio learning process connected them to learning as a series of participatory events that they enjoyed and internalized as needed, worthwhile, and meaningful. They each had shifted to looking at learning as equipping them *for* life and in turn, felt strengthened in their ability to *live* life. Now reflecting hope and trust, they actively practised these new life learnings outside of the agency in which they learned them.
The certificates, evidence of the marking, and, therefore, proof of success, served as a critical affirmation of ability long-doubted. The physical presence of such proof made going back to previous thought patterns or behaviours uncomfortable. There was personal investment and importance attached to both the process of claiming the skills and the reclaiming of self as the possessor of the skills. The impact of the feelings of self-worth caused the door to previous incarnations of self to be in various stages of closing.

Through a new perspective, all participants experienced a sense of being internally freed from the things in their pasts they wished had been different. They had a new view of themselves that, in a sense, began their life stories again. They identified the starting point of the rest of their lives in the present, although the past was not forgotten or denied. For each of them it served as a backdrop against which the forward movement was set.

As the participants gained an understanding that learning is critical in any society and through that learning a relationship is formed between one’s self and society that grows and develops over time, each of the participants demonstrated a participatory acceptance of inclusion in the broader society. They now understood the connection between what is learned and what one does with that learning. They were tentatively experimenting with the feeling that they each knew enough to be able to predict within reason what could likely happen, pending their own efforts.

A significant focus on the future emerged based on the accumulated weight of evidence that skills had been acquired and knowledge gained. Possibilities that had not been thought of or hoped for now became part of discussion. The horizon of potential that had been either obscured or limited now was visible. Current fiscal realities mixed with
current responsibilities served to further enhance the perception of future rather than dampen it. The perception of movement forward was essential while size of the steps forward had less importance.

The introductions to, engagement in dialogue with and practice of interview contact with prospective employers gave a sense of personal connection with those in broader society that had not been possible prior to the portfolio learning process. These were opportunities to gain comfort in association with individuals who would be seeing and hearing the newness of self. The portfolio provided a basis, and security, in engagement. As positive outcomes resulted for the participants, the tentative feeling of inclusion and acceptance was nurtured.

The concept of rescue was a critical aspect to the portfolio learning process. Participants felt either rescued by the happenstanes of their involvement in the Road to Employment and the portfolio learning process, or felt they were rescuing themselves through the skills they had gained through their participation in both. There was now the possibility for entry into the broader society, made possible by the acquisition of life skills that gave them the keys to the how of fulfilling societal expectations. Their portfolio held the proof.

*Legacy*

Each individual gradually became aware of his or her own personal mission over the course of constructing the portfolio. Each was encouraged to see the how of his/her contribution to the broader context of society. Through the development of their portfolios and the discussions that allowed for a rediscovery of their own essences, the individuals were encouraged to see themselves moving in the directions they are now
guided to by their passions and purposes. Possibilities began to take the place of obstacles. The fear of not belonging gave way to a sense of self-confidence.

All the participants expressed confidence that they now knew what to do or what to say in situations they formerly would have considered threatening or frightening. With that confidence came hope and a strong desire to reach out to others who were on the same path as they had walked. The understanding of themselves had also increased their understanding of others. Those participants who were parents were impassioned in their need to parent their children in a way that nurtured their strengths, increased their understanding of life, and instilled a sense of self-worth. Those who were not parents had a clear desire to extend support to others, either family or friends. All the participants demonstrated a sense of personal responsibility for self, a desire to extend out to others, and recognition that they had moved toward self-control rather than continue being controlled by others.

The magnitude of personal change was reflected back through its effects on those closest to the participants. There was an internal recognition of the influence of doing good that was visible through concrete behaviour changes of others resulting in enhanced emotional connections. It gave the feeling of being part of something much larger and far-reaching than what could be determined by simply an accumulation of paper within a plastic-encased binder. Reconciliation with self and others was facilitated not only through acceptance of self and others, but also through a sense of purpose – a belief that what had been and was experienced was broader than that of a single person.

The connection between investment in self and investment in others was of significant importance. This interdependency further enhanced the need to continue and
awakened a sense of awe at the experiencing of such a need. It was within the awe that the primary source of happiness lay; the expression of which often pre-empted, but always accompanied, the discussion of how it came to be. It was within the sense of satisfaction that the exercising of self-control and self-regulation was rooted.

The knowledge of self and the important role of adherence to the thoughts and behaviours that were part of the new perspective of self were not lost on the participants. Each felt a commitment towards who he/she had become and was in the process of becoming. The problems of the past – their lack of success on the normative path of K to 12 schooling and their personal involvement in criminal activities as an outgrowth of finding a sense of belonging only among delinquent peers – were viewed differently through their engagement with the portfolio learning process. A sense of self was rebuilt based upon the value of what was learned through the experiences of the past. It was not that negative experiences were now considered positive. Rather, the learnings that came from those experiences were now being seen within the context of their own personal development.

Disappointments and Regrets

From their current perspectives, all of the participants expressed disappointment at missed opportunities that had been available to them, but had been lost due to events in their lives that took precedence at the time. With the reinterpretation of skills and experiences came an emerging sense of what might have been. Several expressed a sense of bewilderment at how things could have gone so very wrong.

At times the participants found a section of their portfolio difficult to complete. Memories were painful and there was frustration with the inability to identify positive
personal attributes that were part of their negative experiences. However, when the experiences were identified, named and considered for their value in providing learnings, the participants were able to move on. They explored examples of how they either currently demonstrated those learnings or could potentially demonstrate those learnings in their day-to-day lives.

The shape of past experiences shifted for the participants. They came to understand at a personal level the often repeated statement that “everyone should have the ability to change”. Their portfolios were meant to be added to over time, incorporating more and more of who they were becoming. Each participant understood this self-renewing aspect of the portfolio with increasing clarity, as they each returned again and again to its development after the completion of each workshop and the attainment of yet another goal.

Discussion

The study question of what happens when a youth or young adult who had been unsuccessful in the regular education system and involved in criminal behaviour experiences being a learner through a portfolio learning process drew from the descriptions of personal experience the powerful mediating effect of the portfolio learning process in facilitating a personal change process. The study participants experienced a significant degree of success in transforming how they perceived themselves as learners. However, the participants were not only experiencing success, they were learning how to experience success. Through the portfolio learning process they saw they could use their past learnings to better their present, recognize and affirm their present openness to change and focus their newly acquired skills to generate further
success for themselves. They were integrating transferable skills into their thinking, feelings and actions.

While this phenomenological study centred on lived experience, it is important to recognize that lived experience occurs within a broader societal context and is influenced by factors at play within that context. As such, the following fundamental findings are presented within which to situate the transformative learning experiences of the study participants:

1. The recognition of the value of what one knows and has experienced on an informal educative basis was clearly identified as a factor in motivating and promoting personal change among the study participants. However, the data carries within it the question as to why the underlying need for individuals to change to fit is broadly assumed. The systemic disadvantage experienced by the youth within the study precluded learning how the society in which they live, in essence, works. The maintenance of such systemic disadvantage through cultural disconnection resonates strongly with the theme of control presented in Chapter 2.

2. The reality of racism and prejudice experienced by the youth within the study who were Aboriginal clearly affected their knowledge of self, knowledge of others and knowledge of their society. For them, the experience of school and learning was influenced by factors not experienced by their non-marginalized peers. The theme of fear arose within the data as related to fear of failure, non-acceptance, and lack of place. The seat of fear was, in a sense, within the study participants themselves. While society promoted a fear of youth who do not belong, the experience of the youth within the study rested on a fear of not belonging.
3. The need for learning environments that provide contextual learning to accompany academic learning challenged both the accepted notion of a quality education and that of the regular high school environment as the norm in terms of fostering a positive self as learner identity. The internal and external causes of the negative experience of schooling and learning that arose from the data questioned an assignment of blame to the individuals themselves for not finding a fit within the regular system. Rather, if blame was to assigned it would better rest on the limited applicability of the current structure to address the learning needs of children and youth who are marginalized.

Facilitating a change in how youth see themselves as learners should not be considered one of several optional outcomes of the educational process, but rather as foundational, a critical determiner of the experience of how one learns, especially among those who are the most marginalized.

**Summary**

This chapter detailed the stories of the lived experience that were drawn from interviews with six individuals who consented to be participants in this study. From the analysis of the stories of lived experience the researcher sought to describe what happens when a youth or young adult who had been unsuccessful in the regular education system and involved in criminal behaviour experiences being a learner through a portfolio learning process.

The portfolio learning process within a life skills program, the Road to Employment program, offered within an agency providing services to youth and young adults, served as facilitating and precipitating events that formed a shared experience by
the participants. The meanings associated with the experiences of the participants were explored by the researcher through the process of bracketing and a procedure of analysis (Moustakas, 1994) which facilitated a discovery of themes in a manner as objective as possible.

Based on the criteria, five major distinctions in thematic content meanings emerged:

1. The school environment had a critical role in encouraging either success or failure.
2. The curricula, in its focus and scope, had a critical role in either maintaining exclusion through contextual disadvantage or facilitating social bonding and inclusion.
3. The personal relationships teachers developed or avoided had a critical role in facilitating or derailing engagement with learning.
4. The substitution of peer influence for parental guidance and support had a critical role in introducing substance use and delinquent behaviours.
5. Emotion played a critical role in determining the extent to which factors either suppressed or encouraged the learner in learning.

In addition, three fundamental findings, concerning the broader context in which the lived experiences of the study participants emerged, were identified as being congruent with the themes established in the literature within Chapter 2:

- the role of systemic disadvantage in maintaining control and precluding learning how society works for those who are marginalized
• the role of racism and prejudice in sustaining a perception of fear of youth who are perceived to not belong even though those youth may themselves fear not belonging and

• the role of learning environments in providing contextual learning while they provide academic learning, which can emphasize individual blame for lack of success as a learner.

Chapter 5 will provide a summation of the study, distinguish the findings of the study from prior research, provide a discussion of the results of the study in terms of social meanings and implications as well as personal and professional values, and will outline potential further research explorations that would further extend knowledge in this area.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Summation of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to gain understanding of the lived experience of individuals who had been unsuccessful in the regular education system, had engaged in criminal behaviour, and who had demonstrated they were open to life change through involvement in an agency program that incorporated the use of the portfolio learning process. The need for this study arose from a concern for the large number of youth in Saskatchewan for whom life success was hampered by lack of educational credentials, lack of employable skills resulting in limited options for employment and involvement with the criminal justice system.

For those youth who drop out of school, few options exist other than social maintenance at the expense of the society in which they feel out of place. They may experience a loss of independence due to the need for extended support from their families. They may also meet their needs through illegal activities. For those youth who exit the education system prior to completion and engage in criminal behaviour, the attainment of the benchmarks related to school-based learning becomes much more difficult. Without the measures of personal value – awards, scholarships, entry criteria, certificates, degrees – these youth do not have the credentials distributed by the education system that are valued in society and required for entry into employment or postsecondary education. Efforts that have been made on the part of the education system to alter the educational environment or provide special education services to youth not experiencing success within the regular education system have met with limited success for some youth.
This study explored the potential for a different emphasis in educational programming – one that focused on the understanding of how individuals shift their perceptions of themselves to include that of a continuous learner, one who is able to conceive of making and taking action to make a significant life change. This study is significant because, at the time of this writing, it was alone in detailing a process of transformative learning facilitated through the use of the portfolio learning process within a life skills program offered by a local non-profit agency. Study participants were part of a larger group of individuals who were exposed to an experience that transformed their world views and enabled them to take actions to exchange negative behaviours for positive ones as they interpreted their life experience from a different perspective. In so doing, they were engaged in creating a new existence for themselves within the society of which they are part.

Phenomenology was an appropriate methodology for this study. The internal, complex process of self-discovery within human experience was sought through verbal descriptions captured during interviews as the participants recreated their experience. The phenomenon of interest within this study was not the experience of success or failure, independent of each other, within the regular education system or even the desistance from criminal behaviour. Rather, it was about the experiences of transformative change that occurred through their experiences of self as learner by engaging in a process that broadened their personal meanings of success. For the study participants, their thoughts about themselves, their understandings of the society in which they live and the experiences they have had within their families and neighbourhoods had contributed to self-portraits that were limiting and self-destructive. They broadened their personal
meaning of success through the portfolio learning experience and through the life skills taught through the Road to Employment program. The study participants significantly changed their thinking which in turn significantly changed their behaviour.

**Cognitive and Emotional Aspects**

Each of the participants shared memories of events, explained the importance of personal circumstances or situations and relayed the differences they were aware of in their own thinking and behaviour. Each of these encompassed a range of topics that was based in their conscious experience. Accompanying these rich descriptions of experiences rooted in their own lives was significant emotion. The telling was not aside from the feeling. Rather, the emotion formed a base upon which the meanings attributed to the experience rested. Events were significant, remembered and held power of influence due to their attachment to emotion.

For all the participants, the interviews stimulated a re-feeling of the emotions that were part of the lived experiences in the past. The years distancing past experiences from the present appeared to have no effect on the depth of emotion the experiences held. There was, however, a significant difference in which emotions were attached to the past and present lived experiences. Stories of the past, related to both learning and being a learner, held painful feelings of rejection, exclusion and fear for self either physically or emotionally while the experiences closer to the immediate present spoke to feelings of wonder, excitement, relief and, most of all, hope.

The feeling of empowerment rose through the descriptions given by each of the participants when they described their portfolios and, by doing so, described themselves. While the physical portfolios lay before them, comprised of paper, ink, plastic and
cardboard, the participants’ eyes, faces, posture and words joined in an expression of internal contentment and happiness at having who they were mirrored by the contents. While affirmation of self-worth may come more slowly from society at large, the self-affirmation was transforming.

**School as Microcosm of Society**

As mentioned in Chapter 1 and detailed in Chapter 2, Canada today is dealing with a challenging present with attitudes, beliefs and actions that are relics of a colonial past which continue to have predictable results for those over which these attitudes, beliefs and actions hold power. Saskatchewan cannot claim to be free of prejudicial words, actions, policies or practices. For participants who were Aboriginal, their life experiences as a learner traced outlines of the effects of the past on the new page of their lives. For them, educational experiences did not have the effect of preparing them to go with their peers into employment or postsecondary institutions. The quality of their experiences was different in ways that had the effect of distancing them from a perception of learning and suppressing their senses of themselves as learners:

1. Their entry into the social arena of school as very young children served as an introduction to marginalization. The participants felt defined by difference, both educationally and socially.
2. The content of the curriculum reflected a cultural perspective that they did not have access to and therefore did not, could not, relate to their own cultural context.
3. School supports were offered, but were time-limited. Specific amounts of time with a specialist teacher on a weekly basis estranged the content of the supportive sessions from the content of the classroom instruction.
4. The focus on what to know in an instructional way that reflected an assumption of how to learn it was disconnected from the necessary bridging of how you can come to know it that the participants required.

5. Schooling was a location to the participants rather than a process of having the complexities of life within society untangled and made clear. They were not able to do the untangling and clarifications on their own.

6. Opportunities to learn in alternative programming that was able to provide what had been missing for the participants within the large high school setting was time-limited. Participants who had found success within an alternative program were only allowed to remain within it for a defined period of time; this time did not correspond with the length of time needed for them to successfully complete their high school course requirements.

The very societal institution that was to prepare them for life in the society, of which they were part, held powerful negative associations for each of the participants.

**Congruence of Findings with the Conceptual Model**

The conceptual model presented in Chapter 1 was developed to incorporate the topics and relationships that were anticipated in relation to youth and young adults based on the review of the literature. Its focus was on the process of change rather than causation of the condition or circumstances in which change was required. Causal factors, however, are not discounted in the conceptual model. Rather, they are accepted as being both part of and contributing to the lived experience of the participants prior to the current engagement in a change process. The interview data confirmed this perspective as
each of the participants told the story of his/her past as a way of making meaning of the present.

The participants had all experienced schooling as a hurtful event, one that diminished their sense of self-worth. Vulnerability was a common base for memorable emotional events directed towards the participants by others within the school that caused them significant distress. As little children, such events were identified by the participants as central in determining how they saw themselves.

With each of the participants, adolescence proved to be a pivotal life stage. Building on a feeling of exclusion that dominated their earlier educational experiences, finding acceptance within a group of peers was of primary importance. As the participants entered adolescence they entered into significant negative involvement with peers. Their peers had a major influence on how the participants perceived themselves and the types of behaviours they demonstrated. Coinciding with their physical entry into adolescence and the finding of a group with which to align, there was also a lessening of involvement of family. The participants had little guidance beyond their peer group.

Through this period of time, each of the participants developed a sense of identity that was both reflected and reinforced through their peer groups. As each participant sought acceptance and belonging with others, the self-portrait they internalized and the behaviour they engaged in were at odds with the educational system and the broader society. Combined with negative peer influence, substance use, and lack of boundaries, the participants had time and opportunity to engage in risky behaviours.

Within the conceptual model, a critical phase that emerged through the interview data was the time period in which each participant experienced a need and desire to
change their lives. For the majority of participants having children sparked the search for a vehicle of change. For others, it was an awareness of the likelihood of fatal consequences that would be the results of the lifestyle in which they were engaged. While the participants were not necessarily aware of how the need and desire for change had emerged at the time that it surfaced in their lives, each was able to describe it through reflection in the telling of his/her story within the interviews. Within the meaning they made of their pasts, they were conscious of the past choices they had made, as well as the consequences of those choices. That consciousness brought with it a readiness to change and a willingness to learn.

Interestingly, all participants described procedural efforts such as filling out forms, seeking information and preparing for an interview, that they themselves made in order to gain entry to the Road to Employment program. This overall action of seeking acceptance into the program, while comprised of various tasks, occurred as a self-motivated choice and created a sense of personal investment in the program elements that the participants were seeking. It was noteworthy that even when some of the participants had had assistance by family members or friends in fulfilling the required entry application process, they framed that assistance in terms of support rather than a course of action determined for them by others.

A further commonality was the belief on the part of all the participants that maturity played a significant role in their status of being willing to change. Part of the comparisons that were made focused on how much more they, as individuals, had matured. To the participants, maturity was closely tied to acceptance of personal
responsibility and a perspective that took into account not only their own wants and needs but those of others in their lives.

The point of [re]engagement and identity [re]construction in the conceptual model was clearly evident in the interviews. The initial interview was conducted as the participants completed their portfolios so that they could be used in job interviews. The tone and content of that interview differed for all of the participants from the follow-up interviews. In the follow-up interviews, the participants had had a week of time in which they had been able to incorporate into their thoughts and conversations what they had learned about themselves through the overall portfolio learning process. They had also had time to reflect on the life stories they had told within the first interview. The content of the follow-up interview for each of the participants demonstrated a higher degree of confidence and an increase in motivation to continue with learning as a life skill. There was also an articulated, defined difference between their former selves and who they were in the process of becoming. It was notable that all participants, without exception, saw themselves differently and had already begun to incorporate those differences into their speech, their interactions with others and their thoughts about the future.

The interviews, therefore, confirmed the evolving nature of change and its significant altering effect on the self-perception of an individual as presented in the conceptual model. All the variables contained within the conceptual model were addressed by the participants over the course of the two interviews. Specifically, the data confirmed:
1. the formation of identity of self as learner as an evolving process, one that is established through time, that responds to the interactions one has with one’s environment as well as with oneself, and 

2. as individuals begin to see themselves not only through the lenses of their prior experiences but through reflection on those experiences, they become aware of how they construct knowledge, recognize the sources of their ideas and become more adept at reconstructing knowledge based on new experiences and reflection.

Within the context of this research study, the exploration of the understandings of the participants as learners was reached through the overlap of the processes of meaning making and learning, all within the understanding of the context of the lived experience, both past and current.

**Results**

**Social Meanings**

The engagement with a personal change process on the part of these six study participants gave rise to questions that prompt reflection on the nature and emphasis of our current educational system when considering youth whose experience within it was characterized by failure. Much information was gleaned through the reflective descriptions of the schooling experience and the effects those experiences had on the outlooks of the participants toward themselves as learners. It is within the contrast that emerged between interpretations of the phenomenon of ‘self as learner’ within the K – 12 system and then after involvement in the process of recognition of informal learning within the contexts of lives lived, that a questioning of some of the following interdependent assumptions that construct our current education system arise.
Question: How can the educational experience be structured and organized so that the vulnerabilities of youth at risk are recognized and help to direct the provision of supports to them?

While it may be that the education system is seen as just one of the agencies that deal with youth who are considered at risk, the results of the study infer that through its curricular offerings, organization, and school size it can have a role as one of the causal factors in youth experiencing lack of success. With recognition that the regular education system has the potential to make significant differences in the lives of youth who are at risk, attention needs to be directed to the elements of school climate, class/school size, class/school supervision and organization that were identified by such youth as critical experiential obstacles to success. Each of the participants identified the high school environment as one that, for them, limited their success and facilitated failure. The structure of the large high school setting with the large classes, entrenched social groups, limited supervision due to size and class structure, and impersonal atmosphere, exacerbated the feelings of exclusion and promoted engagement with negative youth culture.

Question: Is the regular high school the best location for learning to occur for youth who are at risk?

Each participant was clear about the range of delinquent behaviours that can be facilitated by the structure of the large high school in contrast to the smaller, more interactive alternative programming options. It was the consideration of high school as a location rather than the level of learning that was problematic for the participants. The prevailing belief that only the high school experience was normal or approved of and that attaining high school credits through an alternative learning site was somehow lesser than
was a clear limiter for the participants. Within such a structure, recognition of what the learner brings to the learning that is to occur is limited.

**Question:** Should the regular education system make the assumption that the children and youth who are clients of the educational services that are offered are ‘culturally fluent’ in the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs of the dominant cultural group?

While the participants understood the importance of the established curricula, both at the elementary level and at the high school level, the focus on academic to the exclusion of life skills played a critical role in maintaining exclusion through contextual disadvantage. The participants did not enter school, either as a young child or as a high school student, with the same broad normatively accepted societal contextual base of social conventions, cultural fit or orientation to the future. Without such knowledge and skills the participants felt they were adrift, missing the context of what was taught, making social interaction mistakes, misinterpreting things said or done and falling further and further outside of the accepted group. They felt unequipped to engage in social bonding with non-delinquent peers and to seek inclusion within the school itself. What they needed, along with the academic content, was the learning about the world in which they found themselves. Only when they were identified as problematic or at risk and were offered an alternative programming that did include life skills did they experience success.

**Question:** How can teachers be assisted to understand, at a level that will have an impact on their attitudes, beliefs and actions, the needs of youth who do not have the cultural fluency of the dominant cultural group? How can teachers be assisted to also understand the significant impact of words and actions that come from prejudice?

Through the reflective process of the portfolio learning process, teachers were identified by the participants as having a critical role in facilitating or derailing
engagement with learning. For children and youth struggling to understand not only what was to be learned, but how that learning figured into their lives, the teacher made the difference one way or another. The participants each had a story about a teacher who did appreciate the magnitude of the challenges they, as at risk students, faced. However, those were the exception rather than the rule. There were many more stories of teachers who made comments consciously, intentionally or not, that wounded and had the effect of either starting or normalizing marginalization among the participants’ class peers. Every participant had the impression that the teachers did not care about kids like them and each participant described how he or she sought out association with peers who were like them. These peers then became a substitute for adult guidance and support. This had a critical role in introducing substance use and criminal behaviours to the participants, which in turn affected any level of engagement with learning. Each of the participants indicated that, with occasional exceptions, they never felt a link to a teacher as a significant adult in their lives. The exceptions existed within alternative programming.

**Question:** Can we continue to assume that by being part of the approved educational structure youth who are at risk will feel included?

The participants independently identified the role that emotion played in determining the extent to which negative factors impacted them as learners, or positive factors facilitated the learning. How they felt about themselves as persons was directly linked to their engagement with learning. The feeling of being included was not associated with the regular education system. Participants used words such as “angry,” “afraid,” “depressed,” “hurt,” “not smart,” and “failure” among others to signify the feelings that permeated their memories of elementary school. For high school, they used phrases such as “being different,” “called stupid,” “being rebellious,” “wanting to be
loved,” “lash out,” and “closed in” among others to describe the feelings that accompanied the regular high school experience. Participants who had attended an alternative learning program used words such as “fun,” “the best,” “more accepting,” “intimate,” and “safer.”

Each of the participants talked at length with significant enjoyment about the learning experience they had engaged in through the Road to Employment program and the portfolio learning process. Without exception, the participants talked of their increased “confidence,” their feelings of “empowerment,” the “motivation” they felt, their “determination” to get the credentials offered through the program and the “support” they felt on a personal level, not only from each other as participants but from their facilitators.

Organizational Implications

Education of Teachers

Universities.

The study results underscored the importance of teachers having exposure to not only the what of teaching (the content of subject areas, the instructional strategies that may be chosen, the outcomes students are to achieve and the various ways of assessing student progress), but also the how and the why of the educational process in assisting children and youth to have the knowledge and skills for life. The experiences of the participants within the regular education system were marred by comments and attitudes of teachers who may not have intended what they said or portrayed to be hurtful and traumatizing; but, that was the result for the participants.
Suggestions emanating from the study for faculties of education focus on the potential for development of a strand of teacher preparation that has as its focus youth at risk and would include:

1. human-justice issues such as understanding the nature of marginalization, the effects of poverty, the needs of those who differ in ethnicity/gender/sexual preference/age/social class, as well as the effects of minority status in relation to justice to provide pre-service teachers with the background necessary to moderate the effects of their own biases

2. understanding how compliance and noncompliance varies in interpretation and expression

3. emphasis on skills in interpersonal communication to assist teachers in connecting with all students within their classes

4. understanding of the uses and benefits of alternative programming for youth experiencing difficulties in accessing learning in the regular education system

5. attentiveness to not only the academic requirements, but also the challenging factors active in the lives of children and youth

6. the need for life skills for children and youth to complement their learning of academic material and

7. how to facilitate the portfolio learning process in conjunction with life skills programming for youth demonstrating learning gaps.

Ministry of Education and school divisions.

The study results highlighted the importance of several areas of need that relate to the Ministry of Education in its commitment to the improvement of learning success and
well-being for all Saskatchewan children and youth. These areas were identified by the
participants as having a critical role both in how they experienced schooling and in their
ability to see themselves as learners. Through its leadership and identification of direction
for school divisions in the province, the Ministry is encouraged to consider developing
expectations concerning:

1. ongoing professional development related to human-justice issues that may not have
   been part of the degree programs the teachers would have been part of at the time
   they graduated
2. familiarity with human-justice issues as part of the expected skill base in new
   teachers
3. reconsideration of how alternative programming is offered, to whom, and for how
   long
4. availability of life skills programming in addition to remedial academic support for
   students demonstrating learning gaps
5. guidelines for the provision of life skills programming and module certificates for
   recognition of achievement at both the elementary and high school levels
6. incorporation of the use of the portfolio learning process in conjunction with life
   skills programming for youth demonstrating learning gaps and
7. consideration of awarding a high school credit under a ministry-chosen subject
   name for the completion of a predetermined number of life skills modules
   (regardless of student’s grade level).
Community-Based Supportive Agencies

For Rainbow Youth, the community-based organization working to address the life-effectiveness needs of youth, young adults and their families, the results of the study affirmed the importance of both life skills development and the portfolio learning process that forms the base for the Road to Employment program. The reverberation created by the positive life changes and choices made by the participants that had an effect on their family members makes the potential for change much broader than one person at a time.

Future Research Projects

There are distinct areas for future research that flow from this study and which would contribute to the literature in this area. They are presented for consideration in no particular order of priority, but rather follow the flow of the conduction of the study:

1. The participants had actively sought out the Road to Employment program that provided life skills programming and incorporated the portfolio learning process. There is potential to investigate whether there would be similar results if the portfolio learning process and life skills programming were used within the secondary school level, where youth are part of a system in which there is an expectation of attendance rather than a personal choice to attend. Such research may provide additional insight into the effects and importance of providing both contextual and academic learning opportunities.

2. All participants in the study had faced significant life challenges that had placed serious limitations on them, yet they were willing to engage in a personal change process. Research into the presence of the intangible quality of resilience in
participants who respond positively to the portfolio learning process and life skills programming may assist in providing additional information about youth and young adults who are able to change their life course.

3. The participants in the study had just completed the portfolio learning process and a significant number of life skills program modules. There would be potential to query the permanence of the [re]construction of the self as learner with participants willing to be followed over their life course.

4. The participants self-identified maturity as a significant influence in their desire and need to make changes in their lives. There may be value in research investigating the potential for [re]construction of the self as learner with youth of a younger chronological age than the study participants who were between 19 and 25 years; such a study could indicate the range of years during which the use of the portfolio learning process would be of benefit.

5. There may be a relationship between a comfort level with risk in youth and young adults who engage in criminal activity and a willingness on the part of those youth and young adults to engage in a personal life change process. Further research into such characteristics may provide information about who may benefit from such a life skills program and the portfolio learning process, which may, in turn, assist in directing educational efforts.

6. This study used a phenomenological approach to gather the retrospective stories of participants to draw its conclusions. There may be other research methodologies that would make further significant contributions to learning about how the perceptions of self as learner may be changed.
Final Words

This study, *The [Re]Construction of a Learner Self*, which engages a phenomenological approach, provides new data for the body of literature on personal change and educational programming. The methodology of phenomenology involves a process of making known the hidden through the descriptions offered by those individuals who have a lived experience of a phenomenon. It brought to view what it is to be human within the experience of the phenomenon under study – a reflection of life through the mirror of experience that involved seeing oneself as a learner with abilities and capabilities despite all previous messages to the contrary.

The study focused on six youth/young adults, both male and female, who had been involved in criminal behaviour and who were engaging in a personal change process with a local community agency that incorporated life skills programming and the portfolio learning process. Their experience of schooling within the regular education system was characterized by academic gaps, lack of relevance to their lives, lack of engagement with the education process, lack of communication between home and school, substance use, sporadic attendance, transiency, minimal connection with teachers, externalising behaviour, negative peer involvement, bullying and being bullied and receiving social passes from one grade to another without attaining the requisite skills.

Through their involvement in the Road to Employment program offered by a community-based agency, Rainbow Youth, the participants in the study had access to life skills programming as well as academic upgrading through the pursuit of a General Education Diploma. They also had involvement in a portfolio learning process that assisted them in seeing themselves and their life experiences differently and promoted the
potential for external life changes as an outcome of internal change. This work is significant as, at the time of its writing, it was alone in investigating the potential the portfolio learning process has, as applied to youth and young adults who have engaged in criminal behaviour and who sought entry into a life skills program offered by a nongovernment community agency. It provides access to their thoughts and feelings that accompanied the change in perception of themselves as learners. It also provides new insights that can contribute to improved planning invaluable not only to youth who have a predisposition to engage in criminal behaviour, but also for those youth who have reached a life decision point where they are ready to make a change.

This study yielded an overall significant finding related to youth and young adults who have been unsuccessful within the regular education system: it is the complementary melding of both the formal and the informal learnings that individuals amass that is essential in forming perceptions regarding one’s own abilities, capabilities and achievements and which influence further perceptions of self-efficacy and self-esteem.

The literature review included examination of research emanating from multiple, and many times related, discipline areas: psychology, educational psychology, criminal psychology, criminology, sociology, biological criminology, history, educational administration, law and justice. The span of contributing literature was broad with its focus primarily on individual change rather than organizational change; however, the implications of the findings of this study have ramifications for many of the multiple disciplines noted above which could be applied within the organizations related to service delivery. This breadth of application is considered by the researcher to be a unique feature of The [Re]Construction of a Learner Self.
The findings of this research do not support the promotion of ever-punitive laws to control youth and young adults, reported through the media as being espoused by politicians (Makin, 2009). They also do not affirm a noted outcome of the media-popularised, generalized view for the general public that youth who engage in criminal behaviour are themselves criminal (Waymer, 2009). The focus of the legal, judicial system has been described as supporting the victim to the exclusion of supporting the offender (Beck, 2004) – this, too, is not supported by these study results. For the population participating in this study, for whom the involvement in criminal behaviour was an outgrowth of no options outside of the life circumstances in which they found themselves, such a focus not only is inappropriate, but it ensures the continuance of such behaviour.

The study confirms the questioning of the notion of the regular high school as a ‘universal’ construct for all youth (Doob & Cesaroni, 2004). Its findings are congruent with research that asserted that the high school of the 20th century reinforces class, ethnic, and gender distinctions (Comacchio, 2006) and is a major contributor to the process that differentiates populations into strata through academic performance (O’Connor, 2001). Its findings are also compatible with research indicating that providing smaller, more intimate, supportive learning environments for youth at risk supports those youth who need a more structured, interpersonal, and supervised environment from the rest of the normative group of youth (Wishart et al., 2006), who are able to survive within the regular high school setting.

The experiences of the study participants included outcomes of the perception on the part of the education system of “deficit” as residing within the learner (Wotherspoon
& Schissel, 2001). They also supported the assertion that youth neither value nor see the relevance of the abstract feedback they receive through a report card (Allen & Worrell, 2009), when what they really need is recognition of achievement as they learned. The study results also confirmed the negative outcomes described by scholars (McWhirter et al., 1998; Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Volpe, 2000) as faced by youth when they have multiple factors in their lives that place them in jeopardy and cause them to be described as at risk. Descriptions provided by the participants affirmed that their feelings of self-worth were not associated with what they had come to know as school (Bell, 2007), but, instead, rested on whether they saw themselves as a success or a failure in domains such as family and friends (Crocker, 2002).

The study results may be interpreted to contradict the findings of a review of the literature (Deci & Ryan, 2000) that indicated that rewards and evaluations were found to decrease creativity, complex problem solving and deep, conceptual processing of information due to the lack of autonomy experienced by the learners, rather than to increase learning. For the participants in the study, the receipt of multiple rewards and tangible markers of success was critical to each of them, affirming their ability to learn and what they had learned. Part of their difficulty within the regular education system was the absence of such rewards and markers. To have final approval in the form of a Grade 12 certificate had little meaning for the study participants. To have certificates awarded that showed their successful completion of modules of content had significant meaning for them and served as powerful motivators.

The participant group had the socio-cultural factors in their lives that have been identified as negatively influencing educational performance (Richards, 2011). Their
descriptions also affirmed the finding that youth and young adults often receive their first experience with success in integration programs run by non-profit groups (Bell, 2007). In addition, the participants were part of a program that was similar to those described in the literature as, most often, the only vehicle that youth or young adults have to gain exposure to, and experience with, productive activities (Maruna, 2001).

This study lends significant support to the use of the theoretical frameworks chosen to guide the study: the transtheoretical model (Prochaska, 2008) which provided a context for understanding how individuals change, and the theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) which provided a framework for understanding how learning transforms people. Both theories were complementary and served to enhance the layers of understanding implicit in the [re]construction of self as learner.

Human-services ministries, as well as nongovernmental organizations providing services to individuals for whom criminal involvement has been a factor in their lives, will be able to draw elements from this study for practical application in their work with this population. Although one ministry was noted in the study due to the focus on learner in the past and specific suggestions were made for consideration based on the experiential needs that surfaced through the study results, there are others within the broad umbrella of human service that will be informed by this study. For those who develop policy and procedures that have a direct influence on those youth and young adults who transition out of judicial involvement there is particular relevance.

Finally, for scholars and academics, this study provides phenomenological data that can enrich their intellectual understanding of how individuals who have had, and
may perhaps retain, a significant complement of risk factors active in their lives can be assisted to [re]construct their perceptions of themselves as learners.
REFERENCES


Hogeveen, B. R. (2005). ‘If we are tough on crime, if we punish crime, then people get the message’: Constructing and governing the punishable young offender in Canada during the late 1990s. *Punishment and Society, 7*(1), 73-89.


APPENDIX A

Table A1

Historical Summary of Canadian Law and Society as Applied to Delinquent/Criminal Youth
Table A1

Historical Summary of Canadian Law and Society as Applied to Delinquent/Criminal Youth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period, Legislation Enacted, Emphasis</th>
<th>Historical Context</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1800s</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1857 Act for the More Speedy Trial and Punishment of Juvenile Offenders</strong></td>
<td>Europeans left country of origin and begin to occupy land that would become Canada – brought with them consensus of values and a belief science would propel progress in human activities – crime considered stable trait, inherited or conditioned in early life, which could be measured (Webber, 2009)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• dealt with crimes committed by children aged 16 or younger who were officially called “juveniles” (Department of Justice, 2009; Goodwin &amp; McKay-Panos, 2004)</td>
<td>Many European children immigrated with parents – significant numbers came to Canada on their own or were sent by criminal courts in their home country – inhabitants of slums, jails, poorhouses, and orphanages were placed on a ship to Canada (Bagnell, 2001; Department of Justice, 2009) - unease among ‘established’ and ‘respectable’ population at this influx that built upon the already-present separations (Comacchio, 2006) European settlement spread west as did attitudes, beliefs, along with patterns of delinquency – majority were minor offences, higher in urban areas than rural, committed more by boys than girls – adult standards of behaviour applied to behaviour of children – laws defining exactly what behaviour was ‘illegal’ and ‘punishable by law’ came from English common law, the base for much of Canada’s statutory law (Schmalleger &amp; Volk, 2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• section of this Act gave the young person choice of whether to be sentenced as a juvenile or have an adult trial (only period of time when young people could make the choice of where to be tried as subsequent legislation shifted that choice to the court (Department of Justice, 2009; Goodwin &amp; McKay-Panos, 2004)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1857 Prisons for Young Offenders Act</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• formally introduced term “young offender” in language of law and society in Canada</td>
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<td>• separated the system that tried young person for crime from system that incarcerated him/her</td>
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Youth crime was common even in early days of New France - ranged from petty theft and vandalism to murder but general level of delinquency was low – most common: vandalism, petty theft, acts of immorality, breaking of local ordinances,
abandonment of indentured service contracts, brawling and swearing - more serious crimes committed were linked with social circumstances of the time: abortion and infanticide not uncommon among teenage servant girls who would face unemployment and extreme difficulty securing a husband if pregnancy was to proceed; assault, brawls and murder among adolescent boys encouraged by a combination of easy access to liquor and significant competition for furs for those who were employed in the fur trade; and occasional murder of violent and heavy drinking husbands perpetrated by their 12 or 13 year old wives who had been forced to marry them (Department of Justice, 2009).

Children were powerless to express own interests or organize themselves into self-interested population - by end of 1800s reformers had identified children and youth as in need of ‘saving’ (Platt, 1969; Shelden & Osborne, 1989)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1900s</th>
<th>1908 Act Respecting Juvenile Delinquents (JDA)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>- became basis of Canadian youth justice policy until 1984 (Department of Justice, 2009; Hogeveen, 2005)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- decisions based on ‘best interests of the child’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- ‘welfare approach’ entered legislation (Doob &amp; Cesaroni, 2004; Goodwin &amp; McKay-Panos, 2004)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- court viewed as paternalistic, acting to protect and chastise using measures at its disposal - underlying assumption that broader protection of society would be facilitated if children were protected from their own evil ways and association with immoral adults (Department of Justice, 2009)</td>
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While youth in an agrarian family were essential to functioning of the household through chores and contribution to total household income, functioned as adults with ability to exert control over their lives (Allen & Worrell Allen, 2009), at turn of the century idea emerged that childhood and adolescence were different stages from that of an adult – marked the beginning of consideration being given to developmental stages of maturation process – word “adolescence” was coined and became a concept to be studies scientifically (Santrock, 2010)

Significant worries about ‘youth problem’ stimulated by industrialization and drawing of youth to urban centres – middle class reformers sought to make the state responsible for intervention that was
- did allow for transfer of young offender to adult court if accused of crime such as murder or treason (Department of Justice, 2009)
- criticisms of the Act focused on lack of due process, lack of emphasis on acceptance of responsibility by young offender, subsequent failure to provide adequate protection of society (Goodwin & McKay-Panos, 2004)

Became a reality that deviant or ‘problem’ families were measured against the ideals of maternalism - policy was made reflecting the dominant perspective (Comacchio, 1999)

Dominant class established the norm, regulating and punishing those who deviated (Belisle, 2006)

Parental rights gave way to parental responsibility and children’s rights emerged - child-saving movement was a moral crusade developed in United States and Canada alongside rising cultural regard for maternalism (Shelden & Osborne, 1989) - educated middle-class women, with more leisure time but few choices for careers, took on child-saving as extension of housekeeping functions into the community while preserving the stereotype of ‘woman’s place’ (Platt, 1969)

Population of Canada now reflected diversity of religious, cultural and national backgrounds - shaped attitudes towards marriage, family, childrearing, women’s labour, and child labour that differed substantially in some cases from those idealized by ‘middle-class Canadians’ (Comacchio, 1999) - reform efforts on the part of such agencies as the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) targeted neglected, abused and abandoned children as indicative of irresponsible parenting - a ‘bad’ home environment determined as such by the
1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- legal rights were guaranteed for both children and adults
- exposed provisions of JDA that ignored the now legislated legal rights (Department of Justice, 2009)

1984 Young Offenders Act
- ending the paternalistic handling of delinquents, this Act provided substantially different, more benign, way of dealing with youth while making them more accountable (Department of Justice, 2009)
- set minimum to maximum age for prosecution (12 - 17 years old), while permitting transfer to adult court in some circumstances, ensured: separation in detention

judgement of these newly sanctioned social agents led to one solution: removal of the child and prosecution of the parents - state agencies that had taken root at the turn of the century and had followed a doctrine of rescue and removal in terms of child welfare made a shift in philosophy and practice - new emphasis on family as the only appropriate nurturing environment saw child-welfare workers promote adoption and fostering over institutional care for neglected, abandoned and delinquent children (Comacchio, 1999) - new model of family, while actively promoted as the ideal, was not the experience for a large number of Canadians and prompted increasing subjection of families to watchful eyes of new family experts and agencies - intervention, however, was restricted to small number of ‘problem families’ (Christie, 2000; Comacchio, 1999)

Perceived importance of maternalism and commitment to social purity (sexual self-control) began to share the stage with the birth-control movement and eugenics movement (Christie, 2000) during the Depression in Canada - specific groups began to exert social power in support of what they perceived to be essential to the national social agenda – example is Canadian medical profession which used social influence and expertise of its members to encourage legislation in effect until 1970s permitting forcible sterilization of the mentally ill and those individuals loosely classified as ‘feeble-minded’ – those identified as ‘subnormal’ individuals were actually the poor, who appeared unfit and antisocial to those of higher station within Canadian society who feared both internal revolution and state responsibility for the needy (Christie, 2000; Comacchio, 1999)
from adults, proper notice given to parents, dispositions consistent with seriousness of crime, and offences clearly outlined and not up to discretion of judges (Department of Justice, 2009)

✓ seen to bring balance among due process rights of young people, protection of society, and special needs of offenders (Department of Justice, 2009)

| Philosophy of child welfare, in place since the late 1800s, shifted toward a more pathological philosophy which now considered maltreatment of children as “child abuse” - philosophical shift was direct response to increased amalgamation of federal and provincial funding within housing, health, and education - now directed at investigative practices, child welfare services focused resources away from the child welfare practices that had been operative since its inception (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2007) - those whose private lives had been intruded upon were those least able to object (Rodham, 1973).

Growing frustration across communities around practice of apprehending children and family intrusion led to increase in “children’s rights” in the early 1980s - practice of child welfare once again shifted - legislative mandates moved from child protection or child rescue to one of familial support, returning to the emphasis of previous decades on the family as unit of importance - economic costs of this approach outstripped the resources available and the ideologies then returned to a “child rescue” philosophy with the associated mandates (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2007)

Social welfare spending comes to be considered not “good business” – criminal law dimension of youth justice gains currency and power in dealing with social problems (Eisler & Schissel, 2008)

Public interest in individuals involved in crime and justice grows, evidenced by popular crime-related television shows, movies, books (Maruna & Matravers, 2007)
2000s

2003 Youth Criminal Justice Act
- designed to produce increase in accountability and rehabilitation (Doob & Cesaroni, 2004; Goodwin & McKay-Panos, 2004)
- focused on prevention of crime through interventions aimed at circumstances behind youth’s offending (Doob & Cesaroni, 2004)
- separation between criminal law and child welfare law (with boundary of 12 years of age for both) as well between adult and youth justices systems (based on same concerns that were recognized in late 1800s) (Doob & Cesaroni, 2004)
- directs that formal justice system is to be used more selectively – reduced overreliance on incarceration and increased reintegreation of youth into community after custody (Department of Justice, 2009)
- allows for two categories of offences that could result in an adult sentence: presumptive offence (one committed by a person who is 14 years of age or older found guilty of murder, attempted murder, manslaughter, aggravated sexual assault, or two prior serious offences) and a serious violence offence (court decides what would comprise serious violent offence) (Department of Justice, 2009; Goodwin & McKay-Panos, 2004)
- coordination of services for youth done by youth worker - risk assessment tool, the Level of Service Inventory (LSI), used to target services, plan to address risk, development prevention and safety strategies to manage risk, and long-term planning for risk intervention

Penal system now conceived as mechanism of exclusion and control, as a ‘quarantine zone,’ holding dangerous individuals segregated from the public - focus increasingly on the victim seen as requiring information, support and consultation prior to, and after, the conviction of the offender - offender is more abstract, more stereotypical, and more a projected image than a person - interests of convicted offenders are considered to be directly opposed to those of the public, with compassion and concern being directed to the victim (Beck, 2004)

New specialists have appeared - are considered mainstream (crime prevention advisors, coordinators, interagency workers, systems officers, risk managers, crime auditors, community police officers) - are of increasing significance even though they may be small in number (Garland, 2001)

Western governments have shifted from social policy to crime policy resulting in an emphasis away from treatment and rehabilitation to “just desserts” (Estrada, 2004) - in Canada, significant changes are occurring in the justice system with a ‘get tough on crime’ emphasis that will have long-term effects (Makin, 2009) that does not reflect the actual realities of the level of crime as it currently exists and as reported (Doob & Cesaroni, 2004)

Personal attribution of responsibility for not only the criminal action itself but also the conditions and the response to the conditions that gave rise to the criminal behaviour in the first place is embedded in criminal law (Law Commission of Canada, 2003) - problem is seen as universal but resting on individual causes - those in power are absolved of complicity - crime
(T. Neisner [Supervisor, Young Offenders, Corrections, Public Safety and Policing, Government of Saskatchewan], personal interview October 27, 2009).

- one concern - those youth identified as high-risk could face longer period of custody or a range of conditions that other offenders who are accused of similar crimes but who have fewer needs may be spared (Maurutto & Hannah-Moffat, 2007)

not seen as social problem that requires reforms to improve living conditions of most disadvantaged groups in society as blame is placed firmly on the individual – perspective held that the state should focus on law and order rather than wasting money on expensive welfare programmes (Estrada, 2004)
APPENDIX B

Table B2

Biological Explanations for Criminal Behaviour
## Table B2

### Biological Explanations for Criminal Behaviour

| Abnormalities of the brain | Fragility of brain and potential for severe outcomes emphasized when the brain is damaged in its physical structure - impairment of executive functioning where individual neither perceives nor analyzes outside world as others do may not be able to engage in complex reasoning and decision making – impaired performance on tasks requiring complex integration of information from visual, auditory and processing systems – ability to create, plan, organize, maintain attention and concentration, and execute goal-directed behaviours impaired (Arehart-Treichel, 2007; Bryant et al., 1984; Wright et al., 2008)  
Disturbances in maturational process of growth of gray matter in brain just prior to puberty result in gray matter loss, increased amygdala activity with less frontal lobe activity resulting in decreased cognitive functioning in areas of planning, impulse control and reasoning resulting in impaired judgment, emotion, self-monitoring, impulsivity – become prone to ‘reactive’ aggression in response to, most often, benign action or event that acts as trigger (Arehart-Treichel, 2007; Martens, 2002; NIMH, 2005; Wacker Foundation, 2008)  
Birth complications (hypoxia, hypertension) linked to deficiencies in self-regulation, self-control (Beaver & Wright, 2005)  
Infection due to syphilis due to risky sexual behaviour – early neurosyphilis can coexist with primary or secondary syphilis, occurring within weeks, months or years of infection (Brewer-Smyth, 2006; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005; Health Canada, 2004) |

Infection due to syphilis due to risky sexual behaviour – early neurosyphilis can coexist with primary or secondary syphilis, occurring within weeks, months or years of infection (Brewer-Smyth, 2006; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005; Health Canada, 2004)
Epilepsy that may be invoked by environmental factors (physical injury, viral infections, birth trauma, exposure to chemicals) as well as hormonal changes (hypoglycemia) – appears to be correlated with violent behaviour, with rate highest for most violent individuals with repeated convictions (Coulter, 1990; Ellis, 2005; Raine et al., 1997)

**Genetic Predispositions**

Genetic influences demonstrated to account for 40% - 80% of variation in measures of antisocial outcomes in studies using diverse methodologies, different samples of respondents, collected in different countries, at different time periods (Beaver et al., 2007; Wright et al., 2008)

Wide assortment of behavioural problems, personality disorders, mood disorders related to criminal behaviour are influenced by genes – intellectual functioning, personality characteristics (e.g., negativity), temperamental factors (e.g., impulsivity) (Cottle, Lee & Heilbrun, 2001; Wright et al., 2008)

**Hormonal Excess**

High levels of testosterone linked to increased aggression in males (Ellis, 2005; Hayslett-McCall & Bernard, 2002; Schmalleger & Volk, 2006)

Maternal stress, causing elevated levels of cortisol (stress hormone) in the fetus is associated with increases in behavioural disturbance in animals through inhibition of development of nervous system causing damage to brain resulting in permanent disorders (Mulder et al., 2002; O’Connor et al., 2005) – while may be caused by multitude of factors, has been associated with appearance of emotional problems with hyperactivity, attention deficit, Tourette's Syndrome, higher incidences of schizophrenia, depression, and drug abuse (Champagne & Meaney, 2006; Merlot, Couret, & Otten, 2008; Mulder et al., 2002; Weinstock, 2005).
| **Chemical Mediators** | Maternal ingestion of alcohol, occurring statistically at 60% worldwide (Gilbert, 2004) can damage fetus throughout pregnancy, not just first trimester – alcohol freely, rapidly crosses barrier of placenta to unborn fetus causing havoc with brain and central nervous system of unborn child – results in increased risk for attention and memory problems, delays in language acquisition, learning difficulties resulting in neurobehavioural disorders that can include intellectual disabilities, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, and behavioural disorders (Burd, Selfridge, Klug, & Jeulson, 2003; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2008; Cramer & Davidhizar, 1999; Health Canada, 2007; Saskatchewan Institute on Prevention of Handicaps, n.d.; Wright et al., 2008)

Prenatal ingestion of drugs, prescription, nonprescription, or illicit, can act directly on the fetus causing damage and abnormal development leading to birth defects (2 – 3% of all birth defects) by altering function of placenta through causing blood vessels to constrict – can result in reduced oxygen and nutrients to fetus, muscles of uterus contracting forcefully and injuring fetus, premature labour and delivery (Merck, n.d.)

Maternal cigarette smoking has strong association with psychological problems in offspring – include attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), antisocial behaviours (delinquency, conduct problems, criminality), substance abuse problems – reduces blood flow to brain of fetus, impacting psychological development (Button, Maughan & McGuffin, 2007; Pratt, McGloin & Fearn, 2006)

Low levels of neurotransmitter, serotonin, has been linked to impulsive crimes |
(Button et al., 2007; Champagne & Meany, 2006; Ellis, 2005; Martens, 2002; Rose, 2000)

Low levels of enzyme monoamine oxidase (MOA) have been strongly, consistently linked to impulsive aggression and criminality (Wright et al., 2008), and high levels of sensation seeking (Martens, 2002)
APPENDIX C

Table C3

Summary of Theories Pertaining to the Psychological/Behavioural Bases for Criminal Behaviour
### Table C3

**Summary of Theories Pertaining to the Psychological/Behavioural Bases for Criminal Behaviour**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory and Theorist</th>
<th>Basic Premise Relating to Deviant/Criminal Behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychosexual theory</strong> (Sigmund Freud&lt;sup&gt;5&lt;/sup&gt;)</td>
<td>Criminal behaviour results from internal conflict and tension among the id (consisting of instincts, the psychic reservoir of energy), ego (deals with the demands of reality through the use of reasoning to make decisions) and superego (the moral branch of personality that takes into account whether something is right or wrong). Such conflict may be due to organic sources (based within the brain or resulting from brain chemistry) or functional sources (no known physical base but with a mental experiential or psychic base). Criminal and antisocial behaviour was the product of an uncontrolled id, an unconscious internal conflict expressed through an overt act that may be a means to gratify the needs that were not met by the individual’s family, the result of traumatic experiences that cannot be remembered due to repression, and the result of displaced hostility and/or an unconscious desire for punishment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frustration-aggression theory</strong> (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Maurer, &amp; Sears, 1939&lt;sup&gt;6&lt;/sup&gt;)</td>
<td>External stimuli are considered sources of frustration and aggression is considered a predictable reaction to frustration. Two dimensions of aggression: proactive aggression (involving socially acceptable aggressive behaviours such as within sports or policing), reactive aggression (associated with emotional dysregulation associated with poor psychological and social adjustment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral development theory</strong> (Jean Piaget&lt;sup&gt;7&lt;/sup&gt;)</td>
<td>Asserted that all morality consists of a system of rules and most of these rules a child learns as moral realities passed down from one generation to another, preserved solely by the respect that is felt for them by individuals. Consisted of three stages: premoral judgement (birth to 5 years of age – is noted by poor conception of other people’s consciousnesses and inability of carrying out complex mental operations thereby making it not possible to have a sense of morality); moral realism (ages 5 to 9 years - can now understand concept of rules but they are seen as external and immutable to be obeyed because</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<sup>5</sup> Storr, 2001  
<sup>6</sup> Hollin, 2007  
<sup>7</sup> Piaget, 1965
they are there); and **moral relativity** (begins at 7 years of age – recognition that rules are not fixed and can be changed by mutual consent therefore beginning of development of own internal morality which is no longer the same as external rules)

| Moral Development | Applying Piaget’s concept of moral development to criminality, theorized that all individuals pass through the same levels and stages in which they develop their moral reasoning skills: **preconventional level** (responsivity to cultural rules and labels of good/bad, right/wrong but interprets labels in terms of consequences of action or in terms of physical power of those who enunciate the rules) with two stages: *punishment and obedience orientation* and *individualism, instrumental purpose and exchange*; **conventional level** (rules or norms of a group to which one belongs becomes the base of moral judgements) with two stages: *mutual expectations, relationships, and interpersonal conformity* and *social system and conscience*; and **postconventional, autonomous, or principled level** (judgements are made based on integration of individual rights and the needs of society) with two stages: *social contract or utility and individual rights* and *universal ethical principles*.

| Psychological theory of crime (H. J. Eysenck) | Trait-based psychological theory of crime based on interaction of biological, social and individual factors. Posited that through conditioning, influenced by biological factors one becomes socialized, learning to control impulses and actions; through genetic inheritance there are individual differences in functioning of the cortical and autonomic nervous systems which are associated with individual differences in the ability to learn from or condition to environmental stimuli. Three dimensions of personality were outlined: **extravert** (cortically under-aroused, seeks stimulation to increase arousal to optimal level – characterized by impulsivity, risk-taking, thrill-seeking); **introvert** (cortically over-aroused, avoids stimulation to hold arousal at comfortable level – characterized by quiet, reserved demeanour); and **neurotic** (emotionality) (at high end of continuum are highly labile, giving strong reactions to any pleasant or painful stimuli – characterized by irritable, anxious behaviour; at low end of continuum are highly stable with calm, even tempered behaviour even under stress).

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8 Kohlberg, 1981
9 Hollin, 2007
Individual differences in condition-ability lead to varying levels of socialization. An individual’s stable pattern of behaviour, influenced by both biological and social factors, flows from that person’s personality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differential association theory (E. H. Sutherland(^{10}))</th>
<th>Attempted to clarify the notion of crime-as-social-process. Deviance was examined at an individual level as it was seen as an embedded, shared, symbolic experience changing over time. Criminal or delinquent behaviour involves learning of techniques of committing crimes, and motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes favourable to violation of law. Learning is seen as occurring in close social groups and behaviour is acquired through contact. As learned behaviour, criminal behaviour is considered no different in nature than any other learned behaviour. A delinquent subculture is seen as a system of values that represent an inversion of values held by respectable, law-abiding society. Definitions of legal codes are exchanged interactions and influence the development of a particular form of self: the criminal self which is a result of considering actions in relation to the actions of others, and holding an internal conversation that considers social contexts and actions within those contexts. The actions an individual chooses and the self that individual articulates is dependent on the role(s) they take in a given situation as well as on a unified sense of self that relies on an abstract sense of the community as a whole.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differential Reinforcement (C. Ray Jeffrey(^{11}))</td>
<td>Learning plays a fundamental part in understanding criminal behaviour. Criminal behaviour is seen as operant behaviour - a function of the consequences it produces for the individual concerned. To understand criminal behaviour means to understand the consequences of a criminal act for a particular person. Rewards for criminal acts can be social (social approval, status) as well as material. Depending on their social environment, some individuals will have gained rewards for criminal behaviour while others will have suffered negative consequences. Patterns of reinforcement are seen to be inconstant between individuals or for the same individual over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Learning (R. Akers(^{12}))</td>
<td>Posited that normative definitions and interactions with others are differentially reinforced or punished and so are</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{10}\) Hollin, 2007  
\(^{11}\) Hollin, 2007  
\(^{12}\) Hollin, 2007
patterns of behaviour. With an emphasis on the importance of the process of acquiring and maintaining deviant definitions and behaviours, associations are seen to provide the social environments in which exposure to definitions, imitation of others, and social reinforcement of deviance or conformity take place. Communities will have more deviance wherever the diversity makes it easier to associate with deviant others, learn the definitions favourable for deviance, and have deviant behaviour reinforced by those in one’s environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social control theory (A. J. Reiss\textsuperscript{13})</th>
<th>Formulated the earliest form of the theory. Delinquent behaviour was seen to be the result of the failure of personal and social controls in producing behaviour that conforms to the norms of the social system which has legal penalties attached. Delinquency was to result from lack of internalization of norms. \textbf{Personal control} is the ability of an individual to refrain from meeting his/her own needs in ways that conflict with the norms and rules of the community. \textbf{Social control} is the ability of social groups or institutions to make norms or rules effective. The failure of primary groups such as the family to provide reinforcement for non-delinquent roles and values was crucial to explaining delinquency.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Containment theory (Walter Reckless\textsuperscript{14})</td>
<td>Focused on the insulating effects of a youth’s self-conception or self-image as being a good person against peer pressure to engage in delinquency. The ‘\textit{pushes}’ (such as discontent with living conditions and family conflicts; aggressiveness and hostility; frustration and boredom) and ‘\textit{pulls}’ (such as delinquent peers and delinquent subcultures) that produce delinquent behaviour need to be counteracted by containment, of which there are two types: \textbf{inner containment} (accomplished through the positive sense of self) and \textbf{outer containment} (accomplished through supervision and discipline).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutralization theory (Sykes &amp; Matza\textsuperscript{15})</td>
<td>Posits that there is little difference between delinquents and non-delinquents as delinquents will engage in non-delinquent behaviour most of the time. Justifications for deviance on the part of some youth are valid to the delinquent but not to society – they are \textbf{rationalizations} that can follow the delinquent behaviour and provide protection for that individual from self-blame while blaming others after the act or precede the deviant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{13} Hollin, 2007  
\textsuperscript{14} Hollin, 2007  
\textsuperscript{15} Hollin, 2007
Disapproval from norms that have been internalized and from others who conform is neutralized – turned back and deflected, leaving social controls that would check or inhibit deviant motivational patterns inoperative with the individual free to engage in delinquency with no damage to his/her self-image. This allows the delinquent to translate violations as acceptable although not right and therefore remain committed to the dominant normative system. Five techniques of normalization: *denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties*. These techniques are critical in lessening the effectiveness of social controls.

| General theory of crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi) | Individuals differ in likelihood they will commit crimes, with these differences appearing early and remaining stable over the life course. Individuals with **low self-control** are considered more likely to commit criminal acts. Major cause of low self-control is ineffective parenting practices involving attachment of child to parent, parental supervision, recognition and discouragement of deviant behaviour, parental criminality, and family characteristics. As a result of poor parenting practices, social bonds are thought to weaken and criminal opportunities become attractive options. The **criminal offender** is someone who is predisposed to criminal behaviour due to low self-control and negatively impacting personality traits. **Criminal acts** are regarded as criminal opportunities interacting with rational choice. Criminal acts are considered to provide individuals with immediate gratification of desires, be exciting, risky or thrilling, require little skill or planning, result in pain or discomfort for the victim, and provide few, if any, long-term benefits. |

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16Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990
APPENDIX D

Table D4

Dimensions of Development
Table D4

**Dimensions of Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Toward Knowing as a Dialogical Process</strong></td>
<td>Inquiring into and responding openly to ideas of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Surfacing and questioning assumptions that form the base of beliefs, ideas, actions and positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reframing ideas or values that seem in conflict, accepting their differences, and drawing new meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using own experience to critique ‘expert’ opinion and using ‘expert’ opinion to critique own experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moving between ‘separate – connected,’ ‘independent – interdependent’ ways of knowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paying attention to the ‘total’ as well as the parts of which it is comprised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Associating truth with contexts and relationships and not with ‘fact’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pursuing the potential existence of objective truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceiving and constructing own reality by observing and participating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tapping into and drawing on unspoken or implied knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Toward a Dialogical Relationship to Oneself</strong></td>
<td>Addressing fear of losing what is known and safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging with the lack of balance experienced when one’s ideas and beliefs are challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploring own experience through a (or some) framework of analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questioning critically the value of own pursuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploring and making meaning of own life stories within contexts (familial, societal, universal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Toward Being a Continuous Learner</strong></td>
<td>Reflecting on own as well as others’ experiences as a guide to future actions and conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging oneself to take the risk of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
learning in new spheres or domains
Recognizing and revealing own strengths and challenges as a learner and knower
Anticipating what learning would be required to prevent and solve problems
Asking and pursuing questions simply out of amazement
Accepting internal conflict as part of the learning process
Setting one’s own learning goals, being goal-directed, and being habitual in learning
Seeking genuine feedback from others
Drawing on genuine feedback from others
Drawing on multiple capabilities for effective learning

| Toward Self-Agency and Self-Authority | Constructing a values system that informs own behaviour
                                         | Accepting responsibility for own choices in past and future
                                         | Risking taking action on based on own beliefs and commitments
                                         | Taking action toward own potential while acknowledging own limitations
                                         | Revisiting some aspects of self while maintaining stability of other aspects
                                         | Distinguishing what own self has created from what is imposed by social, cultural and other forces
                                         | “Naming and claiming” own experience and knowledge

| Toward Connection with Others          | Mediating limits between own connection to others and own individuality
                                         | Experiencing self as part of something larger
                                         | Engaging feelings and emotion when meeting or facing differences
                                         | Contributing own voice to a collective effort
                                         | Recognizing that shared awareness and thinking transform the sum of their parts

Adapted from Taylor (2000), pp. 161-162.
APPENDIX E

Introductory Comments to Participants
Introductory Comments to Participants

Welcome and thank you.

- Nature of research
- Purpose of this research study
- Focus of the questions
- Procedure for the interview
- Need to clarify if question not understood
- Questions may be asked at the end of the interview
APPENDIX F

Initial Interview Schedule
Initial Interview Schedule

- Can you tell me what place ‘schooling’ has had in your life in the past? (possible prompts: what happened? How did it make you feel? How did you cope?)

- Why?
- How?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Can you tell me what place ‘schooling’ has in your life now? (possible prompts: what happens? How do you feel?)

- Tell me what you were thinking.
- Can you tell me about a time when you were in school that sticks out in your mind? (possible prompts: What happened? How did you feel? How did you cope?)

- How did you feel?
- Can you describe how going to school affected your relations with other people? (possible prompts: partner, family, friends)
• Can you tell me how you started skipping school? (possible prompts: how long ago? What brought it about? Can you describe how you felt about school at that time?)

• Have you changed the way you think about schooling over time? (possible prompts: in what ways? What makes it better? What makes it worse? How do you feel about these changes?)

• What would be, for you, a positive schooling experience? (possible prompts: how could your situation have improved? Can you imagine what it would feel like?)

• How would you describe yourself as a person? (possible prompt: how do you feel about yourself now? How have you changed in how you feel about yourself?)
• Have the problems in your life changed the way you think or feel about schooling? *(possible prompts: do you see schooling differently now than before you had these problems? In what ways?)*

• How did other people see you when you were in high school/of high school age? *(possible prompts: family, friends, teachers, administrators, potential employers?)*

• How do you think other people see you now? *(possible prompts: family, friends, teachers, potential employers?)*

• How did you see yourself when you were in high school/of high school age? *(possible prompts: how did you think about learning then?)*
• How do you see yourself now? (possible prompts: how did the portfolio learning process make you feel? What is different now about how you see yourself compared to before you did the portfolio learning process? What do you know about yourself now that you didn’t know before?)

• How do you see yourself in the future? (possible prompts: how will what you have learned in the portfolio learning process about yourself make a difference for you?)

• Why?

• How?

• Can you tell me more about that?

• Tell me what you were thinking.

• How did you feel?
APPENDIX G

Follow-Up Interview Schedule
Follow-Up Interview Schedule

Tell me what it is like to think back over your schooling in the past.

What would a typical day have been for you before being involved in this program and developing your portfolio? Describe a typical day now.

How did you become ‘ready’ to be part of this program and involved in developing a portfolio? (Depending on response, follow up with: What was it like to ‘get ready’?)

Tell me about who was/is a role model for you:
   (a) In elementary school?
   (b) In high school?
   (c) Before coming into this program?
   (d) Now?

What would it feel like to be a role model?

Tell me about what you want from life? Where do you see yourself going in the future?

How did you make decisions before you came into this program? How do you make decisions now?

Tell me about what has changed about yourself after going through the making of a portfolio. What does learning mean to you now? What did it mean to you before?
APPENDIX H

Consent Form
Consent Form

Faculty of Graduate Studies

CONSENT FORM

I have read the information in the attached letter about a study being conducted by Rhonda Nelson as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. under the direction of Dr. Heather Ryan, Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, University of Regina. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that I give my permission for an interview with the researcher to happen at Rainbow Youth during a lunch hour in the KidsFirst Group Room with a facilitator of my choice present. I am also aware that some of my words from the interview might be included in the dissertation that is to come from this research. I understand that any words I have said will have only my first name or the name that I choose attached to them.

I am aware that I can volunteer to share my portfolio with the researcher. If I do that, I understand that some of the contents of the portfolio that I have made may be copied but everything that could show who made it will be covered so it cannot be identified as mine.

I was informed that I may say I want to withdraw my consent to be part of the study at any time without penalty by advising the researcher. I also understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance, through the Ethics Review Board of the University of Regina. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact Dr. Heather Ryan, University of Regina, at (306) 585-4002.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study: YES ____ NO ____

I agree to participate with a facilitator of my choice in interviews with the researcher and to have those interviews recorded:

YES ____ NO ____
I agree to have my participation in the portfolio learning session(s) observed:

YES ____  NO ____

I agree to share my portfolio and have the contents scanned as long as all personal identifiers are covered up:

YES ____  NO ____

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations from the recorded interview in the dissertation that will result from this research.

YES ____  NO ____

Participant Name:  _______________  Participant Signature: _______________

Witness Name:  _______________  Witness Signature: _______________

Date:  ______________________

Cc: Rainbow Youth
APPENDIX I

Research Ethics Board Approval
Research Ethics Board Approval

DATE: February 15, 2011

TO: Rhonda LaVonne Nelson
    P.O. Box 507
    Regina Beach, SK S0G 4C0

FROM: Dr. Bruce Plouffe
      Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: Reconstruction of a Learner Self: A Phenomenological Study with Youth and Young Adults Post-Incarceration (File # 64S1011)

Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

☑ 1. APPROVED AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. For research lasting more than one year (Section 1F), ETHICAL APPROVAL MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS. Approval will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received. Any substantive changes in methodology or instrumentation must also be approved prior to their implementation.

☐ 2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. **Do not submit a new application.** Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 3. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. **Do not submit a new application.** Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 4. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. The proposal requires substantial additions or redesign. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

Dr. Bruce Plouffe

cc: Dr. Heather Ryan – Faculty of Education

**supplementary memo should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (Research and Innovation Centre, Room 109) or by e-mail to research.ethics@uregina.ca**
APPENDIX J

Information for Potential Participants Provided to Facilitators
Invitation to participate in a study:

A student from the University of Regina is going to be conducting a study that invites the participation of people who:

- Did not get a Grade 10 or a Grade 12 while they were a teenager, and
- Have experienced being at risk in their own lives, and
- Have experienced getting in trouble with the law at least once as one of the things that have happened to them and,
- Are either ready to make, or are making, a change in their own lives.

Why this study is being done?

There are youth who come out of custody who either didn’t go to school before they went to custody or drop out of school after just a few days, weeks or months after they get out of custody. They don’t get a Grade 10 or a Grade 12 and find going back to school hard because they don’t see themselves as being able to do the school work. These youth don’t see themselves as ‘learners’ and they don’t see school as important in their lives.

This study will gather thoughts from people who understand what those youth are experiencing. It will ask what it means to be a learner when a person has had major life challenges to deal with that have had an influence on their educational experiences. The information could help in understanding some of the challenges that some youth face in trying to be successful in school.
**Why was Rainbow Youth asked to help with this study?**

Rainbow Youth helps people make some changes in their lives. Some of the people who are part of the programs at Rainbow Youth might have experienced custody as one of the negative things that happened to them as a teenager. It is hoped some of those people might agree to be part of the study to have their stories heard and be understood. The hope is to understand how to help more youth get into, or stay in, school. And, maybe, for those youth, staying in school could help them stay out of custody.

**What do participants have to do?**

Anyone who volunteers to be part of the study would have to agree to be interviewed by the University of Regina student about their own experiences as a learner. The interviews would happen at Rainbow Youth and each person who would be interviewed would choose a facilitator from Rainbow Youth to be with them in the interview in case there are questions that need to be answered. The interview would take about an hour.

Everything the people who are interviewed say will be kept confidential. The real names of the people who are interviewed will not be written down. Instead, anything a person who is interviewed says will have only a code beside it (for instance, if there was someone named Mary who was interviewed, everything Mary said would be recorded only as “M1”; if there was someone else who was interviewed whose name also started with “M,” then anything he or she said would be recorded as “M2”). Those people who are interviewed will receive a gift card for Walmart as a thank you for their time and effort in helping to make this study successful.

**How soon would the interviews happen?**

The interviews would be conducted on days in March and April, 2011.

**Who would I tell if I am interested?**

You could let the facilitator you would want in the interview with you at Rainbow Youth know.
RECRUITMENT LETTER

Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Date)

Dear ________________:

This letter is an invitation to participate in a study being conducted as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in the Faculty of Graduate Studies by Rhonda Nelson at the University of Regina under the supervision of Dr. Heather Ryan.

This study will focus on the experiences people have had as learners in the past during the high school years and now in the present after being part of a portfolio learning process.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve:

a) being part of a personal interview that will be conducted in the KidsFirst Group Room at Rainbow Youth at an agreed-upon time and date, and,

b) having the researcher sit in during the portfolio learning sessions.

If you are willing to share your portfolio, the contents of it would be copied but only after everything that would identify you has been masked.

The interview will happen over lunch and you will be able to invite a facilitator to sit in on it with you. You and your facilitator will have a lunch provided not only for you but also for the rest of your program group. You will also receive a $25 gift certificate for Walmart after your interview.
Shortly after the interview has been completed a copy of the interview notes will be given to you so you can see that what was recorded is accurate and you will be able to add or clarify any points that you wish. Your full name will not appear in any documentation resulting from this study however with your permission quotations may be used attributed to only your first name or any other name that you choose.

Information that is collected during this study will be used to produce a dissertation that will be used as the final requirement for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like more information to help you in making a decision about participation, please contact me at 585-3009 at the University of Regina or by e-mail at rhonda.nelson@uregina.ca.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Ethics Review Board at the University of Regina. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Heather Ryan at (306) 585 – 4002 or heather.ryan@uregina.ca.

I look forward to speaking with you. Thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Yours sincerely,

Rhonda Nelson

Doctoral Student

Cc: Rainbow Youth
APPENDIX K

Table K5

Basic and Organizing Themes Contributing to Theme Development
## Table K5

### Basic and Organizing Themes Contributing to Theme Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Organizing Themes</th>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The school environment had a critical role in encouraging failure</td>
<td><strong>Learner self as</strong> alone, displaced, disassociated, derailed, devalued, disempowered, excluded, humiliated, bewildered, angry</td>
<td>Transiency, sporadic attendance, exclusion, bullying, lack of options, racism, lack of school-home communication, lack of personal control, lack of success markers, authoritarian authority structure, unsafe environment, lack of belonging, stigmatisation, violence toward self, dropping out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Learning as</strong> pre-empted, compromised, punitive, rejected, disininvited, conditional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school environment had a critical role in encouraging success</td>
<td><strong>Learner as</strong> empowered, hopeful, emerging, strengthened, connected, accepted, rescued,</td>
<td>Increased role of family, short-term to long-term thinking, affirmation of self worth, tangible evidence of achievement, future orientation, recognition of internal change, priorities, goals, inclusivity, self-knowledge, supportive mentors, dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Learning as</strong> intense, focused, relevant, legacy, reinterpretation, workplace relevant, breaking of cycle, action,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Organizing Themes</td>
<td>Basic Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The curricula, in its focus and scope, had a critical role in either maintaining exclusion through contextual disadvantage</td>
<td><strong>Learner as</strong> faltering, suppressed, bypassed, unequipped</td>
<td>Lack of instruction suited to learner needs, unintended effects of special education support, social pass, school failure, limited time access to alternative programming, return to high school accompanied by educational failure, lack of academic success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Learning as</strong> irrelevant, disjointed, piecemeal, unacknowledged, outside self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The curricula, in its focus and scope, had a critical role in facilitating social</td>
<td><strong>Learner as</strong> self-directed, connected, effective</td>
<td>Meaningful, learning of societal context, need for life skills, growth of self as</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Theme 3 | The personal relationships teachers avoided had a critical role in derailing engagement with learning. | Learner as demoralized, abandoned, disconnected, excluded, targeted  
Learning as withheld, contingent, unrelated, incoherent | Discouragement, limited support, lack of advocacy, lack of understanding, uninvolved, lack of positive recognition, prejudice, racism | Identification of accomplishment, recognition, welcoming, being heard, supported |
| Theme 4 | The substitution of peer influence for parental guidance and support had a critical role in introducing substance use and criminal behaviours which in turn affected any level of engagement with learning. | Learner as needy, proving, fearful, targeted, disconnected, ineffective  
Learning as irrelevant, apart, deferred | Involvement with delinquent peers, substance use, modelling of negative behaviours, peers as priorities, need for connection, need for belonging, negative sense of self, lack of parental involvement, authoritarian parenting style, parental overwhelm, reduced influence of family |
| Theme 5 | Emotion played a critical role in determining the extent to which negative factors impacted the learning of the learner. | Learner as unworthy, worthless, unsuccessful, unable, different,  
Learning as deferred, unattainable, exclusive | Externalising behaviour, self-harm behaviour, emotional interference, lack of engagement with school work, withdrawal, lack of follow-through with school work, low self-esteem, hurt, school as anxiety, overwhelm, need for connection, lack of self-regulatory skills, negative perception of ethnicity, need for escape |
| Emotion played a critical role in determining the extent to which positive factors facilitated the learning of the learner. |
| Learner as reconciled with self, empowered, equipped, affirmed, motivated, hopeful, disciplined, communicative |
| Learning as goals, sense of self, sense of place, achievements, commitment, acquisition of life skills, evidence of skills, change in perspective, process, reflection of self |
| Disengagement from negative peers, increased role of determination, positive peer influence, learner needs met, learning from experience of others, trust, acceptance, belief in self, tracing personal change, legacy, dreams, progression of self, appraisal of life, positive feedback from others, self as positive role model, openness, happiness |