

Running Head: An Exploration of Residential Youth and Education.

An Exploration of Residential Youths' Views Regarding Their Education.

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to hear the views of youth in care regarding their educational experiences. The academic achievement of youth in care is lower than other youth and their rate of school drop out is higher (NYICN, 2001; Vacca, 2008). Understanding the youths' perceptions regarding their educational experiences may help to increase awareness of their learning needs and assist in developing strategies that may contribute to improving their rate of school completion.

Six youth, aged 13 to 16, living at the residential facilities of the HomeBridge Youth Society in Nova Scotia participated in this study. Five of the youth were enrolled full-time in an alternative educational program, called Bridges for Learning, and one was enrolled part-time in this program and part-time in the public school system. Qualitative, phenomenological methodology was employed and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. The main theme the youth expressed was that they wanted to be seen the same as everyone else and not treated any differently at school or in the community because they were in care. They felt that most people did not have an accurate understanding of who they were or their situations and stigmatized them because they were in care. They also believed that they had specific learning needs that were not being met in the public school system and they gave specific suggestions to address this, such as smaller class sizes, more one-on-one support, and greater flexibility with deadlines and expectations around school work. Although participants stated that they did not think they could be successful in the public school system, all of them intended to finish high school and had career plans that depended on post-secondary study.

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## INTRODUCTION

*It was a constant struggle waking the residents up for school. They typically gave an abundance of reasons why they couldn't or wouldn't go. Sometimes they would pretend they could not hear you. If I was successful at getting them up, they often dawdled long enough to be late, and even if they left the residence, they often never made it to school. It became clear that school was not a place they wanted to go. When I tried to encourage the youth to attend school or to do their school work, they often responded, "Why do you care, no one else does." Some managed to do well with school and appeared to like going, but in my experience many did not.*

*It was common for new residents to have to wait for a school placement due to a recent transition. This usually meant missed time from school. It was also not unusual for many of the youth to be suspended from school on a regular basis because of behavioural difficulties. They also frequently missed classes due to appointments or meetings during school hours with their doctors, therapists, or social workers. Some of the youth stated that it was difficult to catch up on the work they missed and they felt too far behind.*

*Often the youth said they did not want to attend school because they felt like they did not fit in or that they did not receive the support they required to do well. Many times they said that no one at school took the time to understand them or their situations. It was as if the youth felt that there was no one there for them, no one that they could talk to or with whom they could share their worries. They were typically guarded even with the other youth in the residence because they did not want others to know about their pasts. The youth would sometimes turn to the staff for support with emotional problems when they felt comfortable enough, but they seldom asked for support with school. When the staff approached them about school work, they usually responded that it was "none of your business."*

*I once attended a school meeting to discuss the educational progress of a thirteen year old girl living at the centre where I worked. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss whether she would obtain enough of the required academic outcomes for her to successfully complete the year. I left feeling very frustrated. It was clear she would not complete the required curriculum outcomes for her grade level, but would still be moved ahead a grade for the following year. For me this was difficult to understand. The position of the school, which I imagine was conveyed to her as well, was that they did not have great expectations for her academically and that it was acceptable, because of her current situation, that she had not completed the majority of the required work. At the meeting it was stated that, "We should all just be happy that she was not out on the streets working as a prostitute." It appeared as though they thought they were doing her a favor by lowering the academic expectations for her because her situation could end up being a lot worse. I worried about this girl being pushed through each year and where that would leave her in the future. I wondered if other schools had similar views regarding residential youth. If they did, I could see why the youth I worked with were not motivated to attend school.*

*Some of the residents seemed to want to do well in school and expressed an interest in pursuing education beyond high school, but it seemed the more struggles they faced with school or their current situations, the less hope they appeared to have. Many of the female residents stated that they did not need to complete high school, because once they turned sixteen they could move out on their own, have children, and go on welfare. They said that their mothers did this and they could as well. I found this heartbreaking because I felt that they did not believe in themselves enough to see their own potential. It seemed they felt they had no other options and this was just expected of them. Encouraging them to imagine other possibilities for the future*

*was a challenge, and they would raise roadblocks and difficulties they did not feel they could overcome. My overall impression from the youth was that they believed education was something that was not attainable and not meant for youth like them, so why should they try.*

*- Author's experiences as a former Youth Care Worker*

## CHAPTER I

### PRESENTING PROBLEM & LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Presenting Problem**

Youth in residential care are more likely than other children to have academic and behavioural difficulties at school (NYICN, 2007; Stone, 2007; Vacca, 2008; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005), as well as higher school drop-out rates (Rosenfeld & Richman, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005). High school graduation is a strong predictor of successful employment (Grover, 2002). By not completing their secondary education, youth in care are at a higher risk of not finding employment and potentially becoming dependent on social assistance. Understanding their views regarding their educational experience and attainment may provide us with insight about why many of these youth do not complete school. This information can be used to develop educational strategies or programs that may help to improve their rate of school completion.

#### **Literature Review**

A number of factors have been found to influence a student's decision to drop out of school, including disengagement, underachievement, retention, low educational expectations, behavioural difficulties, family and personal problems, and low socioeconomic status (HRDC, 2000; Lembke & Stormont, 2005; NDPC, 2007). According to a report published by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), students may drop out of school for school reasons, personal or family reasons, or work reasons. School related reasons included being disengaged, early academic failure, illiteracy, not fitting in at school, skipping classes, not participating in extra-curricular activities, and behavioural difficulties. Personal or family reasons were pregnancy, marriage, drug and alcohol problems, problems at home, medical conditions, living

with a single parent, parental level of education, parent's negative attitudes towards education, parental occupation, and low socioeconomic status. Work related reasons included preferring to work over school, having to work for financial reasons, and working long hours. Working minimal hours, less than twenty hours per week, or not working at all were associated with a positive school experience and academic success (HRDC).

In 2002, Statistics Canada estimated the national school drop out rate as 12%. This represents approximately 48,400 youth who did not complete high school and who were not working towards completion. This number does not include youth residing in care facilities or out-of-home placements, so the actual numbers may be higher. Grover (2002) examined school drop out for Canadian youth in care and found that there was a relationship between being in care and not completing school. The reasons for this were a lack of support, underachievement, numerous transitions, and behavioural difficulties.

According to the National Youth in Care Network (NYICN, 2007) there are over 80,000 children and youth in Canada living in care. This is a 67% increase from the 45,000 living in care in 1995. The label "youth in care" is given to any youth who is considered to be in the legal care or guardianship of child protection agencies, youth justice facilities, or mental health institutions. In 2004 there were 2,079 children in care in Nova Scotia (Child and Family Services Information, 2007). This included children in foster homes, children who were adopted, and 163 who were in residential facilities. It is estimated that many youth in care are not accounted for because they often go through frequent transitions and it can be difficult to track them through the system (NYICN, 2001). Therefore, these numbers are likely an underestimate. Currently, no Canadian provinces track the education levels of youth in care. However, American studies suggest that youth in residential care have higher rates of school drop-out or lower achievement

than other students (Casey, 2002; Rosenfeld & Richman, 2003; Sherr, 2007).

There are a number of educational challenges faced by children living in out-of-home care that may be related to school dropout. Sherr (2007) conducted a review of studies focused on the education of youth in care. It was found that frequent school changes or transitions often result in missed time from school and falling behind academically. Youth were also prevented from moving to advanced grade levels because their capabilities were not recognized by teachers. Sherr also found that it was common for youth in care to be identified for special services at school without having their learning and academic abilities formally tested. They were frequently retained and this was associated with dropping out of school. Youth in care were frequently suspended from school because of behavioural and emotional difficulties and this was found to negatively impact their educational progress (Sherr).

Students in care typically do not perform as well in school as other students academically because of their unique living situations and their learning and emotional needs (Rosenfeld & Richman, 2003). Youth in care are not always provided with opportunities to enhance their academic achievement as they may not have access to special programs and extracurricular clubs or sports, and they may not be encouraged to pursue advanced education courses (Sherr, 2007; Vacca, 2008). It has been recommended that school personnel develop a better understanding of how to help these youth to succeed in school by implementing innovative programs designed specifically to address their needs, such as special projects, tutoring services, and alternate evaluation methods (Vacca, 2007). They may also benefit from teachers utilizing more effective and efficient strategies to support them with improving their overall academic success (Lembke & Stormont, 2005).

More than 60% of youth in care in the United States drop out of school before grade

twelve. This is twice as high as the rate for all students (Casey, 2002). There are no comparable Canadian statistics. Canada does not track the outcomes of residential youth once they leave care, which is commonly by the age of eighteen (NYICN, 2001). Across Canada, residential youth are no longer considered to be under the protection of Community Services at sixteen years old (NYICN). After this time they are expected to be able to live independently. Grover (2002) examined youth in Canada at risk for dropping out of school, in particular street youth and disadvantaged youth, those who are socially disadvantaged due to low socio-economic status or disadvantaged due to family difficulties, such as residential youth. It was found that there was a relationship between youth leaving care and school drop-out because of the challenges they faced living on their own, such as having to support themselves financially. Grover found that youth who leave care at an early age may be at-risk for school drop-out because of the difficulties they face, such as when trying to attend school while living on their own. Grover also found that these factors may be related to a higher risk of mental health difficulties and substance abuse problems among this population of youth.

The National Youth in Care Network, a Canadian non-profit, charitable organization focused primarily on youth in care, conducted a qualitative research study with youth in care about how they felt positive school experiences could be created (NYICN, 2001). A hundred youth participated in this study, ranging from 12 to 23 years of age, with an average age of 17. Sixty-three per cent of the participants were enrolled in school, 13 per cent were not, and 24 per cent did not indicate whether they were in school. The average grade completed was ten, although educational levels ranged from grade six to university. A youth-to-youth approach was used: youth who had previously been in care conducted focus groups with the study participants. The aims of the project were to gain knowledge of how to better support youth in care with their

education and to provide them with an active voice. The youth involved with the study gave accounts of their individual experiences and how they felt they could be supported in terms of their education. They made a number of recommendations to improve the educational outcomes for youth, including involving the youth in their academic planning, reducing the number of transitions, promoting support among teachers, and informing youth in care about their educational options. The factors that they identified as being related to academic success were transitions, support, resources, empowerment, and stereotyping (NYICN). Each of these factors will be discussed in more detail.

### **Transitions**

Stability of placement is a major obstacle to school success because residential youth move a number of times while in care. These frequent changes in residence are associated with poor school performance because of the disruption to schooling (NYICN, 2001). Vincent et al. (1995) evaluated the school performance of 73 U.S. youth living in a residential treatment facility who attended public school. The youth ranged in grade levels from seven to twelve. The youth were compared to a group of a 105 students who did not live in a residential facility. The areas that were evaluated were grade point average, social behaviours, and problematic behaviours. The results indicated that residential youth experienced more academic, social, and behavioural problems at school, such as failing grades and frequent suspensions, than community youth. These difficulties were found to increase when they experienced frequent changes in schools (Vincent et al, 1995). Multiple transitions can create difficulties with school attachment because a youth does not have enough time to become a member of the school. Results from the NYICN study indicated that the youth felt it was difficult to keep friends when school placements changed. Frequent transitions may also make fitting-in difficult because they do not

have enough time to get to know people at school or make friends. Tardiness and chronic absenteeism tend to co-occur with changing schools frequently for youth in care and are also related to school drop-out (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004).

Numerous transitions can result in school absences (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Mancini and Huebner (2004) found that youth in residential care find it difficult to feel connected to school if they have experienced multiple transitions. The participants in this study were 2,701 students from public schools in the United States, ranging from grade seven to twelve. The participants completed an anonymous survey measuring risk behaviours and protective factors. The study findings indicated that there appeared to be a relationship between the youth feeling like part of the school community and the number of transitions they had experienced. Martin and Jackson (2002) interviewed high achieving young Australian adults who had previously been in care. The purpose of the interviews was to explore their views regarding what they felt could improve the education of residential youth. The participants were 12 men and 26 women, with a mean age of 26, who had spent a year or more in care and had graduated from secondary school and/or had completed post-secondary studies. The participants were interviewed on topics such as their family backgrounds, their experiences in care, school, higher education and career experiences. Participants suggested that if a placement transition was unavoidable, efforts should be made to coordinate the move with the school timetable, so that it would not occur in the middle of the term or a time that may be crucial to the youths' educational success. They also recommended that it be made mandatory for youth living in out of home placements to attend school regularly.

## **Support**

Personal and academic support contributes to residential youth's educational success. A

study conducted by Taggart (2000) examined the educational experiences of residential youth and found support systems to be an important factor contributing to academic success. Six youth, ranging in age from seventeen to nineteen years who were living in a residential facility in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia were interviewed. They were attending high school at the time of the study and were enrolled in grades ten to twelve. A condition of the facility was that the youth be enrolled in school. A number of the participants commented that they wanted to live there because they wanted to return to school and needed a residential address (Taggart). A finding that emerged from the interviews was that the youth were aware of supports available to them at school and in the community, and that the staff at their residence helped them become aware of these resources. The staff members at the residence were also considered to be a source of personal support for the youth, as well as an educational support when needed. Guidance Counsellors were identified as a primary support at school by most of the youth, and teachers were mentioned as a potential support. The participants had limited knowledge regarding community supports. The youth suggested that support at school was hard to access because teachers were not always available and there were only one or two Guidance Counsellors for a large number of students. In other studies (Hair, 2005; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge, & Sinclair, 2007; Vacca, 2007) teachers' support has been shown to be related to a more positive educational experience. School personnel's understanding of the youth's background can also help them make accurate decisions regarding academic programming or regarding how the youth may be dealt with in difficult situations (Hair, 2005). Hair found that youth in care who felt their teachers understood them and their situations attended school on a more regular basis.

Parental support has been found to be a strong predictor of school success, with parental expectations of their child's educational level being the strongest predictor of high academic

achievement (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). Having a positive relationship with an adult, specifically a parent, appears to be related to the educational success of youth living in care (Hair, 2005). The parents of residential youth are not typically actively involved with their child's education because they are not in their direct care. This limits the support these youth can receive from their parents or guardians and this may be related to their overall educational success. Most youth in care do not have parental support while living in care and even if they have parental contact, they do not have daily support for their school work. When youth have frequent visits with their family while living in residential care, this appears to be associated with them achieving their goals and graduating from high school (Hair). Youth in residential care often do not have the support of family while in care. Taggart (2000) found that youth who did not have family support or a positive relationship with a family member did not achieve as well in school because of the pressures involved with trying to deal with their home situations. If residential youth are subject to negative comments from their parents regarding their academic capabilities, this may affect their motivation at school (Fitzgerald, 1998).

Another problem that affects residential youth's schooling is a lack of communication between school staff and social workers (Harker et al., 2007; Jackson, 1994; Zetlin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2005). Some youth reported that their social workers were not readily available to them when needed and that they sometimes had difficulty reaching their social workers (Harker et al.). Others felt their social workers hindered their educational progress because of the appointments they arrange for them during school hours or because they do not provide them with monetary funds for educational needs in a timely manner (Harker et al.).

## **Resources**

A lack of practical resources can play a critical role in the educational success of youth in

residential care (NYICN, 2001). It is not uncommon for youth in care not to be provided with a desk, a quiet location, or a set time to study. It can be difficult to find a quiet location in a residential facility if there are disturbances on a frequent basis, for example, other residents are experiencing emotional crises (Martin & Jackson, 2002). The youth in Taggart's (2000) study were more likely to use resources, such as libraries or community programs, that could help with school related issues if they were easy to access.

Youth in residential care are also not always aware of the resources available to them regarding educational (NYICN, 2001) and post-secondary options, such as bursaries and scholarships that could help with the financial commitment of furthering their education (Sherr, 2007). In the NYICN report, it was suggested that this may be overlooked because of the number of people involved with the youth. Everyone may believe that someone else is informing the youth about financial or educational resources. The youth felt they were mainly left on their own to obtain the information they needed (NYICN). They also expressed concerns regarding the lack of financial resources available to pursue post-secondary education.

It is not uncommon for young adults to remain living at home while attending university. This provides them with the resources they may need with their studies, such as financial and daily living support with basic necessities, such as meals or laundry. Youth in residential care are commonly living independently by the time they are eighteen or even earlier, so they generally do not have access to these types of resources or support and have to deal with educational demands as well as the demands of independent living on their own (OACAS, 2007, NYICN, 2007). Youth in residential care attending high school have reported experiencing difficulty with obtaining money for fees, such as lab costs or book fees (Taggart, 2000). Being able to obtain the financial means to attend college or university was identified by youth in care as a challenge and

a possible factor associated with youth in care not pursuing post-secondary educational options (NYICN).

### **Empowerment**

A mentor or role model may provide youth in residential care with the motivation and encouragement they need to believe in themselves (Hair, 2005; Martin & Jackson, 2002). A study by Martin and Jackson suggested that a mentor should be a consistent figure in the youth's life and follow him or her through to adulthood. The study overall found that the encouragement and support from a positive role model may help residential youth learn to make their own decisions, gain control over their lives, and advocate for themselves (Martin & Jackson). It was also recognized, however, that, because of the number of transitions youth in residential care may experience, this is often not possible (Martin & Jackson). Other research studies found that the involvement of a positive role model was associated with a successful educational experience and improved employment opportunities for youth in care. This may be related to an increase in the youth's sense of empowerment (Hair; Stone, 2007).

### **Stereotyping**

The youth who participated in the NYICN (2001) study reported that a relationship existed between how empowered they felt and the stereotyping they perceived to occur from members of the community. The youth stated that negative stereotyping reduced their desire to believe in their capabilities and their motivation to succeed in school. DeCesare (2004) also reported that youth in residential care are stereotyped as "troubled" kids, or it is believed they are responsible for being in residential care. Taggart (2000) found that youth in residential care feel they face stereotyping or labeling by their teachers or community members on a daily basis. The youth felt as though they were portrayed in a negative way and that this stereotyping does not

provide them with the encouragement needed to feel positive about their educational futures. Furthermore, they did not feel as though they could advocate on their own behalf (Taggart). The youth felt judged not only by their teachers, but also by their peers at school who do not live in residential care (Taggart). As noted earlier, teachers' preconceptions about residential youth result in lower academic expectations for them (Martin & Jackson, 2002). A study by Davis and Dupper (2004) found that when teachers had lower expectations, the youth were not always provided with the necessary opportunities to be successful academically. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs can affect their relationship with the youth and this can impact the youth's school success (Davis & Dupper).

### **Conclusion**

There are clearly a number of educational challenges facing youth in care. The present study sought to examine the educational experiences of youth living in care in a Nova Scotia residential facility and their view of the challenges they face as youth in care. By understanding the challenges that these youth face in terms of their education, we may gain insight into their academic needs and their outlook regarding school. Creating an awareness of the challenges and needs of this population of youth among educators may help to create programs in schools that may improve their educational experiences overall.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

#### Participants

Six youth participated in this study, four males and two females, ranging in age from fourteen to sixteen years old. One youth was fourteen, four were fifteen, and one was sixteen years old. They were all in residential care, that is, they were in the legal care of local child protection agencies and were residing in residential facilities or group homes. All of the youth lived at the HomeBridge Youth Society residential facilities. The length of time each of the youth had spent in care ranged from one and a half years to six years, with the average being four years. Each of the youth had been living within the HomeBridge facilities for a minimum of one year. The number of placements that each youth experienced while in care ranged from three to eight, with the average being five placements. The number of schools attended ranged from four to ten, with the average being six schools. Five had completed grade nine and one had completed grade ten.

All the participants attended an educational program developed by the HomeBridge Youth Society called Bridges for Learning. This program is a one-year education and life/employment skills development program for youth in residential care who cannot attend a mainstream school for various reasons, such as their unique situations and/or individual needs. This program is intended to assist the youth with transitioning back into a mainstream school or an alternative school program. Youth must be between 15 and 18 years of age, although youth under the age of 15 are considered based on availability of places and identified need. The youth must also be in the voluntary, temporary, or permanent care of a child welfare agency, residing within the HomeBridge Community or another residential care program within the same region,

and be referred by an agency social worker. A maximum of twelve youth can be enrolled at a time mainly on a full-time basis, although youth can attend part-time in the beginning and gradually move into full-time. Five of the six participants were enrolled full-time in the program and one was enrolled part-time in the program and part-time in a public school. Classes are held Monday to Thursday from 8:45am to 2:30pm, and on Friday students are dismissed at 11:10am to allow for program preparation for the following week. Extra help sessions are available to students from Monday to Thursday from 2:30pm to 3:00pm.

In the Bridges for Learning program, students follow an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) based on their specific academic needs and abilities. An IPP is a program developed for an individual student based on the student's strengths and needs when curriculum outcomes are not applicable and/or attainable. An IPP involves the development and implementation of specific individualized academic outcomes in one or more subject areas. An IPP may also include behavioural programming or life skills. The program curriculum for the youth attending the Bridges for Learning program is based on work packages provided by the public school the youth would normally be attending or correspondence materials if the youth was not attending school. A licensed teacher and a teaching assistant facilitate this component of the program. Life and employability skills are taught as part of this program based on guidelines from the Conference Board of Canada, which is a non-profit organization that conducts research in the areas of Canadian life such as education, health care, business, economics and international trade relations. This component is facilitated by the HomeBridge program coordinator. Courses completed while in the program count as credit towards each youth's high school certificate.

### **Procedure**

Initial contact with the HomeBridge Youth Society was made with the HomeBridge staff

psychologist, Joanna Buisseret-McKinnon. The goals of the study and the procedure for data collection were outlined. Following this, the Executive Director of HomeBridge Youth Society was contacted by letter to obtain permission to conduct the study (Appendix A). In order to obtain consent to involve the youth in the study, the Executive Director stated that a research proposal should be submitted to the Department of Community Services (Appendix B). Once ethics approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University, Mrs. Buisseret-McKinnon met with potential participants and provided them with information describing the purpose of the research study (Appendix C). This procedure was followed to ensure the protection of the identities of the youth residing at the centre, as the primary researcher would not have access to the youth until they agreed to participate in the study.

The selection criteria for this study required that the youth have resided in care for a minimum of 12 months and be in the custody of the Halifax Division of the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services. It was felt that living in residential care for at least one year would be sufficient for the youth to have experienced some of the educational challenges related to living in this type of setting. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked to provide background information regarding their age, gender, level of education, length of time in care, type and number of placements they had lived in, the number of schools they had attended, and their current educational status (Appendix D). This information was not used for identification purposes, but provided a context to understand the participants' experiences. Informed consent (Appendix E) was obtained from each of the study participants and all participants were assured that identifying information would not be included in the study results. The consent form was thoroughly reviewed with all the youth to ensure they understood the

study and what was expected of them. They were also each given a copy in case they had questions and wanted to contact the researcher.

Prior to conducting individual interviews, each youth was informed about the nature of the study, the limits of confidentiality, and his or her right to withdraw from the study at any time. The HomeBridge Youth Society requires that residents in their care be compensated for their participation in research and each of the youth received a \$10.00 honorarium. The interviews took place at the Reigh Allen Centre. This location was chosen because Mrs. Buisseret-McKinnon, the staff psychologist, worked at this location and was accessible if the youth become upset or experienced any difficulties while discussing their experiences.

The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour in length and were audio-taped. The format was semi-structured and guided by a number of mainly open-ended questions (Appendix F). This allowed the youth to expand on their experiences. They were also prompted to expand on their answers. Each question addressed a different aspect of the overall purpose of the study. Questions one and two focused on their experiences with school and were intended to elicit some background information about their education. Questions three and four asked about the youths' success and lack of success in school. The intent of these questions was to explore what they regard as educational success and how this may contribute to their motivation with school. In questions five to seven the youth were asked to identify some of the challenges they felt they had at school. In question eight youth were asked about their motivation regarding school. If they indicated feeling unmotivated to go to school, this question allowed for the discussion to explore why this was. Question nine was intended to explore how the youth felt about the importance of graduating from high school. Question ten asked about their future plans. In questions eleven and twelve youth were asked about the kinds of supports they were

aware of, the types of support they had experienced, and what they felt could better support them with school. The intention of these questions was to identify some potential supports of the educational system or the residential facility. The final question, number thirteen, provided each of the youth an opportunity to share his or her opinion regarding being a youth living in residential care and trying to succeed in school.

All participants were provided with the option to receive a private verbal report of the results individually with the researcher or to review a copy of the study on their own. If the youth chose to have a verbal report, a mutually agreeable date and time would have been arranged. None of the youth chose to review the results with the researcher.

The interviews were taped and transcribed with all identifying information removed. The recorded interviews were then erased. Transcripts are being stored in a locked cabinet for seven years following the study and will only be accessible by the primary researcher of this study and her thesis supervisor. Following this time period they will be shredded. Field notes collected during the interviews are also being stored in a locked cabinet for seven years after which they will be destroyed.

### **Qualitative Methodology**

Since youth in care are often not given the opportunity to express their views, the intent of this study was to gain an understanding of the perceptions of residential youth regarding their educational experiences. Qualitative methodology can be used to examine life experiences in an effort to understand and explain them by focusing on a specific social experience from the viewpoint of those directly involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A qualitative approach was considered to be the most appropriate because it allowed participants to tell their stories from their perspectives.

A phenomenological approach was adopted for the purposes of this study.

Phenomenology “studies the subjects’ perspectives on their world; attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subjects’ consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings” (Kvale, 1996, p. 53). Phenomenology seeks to “capture” a person’s lived experiences and to understand those experiences from their perspectives (van Manen, 1990). This is an important aspect of this study as the interviews conducted with the youth were essential to gaining insight and knowledge into their experiences from their point of view. Phenomenological methods are intended to “interpret and explain human action and thought” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In other words, phenomenological researchers seek to understand specific social phenomena by interpreting and explaining what the participants may be trying to tell us. This information is then synthesized into a reflective description of what the study participants are trying to convey (Morse, 1994). Phenomenological research is intended to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved (Groenewald, 2004). It would be difficult to understand and accurately portray the experiences of the youth without obtaining the information directly from them. For the purposes of this study it was important to give residential youth a voice as only they can depict their educational experiences.

With phenomenological methodology, researchers need to consider their assumptions as they have an impact on how the findings are interpreted and presented. Having had prior experiences with youth in residential care, I had some preconceptions about their educational struggles. I saw some of the educational difficulties the residential youth experienced. I carried these experiences with me as I developed this study, and as I reviewed the literature on the topic of school drop-out for residential youth, I was reminded of some the challenges I had observed

the youth have with school. In order to have a better understanding of what my assumptions or preconceptions were, I kept field notes of my personal thoughts and emotions following each interview and during the analysis.

Kvale's methodology of phenomenology was selected for this study (Kvale, 1996). He recommends that researchers "describe the given as precisely and completely as possible" and "describe rather than to explain or analyze" (Kvale, 1996). Rather than focusing only on each participant's individual experience, this methodology allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the essential elements of the experience being studied by comparing the responses from all the participants' interviews. The process of analysis involves identifying themes that emerge from the youth's responses. Kvale describes five steps in this process of phenomenological analysis. The first step is to read each interview thoroughly to get an overall sense of what has been said. The next step is to determine the natural "meaning units." These are descriptive words or phrases that elicit the meaning of what the participant is trying to express. The third step is to state the dominant theme or themes that emerge from the interview based on the "meaning units." The fourth step is to further examine the "meaning units" in terms of the specific purpose of the study. This involves re-examining the words or phrases that were considered to be of importance to ensure that they were accurately analyzed. In the final step, the important themes are summarized in order to express the overall essential meanings expressed by the study participants. These are used to describe the key issues that result from the interviews and create a picture of each participant's experiences regarding their education.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

#### **Interview Process**

The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour. Two of the youth were finished closer to forty-five minutes and the other four closer to an hour. The latter group appeared to be comfortable throughout the interview sessions. They openly discussed their experiences and seemed at ease with answering the questions. The other two seemed somewhat hesitant and guarded. Their responses were quite brief and they did not expand or elaborate when prompted. In my experience this is typical for some youth in residential care, particularly when asked to discuss personal experiences with someone they do not know well.

All the participants seemed to understand the questions presented to them. None asked for clarification of a question nor did they give responses indicating that they did not comprehend what was being asked. The youth were prompted in order to encourage them to expand on their responses. Four seemed to enjoy being interviewed, but it seemed that the other two just wanted to spend the time they needed to and leave. It was more difficult to make small talk with them, while the others wanted to stay and have a conversation about the study and my experiences working with youth in care after the interview had been completed. Two inquired at the end of their interview session if they had been helpful. Since the youth had been in two types of educational settings, the public system and the Bridges for Learning program, we could explore their views of each program and how they felt each has impacted their educational experiences.

#### **Analysis of the Interviews**

Once the interviews were completed they were each transcribed by the researcher. The

interview transcripts were initially read over to obtain an overall description of what each of the participants were trying to express about his or her educational experiences. Words and statements that appeared to be related to the purpose of the study were highlighted while reviewing each of the transcripts. For example, when the participants were asked questions focused on times they felt successful in school, words or phrases that described what they meant by success were highlighted. The transcripts were then reread and summaries of each of them were prepared to provide clarification of what was being expressed by each of the participants. Recurring words and phrases from each of the interviews were identified. For example, the term “bad kids” was a phrase frequently used by all of the participants to describe how they felt they were viewed by others. These words and phrases were then organized into groups, or meaning units, as described by Kvale (1996). The groups were determined by putting together similar words and phrases that were expressed by the participants. Each group or meaning unit was then further examined in order to identify the theme that was being described. The phrase “bad kids,” for example, was placed in a group along with other similar phrases and words that expressed how the youth felt stereotyped. The theme that emerged from this analysis was that the youth felt they did not belong. Four groups were created that embodied what was being expressed. A theme was identified for each group. These themes were then further analyzed to identify the overall main theme that seemed to provide the most accurate representation of the youth’s perspectives of their educational experiences. This was accomplished by looking at the themes in relation to the summaries to ensure what the youth were trying to express was accurately described.

### **Themes**

The overall main theme that emerged from the interviews was that the youth wanted to be seen for who they were as youth and not judged because they were in care. The youth described

themselves as, “just people needing help” and that “they are not outsiders.” They wanted people to understand that they have problems like everyone else and “are no different” because of where they live. They did not want to be singled out or labeled in a negative way, such as being seen as “bad kids” because they were in care, and they felt people at school and in the community did not have an accurate picture of who they were. They believed that these misconceptions impacted their educational experiences.

A number of sub-themes were identified that were connected to the main theme, and they are discussed below: *Feeling misunderstood and stigmatized at school and by the community, Feeling that they do not belong or fit in the school system, Feeling that the public school system does not meet their needs, and Belief that school is necessary to achieve their future plans.*

#### **Feeling misunderstood and stigmatized at school and by the community.**

All the participants expressed feeling misunderstood or stigmatized at school and in the community. Throughout the interviews they made frequent comments that they felt other people did not understand them. They said they were viewed as “bad kids” by other students, their teachers, and people in the community. All the youth indicated feeling judged, labeled, and singled out by their teachers because they are in care. One participant noticed that teachers treated her differently after she was placed in care, “They were nice and everything, but as soon as I got in care everything changed, they were like you’re so bad. I didn’t feel like going anymore because my teachers were too rude.” Four others also said they felt teachers stereotyped them on a regular basis.

The youth also felt teachers had different academic expectations for them because they were in care, “Teachers don’t care, they think I’m a bad kid and that I can’t learn like everyone else.” One participant felt teachers automatically assumed that youth in care were not capable of

achieving as well as other youth, “Teachers think you won’t do as well because you are in care.”

Five youth believed that there were different academic expectations for them because they were in care. One youth felt that he was put in a special program at school because he was in care:

They think we might fail or not do as good, so they put me in an at-risk program. It made me feel like they were putting it out there that you’re in care and they’re showing everybody, when you could just be put in regular classes and do what everybody else does.

The participants stated that they felt stigmatized at school because of being treated differently and receiving consequences for their behaviours when students who are not in care may not.

When you are in care or in group homes you’re expected to be in school and if you’re not then there are consequences, when sometimes if you are not in care and you are not in school you might not suffer consequences.

This youth felt that other students at school who did not live in residential care did not “get in trouble” as much as they did, even though they may have acted in a similar manner. Another participant described feeling as though he was singled out by the principal at his school because of being in care:

I was expected to check in with the principal everyday to make sure I wasn’t causing any problems or they would put me out. It was like they were just waiting for me to screw up so they could kick me out because I am in care and a bad kid. It made me feel uncomfortable there.

Five participants stated that they had been suspended from school numerous times because of being in trouble at school. They found it difficult to return to school because they would be seen as the “bad kid” by other students and their teachers and this further alienated them. Only one participant believed that she was not treated differently at school, “They treat me exactly the same, if I do something wrong, like swear in class, I get sent to the office or detention like everyone else.”

Three youth stated that teachers do not understand why they are in care, or the challenges they face in care, and assume that they are “bad:”

Some of the teachers come up to me and tell me, “You live in group homes and stuff.” They think kids in group homes are bad, like we are bad kids who don’t know nothing, and don’t care. They don’t know what it feels like to be in care.

One participant said it would be helpful if teachers were made more aware of the situations of youth in care, then perhaps teachers would not “judge us so much...we’re in care because we did something bad, just inconsiderate little children.” All of the youth referred to feeling “labeled” and “judged” by teachers. One of the youth stated that “if they actually got to know why you were in care and stuff that would help a lot because they would actually understand why you are in care and they wouldn’t put a label on you.” When this youth was asked whose responsibility it was to better inform teachers, this youth was not sure whose job that should be, but did indicate that “it would be a lot easier.” As one of the youth indicated, “I just think that everybody needs to learn that we are just people needing help.”

All the youth felt the teachers in the Bridges for Learning program were more understanding of their situations. They accepted the youth and their academic expectations were realistic. As one of the youth stated, “The teachers here understand that we have problems and they don’t expect things from us beyond what we can do, they just help us. It makes me want to do my work and go to school.” The youth generally felt that the Bridges for Learning program was more conducive to their learning needs and this motivated them to attend school and do their work.

All the youth said that feeling stereotyped affected their motivation to attend school. One participant described his experience with feeling labeled at school:

They pretty much put a label on us because we were in care. We were bad kids so we were always in trouble. I think that's what got me started on the not caring about school thing because they pretty much put a label on you.

Another participant stated that if he is seen as a "bad kid" he may choose to associate with other students that may be frequently in trouble and may conduct himself in an unfavourable manner at school because this is what he felt was expected of him. He also expressed that this is "common behaviour for youth in care." Another youth stated that most youth in residential care are seen as "bad kids" and this can sometimes lead to them acting out.

The youth also felt stigmatized in the community. Some of the participants said they thought it was important to attempt to change the perceptions of others regarding youth in residential care. If people in the community regarded them in a more positive way and were more understanding and supportive of their situations, they thought they would feel less "stereotyped" and more accepted overall. One youth stated, "I feel the community could be more supportive and maybe promote more that kids in care aren't bad, we are just there to get help." Another stated, "All people have hard times, so we are no different, we just need help." These youth wanted people to understand that they were not different because they were in care and more importantly, they want others to recognize that they were in care because they need help. One of the youth indicated that he and others had attempted to build relationships with people in the community so that community members might get to know them and overcome their prejudices:

Most people in the community just judge us because we are in group homes and maybe they shouldn't judge us before they know us. We go around in the wintertime to shovel people's driveways and stuff so they can get to know us.

### **Feeling that they do not belong or fit in the public school system.**

All the youth said that they did not feel as though they fit in at school. Five stated that

they kept to themselves at school and did not really talk to people unless they had to or it was initiated by someone else. The sixth participant stated that the only reason she liked school was because she got to spend time with her friends, “I don’t do anything in class. I just talk to my friends. That’s the only reason I go to school.” Further discussion revealed that the friends she was referring to were also youth in care, and it appeared that she did not socialize with students who were not in care. Two mentioned feeling judged by other students because of their situations and all were uncomfortable talking about their living situations. As one stated, “It’s hard to talk to other kids about being in care, why you are there and stuff...sometimes it doesn’t bother me, but at school I don’t want to hear it.” Generally, they seemed to want to avoid sharing this information and preferred not to talk about it while at school because they did not want to stand out from other students. One youth described how he felt about talking about his situation, “I just want to go to school and be like everyone else, I don’t want to talk about my stuff.” Another youth said that comments by people about his living situation resulted in him becoming easily angry and frustrated. He said that this affected his desire to want to go to school, “When I get angry I don’t want to be at school, I will just get into trouble when I am like that.”

One participant described feeling as though she did not “fit in” at public school because she did not have the same things as other students. She stated that, “kids not in care are normal and get to live happily at home and get everything they need.” Further exploration clarified that “needs” meant material objects such as money and clothes. She thought that if she could dress like the other students then she would feel as though she fit in better. All the youth felt like they did not “fit in” because they were singled out by teachers, which also made them feel different from other students. They said the way their teachers treated and viewed them made them feel uncomfortable at school and they did not want to attend.

None of the participants belonged to any teams or clubs at school. They stated that they only went to school when they had to and did not have time to sign up for things. One participant indicated that youth in care have constant worries about being in care, which results in a considerable amount of stress. This means they have little energy for other activities, such as school, “No one gets how much we have to think about and stress about, we can’t think about anything else, not even school sometimes.” The youth referred to “stress” as worrying about where they are going to live next, their situations at home, money, and what will happen after they leave care. Although they were no longer living at home with their families, they still thought about the problems they had there. They are also “worried” about whether or not they would be sent to another group home or where they would live when they were no longer able to stay in care because of their age. One participant indicated that the stress youth in care experience can have an impact on their performance in school, “stress is bad for people in care, we don’t care about passing school when we are stressed.”

It was also difficult for the youth to become involved at school because they generally did not stay at one school for long. The average number of schools the participants had been in was six, with one youth having changed schools ten times. Four of the participants stated that they felt “behind” academically because of frequently changing schools. One youth stated that every time he moved to a new school, his motivation to attend school decreased because he felt so behind in his learning compared to the other students. He would pretend to be sick so that he would not have to go to a new school, “I was in a lot of schools and that was hard because you move to a new school and know nobody and you feel behind. It made me not want to go.”

Another participant indicated that, because youth in care have a difficult time fitting in at school or feeling accepted, they may choose the wrong peer group. They may spend time with

students who may be frequently in trouble, which further separated them from other students at school, “When you’re in care, you sometimes do what the other kids are doing and that’s not always a good thing. You can get in trouble or get into drugs, then you’re not going to school anymore.” The youth indicated that, when they were part of a group, they felt like they belonged or fit in even if the group was regarded as “trouble makers.” Another youth stated that frequently being in “trouble” at school, for example, by fighting, could result in suspensions or expulsions, further contributing to them feeling different from other students at school.

By contrast, all the participants described feeling “comfortable” in the Bridges for Learning program because everyone was in care and they did not have to discuss their living situations. Being around youth who are in similar situations made them feel as though they “fit in” and “belong” because they did not feel different. They were therefore able to focus on their work better. One of the participants described his experiences with other students in the Bridges for Learning program as, “The kids here don’t bother you, we all get along most of the time and we don’t have to explain anything because we are all in the same place.”

### **Belief that the public school system does not meet their educational needs.**

All the youth were clear that they did not view the public school system as a good learning environment. They felt that classes were “too big”, there was not enough “one-on-one help,” and there were “too many distractions.” They felt that teachers did not understand their situations or make allowances with school work. All the youth felt “unsuccessful” in the public school system. They defined success at school mainly in terms of “getting good marks” or “finishing school work.” They did not attribute their marks to their own abilities to achieve in school. Rather, they saw the school environment as the main factor which determined whether they did well academically. For example, they all felt they did better academically in the Bridges

for Learning program because of the individual help they received and because the teachers understood their situations and capabilities. Only one participant indicated feeling successful in the public school system. This was not due to academic reasons, but because of her involvement as a volunteer in a Breakfast Program at her school. She was the only one to relate success to something other than a mark or grade, "It was alright, just the feeling that you did something. You don't really need stuff to know that you did it like awards, but it is nice." She felt good about the recognition she received for being involved in a program at school. Despite this achievement, she also felt that she was doing better academically in the Bridges for Learning program because her marks had improved.

The participants also noted that the public school system does not accommodate that they frequently miss school or transfer to new schools. As stated above, the youth felt unsuccessful when they were out of school when they were transitioning to a new school or were suspended. One participant stated, "when you're not in school, I guess you feel like you're not learning anything and you're behind and when you go back you're not raising your hand for any answers just in case it's not right because you missed things from not being in school." They all found it was hard and sometimes "impossible" to catch up academically following a period away from school. It was hard to catch up on work and to make new friends. Each time they were out of school, it felt as though they had to "start over." By contrast, in the Bridges for Learning program, the students followed individual programs, so this allowed them to work at their own pace and they did not have to worry about feeling that they had fallen behind.

Suspensions were another problem in the public school system. Four of the participants said they felt unsuccessful at school when they were suspended or "kicked out." For one youth this occurred quite frequently, "I was suspended four or five times in one year...it takes time

away from my education.” Fighting or being disruptive in the classroom was described as the most common reason for being suspended or expelled from school. It appeared from their comments that fighting was a common occurrence, almost an expected behaviour, despite that the youth indicated that they do not like to be seen as “bad kids” or causing trouble. They stated that they did not typically initiate the fighting, but it was a way to protect themselves in certain situations, specifically when their peers were “annoying” them, “Kids just seem to want to annoy me, saying things about where I live and stuff. It can make me angry and I just want to hit someone.” Suspensions led to more time out of school and more challenges trying to reintegrate into the school system.

The youth generally felt overwhelmed and unsure of their learning abilities in the public school system. They did not feel they received the academic support they needed to be successful, for example, help with school work. They preferred the support they received from the teachers in the Bridges for Learning program because it was one-on-one. One youth stated that even though he was capable of achieving good grades in the Bridges for Learning program, he did not feel he could do this in the public school system because he would not receive the academic support he needed. One of the problems in the public system that they had to rely mainly on themselves in order to succeed, “In the end it is up to me to find a way to get good grades and finish school. The school isn’t going to help me.” Three of the six youth had received academic support from resource teachers in the public school system. They found individual attention helpful, but they felt they did not have enough opportunities to work with resource teachers. One youth described how he benefited from resource at school:

At one of my schools I was on a program where I had my own teacher that would like take me out of class to help me with science and math. It’s easier that way because then I have someone, not like in class where the teacher has to help everyone. I’m just the only one there and I am getting all the help I need.

The participants also indicated needing personal support to assist them with school, for example, the staff at the residence talked to them when they were having a personal difficulty or crisis. They felt that this had a positive effect on their performance at school. Without staff support, they believed they would not be able to get through the school day because they would not be able to focus at school. They felt the staff “understand stuff” and because “the staff are with us everyday and they see the stuff we got through, so they know when we need them and when to back off.” Another youth stated, “the staff don’t label us, they get us....they don’t see us as bad kids just because we are in care.” A third participant said that he felt the staff were available to listen when he felt frustrated, “They are there for me when I need to talk and they don’t judge me because of things I do or say.” They believed that the support from the staff at their residence was more consistent than what they had had prior to entering care. One participant also relied on his therapist. He felt that this was more beneficial than the school counsellor because he felt he was listened to more and was not just told what to do. This helped him cope with school.

I go to a therapist now and that’s ten times better than the support at school, like guidance counsellors. I don’t find they help at all. They just talk to you like a child, like you don’t know nothing, and tell you everything you already know.

Overall, all of the participants felt the Bridges for Learning program better met their learning needs. Since there were fewer people in the program, they received more one-on-one help with school work, the teachers understood what they were experiencing, and they felt more comfortable because there were no rules about dress or using personal music devices while in class. One participant described how the environment in the Bridges for Learning program was more conducive to learning:

Here at this school the classes are smaller, in public school you can have a class of thirty, but here you can get the help you need when you need it, one on one help, so it’s easier. I

like smaller classes with not that many kids, it's easier to concentrate. We can actually wear our hoods and listen to music while we do our work, that helps a lot. I can get more work done when I am comfortable. I can do what I need to do here and I feel more comfortable than in public school.

They all said that their school performance was better in the Bridges for Learning program. One youth stated that, "...since I've been here things have been good....I'm on a good path, I'm doing my work and staying out of trouble." For another, being enrolled in the Bridges for Learning program had increased his attendance, "I go to school all the time now, last year I never went. I like the program here because there are less people and the teachers are good, they know what you are going through." One believed that he would probably be failing if he was in public school, "I am doing well now, since I have been in this program, but if I was in a regular school I would probably be failing."

For all of them, the Bridges for Learning program was the first time they received a good mark. One participant stated, "I was failing before I came to this program, I didn't get the help I needed, here I do." Another participant stated, "I never felt successful in public school. Here I feel successful almost everyday because I actually get stuff done and it's right. That makes me feel successful." One youth felt he did not do well most of the time in public school because he did not have his work done, "At homework checks everyone had their work out and the teacher would come around and if I didn't have it done, it was like well, "detention for you" or you don't get your mark, unsuccessful obviously."

Youth in the Bridges for Learning program typically only attend for one year and then return to their previous public school. None of the participants wanted to return to public school once they completed the year at the Bridges for Learning program, "I would like to stay in this program, but I guess I don't have a choice." The youth indicated they would still try to do well in public school when they returned, but they could see themselves failing once again. One youth

stated, “I don’t see myself graduating back in regular school.” Another stated that by returning to the public school system he would likely not do as well as he did in the Bridges for Learning program, “I didn’t do well in school before coming to this program and I would fail if I had to go back to my old school.”

**Belief that school is necessary to achieve their future goals.**

The participants viewed school as a means to an end, a way to find employment, a place to live, or to become independent, “Going to school is pointless. I know I have to do it though to get a good job and stay off welfare. I don’t want to end up like my parents, on welfare with no money. I want an education.” Although school was seen as “pointless” because it was not an environment in which they could learn, it was necessary for their future plans. Two participants said that their motivation for finishing high school was so they would not end up like their parents, “I know I have to get through it to get a job and actually live. That’s the only reason I am in school because I know without school I’d be on welfare and stuck in some little room like my parents, which I don’t want.” These youth indicated that they did not want to end up in a similar situation, and believed that graduating from school would help to ensure this did not happen. All participants said that they expected to graduate from high school and either continue their education or obtain employment. They believed they needed to finish school in order to get a good job and make money, “If you want to make money you have to graduate. If I really want anything to happen in my life I’m gonna have to go to school.” Another youth also recognized the importance of finishing school and employment:

Without an education you can’t get a good job and without a good job you don’t get that much money. Without money it’s a lot harder to live. I figure you go to school, you do what you gotta do and in the end you get your job and you’re happy.

Each youth articulated a plan for the future. Two wanted to join the military or armed forces and indicated that they could once they completed Grade Ten; however, they also recognized that they would need to finish high school as part of their employment. One wanted to become a carpenter and open his own business, another wanted to be a hairdresser, and one wanted to go to university. One youth stated that she wanted to “make something of myself” and suggested that she could do that by staying in school and eventually get a job and an apartment. One participant expressed his desire to get a “good” job, “you have to get a good job, can’t work as a dishwasher or something like that all my life.” When the youth were asked about what they considered to be a “good” job, responses included, “a hairdresser,” “the military and armed forces,” “owning your own business,” and “getting a trade.” Their plans for the future included postsecondary education. Even the two the youth who said they wanted to open their own businesses indicated they would need community college to achieve this.

They all were optimistic about their ability to achieve their goals for the future. One youth said, “I plan to go on to university and I know I need to change my behaviour, and work harder and focus.” Another commented, “I know I can achieve my goals by putting my mind to it” and “I need to keep working hard...can’t fall behind.” None of them identified any obstacles that would impede their plans, nor did they mention dropping out of school as a possibility. Although the youth had expressed concern about not doing well academically or failing once they returned to the public school system, they did not refer to this when speaking about their futures. They did not make the connection between their negative views of their success in the public school system and how this could have an impact on their future. One youth mentioned that other youth living in residential care may choose not to complete school, but he did not see

this as his path. One of the youth mentioned a specific plan as to how he was going to reach his goals, “if I join the army, I can get in with Grade Ten and then I have to finish school to stay in.”

The youth recognized the importance of having the support or guidance of someone significant in their lives to help them achieve their goals. One participant indicated that the staff at her residence was a source of support for her, “it’s very important to graduate, I want to get a job and an apartment, and I am committed to doing it with the help of the staff, not my family.” She felt the staff were a source of consistent support in her life, while her contact with her parents was sporadic. Others also noted that it was important to have either a role model or someone in their lives to push them towards their goal. One youth said her friends are her source of support, “putting my mind to it, working hard towards it and having someone to back me up if I feel like I don’t want to do it helps me to do what I need to.” Another identified his father as his role model, “My dad worked through school and got a good job, so if you have an education you don’t have to worry about what you can or can’t have.”

### **Researcher’s Reflections**

Having had experiences with youth in residential care, it was difficult to not have some preconceived notions about their educational experiences. Generally, I was able to put my thoughts and experiences aside and focus on the youths’ responses. However, when I reviewed my reflexivity journal, it was apparent that I questioned some of their responses during the interviews. They had all positively discussed their plans for the future despite the difficulties they experienced academically, in contrast to the youth with whom I worked with who did not have a positive outlook. This made me wonder if their answers were based on what they may have wanted me to believe and not their actual thoughts.

My overall impression was that the youth I interviewed were similar to many of the youth with whom I had worked with. They had a strong desire to be accepted and understood. They did not always convey this in words, but rather sometimes in the way they carried themselves or the way some of them avoided direct eye contact when discussing their lives with someone they may not have felt completely comfortable with. They also wanted support, both academically and emotionally. Support was not always provided or consistent, but something they needed to be successful and to reach their goals.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

#### **Discussion of the Findings**

The participants in this study were clear that they wanted to be seen for who they were and not judged or labeled because they were in care. They viewed themselves as people “needing help” just like everyone else, but felt that people at school and in the community viewed them as “bad kids”, as “outsiders”, and did not understand them. They described the way in which this impacted their educational success. They also felt the public school system did not accommodate their needs as youth in care who are typically in and out of school. The youth mainly viewed school mostly as a means to an end, that they needed to get an education in order to achieve their future plans. Four sub-themes were identified from the analysis that related to the overall theme. Each is discussed below in relation to prior research.

#### **Feeling stigmatized and misunderstood.**

The youth described feeling stigmatized, or labeled, at school and in the community. They felt they were not accepted or understood by their teachers and/or their peers at school. They did not indicate that they wanted to drop out of school because of the stereotyping they experienced, but they believed that the public school system made it difficult for them to succeed academically. Some of the participants felt they were not treated the same as other students not in care and that their teachers generally felt they were not capable of achieving at the same level. The youth felt more accepted in the Bridges for Learning program because they felt their learning needs were better met and their teachers understood their situations and did not label them. They felt the teachers had realistic expectations of their academic capabilities and were more understanding of their situations.

Being accepted and feeling comfortable were considered to be motivating factors academically for the youth. Research has shown that these factors are important to the educational achievement of youth in care (Davis & Dupper, 2004; NYICN). Studies focused on youth in care have also found that stereotyping and labeling is related to a decrease in achievement and motivation with school (DeCesare, 2004, Martin & Jackson, 2002, Taggart, 2000). This may result in the youth dropping out of school (NYICN, 2001). Teachers may also have lower academic expectations for youth in care (Davis & Dupper). Research has shown that teacher's expectations are related to academic success (Davis & Dupper). The development and implementation of special academic programs may be helpful to the academic success of youth in care (Vacca, 2002).

### **Feeling that they do not fit in.**

The youth in this study did not feel that they fit in or belonged in the public school system. The participants said they experienced a great deal of stress being in care and this left them with little energy to become involved with school activities. They felt further alienated as a result because they felt others did not understand the stress they experienced. Some of the participants felt like they did not fit in because they did not have the same material objects, such as clothes and money, as other students. They also identified time out of school, whether because of changing schools, new placements, or suspensions, as another reason they felt like they did not belong. They also experienced multiple suspensions.

Youth in residential care typically have a number of thoughts or concerns that can cause stress for them on a daily basis (Hair, 2005; Stone, 2007). Stressors commonly experienced by youth in care, such as worrying about their placements or money, can have an effect on their academic success and may result in dropping out of school (Grover, 2002). Frequent transitions

can also make it difficult for youth in care to feel they fit in at school because they are not in one location long enough to build strong friendships or feel connected to a school (Mancini & Huebner, 2004; Sherr, 2007). It is difficult for youth in care to feel connected at school if they have experienced multiple transitions (Martin and Jackson, 2002). Time missed from school because of suspensions can also result in the youth feeling disconnected from school or that they do not fit in with other students (NYICN, 2007).

**School system does not meet their needs.**

The participants all clearly stated that the public school system was not a good learning environment for them. They felt that there were too many students in their classes, they did not receive enough direct support with school work, and teachers were not understanding of their situations and did not make allowances with school work. The youth felt that they were not successful in the public school system because their learning needs were not met. Despite that they felt they were not able to do well in this environment, none of them indicated that they would not be finishing high school as a result.

In contrast, they felt successful in the Bridges for Learning program. They felt the teachers were more understanding and as a result they felt more supported. For all of them this was the first time they obtained good marks and were able to complete their work. The youth found the Bridges for Learning program to be a positive experience because of the support they received from their teachers. They also identified the staff at their residences as a source of support that helped to improve their school performance. They believed the success they were experiencing in the Bridges for Learning program would not continue once they returned to the public school system.

Youth in care who felt their teachers understood their situations attend school more regularly (Hair, 2005). It was also found that teachers who have an understanding of a youth's background are able to make more accurate decisions regarding academic programming, which in turn provides the youth with better support (Hair, 2005). A mentor or role model can also be a source of support to provide youth in care with the motivation and encouragement they need to be successful academically, as well as a positive educational experience (Martin & Jackson, 2002).

### **Achieving their future plans.**

All the participants had specific plans for the future and they believed that completing school was necessary to achieve their goals. School was viewed as a means to an end: by graduating they could get a "good" job. This was important to the youth because they wanted a "better life" than their parents and they recognized that obtaining an education was important to achieve this. The youth did not appear to see any obstacles that would prevent them from graduating or achieving their goals and this was at odds with their expectations that they would not succeed. They did not seem to recognize the disconnection between their goals and their achievement. Research suggests that the future outlook for youth in residential care is generally not positive (Casey, 2002; Rosenfeld & Richman, 2003). Youth in care typically do not do as well academically as other students for a number of reasons (NYICN, 2001) and as a result they may drop out of school (Sherr, 2007; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005). Dropping out of school may make gaining employment difficult (Grover, 2002), which in turn would make achieving their future goals a challenge.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study was the small number of participants. The findings

cannot be generalized to the overall population of youth in residential care. This study was also limited geographically in that there was only one setting, in one city, and one province. Another limitation was that the perceptions of others involved with the youth, such as their teachers or the staff at their residences, were not part of this study. The main objective of this study was to focus on the youths' perceptions of their experiences. Additional insight may have been provided had the views of their teachers, school personnel, and/or staff members where they were residing been obtained. For example, it may have been of interest to compare the youths' responses regarding the stereotyping they described with the perceptions and opinions of school personnel. This would allow for the opportunity to find out if others perspectives were similar to the youths'. This study was also based solely on the self reports of the youth. It cannot be determined if their responses were based on how they actually felt or if they were responding how they thought they should.

A final limitation was that the interviews were only approximately an hour in length. This may not have been long enough for the youth to feel comfortable with the researcher because it may not have been enough time for them to open up or to get an accurate understanding of their educational experiences. Spending more time with the youth and observing them in their environment, such as in class or at the residence, may have resulted in a more in-depth study and provided a greater understanding of their academic challenges.

### **Implications**

The youth in this study were clear that they did not feel the public school system was meeting their learning needs. The youth made specific suggestions as to how they could be more successful academically at school, such as smaller class sizes, more one-on-one support, and more flexibility in terms of school work. They felt the Bridges for Learning Program was a better

learning environment overall because they did better academically and they felt more supported. There has been no outcome research on the Bridges for Learning program. Evaluating the program would help to verify if the youth are performing better in this environment and why. It may also be important to explore the role youth care workers play in the success of the youth in this program. Since the youth felt the public school system was not an ideal learning environment for them, it would also be important to determine how this could be improved. Informing educators, school boards, and residential care workers about what the youth identified would be helpful for increasing the awareness of their learning needs. Identifying extra-curricular activities and programs that the youth could become involved with could also help them to feel more connected at school, which may help to improve their academic performance.

Since the youth felt it would be helpful if people at school and in the community had a better understanding regarding the reasons why youth are in care, educating people may help to shift their attitudes. The youth identified mentors as providing them with support. They felt it made a difference when they had someone to talk to and that they were better able to cope with personal and academic challenges. Establishing mentor programs may provide the youth with the support they need to be successful academically. This may require finding a mentor outside of the school system as the youth are frequently changing schools due to transitioning. Teachers or other school personnel may be an initial source of support to assist the youth with feeling connected at school, but once the youth transitions to a new school this relationship would likely not continue. Social workers are typically a consistent person in the youths' lives and may be able to be a mentor for the youth they are working with; however, their case loads can be heavy and this may not be possible. Ideally, providing the youth with a mentor who can act as an educational advocate and be a source of support throughout their school careers would be the

best situation. It is important to determine whether these mentors would be from the educational system or Community Services and how this support system would be set up. This would likely need to be a multidisciplinary approach involving people working together from different systems, such as school personnel, social workers, and youth care staff, in order for the youth to be successful.

Finally, all the youth in this study had plans for the future. There seemed to be a discrepancy, however, between their future plans and their achievement in the public school system. Questions that need to be addressed by educators are: How do we help them achieve their plans and goals? What kinds of supports could be put in place to help them achieve this? The role of mentors may also be helpful in providing youth with consistent support. It would be important to educate the youth as well about what they can do to achieve their future goals, such as learning about sources of financial support that may be available for postsecondary education.

## **Conclusion**

This study confirms what other studies have found regarding the educational challenges of youth in residential care, such as stereotyping, transitions, and support. It is clear from the research literature that most youth in care are not as educationally successful as youth in general and have higher rates of school drop out. The youth described their experiences in both the public school system and a program designed specifically for youth residential in care. They provided information on what they felt the differences were in each program in terms of their academic achievement. The youth felt more successful in the program designed specifically for youth in care because they felt that their learning needs were better met in this environment.

They identified a number of reasons as to why they felt more successful and gave specific suggestions that could be adopted in the public school system.

Overall, the youths' responses provided more insight into why they may struggle with school and what their learning needs are. As someone who has worked with youth in residential care and has seen first hand the difficulties they face educationally, this information is important to finding ways to better support these youth with their education. Although, it is recognized that this is a small study and the findings cannot be generalized to all youth in residential care, the findings may still be beneficial to consider for programming in school for these youth.

In conclusion, the youths' main message from this study was encapsulated in this statement, "I just think that everybody needs to learn that we are just people needing help." The youth wanted to be seen and treated the same as everyone else. They also identified, however, that they have specific needs academically that are not being met in the public school system. In order to improve the rate of high school completion for these youth, it may be important to consider the findings of this study and to recognize that the school system may need to adopt alternate programming to help them achieve success.

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**APPENDIX A****LETTER TO EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HOMEBRIDGE YOUTH SOCIETY**

Ms. Linda Wilson  
Executive Director  
HomeBridge Youth Society  
270 Pleasant Street  
Dartmouth, NS  
B2Y 3S3

February 16, 2007

Dear Ms. Wilson:

My name is Delinda Trudel and I am a graduate student in the Masters of Arts in School Psychology program at Mount Saint Vincent University. I contacted you prior to this regarding my interest in conducting research with the HomeBridge Youth Society. This letter is to update you as to the status of my proposed research study.

The goal of my research is to explore the views of residential youth regarding their educational achievement and experiences. Specifically, I would be looking at their successes, challenges, motivation, and educational outlook. I am interested in interviewing 6 youth between the ages of thirteen to fifteen, who are currently residing within the facilities of the HomeBridge Youth Society. I have spoken with Joanna Buisseret-McKinnon and she has agreed to meet with potential youth to provide them with information about the study. I will not have contact with the youth until they have agreed to participate. Each youth would be paid a consultation fee of \$10.00 for his or her time and all personal information obtained would be kept strictly confidential. The interviews would be audiotaped and transcribed with all identifying information removed in order to ensure confidentiality. The only people to have access to the transcribed interviews would be me and my supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Church.

This research proposal has been approved by the University Research Ethics Board at MSVU and by the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services Research Committee. These committees ensure that all ethical considerations pertaining to the youth have been addressed. If you have any questions or if you would prefer to meet to further discuss my interests, please feel free to contact me at 431-4324 or by email at [delinda.trudel@msvu.ca](mailto:delinda.trudel@msvu.ca). If you would like to speak with my thesis supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Church, please feel free to contact her at 457-6721 or by email at [elizabeth.church@msvu.ca](mailto:elizabeth.church@msvu.ca). Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Delinda Trudel  
Masters of Arts in School Psychology Student  
Mount Saint Vincent University

**APPENDIX B****LETTER TO NOVA SCOTIA DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES**

February 28, 2007

Ms. Brenda Murray  
Director, Policy Support and Evaluation  
NS Department of Community Services  
Box 696, Halifax, NS, B3J 2T7

Dear Ms. Murray,

My name is Delinda Trudel and I am a graduate student in the Masters of Arts in School Psychology program at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am contacting you regarding my interest in conducting research for my master's thesis with youth in residential care. The title of my proposed research project is "An Exploration of Residential Youths' Views Regarding Their Education." Following the research proposal format required by your department, I have enclosed a copy of my proposal for review.

I have been in contact with Joanna Buisseret-McKinnon at HomeBridge Youth Society about my project and she has agreed to be part of my research committee. I am interested in conducting my research with the youth at HomeBridge provided I obtain approval from your department. I have also been in contact with the Executive Director of HomeBridge, Ms. Linda Wilson, and she is aware of my research interests as well. The Research Ethics Committee at Mount Saint Vincent University is also currently reviewing my proposal. The anticipated start date for this study is pending approval by your organization, as well as from the MSVU.

My thesis committee consists of myself as the principal investigator, Dr. Elizabeth Church as my supervisor, and Joanna Buisseret-McKinnon, Registered Psychologist. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at 457-6358 or by email at [delinda.trudel@msvu.ca](mailto:delinda.trudel@msvu.ca). If you would like to contact Dr. Church, she can be reached by phone at 457-6721 or by email at [Elizabeth.church@msvu.ca](mailto:Elizabeth.church@msvu.ca).

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you regarding my proposal.

Sincerely,

Delinda Trudel  
Masters of Arts in School Psychology Student  
Mount Saint Vincent University

## APPENDIX C

### INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

**Title of Study:** An Exploration of Residential Youth's Views Regarding Their Education.

**Name of Researcher:** Delinda Trudel

Delinda Trudel is a graduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University and she is conducting a research study with youth in residential care. The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the experiences residential youth have with school. The study will involve having individual, private interviews with Delinda that will last for about an hour. You will be paid \$10.00 for your participation immediately following the interview. Your participation is completely voluntary and whether or not you decide to participate will not affect your status with HomeBridge Youth Society.

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to complete a background information form and sign a consent form. The background information form is so Delinda can have an understanding of your experiences in care, your school history, as well as your current school enrollment. This information will not be used for identification purposes.

The interviews will be tape recorded so that they can be reviewed and your responses accurately written down. Delinda will type out what you have said and take out any names or other details that might identify you. Any information that could identify you will not be included in the study results or provided to anyone other than Delinda. The interview will be focus on your personal experiences with school, such as what you feel are your successes, your challenges, and your motivation to complete school. You will also be asked about how you believe you could be better supported with school and your future goals. These questions are very flexible and you will be able to add in other information you feel is important. The audiotapes will be erased and the only people to see the paper version will be Delinda and her research supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Church.

Once the study is completed you will have the option to receive a private meeting with Delinda and she will explain what she has found. If you do not wish to meet with Delinda, a copy of the final study will be left with me, Mrs. Buisseret-McKinnon, so you can read it on your own at a later time.

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact Delinda by phone at 902-457-6358 or by email at [delinda.trudel@msvu.ca](mailto:delinda.trudel@msvu.ca). You may also contact Dr. Elizabeth Church, Delinda's supervisor, by phone at 902-457-6721 or by email at [elizabeth.church@msvu.ca](mailto:elizabeth.church@msvu.ca).

Delinda thanks you very much for your time and your consideration to participate in this study.

**APPENDIX D**  
**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: M \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_

Length of Time in Care: Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Placements \_\_\_\_\_

Type of Placements (ex. Foster Care, Residential Care, etc.):

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Number of Schools Attended: \_\_\_\_\_

Names of Schools Attended: \_\_\_\_\_

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Highest Grade Level Completed: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you Currently Enrolled in School: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Other (Explain) \_\_\_\_\_

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## APPENDIX E

### PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of Study:** An Exploration of Residential Youth's Views Regarding Their Education.

**Name of Researcher:** Delinda Trudel

I am a graduate student in the Department of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. As part of my Master of School Psychology program, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Church. I am inviting you to participate in my study, "An Exploration of Residential Youth's Views Regarding Their Education." The purpose of this study is to understand your views regarding your educational achievement and experiences.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked a number of questions about your experiences and progress with school, such as your successes and challenges, motivation, and plans for the future. You will also be asked about how you feel you could get more support with your schooling. The interview will be with me and will be approximately an hour in length. You will be given \$10.00 for your participation immediately following the completed interview. If you become emotional or upset at any time during the interview and wish to talk to the Psychologist on staff, Joanna Buisseret-McKinnon, she will be available. Once the study is completed a verbal report of the results can be shared with you privately by arranging a follow-up meeting with me (see below). If you do not want this meeting, a copy of this study will be given to Mrs. Buisseret-McKinnon and you will be able to read it whenever you want.

The interviews are private and you will not be identified in any documents or final reports. The audiotapes will be erased and all written records will be stored in a locked cabinet and my supervisor and I will be the only ones to read them. The information you choose to share with me during the interview is confidential and will not be shared with anyone. If you tell me anything that may suggest potential harm to yourself or someone else, I will need to make Mrs. Buisseret-McKinnon aware of this. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Delinda Trudel, by phone at 902-457-6358 or by email at [delinda.trudel@msvu.ca](mailto:delinda.trudel@msvu.ca). You may also contact Dr. Elizabeth Church by phone at 902-457-6721 or by email at [elizabeth.church@msvu.ca](mailto:elizabeth.church@msvu.ca). This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University and by the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services Research Committee. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved with this study, you may contact the University Research Ethics Board, by phone at 902-457-6350 or by email at [research@msvu.ca](mailto:research@msvu.ca).

**By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.**

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**Participant's signature**

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**Date**

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**Researcher's signature**

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**Date**

If you would like to meet with me to hear about the results of this study once it is completed, please print your name below and provide information on how I can contact you to arrange a time and place that is convenient for you.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Information:

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**APPENDIX F****INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Tell me about your experiences with school, for example the number of times you have switched schools, periods of time you were out of school, etc.
2. What is school like for you? What do you find easy? What do you find hard? Did you do well in school?
3. Describe a time you felt successful at school.
4. Describe a time you felt unsuccessful at school?
5. Do you feel that there are different expectations for you at school because you are in care?
6. What are some of the challenges you face at school because of being in care?
7. What are some of the differences between you and students who are not in care in terms of education?
8. What motivates you to go to school? Where do you get your motivation from?
9. How do you feel about the importance of graduating from high school?
10. What are your future plans? How do you think you might achieve this? What do you see yourself doing in 10 years?
11. What supports are you aware of that are available to you?
12. What do you think could be done to support you with school? (Q) Educationally, in the residential setting, others.
13. If there was one thing you would like others to know about being a youth in care and school, what would that be?