

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF DISENGAGEMENT  
AS LIVED BY STUDENTS WHO LEFT SCHOOL  
WITHOUT GRADUATING

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study was designed to explore the meaning of disengagement from school as experienced by those who left school before graduating. Data for the study was gathered using an unstructured interview format. The research produced authentic narrative accounts of the meaning of disengagement for the individual participants. A cross case comparison of these narratives indicated the presence of three common streams of movement. As children, each of the participants were involved in an escalating cumulation of problems which over time, increased in scope and intensity. Their personal vulnerabilities generated through a troubled background, when coupled with the more complex demands of the secondary system, translated into an increased school maladjustment. The third movement involved a crystallizing of previous experiences and attitudes and an engulfment in a spoiled identity. The stories collected indicated that a comprehensive theory of disengagement must be built on a holistic perspective. Beyond the events, experiences, and circumstances that contribute to a disengagement process, questions of individual interpretation and meaning must also be considered. Finally, the thesis raises questions about the relationship of school practices and dropout experiences.

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## Chapter 1

### Purpose of the study

This study was designed to explore the meaning of disengagement from school as experienced by those who left school before they graduated.

The literature dedicated to the issue of high school dropouts falls primarily into two camps. Empirical studies have generated data about the correlates of dropping out, and the stated reasons that children have cited for leaving school prematurely (Gilbert, Barr, Clark, Blue & Sunter, 1993). Another body of research has identified intervention efforts to prevent students from leaving school (Finn, 1989). While useful in articulating certain aspects of the dropout problem, the nature of the research from both camps is limited to an external focus on structural characteristics. Missing in the literature is any large scale effort to understand the internal, lived process of dropping out (Bloch, 1991; Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 1987).

Articulating the process presupposes a faithful grasp of the meaning of events. According to Polkinghorne (1988), "experience is meaningful and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness. Thus, the study of behavior needs to include an exploration of the meaning systems that form human experience" (p. 1). The intent of this study was to explore and describe the lived experience of disengagement. Capturing this process necessitated a

"respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself" (Colaizzi p. 53).

### Rationale

There is a growing recognition of a need for a better understanding of the disengagement process. Miller, Leinhardt and Zigmond (1988) in an ethnographic study of social and academic participation among high school students described "dropping out as a process of gradual disengagement from school" (p.12). Rumberger (1987) emphasized the importance of researching the process of disengagement rather than the "structural characteristics" such as family background and socioeconomic status. After their review of quantitative, observational and interview data from 14 secondary school dropout prevention programs, Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, (1987) suggested that dropping out can best be understood as a process of mutual rejection. Commenting on the state of present dropout research Finn (1991) noted that what the field needs is "good conceptual analyses" rather than "statistical tallies of dropout rates or dropout correlates" (p. 30).

Research on the process, often referred to as disengagement, (Kelly, 1993; Rumberger, 1987) has both practical and theoretical advantages over a more traditional perspective. As a construct, disengagement has practical value because it cuts across the polemics of blame often associated with the terms "dropout" and "pushout". The former attributes blame to the individual; the latter

attributes blame to the system. In terms of theory, research on disengagement is needed because it "encourages us to connect events in students' lives over time and to look for cumulative effects" (Kelly, p. 29).

School counselling has much to gain from a well articulated theory of the disengagement process. In their role as child advocates counsellors have an obligation to enhance school personnels' understanding and tolerance of at risk students. According to Bloch (1991) counsellors "have an obligation to promote a forthright examination of the facts of dropping out and research on effective strategies to help schools more adequately serve all students" (p. 45). An understanding of the lived experience of disengagement would provide a holistic perspective that may assist and guide counsellors' intervention efforts.

A better understanding of the disengagement process might also broaden the influence of school counselling. Some critics of the school system have proposed that the dropout problem would be more effectively addressed through an ecological approach (Srebnik & Elias, 1993). These researchers maintained that "the holding power of a school should be central not only to the definition of school excellence, but of basic school competence" (p.527). Certain aspects of "holding power" which are often addressed by school counsellors include student bonding (Hawkins & Weis, 1985), peer tutoring and peer counselling (Natriello , Pallas, McDill, McPartland & Royster, 1988), and

social skills training (Elias, Gara, & Ubriaco, 1985). An articulated theory of disengagement might contribute a unique and helpful perspective to discussion with educators on matters such as discipline, evaluation, and retention each of which is seen as contributing to the dropout problem.

A theory of disengagement would also be useful to the development of school counselling as a profession. Across the province of British Columbia there is substantial variability in the roles that counsellors perform (Paterson, personal communication, September, 1996). Job functions vary from child advocates, therapists, behavior specialists to administrators. If the job description is left to the understanding of the school administrator there is a danger that the role of the counsellor can be eroded and limited by the imagination and perspective of those with little direct information. This is a particular concern in difficult economic times. Disengagement theory can help address this concern. A better understanding of how some children disengage would also inform on what may be involved in the process of student engagement. These findings, while interesting, are ancillary data that are beyond the scope of the current inquiry. By charting the lived experiences of the developing child in the school system, a theory of disengagement could begin to lay the groundwork for a field-driven emotional curriculum. The management and establishment of such a curriculum potentially would serve

to ground, articulate, and enhance the role of school counselling. Disengagement theory provides the field of school counselling with a potent means of crystallizing a comprehensive affective developmental guidance curriculum.

### Research Strategy

Yin (1984) indicated that case study is an effective means of "investigating phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 23). A multiple-case design is a variation of the case study and is akin to multiple experiments. Utilizing replication logic, this approach generates evidence that can be considered compelling and robust (Yin, 1984).

Data for this study was gathered using an unstructured interview format. This approach is characterized as "a flexible strategy of discovery [whose] object is to carry on a guided conversation and to elicit rich, detailed materials" (Mishler, 1986, p. 27). The intent was to allow participants maximum latitude to identify and articulate significant aspects of their experience. The primary focus of the study was to capture and describe the lived experience of each participant.

The research produced authentic narrative accounts of the meaning of disengagement for individual participants. A cross case comparison of these narratives indicated the presence of common streams of movement.

### Definition of Terms

Dropout in this study refers to any student who has left school prior to graduation. Definitional ambiguities of the term commonly associated with efforts to estimate the size of dropout populations (Carson, 1993) are outside of the scope of this research.

Pushout commonly refers to a student who has been evicted through some school initiated policy or action (Fine, 1986). Since the focus of this research was the description and identification of the process of leaving as experienced by individual students, the "pushout-dropout" dichotomy was not utilized.

Agency is a combination of skills, attitudes, beliefs, and convictions, that enable people to direct, control, and shape their lives (Cochran & Laub, 1994).

Disengagement has been described as a process of mutual rejection (Wehlage et al., 1987). Kelly (1993) elaborated on this notion through her metaphor for engagement which she described as "two toothed wheels of a gear, student and school, meshed together so that the motion of one is passed on to the other" (p.29).

In the following chapter, research in the field of high school dropouts is examined. Two models of school leaving are reviewed and studies focused on the process of disengagement are presented.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

In some ways the term "dropout" is a benchmark of North America's dreams and failures. The word entered the popular imagination in the early 1960's, when completing secondary school was first established as a norm (Dorn, 1993). Over the years dropping out has been associated with personal and institutional failure, delinquent behavior, and societal injustice. At stake are issues of individual and collective hope and security.

Dropping out of high school has serious personal, social and economic implications. Dropouts have higher levels of unemployment and lower earnings than graduates (Gilbert, et al., 1993; Rumberger, 1987). Social costs come in the form of increased criminal activity, a greater tendency to have health problems, and a higher rate of welfare dependency (Rumberger, 1987). Calculated in real dollars one American estimate of the annual loss to the nation is \$77 billion--\$3 billion in crime prevention, \$3 billion in welfare and unemployment and \$71 billion in tax revenue (Weis, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989). Dropping out has been shown to have a significantly negative effect on psychological functioning in young adulthood (Damphousse & Kaplan, 1994). Individual consequences of dropping out include lower academic skills (Alexander, Natreillo, & Pallas, 1985), reduced opportunity for employment



(Catterall, 1987) and increased psychological stress. One study linked increased unemployment with a greater risk of suicide and mental illness (Brenner, 1976). Since dropouts tend to find work harder to secure Brenner suggested that they would also suffer greater rates of mortality and mental illness.

Efforts to address the dropout phenomenon have generated different bodies of research. Depending on how the term "dropout" is framed, studies have focused on individuals, families, schools, or societies at large. Regardless of the focus, there is an overriding concern that a substantial body of dropout research is decontextualized data (Finn, 1991). Many of these studies have focused on identifying the characteristics of the dropout population, the schools or school systems from which students leave, and the attempted resolutions to the problem. Building on this work, more recent efforts have attempted to delineate the process of dropping out (Kelly, 1993; Finn, 1989; Fine, 1986). An understanding of the process would better illuminate how dropouts come into being. In this chapter information is provided on the characteristics of the population, school-level contributions to the problem, attempted solutions, and efforts to articulate the process.

#### The Problem Of Incidence

Research efforts to understand the magnitude of the dropout phenomenon all grapple with questions of definition

(Carson, 1993; Kominski, 1990; Rumberger, 1987). Three different terms are most often used: the event dropout rate, the status dropout rate, and the cohort dropout rate. The event rate is simply the percentage of enrolled students who leave school in any given year. The status dropout rate measures the percentage of a population that has not completed high school and is not enrolled in school. The cohort dropout rate refers to the percentage of dropouts in a single group over a period of time. Questions of definition translate into varying estimates (figures range from 15% - 30%) about the size of the dropout problem (Carson, 1993; Gilbert et al., 1993; Rumberger, 1987). For the purposes of this study a broad inclusive definition has been utilized, that is, dropouts are students who left the school system before graduating.

#### Causes associated with the problem

Research on the causes of dropping out is divided along two general levels of analysis. The larger group of studies has focused on the individual and attempted to ascertain the many factors associated with leaving school prematurely. A second strand of research has taken a school focus. The intent here has been to uncover the different institutional level factors and characteristics that influence dropout rates (Rumberger, 1995).

### Individual perspective

Studies have identified a large number of individual level factors associated with dropping out. The most often mentioned general categories include: demographics, family background, and individual school experience.

A demographic focus indicated that race, ethnicity (Gilbert et al., 1993; Rumberger, 1987) and low socioeconomic status (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, 1983) are highly correlated with leaving school prematurely. Dropout rates in the United States were higher for Blacks and Hispanics than for Anglo and Asian students (McMillen, Kaufman, Hausken, & Bradby, 1993). Aboriginal people were also disproportionately represented in dropout data. One national Canadian study indicated that over 40% of aboriginal 18-20 year-olds dropped out as compared to 16% for the general population (Gilbert et al., 1993).

Research about family background, another key factor, is often divided along lines of underlying family processes and overall family structure.

Investigation of family structure has linked dropout behavior with lower parental education, socioeconomic status and single parent families (Gilbert et al., 1993; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1983). When socioeconomic status was held constant, children from stepparent families exhibited similar difficulties with educational attainment as did children from single parent families (Astone & McLanahan,

1991). This research expanded on Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital. He maintained that the relationship between a child and the parents determined the child's access to whatever financial and human capital existed in the household. Two-parent families therefore would have more social capital. Astone & McLanahan (1991) expanded on this quantitative notion of social capital and introduced a qualitative measure. They argued that social capital was also indicated by the strength of the attachment between parent and child. From this perspective the quality of attachment is a matter of: (1) parental willingness and ability to provide the child with care and attention and (2) the child's receptivity to the parent's gestures.

A much smaller body of data exists about the underlying processes through which family background influences school success. Measures of parental involvement through activities like reading at home and attending school functions have been tied to academic accomplishment (Astone & McLanahan, 1991) which in turn is associated with increased engagement and decreased dropout behavior (Ekstrom et al., 1986). Parenting style has also been linked with school success. Students who came from homes where parents regulated and monitored behavior while providing emotional support tended to be more successful at school (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh 1987; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989). One study which compared families of dropouts to families of other students identified three

major differences between the two. Dropout behavior was facilitated by permissive parenting, negative reactions and sanctions to poor grades, and a lack of parental involvement in their children's schooling (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). The implication, while based on limited data, is that parental practices and styles do play a role in dropout behavior (Rumberger, 1995). Investigations of family functioning indicated that less cohesive and less adaptable families fostered more at-risk children (Vickers, 1994). Other home related factors included parental attitudes towards school and the value placed on education by parents. (Gilbert et al., 1993).

The relationship between an individual's school experience and dropping out has also received a substantial amount of attention. Poor academic achievement, low test scores, grade retention, poor attendance and unacceptable behavior were all linked with a higher risk of dropping out (Bhaerman & Kopp, 1988; Borus & Carpenter, 1984; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Gilbert et al., 1993; Grannis & Riehl, 1989; Natreillo et al., 1988). Excessive part-time employment (over 15 hours a week) has been associated with higher dropout rates as well (Hergert, 1991).

Researchers have also identified a number of individual factors associated with dropping out. Lower levels of self-esteem, a reduced sense of control over their lives (Rumberger, 1987), poor attitudes towards school and lower levels of occupational and educational aspiration (Ekstrom

et al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) have all correlated with dropout behavior. Other factors associated with dropping out are alienation from peers (Mahan & Johnson, 1983; Wells, 1990), pregnancy, and early marriage (Bhaerman & Kopp, 1988; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1983). Finally, potential dropouts often find the relevance of school to later life difficult to comprehend (Natreillo et al., 1988).

Studies aimed at uncovering the factors associated with dropouts have been criticized on several fronts. Much of this criticism has focused on the implications and assumptions of such research. Efforts to uncover the underlying factors have had a tendency to hold students or their families responsible for dropping out (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). Other researchers have queried the significance of specific factors. For instance, while it is broadly accepted that low socioeconomic status is a key factor in dropout rates (Weis, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989) this argument fails to explain why some minority groups from the same economic level succeed while others do not (Rumberger, 1991). Efforts to address this critique have advanced a sociocultural argument. This position maintained that the degree of acceptance of the dominant culture by different minorities explained why some minority students were successful while others were not (Mehan, 1992; Ogbu, 1992). Grounded in philosophical debates about culture, human agency, and constitutive action, the sociocultural viewpoint

has invited a broader and deeper investigation about the dropout phenomenon.

Studies aimed at uncovering factors associated with dropping out can also be criticized on grounds of usefulness. An understanding of the factors does little to help determine interventions. Designing interventions requires an appreciation of the role that such factors play in the lived experience of the children in question.

#### School Perspective

The literature on school-level factors and dropout rates is limited. Few studies have focused directly on how schools may be contributing to the dropout problem. To date, researchers have looked at the effects of school size, internal organization, various policies, some teacher practices and attitudes, and classroom structure.

Research on school size is mixed. One study indicated that school size had an indirect effect on dropout rates. Larger student bodies were linked with less positive social climates, less social integration, and reduced identity with the institution. These experiences, in turn, were seen as contributing to increased dropout rates (Pittman, & Haughwout, 1987; Bryk & Thum, 1989). This finding contrasted with previous research which indicated that smaller schools were associated with increased student alienation. According to this perspective, a smaller student body increased pressure to successfully participate

in all school activities, thereby generating negative self-evaluations when expectations weren't met (Grabe, 1981).

The internal organization of schools was also cited as an important factor in the dropout problem. From this perspective, smaller schools, less diversified academic offerings, and teachers interested in participating with students fostered a sense of belonging. Decreased alienation translated into less absenteeism and reduced dropout rates (Bryk & Thum, 1989). This conclusion offered support to Newman's concern (1981) about the need to counter school generated student alienation.

The quest for harmony-integration (the reduction of alienation) through learning requires a differentiation of self from experience, an analytic detachment, but this must be pursued with effort, struggle, and engagement. Reducing alienation, then, is not tantamount to eliminating stress or effort; rather, it is arranging conditions so that people expend energy in ways that enhance engagement with work, people, and physical surroundings. (p. 548)

One of the school generated conditions that has received attention and is linked with student alienation is a school's retention policy. Roderick (1994) concluded that students who repeated a grade in elementary school were twice as likely to drop out at age 16. These findings were



part of an emerging perspective (Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Schultz, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1988) questioning the long-term emotional and academic benefits of kindergarten and early grade retention.

Beyond retention policies, the education system has also been criticized for being too insular. Citing parental dissatisfaction, Coleman (1993) has called upon schools to be more effective in involving families in the education process of their children. Specifically, he saw the exclusionary practices and attitudes of teachers as a contributing factor in alienating parents. In a related study, parental support was identified as an important variable in student academic engagement (Raddysh, 1992).

Student generated reports indicated that a perceived lack of teacher interest in students, the perception that discipline practices were unfair and ineffective, and widespread truancy were school-level factors which contributed to premature school leaving (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Fine's (1986) ethnographic study of an inner city New York school identified school policy and classroom structure to be large contributors to the dropout problem. An accepted practice of ridding the school of "bad kids" and classrooms organized around notions of competition, obedience, and authority were seen as factors that pushed students out of school.

### Solutions to the problem

Research on dropout prevention programs provided a critical evaluation of previous efforts to address the problem as well as a snapshot of the latest proposed solutions. These different viewpoints are pertinent to the present research because they offer a perspective about past and present conceptualizations of the dropout phenomenon. Various elements have been identified as critical to a successful prevention program.

One element focused on the academic needs of this diverse population. Identified concerns included an appropriate curriculum, sensitive and sympathetic teaching staff, and varied measures of progress (Rumberger, 1987). Desirable aspects of a dropout prevention program that made a positive difference included a mix of academic and vocational studies, individualized instruction, and a more sensitive staff (Bullis, 1986; Olsen & Edwards, 1982).

Successful and timely recognition was another critical element of prevention programs. Efforts to address the problem among high risk disadvantaged students have linked lower dropout rates with preschool programs (Schweinhart, Berrueta-Clement, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1985).

Attempts to meet the psychological needs of potential dropouts, most often articulated as a desire for someone to care about them individually, have often been addressed through increased availability of counselling time (Bullis, 1986; Olsen & Edwards, 1982).

For the most part, these types of solutions are grounded in the different structural characteristics used to define the dropout population (Finn, 1989). Researchers who espoused an ecologically focused solution (Srbnik & Elias, 1993) saw individually-based prevention interventions as fundamentally flawed. The source of the error was the conceptualization of the problem. According to Rappaport (1981) the very notion of prevention may limit our ability to address such issues.

The idea of prevention is the logical extension of a needs model which views people in difficulty as children; the idea of advocacy is an extension of the rights model of people as citizens. Both of these are one-sided. I propose an empowerment model for a social policy which views people as complete human beings, creates a symbolic sense of urgency, requires attention to paradox, and expects divergent and dialectical rather than convergent solutions. (p. 1)

Within the context of the dropout problem, the ecological approach advocated utilizing supportive structures like peer tutoring, peer counselling, buddy programs, and social skills training (Wells, 1990; Greenwood, Carta, & Hall, 1988; Cohen, 1986). While these are valuable additions to the school system, this systemic focus is hampered by an old dropout paradigm. Specifically, the proposed ecological

perspective was limited to a school focus and failed to take into consideration the broader process involved in disengaging from school.

The process of disengagement was central to the findings of a large scale American evaluation of high school prevention programs (Natriello et al., 1988). This study resulted in a four-category typology of approaches to the dropout problem. The identified categories included: (1) success in school, (2) positive relationships in school, (3) relevance of school and (4) outside interferences. In a critique of their own typology the authors offered the following:

One weakness of the typology is its static character, when dropping out is actually a process that develops over time. A student does not get classified as a dropout usually as a result of a single decision one day by the individual that enrollment in school is no longer of interest. Dropping out is usually not a final, explicit decision by a student to leave school or by a school official to terminate a student. More often an individual begins a pattern of off-and-on attendance that grows over time into an even more intermittent attendance pattern until the individual finally stops coming to school altogether. It often

would be more accurate to speak of the "driftout" problem than the "dropout" problem. (p. 36)

A similar critique of the state of present research was offered by Diem (1991). This research employed a case study methodology to investigate at-risk students and the outcomes of the school-based interventions they were involved with. Among the interventions cited are teacher and business mentors, work-study programs, and utilization of at-risk program co-ordinators and counsellors. Diem concluded that:

To set up a viable at risk intervention program it is necessary to gain some understanding of the population one is dealing with that goes beyond attendance records, test scores, promotion records, and guidance referrals and should include inquiries into the lives of students and how school fits into them... Providing programs that only focus on obvious academic and interpersonal difficulties has not reversed dropout patterns. Yet, trying to develop a systemic community oriented at risk prevention model would not only be costly, but probably unacceptable to many who might view these efforts as beyond the purview of educational institutions. We have come to understand that the needs of students at risk are numerous, programs to serve them diverse, and that a systematic theory for

understanding student engagement and disengagement is still in a primitive state. Because of this we may well be at an impasse in devising effective interventions towards reducing the dropout rate. (p.15)

### Process Models

Kelly (1993) stated that "the metaphor underlying engagement is that of two toothed wheels of a gear, student and school, meshed together so that the motion of one is passed on to the other" (p.29). Disengagement, by contrast, has been described as a process of mutual rejection (Fine, 1991; Wehlage et al., 1987). In a review of the literature on dropouts, Finn (1989) argued that efforts to understand and address the dropout phenomenon lacked a "systematic understanding of the developmental processes that lead an individual to withdraw completely from school" (p. 118). He described and offered support for two developmental models of the disengagement process: (a) The frustration self-esteem model and (b) the participation-identification model.

### Frustration-Self-Esteem Model

The basic tenants of this model maintained that poor school performance led to an impaired self-view which in turn, resulted in oppositional behavior and early withdrawal. These three components were common across various studies even though measures of the constructs differed. School performance was established by the use of standardized tests, subject generated tests, cumulative

grade histories and, on occasion, IQ scores. The explanation of poor performance varied although it was commonly attributed to the school's inability or failure to address students' intellectual or emotional needs. An impaired self-view often resulted from embarrassment or frustration and was operationalized as general self-esteem, self-concept, academic self-concept, or personal agency beliefs. Finally, oppositional behavior took the form of class disruptions, missing school, delinquent acts, or some combination of all three. Finn reported that the frustration-self-esteem paradigm was present in various analyses of adolescent behavior.

Berstein and Rulo (1976) utilized this line of reasoning to offer an explanation of how undiagnosed learning disabilities may lead to delinquent behavior. Frustrated and embarrassed by limited school success or failure from the start, the child becomes increasingly disruptive in the classroom. Over time, controlling unacceptable behavior, as opposed to addressing the learning disability, becomes the main concern of the adults involved and the child "falls farther and farther behind and becomes more of a problem. Eventually, the child is suspended, drops out, or is thrown out of school and the movement towards delinquency is well under way" (p. 44).

A broader though similar perspective was taken by Bloom (1976) who maintained that ongoing evidence of school-

related adequacy leads to self-confidence and ego strength in the developing child. This provided:

a type of immunization against mental illness for an indefinite period of time [while at the other extreme] are the bottom third of the students who have been given consistent evidence of their inadequacy...over a period of 5 to 10 years. Such students rarely secure any positive reinforcement in the classroom...from teachers or parents. We would expect such students to be infected with emotional difficulties and to exhibit symptoms of acute distress and alienation from the world of school and adults. (p. 158)

Theories of delinquent behavior postulated student alienation and distress as part of the "aspiration-opportunity disjunction". Failure, or anticipated failure in school activities attenuated commitment and generated alienation which in turn opened the door for delinquent behavior (Elliot, Ageton, & Canter, 1979).

Ford and Nickols (1987) provided one explanation of how unattainable goals might result in frustration and withdrawal from school. Within their framework, behavior was organized into hierarchies of goal-directed episodes. The framework consisted of broad categories of goals which included: "affective goals", "cognitive goals", "subjective



organization goals", "social relationship goals", and "task goals". In this context the frustration-esteem model assumed that the cognitive goals "exploration", "understanding", and "positive or confirmatory self-evaluations", along with "mastery" and "meeting a standard of achievement" were salient for most students (p. 295).

Ford (1987) maintained that one's agency beliefs, the perception that a goal is attainable, regulated the priority given to desired goals. Where students experienced ongoing frustrations and failure in school subjects, a perception of the self as "ineffective and powerless" (Ford, 1987, p. 214) might take hold and could lead to early withdrawal from school. A threatened or belittled self-view resulted in a student's search for other, less socially sanctioned activities. Gold and Mann (1984) saw self-esteem as the engine that drove this process:

Under conditions of low social control, these young people turn to delinquent behavior to raise their self-esteem. If experiences at school were altered sufficiently to raise their self-esteem...their disruptive and delinquent behavior would subside. (p. 19)

Various studies have indicated that a relationship is present between self-concept and self-esteem measures and academic performance (Byrne, 1984; Gold & Mann, 1984;

Hansford and Hattie, 1982). This relationship has also been demonstrated to exist over time (Kifer, 1975). A more specific focus revealed that academic self-concept in particular correlates more highly with academic performance and grades than other broader measures of self-esteem. These associations however, are supported primarily by correlational evidence, therefore directional conclusions are not justifiable. Byrne (1984) stated that:

Causal predominance between self-concept and academic achievement has not been fully confirmed. An examination of the results from all the causal modeling studies reviewed indicated that other important variables appear to influence the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement. [Included in these variables are]: socioeconomic status, ethnicity, ability level, and specificity of self-concept and academic achievement measure. (p. 451)

Shavelson and Bolus (1982) recommended the inclusion of peer and parental influence on this relationship.

The conclusions about the relationship between self-esteem and problem behavior are mixed. Reid (1984) reported that students who were absent regularly tended to have lower academic self-concepts and lower general levels of self-esteem. Kaplan (1980) stated that children rated low in general self-esteem were more likely to display deviant

behavior. On the other hand, Ekstrom et al., (1986) found that on measures of general self-esteem, there was no significant difference between graduates and dropouts. Other researchers (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) confirmed this finding. Measuring the change in self-esteem over a three year period with a group of sophomores, they reported an increase in self-esteem for all students. The gain for dropouts was the same as the gain for graduates.

While a number of different studies lend support to the frustration-self-esteem paradigm, substantial gaps exist between theory and research. Support for the model is largely correlational (Hansford & Hattie, 1982) or speculative (Bernstein & Rulo, 1976). The main construct, self-esteem/self-concept is burdened by a lack of accepted definitional clarity and questions of causal predominance (Byrne, 1984). Finally, the simplicity of the model makes it easy to blame the school system for the child's lack of success when, what is needed, is a better understanding of the developmental sequences involved in disengagement (Finn, 1989).

#### Participation-Identification Model

The second model reviewed by Finn postulated that student disengagement was associated with identity and participation. Premature departure was linked with a lack of active participation in school and classroom activities and an absent or reduced sense of identification with

school. As with the frustration-self-esteem model, Finn cited several studies to support this paradigm.

Identification with school.

Student identification with school has been studied under numerous guises. In positive terms it has been described as "affiliation", "involvement", "attachment", "bonding", and "commitment". From a negative perspective it has been considered in light of "alienation" and "withdrawal". Finn (1989) maintained that:

These terms denote two ideas in common that constitute a good working definition of identification. First, students who identify with school have an internalized conception of belongingness-that they are discernibly part of the school environment and that school constitutes an important part of their experience. And second, these individuals value success in school-relevant goals. (p. 123)

Various studies linked identification with school success. A longitudinal study, the Perry Preschool Project (as cited in Finn, 1989) identified bonding as a significant contributor to student success.

On the basis of these internal [commitment to schooling] and external [student role reinforcement] factors, social bonds develop between persons and

settings in the course of human development. Strong social bonds to conventional settings, such as school, are seen as making delinquency less likely whereas weak social bonds make delinquency more likely. (p. 123)

In their investigation of alternate schools Gold and Mann (1984) found correlational support for identification as valuing of school. In this new setting students were less disruptive and indicated an increased commitment to, and an optimism about, their chances of academic success. Other studies looked at identification as a measure of belonging. Polk and Halferty, (1972) linked lack of commitment with eventual withdrawal and delinquency.

Delinquency among at least some youth may be a function of the lack of commitment to school and adult success...The uncommitted delinquent youth, it would appear, is characterized by behavioral withdrawal from school. He does not study, he receives poor grades, and he does not participate in activities...there is a pattern of psychological discomfort and alienation in the attitudes the delinquent and uncommitted youth exhibits toward the school (p. 85).

Firestone and Rosenbloom (1988) identified commitment to place and commitment to learning as important variables linking identification with school success.

From a different perspective, alienation has been studied as an indicator of weak school involvement. Seeman (1975) identified six essential components of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, social isolation and cultural estrangement. Finn (1989) saw social isolation and normlessness as most closely aligned with the valuing and belonging aspects of identification. Support for this position is offered by Reid (1981). He reported significant differences between persistent school absentees and regular attenders for these two aspects of alienation. Normlessness and social isolation were also linked with delinquent acts and dropping out by Elliot and Voss(1974). They concluded that "delinquent behavior and dropping out are alternate responses to failure and alienation" (p. 202).

Some support for the identification aspect of the model is also to be found in social control research. Social control theory postulates that "ties (links, attachments, binds, and bonds) to conventional institutions function to control or inhibit the behavioral expression of deviant motivation" (Liska & Reed, 1985, p. 547). Hirschi (1969) stated that these bonds are comprised of four elements: attachment (concern with the opinions of others), commitment (a rational decision to behave in acceptable ways), involvement (the expenditure of time and energy in institutionally encouraged behaviors; and belief (a view that the principles encouraged by the institution are

valid). Social control theory maintains that when children fail to bond appropriately to parents and school they are freed to engage in delinquent behavior. Liska and Reed (1985) have challenged the capacity of schools to generate this direct type of holding power. In a departure from the unidirectional relationship between school bonding and delinquency they noted that:

parents, not schools are the major institutional sources of delinquency control... Parental attachment affects delinquency, which affects school attachment, which in turn affects parental attachment. (p. 558)

Identification then was hypothesized as an internal state with two components, belonging and valuing. It is associated with such behaviors as absenteeism, truancy, dropout, and delinquency. Finn (1989) saw this distinction between the emotional (internal) and behavioral (external) dimensions as significant.

The two may develop in different ways and are certainly manipulable to different extents. In fact, the ability to manipulate participation in school activities may provide a handle through which increased levels of identification may become accessible. (p. 127)

### Participation in school.

The participation component of the model was discussed in terms of four different levels. Level one was measured through behaviors like attending class, being prepared and answering questions. Level two centered around students initiating questions and displaying enthusiasm. The third level was a measure of social, extracurricular, and athletic involvement. Level four was hypothesized as a measure of school governance.

Research offered correlational support for level one participation and school success. Classroom observation studies (McKinney, Mason, Perkerson, & Clifford, 1975; Kerr, Zigmond, Schaeffer, & Brown, 1986) identified behaviors that included participatory measures. The McKinney framework, which was based on observations of second grade students, linked school success with "attending", "task-oriented interaction", "constructive play", "constructive self-directed activity", "distractibility", and "aggression". Working with high school students, Kerr produced three scales that discriminated between successful and unsuccessful students: "class preparedness", "exhibiting an interest in academic performance" and "interacting appropriately with teachers".

Level two participation was hypothesized as academic interest and enthusiasm translating into out-of-school subject-related endeavors (clubs, job shadowing etc.) While



no direct evidence linking enthusiasm with this type of activity has been produced, dropouts (Ekstrom et al., 1986) and delinquents (Hirschi, 1969) tend to do less nonrequired reading and less homework than their more successful peers (Ekstrom et al., 1986).

The relationship between the third level of participation and extracurricular, social, and athletic activity is correlational. Dropouts (Ekstrom et al., 1986) and delinquents (Landers & Landers, 1978; Schafer, 1972) participated less in extracurricular activities and sports than their nondropout or nondelinquent peers. Participation, on the other hand, is correlated with higher levels of self-esteem, higher educational aspirations, better grades for males, and a greater sense of control over one's life (Holland & Andre, 1987). The authors' speculated that:

Participation has effects because of what happens as a result of participation... Participation may lead adolescents to acquire new skills (organizational, planning, time-management, etc.), to develop or strengthen particular attitudes (discipline, motivation), or to receive social rewards that influence personality characteristics. (p. 447)

The fourth level of participation focused on student involvement in school governance. Advocates of this notion

(Ekstrom et al., 1986, Reid, 1981; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) saw student empowerment as an effective means of countering feelings of alienation and resignation. To date no data exists that offers support for the merits of this type of power sharing in schools (Finn, 1989).

The basic premise of the Participation-identification model is that participation in school activities is a prerequisite to school success. Participation was also seen as a possible means of fostering identification with school. Four levels of participation were postulated and correlational support was offered primarily for level one. Little research has been conducted on levels two, three, and four.

A limitation of the model is its point of origin. Focused on school life, this conceptualization of dropping out fails to take into consideration the role of the family in dropout behavior. This is a limitation that Finn recognized that "Youngsters lacking the necessary encouragement at home may arrive at school predisposed to nonparticipation and nonidentification" (p.130).

Research on the relationship of family dynamics to school success suggested that this is a significant weakness of the model. As Finn pointed out, research has linked student participation and identification with more

communicative families (Cervantes, 1966; Clyne, 1966; Reiss, 1951). Other studies found that dropouts' homes offered substantially less support than homes of more successful students. Some significant differences were fewer study aids, less opportunity for non-school-related learning, lower parental educational expectations, and lower interest in and attention paid to students' school activities (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Liska & Reed, 1985). A model of disengagement needs to take these factors into consideration.

The most in depth commentary on disengagement was found in Kelly's (1993) ethnographic comparison of two alternate schools. Four different disengagement styles were identified: (a) academic, (b) peer relations, (c) extracurricular activities, and (d) credential. Indicators of academic disengagement included poor academic progress, classroom withdrawal, grade repetition, suspension and expulsion. Disengagement related to peers involved fighting, inability to make friends, alienation from school sanctioned peer groups, and membership in marginalized school groups. Extracurricular disengagement included both lack of participation in and dislike of school functions. Credential disengagement centered around the usefulness or attainability of a high school diploma. The main thrust of this study focused on how disengagement styles differed with respect to gender. By identifying and detailing reciprocal influences involved in the process of leaving school

prematurely, this research constituted an invaluable beginning point to the question of disengagement.

The purpose of the present research was to investigate how these and other influences come together in the course of an individual's life. Furthermore, is disengagement from school a uniquely individual experience or are there common points that make for a general theory of disengagement?

### Personal Reflections

My interest in student disengagement stems from my work as an educator and my experience as a father. Over the past 18 years I have worked as a classroom teacher, a vice-principal, and a school counsellor. With the exception of a one year part-time elementary school counselling position, the bulk of my time has been spent at the junior high school level (13 to 16-year-olds). Over the past 16 years I have also helped raise our three children, twin 16-year-old boys and a 13 year old girl. My biases, prejudices, hopes, and dreams about the education system stem mainly from these two sources.

My experience has given me access to both the public presentations and the private musings of students, teachers, parents, and administrators. The vast majority of the professionals I've known are well intentioned and caring. I've met only a few parents who didn't care; most, regardless of how incapable they were of parenting, had the best interests of their children in mind. And, whatever

their public stance, all the children that I've known have wanted to learn.

I have had three distinct roles in the school system. For my first 5 years I was a full-time classroom teacher. I then spent 6 years as a school administrator responsible for school-wide management and discipline. Presently, I work as a counsellor--focusing primarily on the needs of individuals. The last two-thirds of my career has been spent working with students who are not well served by the educational system, or, from a different perspective, children who couldn't find success within the regular system. While in the past I was more prone to ascribing blame, my interest here is to describe what I've seen and to articulate my beliefs about the role of junior high in the disengagement process.

I see the transition from elementary school to junior high school as the single, most difficult schooling experience that children encounter. For too many it is a time of increasing chaos and self-doubt. Ironically, it is also a time when the school system starts to become less tolerant, more demanding, and less forgiving. I have come to understand that a large part of this problem originates from the institutionalized assumptions that the system has about its audience. The structure, pace, and expected acquisition of information assumes that children come to school capable of learning. A related assumption is that the homes from which these children originate are stable,

supportive, and guiding. For a myriad of reasons, too often, this is simply not the case. Wherever there are gaps between our assumptions and students' realities, we appear to have children at risk. I have come to believe that most of the children in question cannot cope within the system as it exists. It was my access to their stories, in my role as an administrator and a counsellor, that affected my beliefs about the debilitating structure of schools. The more aware I became of the nuances of individuals' lives, the less able I was to grade, evaluate, and ultimately to fail these children. Over time, I became convinced that the challenge with "at risk" students was not so much with what we taught them, but rather with how long we were able to hold on to, and ultimately educate, them. As this attitude took hold I started to question the sanctity of the curriculum and our methods of evaluation.

#### The Curriculum.

My difficulty with the curriculum occurred primarily at the point where to follow the curriculum meant to lose contact, or to dilute contact, with the audience. More and more, I started to choose the audience over the curriculum. I've come to the point where I believe that there is nothing in the grade 8 - 10 curriculum that cannot be altered, adjusted, or ignored. I'm not arguing for a curriculum free institution, or for curriculum as just a feel good exercise, but simply for an ongoing judgment about the order and timing of events. For me the curriculum exists as a type of

smorgasbord from which to choose; the focus should be on generating engagement and finding student strengths which can translate into academic accomplishment.

### Evaluation Procedures

At my best, I used evaluation to encourage, support, and challenge students. I see evaluation as but another tool, albeit a very powerful one, in the ongoing process of hooking children into learning. I do not believe that seeing evaluation as a part of an ongoing student-teacher dialogue about individual progress reduces standards or dilutes rigor. My blind application of decontextualized standards resulted in some of my most regrettable moments as a teacher. At my worst, I made decisions about children passing or failing by adding up numbers in a column and assigning a grade.

For a while though, I believe that I managed to attain a balance between the legitimate rights and needs of the majority (children who are willing and able to learn) and those deemed to be at risk. However, the price for this balancing act was huge. I left the classroom, in part, because I was spending substantial amounts of time raising other peoples' children while my own were becoming strangers. Over the course of my career as an educator I've never heard anyone ask whether a teacher's job (as defined in practice) can be done. I arrived at the conclusion that while I could teach a subject to 200 students (a typical high school teacher-student ratio is about 1:200) I could

not teach 200 students. The more aware I became of the lives of disengaging students, the more I detached from the system as a whole. My compromise solution has been to find an enclave where, now and again, I can make a difference for an individual student.

### Approach to the Research

#### Introduction

Most previous research on dropouts has been conducted from a third person, objective perspective. The purpose of the present study is to document the subjective, lived experience of students who have dropped out of school. Many rigorous methods exist which enable researchers to clarify personal experience, some of which are ethnography, participant observation, grounded theory, dramaturgical interviewing, and content analysis. The present study used a narrative case study methodology because narrative provides a means of retaining context.

#### Narrative

Narrative is "the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 13). This composite is story. According to Cochran (1986):

We live in story whether we like it or not. We experience life as a narrative flow. We work in story. Our lives are punctuated by overlapping but



identifiable units with beginnings, middles, and ends. The human mode of existence simply is narrative, from transient encounters to lifetime projects, from inward symbolic dramas to outward performances. We are born to drama, to the experience of a meaningful gap between what is and what ought to be, that directs our striving for a suitable completion. We portray ourselves in story. (p. 3)

Story then, becomes a means of framing individual experience so that the meaning of the experience can be better understood. Story provides a context for understanding human meaning. Context gives us a means to understand the essential elements of a life. In the present study, narrative allows us to grasp the process of disengagement of young adults who dropped out of school.

#### Case Study

Case study "allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 1984, p. 14). The present study utilized a multiple-case study design which allowed for a case comparison in order to identify commonalities in the disengagement process. A multiple-case design is similar to multiple experiments in that both rely on replication logic (Yin, 1984). Within this design:

Each individual case study consists of a 'whole' study, in which convergent evidence is sought regarding the facts and conclusions for the case; each case's conclusions are then considered to be the information needing replication by other individual cases. (Yin, 1984, p. 57)

### Research Design

Yin (1984) stated that the five components of a research design particularly important to case studies are: (a) the study's questions; (b) its propositions, if any; (c) its unit(s) of analysis, (d) the logic linking the data to the propositions; and (e) the criteria for interpreting the findings.

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the process of disengagement from school as experienced by those who left school before they graduated. A secondary purpose was to explore the degree to which disengagement was a common as opposed to an unique process.

Because of the exploratory nature of this study no research propositions were utilized. Instead, the researcher sensitized himself to the dropout phenomenon by: (a) reviewing the literature on dropouts and the literature on theories of dropping out; and, (b) drawing on his personal experiences as an educator. This information heightened the researcher's awareness of the phenomenon in

question and prepared him to conduct interviews and to proceed with the larger investigation.

Individual interviews about participants' experiences constituted the study's primary units of analysis. Interviews were conducted with the intent of eliciting the interpretations, understandings, and meanings that participants associated with pertinent disengagement experiences.

Written transcriptions of completed interviews constituted the data base. A logic of reflection was utilized to process the data. For each case study the data was converted into a narrative so that individual experiences, meanings, and understandings could be embedded in a meaningful context. By drawing on this common context the researcher was able to identify three streams of movement that contributed to the larger process of disengagement. The researcher verified streams by tracing each to its point of origin in individual interviews and transcripts. Participants verified their individual stories. Two independent judges had an opportunity to validate the logical flow from original data base, to story construction, and stream identification back to the data base. Judges were asked to answer two questions: (a) Did the researcher create a bias or distortion during the interview process? and, (b) Did narrative accounts accurately reflect participants' verbalized accounts of disengagement?

Criteria for interpreting a study's findings are vague and the least developed part of case study research (Yin, 1984). This study relied on the accuracy utilized in stream identification.

This multiple-case study was designed to document individual experiences of disengagement from school. Utilizing data from interviews, narratives were constructed and three streams of disengagement were identified. Participants verified the accuracy of the stories while two independent judges verified the accuracy of the study as a whole.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

The main steps of this study can be summarized as follows. This study used an open ended interview format to gather initial data. Interviews were transcribed and stories which focused on the participants' lived experiences of disengagement were constructed. Streams of movement which were extracted from these stories suggested a common range of experience across the participants' lives. Interviews were terminated when a repetitive pattern of disengagement started to emerge.

### Design of the Study

The study involved a multiple case study design using narratives of disengagement from school. Each case study was based on an individual narrative of disengagement. This study was based on replication logic as clarified by Yin (1984) in which a pattern from one case is replicated in other cases. The reasoning behind replication logic is that similar results from multiple experiments or case studies are considered more robust and compelling than findings from a single experiment or case study (Yin, 1984). In this study central characteristics from each narrative were examined in order to identify replicating movements of disengagement. Replication of the identified pattern of disengagement across the 10 case studies enhanced confidence in the study's results.

### Participants

Participants were recruited from a school district data base. Initial contact was made by an alternate school principal (B) - someone whom participants (and/or their parents) might be familiar with. B. read prospective participants an outline of the study (see Appendix I) and provided them with my phone number. Once a participant called me I reviewed the nature and purpose of the study with individual participants and established a time to conduct the first interview.

In order to participate in the study, individuals had to meet two criteria. First, individuals needed to have dropped out of school prior to graduation. Second, participants were required to possess some ability to articulate their experience. No age criteria was stipulated at the outset of the study. However, as a result of the recruitment process, 8 of the 10 participants ended up being young adults. Two participants were 16 and 17-year-olds, the remaining 8 were between the ages of 21 - 23. Participant recruitment continued until a point of saturation had been reached. Saturation was determined to have occurred once individual narratives failed to offer any novel information about the disengagement process.

The recruitment process also generated a disproportionate gender representation in the study. National Canadian figures indicate a 3:2 male to female dropout ratio (Gilbert et al., 1993). Of the 10

participants recruited, 7 were female and 3 were male. Two of the females and one of the males were parents, each had one child. Three of the participants were still attempting to finish high school, one of the 16-year-olds had given up altogether. The other seven were either studying a trade or applying to technical or business programs. One participant was applying to graduate school.

#### Interview Process

The intent of the interview was to gather as much depth and breadth of detail as participants were capable of offering (Mishler, 1986). Evidence for the stories that were generated in this study was collected using an unstructured interview format. Establishing rapport and facilitating dialogue was challenging. At the start of the first case study the participants was asked to construct a timeline in order to produce a chronological ordering of events involved in the disengagement process. This approach to orienting participants was abandoned early on in the study as it proved to be problematic. The first participant dismissed the timeline exercise with the words "feels kind of like school". Thereafter a more general orienting procedure was utilized. For example, at the start of the second case study the participants was asked: "What do you remember about being a kid"? This type of approach seemed to have a more relaxing effect on participants and was used for the remainder of the study.

The overall strategy was to establish a level of dialogue that might occur between two friends. Once participants started telling their story, the researcher would join the dialogue in whatever manner seemed appropriate. For example, in the second case study the participant seemed very nervous and was having a hard time feeling comfortable. Near the start of the interview I reminisced about visiting my birthplace after the participant recalled visiting the village in which her father was born. This introduced a conversational tone to the interview and appeared to help her to relax. On another occasion my response helped the participant to distance from his pain and to refocus. During the third case study the participant reached a point where he seemed overwhelmed and appeared unable to continue:

The divorce came and I just, like I went into a shell and I just didn't want anyone to touch me, nothing. I just, I just sat there in school. I just. Why?  
(cries).

Here, I attempted to bring him back to the interview by responding with empathic reflection, "You were really hurt, and there was just no will". The participant responded by collecting himself and continuing with his story.

Throughout the interviewing process, the researcher utilized whatever attending, listening, paraphrasing and empathy skills that seemed appropriate.



Establishing rapport and conducting initial interviews required varying lengths of time. Some interviews were conducted within a 3 - 4 hour period while others required 7 - 8 hours to complete.

Beyond establishing rapport, the interview process presented the researcher with two main types of challenges. Some interviews were so vile and filled with pain that I became very emotionally engaged. On these occasions I had to struggle to regain distance and balance in order to check my inclination to move into a therapeutic role. For example, in the seventh case study when M. started explaining how she had been raped by her mother's boyfriend and then ignored by her mother, I distanced by seeking clarification about the time in her life when these events had occurred. On the other hand, in other types of interviews, where participants seemed very flat, I had to work at engaging. In these sessions the participants were not able to articulate their experiences easily, spoke in a sparse manner, and had difficulty elaborating. Here my challenge was to remain patient and to stay with the participant, while they attempted to explain their stories. With these participants I would often paraphrase what had been offered, query how this fit into the overall story, and seek confirmation for my understanding of what had been expressed. This tended to fill uncomfortable silences and helped to move the interview away from a question and answer format and into a dialogue.

### Construction of Narratives

Narrative construction followed a fairly uniform routine. Once an interview was completed a process of content immersion took place. Taped interviews were turned into verbatim transcripts and read repeatedly while tapes were listened to regularly. Whenever I drove I would listen to an interview. Reading and listening to the interviews enabled me to dwell on and familiarize myself with individual cases. This process helped to create an initial ordering of events into general categories: beginnings, middles, and ends. The initial order was then clarified through writing which used the participants' own words as much as possible. I added my own words to each emerging story in order to: (a) add clarity to events, (b) make connections between events; and (c) make implicit meanings more explicit.

### Validation of Narratives

During the construction of a narrative, I regularly consulted with my advisor and two fellow doctoral students. Their suggestions resulted in changes that helped to add clarity and coherence to individual stories. On a more personal note, these meetings were also an extremely useful way to maintain momentum. Two forms of narrative review, or ways to check on steps from the data base, through narrative construction, to identifying streams were used: (a) a participant review, and (b) an independent judges review.

### Participant Review

Once completed, narrative drafts were submitted to participants to be reviewed. These meetings provided the opportunity to discuss and revise stories so that they more accurately reflected participants' lived experiences. In each of the 10 case studies the initial story draft had captured the essence of the participant's experience, and the changes required were all of a technical nature. For instance, in the 9th case study the participant's name had been misspelled and in the 8th case study the date that he moved out of the lower mainland needed to be changed. Each participant decided when his or her story was completed.

### Independent Judges' Review

Two counselling psychology doctoral students reviewed and evaluated the research process. Each reviewer listened to the audio-tapes, read both the transcripts and the finished stories, and had an opportunity to comment on the accuracy of the identified pattern of disengagement. Reviewers were asked initially to answer two questions: (1) Was the participant led, directed, curtailed, or unduly influenced by the researcher in the verbal account of his/her experience? and (2) Did the written account of each participant's process of disengagement accurately reflect the original account?

With respect to the first question, both judges felt that the integrity of the process had been maintained. Each participant had been allowed to tell his/her story without

being directed or led. My interview style was described as respectful, open, curious, and at times playful. Both judges also felt that the completed stories accurately reflected the original accounts of disengagement offered in each interview. Each felt the translation from interview to completed story had successfully retained the detail, mood, and character of original interviews.

#### Comparative Pattern Analysis

When the 10 stories were completed, they were systematically compared to identify commonalties in the process of disengagement from school. The purpose here was to ascertain whether a common pattern or patterns of experience could be found across all or some of the participants' accounts. Patton (1990) indicated that while there are no universally accepted rules about how to conduct analysis of qualitative data, there are guidelines. Applying these guidelines however, requires judgment and creativity. A central concern is that the researcher's analysis truthfully reflects participants' experiences.

Once a story had been completed the researcher wrote a brief commentary on each, outlining individual processes of disengagement. Commentary construction strengthened the researcher's grasp of individual stories, required a shift from concrete detail to low level abstraction, and facilitated a broader comparative analysis.

The comparative analysis was conducted on a story by story basis. Completed stories and commentaries were

reviewed and experiences, events, and meanings that seemed to have contributed to the disengagement process were coded. This produced groupings of common types of primary difficulties. For instance, some participants had problems with their parents (1st, 3rd 6th case studies) others were troubled by shyness (2nd & 4th case studies), while a couple (7th & 8th) were undermined by the broader social environment. Commentaries, on the other hand, indicated some similar kinds of feelings. For the first four case studies these feelings centered around a loss of trust and a desire to belong. Other commentaries (6th and 10th) revealed feelings of power and control. This process of sifting through the stories enabled the researcher to start to identify and articulate how significant experiences seemed to fit into an overall movement of disengagement.

Common ingredients from each story were then compared on a story by story basis. Ingredients were compared not from a perspective of similarity of detail but rather for similarity of impact in the disengagement process. From this somewhat more abstract point of view, formerly distinct categories started to merge into broader patterns of movement. For instance a common effect of individuals' troubled backgrounds, regardless of the source, were feelings of vulnerability and aloneness. A sense of being abandoned, directionless, or unguided surfaced from relationships with parents. This process resulted in the three movements that constitute the disengagement process.

Once a draft of the comparative patterns was completed, the researcher engaged in a dialogue with his advisor and the two colleagues in order to refine and clarify the three movements. Finally, common story components were checked against individual stories to see if the movements adequately captured individual experiences of disengagement. Both independent judges were asked whether the three streams of disengagement accurately represented the 10 participants experiences of dropping out. Aside from suggestions about semantic choices, both judges agreed with the findings of the study.

The following 10 chapters contain the participants' stories. Each narrative is followed by a commentary which reflects the researcher's understanding of individual stories. A sample transcript is provided in Appendix III. Discussion of the results has been limited to the lives of the participants.

## Chapter 4

### Case Study 1: M

#### Introduction

M. dropped out of high school in October, 1989. He was 16 years old and had completed grade 10. Leaving school without graduating was not a singular act in M's life. Rather, it was the final step in a process of disengagement which centered around his struggle to belong, his growing inability to trust, and his continued lack of agency. This conflict had its origin in his family, intensified during grade 8 and 9, and culminated in his dropping out. In retrospect, dropping out can be seen as an inevitable outcome. At the same time, M's academic ability, his courage and tenacity provided moments of genuine wavering when a successful school experience seemed possible. In the end, disengaging from the experienced brutality of the school system however, was the best thing that young M did.

#### Background

One of M's earliest family memories is of being out of sync with family mores. As he explained it:

well I've always been very cold and self-centered. I've just been told that through my entire life. Like when I was 5 years old I can remember being told I was self-centered and selfish.

While this experience would acquire a different significance in his adult life, as a child it left him with feelings of disapproval and self-doubt. Frustrated in his desire to belong, "fitting in" would become a task of central

importance. Heeding his parents' and grandparents' admonitions, M would at first attempt to accomplish this task by playing according to the rules.

Elementary school however only added to his need to belong. Enrolled in a public elementary school in grades 1 through 4, M's friendships came to a sudden end when he transferred to a Catholic school in grade 5. This sense of loss was deepened by his parents' divorce and the subsequent scapegoating of his father by his mother and her parents. His aloneness was compounded by his mother's personal circumstance. She was a manic depressive alcoholic who was increasingly absent from M emotionally. Transition to junior high then, found M living in difficult circumstances with his mother, ostracized from his father, and moving away from friendships that he had formed at the Catholic elementary school.

#### The Beginning

The move to high school marked, in many ways, the beginning of M's disengagement from school. Saddled with an intense desire to belong and burdened with numerous experiences of not fitting in, M now had to face the increased demands that adolescence brings to the struggle to define oneself. This task became more difficult to realize in the charged atmosphere of junior high where peer acceptance may well mark the difference between success and failure. His failure to find a place during grade 8 and 9 would begin to sow the seeds of resignation.



Part of M's difficulty was his size. Short and angry he often found himself unable to back up a situation that his "big mouth" helped create. Added to the difficulties that his stature presented was his appearance.

My family, my grandparents and my mom...they dressed me...and they dressed me in garbage. In grade 8 people are getting into these fashion things and stuff...and so I was a complete outcast.

Grade 8 also brought a change in school systems.

Come grade 8, they shove me back into the school, public school system. So my brain is just goop by now. You know, I've just been picked up and thrown around. You know, I have no secure relationships with anybody, no friends, no peers, you know, that I can relate to. Then I get back into the school system and I'm just completely messed".

Added to this sense of displacement were experiences of betrayal.

This is what led me to the "fuck you" attitude that I have...And I figured B was my friend and then I'm walking down from 7-Eleven...this guy starts twisting my arm and starts chasing me down the road, right. It's like I'm such a little runt so he can get away with it...And uhm, he did that and I pleaded to B and he didn't do anything so, you know, it was just like...fuck this.

His summer time experiences also added to his difficulties.

My grandparents and my mom are so stupid. What happened is they took me and they sent me off during the summer so that they can have a break from me and my brother. They sent us to our uncle's...he's got four kids...and he knows how to handle kids relatively well. So we'd have a stable environment where we'd actually be happy. I'd sit up there...I wouldn't have to deal with my mother...her freaking out all the time...and then we'd come back and it'd just be hell. You know, I would just go through total anarchy within.

"Anarchy within" was defined as "a feeling of intense uncertainty to what's going to happen in the next few minutes".

During his second year in high school, even his academic accomplishments seemed to distance him. In grade 9 M's performance, motivated by a \$25 per "A" agreement with his grandparents, resulted in the purchase of a much wanted computer. Ironically, realizing this goal only added to M's aloneness. The computer offered him an escape from the daily pain of home and school. It was "another world" which was "very safe" and which "didn't fight back".

Angry and socially alienated from the start, grade 8 and 9 only made matters worse. His own efforts to find a place among his chosen peers failed. His relatives' contributions confirmed that they were ignorant, not to be trusted, and further sabotaged his acceptance by the group. Peers whom he thought he could trust abandoned him. Pleasant summer time experiences ended up deepening his insecurities and made him more aware of the emptiness of life at home. Academic accomplishments provided an escape from the system rather than the membership that he coveted. In the process, academic accomplishment itself was devalued as it did little to address his needs. Increasingly, school became a place to survive and guard against.

#### The Middle

While the first 2 years of high school were marked by struggle and effort, grade 10 and 11 brought about increased

resignation and inevitable withdrawal. The vitality, vigor, and achievement demonstrated as a 13 and 14 year old started to be replaced by a growing numbness. Both home and school contributed to this deadening of the spirit. No longer living with his maternal grandparents, M, his brother, and their mother were now living alone. This move made an already bad situation worse.

I used to come home and my mom would be drunk on the couch...when you're that age and you see your mother having complete disrespect for herself and you know not caring about anything, drunk every single day, you know, partially it led me to be completely cold towards her...I didn't even want to come home when, you know you see your mother like that you just, it's crap.

And, though he could escape her presence he could not escape her influence.

Living with my mom, I just started not caring about anything anymore I guess. It wasn't worth it.

This deadening of spirit and increased resignation were also occurring at school. Socially unaccepted by his chosen peer group M was now "hanging around with grade 9's". Whereas academic achievement had some relevance in the earlier years, if only as a means to an ends, grades no longer mattered. In part this shift was due to work.

In grade 10 my grades went down the toilet. I started working at Burger King. That's right, and I started going to work rather than coming to school.

Burger King offered something that neither home nor school could provide, a sense of peace and agency. "Not

only am I earning my way, it's that I don't have to deal with the garbage ( harassment at school) every day". Putting in 24 to 30 hours a week, work became the main focus of his days. School, on the other hand, started to be seen as a place to raise havoc. In grade 10:

Like I was climbing in and out of windows in my typing class. I was going home halfway through the class, you know I was calling her a bitch, telling her to fuck off.

Most teachers were seen as people who could be dominated:

My English teacher, my Consumer Ed. teacher, and my Typing teacher would, they could have no control over me whatsoever and as soon as they'd let me dominate, that was it.

On the other hand confrontation was equally as useless, only furthering the disengagement.

I walked in there (Drama class) and I had a big attitude problem I guess, and that day she said something to me and I told her to "fuck off you dumb cow" and then I walked away and walked home. So...I got burnt (suspended), big deal.

Accompanying this experience of school as an exercise in contempt, was a change of sought after peers. Near the end of grade 10 his desire to belong to the " popular group" dwindled.

It died in the sense that I didn't care about what other kids like that, supposedly upper class kids, were doing. You know I started hanging around with other people who were, who would be defined as lower class.

No longer working at Burger King, filled with contempt for school and not interested in fitting in with those students for whom school had some meaning, M turned to crime and drugs by the start of grade 11.

Now I was starting to relate to people. Through the one activity which I was good at, which was being a criminal. I wasn't good at sports. I wasn't good at being with other people who were supposedly better than me. I could be a criminal.

Besides the "thrill and entertainment" value of crime, it also provided identity and belonging. School on the other hand, was an emotional and intellectual death.

Most of the time in school I just sit there like a lump of shit. [Thinking] nothing at all. [Feeling] nothing.

Several important changes occurred for M during this period. Though bitterly painful and very much unresolved, his relationship with his mother forced him to become more independent. In a similar fashion, rejection by his "upper class" peers moved him towards the vitality and instant gratification of the street. His seething and uncontrollable rage showed him that the adults in the school system were largely powerless to stop him.

#### The End

M was expelled near the end of grade 11 for stealing a teacher's purse. He returned to school next September and dropped out by early October.

Disengagement had several meanings for M. Withdrawal from school meant leaving an environment that was painful, stifling and increasingly meaningless. It marked the end of an emotional and intellectual emptiness that had become an everyday experience.

Disengagement also meant moving from the position of being a pawn to becoming an agent. Having failed to fit in and attain recognition through appropriate channels, M turned to crime on the street and disruptive behavior in the classroom. This way of being provided identity, a type of security and a power over others.

Perhaps the most significant shift associated with the process of disengagement though, had to do with M's earliest memories. Somewhere in the process M started to learn to put himself first--even to the exclusion of the needs of others. Now instead of denying and being ashamed of his "selfishness" he embraced it as a philosophy.

#### Commentary.

For M, disengagement centered around issues of membership, trust, and agency. Dropping out of school offered short term solutions to entrenched, long standing problems. A sense of belonging was denied first by his family; he had felt like an outsider as early as age five. M's separateness was made worse by his parent's divorce and his mother's illness. This desire to belong was further frustrated by his early school experience. M repeatedly

experienced a cycle of hesitant connection followed by abrupt removal. The process resulted in heightening hesitation, reluctance to form close connections to peers and mistrust of potential friends.

Instead of providing a sense of security, his experience regularly deepened his need to fit in. By the time he left elementary school that hazy feeling of being out of place that he had known as a preschooler, was beginning to crystallize.

High school increased his difficulties. Increasingly angry, short, and mouthy, M's efforts to connect only added to his growing inability to trust and growing defensive stance. Rooted in his family experience, and further exacerbated by his relationships with his peers, this lack of trust encouraged M's alienation. Where others might be carefree and fluid M became increasingly cautious and suspicious. Opportunities for celebration and belonging (school success) only added to his aloneness. Slowly desperation turned to resignation.

Withering in an unpredictable, unreliable world where only rejection seemed certain, M developed a need for control. Increased agency came about through the employment of two strategies. He withdrew from the parts of his world that were painful and beyond his control (home, school), and gravitated towards those enclaves where he could establish himself (work, the street). Work offered a sense of control and some grounding. It also took him away from school.

Freed from his obligation and too bright to find satisfaction flipping hamburgers, M turned to petty crime. Criminal activity provided exhilaration, power, and acceptance. In the end, disengagement from school not only added to M's sense of agency but also revitalized his spirit.



## Chapter 5

Case Study 2: A

Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall  
She walks by the railing of a path  
    in Kensington Gardens,  
And she is dying piece-meal  
    of a sort of emotional anemia.  
                    Ezra Pound

Our survival and development depend on our capacity  
to recruit the invested attention of others to us.  
                    Robert Kegan

Introduction

In some ways, the significance of A's disengagement from school was captured in her parting comment. At the end of a 3 hour interview she noted, "This was good for me you know, I mean, I'm just learning to talk to people". The magnitude of her task was evident throughout our exchange. Though she had volunteered to partake in the study, actually telling her story proved to be difficult.

It was not "natural" for A to elaborate without being prodded. On the other hand, I didn't want to turn the interview into a question and answer session. I was more interested in her story as she opted to tell it. Together we produced a narrative which at times begs for more detail.

Addressing the issue of vagueness became a pivotal point in the construction of the narrative. In the end I decided that the vagueness was a core component of A's experience. What better way to capture the aloneness, the stillness, the overwhelming sense of being abandoned,

repeatedly. On occasion however, A was deliberately vague. She didn't want to offer any details about her first experience of abuse. This event though, needs to be distinguished from the physical abuse that she suffered at the hands of her brother.

The issue of vagueness therefore, will be addressed in two ways. Wherever possible, it will be left to speak to the reader. On those occasions where clarity is required I will offer my comments. These will appear in parentheses.

A never formally dropped out of school. Instead, she drifted into an emotional and academic stillness that had a coma-like quality to it. Over time, school would move from being a source of vitality and discovery in her life to, at best, a daily diversion or obstacle to be overcome. Her process of disengagement from school started early, continued steadily, and moved at a barely perceptible pace. This process was rooted in her overwhelming shyness and was facilitated by her experiences both at home and at school. Her disengagement from school, like her growing disengagement from life, was a product both of her inability to engage and the world's (parents' and school's) failure to notice.

### The Beginning

According to her mom A "always walked to the beat of [her] own drummer. [She] always had a very strong sense of what was right and what [she] thought was right". At times she would come across as feisty and full of bravado. As a 3

year old she didn't like her grandmother's cooking and wouldn't eat it. Internally however, a different self seemed to be taking shape. By the age of five she had a taste of being alone and abandoned:

My mom was working and my dad was working graveyard. And so, he'd be sleeping when I got home from school and we'd be there to take care of ourselves. Or we had a baby-sitter for awhile but she didn't pay any attention to me. And I felt alone a lot of the time. And I talked to my parents about that and they'd say I wasn't alone that much but to me I was.

It was this aloneness that she associated with her independence:

And so I had to learn, I had to learn my independence really young. I had to take care of myself, set my own values and goals and try to figure things out.

Naturally shy, her tendency to go it alone increased after she was abused:

That's (the abuse) part of why I became a loner, that's why I secluded myself.

Still, for the first three years school was a rich and rewarding experience which seemed to give her what she needed. Her grade 3 teacher was:

Wonderful. He'd really pay attention. He'd listen, he really cared. I was shy...and he'd listen, he'd get me to give my answer out. He'd be patient. He'd never scream at us, he never made us feel stupid for not knowing. He'd just be patient and not demand it and just be very relaxed about it.

Other parts of her world however, were not as encouraging. She and her older brother, with whom she shared a room, had a falling out when she was seven. Over

the next eight years he became increasingly more physically and emotionally abusive. It was at the age of seven that she first remembered being visited by a sort of sadness which would remain for years. In addition to the pain, "he was my older brother and I looked up to him", this treatment eroded her confidence:

Well, when you get put down at home then that interferes with how you feel even in school. Even if you're not put down.

In many ways grade 3 was the last time that A was to be engaged in school. Her grade 4 teacher was "mean and impatient". Shortly into the school year he had her placed into Learning Assistance:

Probably because I didn't do my homework. Because I got irritated and I decided I'm not going to do it and they put me into this (L.A.) which made me more irritated, which made me want to do less...I was mad, I was really mad cause I know I'm not stupid.

A loved to read, loved to write, and was in honors math by grade 7, but grade 4 started to derail her:

I just remember feeling so bad because he'd make a comment...If I didn't know the answer he'd say 'I'm not surprised you didn't know' or something to that effect. And when you hear it enough you just don't want to hear it anymore and you don't want to listen to what he has to say.

While grade 4 was the worst, the next 3 years were almost as bad. Forced to deal with teachers whom she found mean and impatient A responded by saying as little as possible, "I'd just be quiet and I wouldn't divulge anything

that wasn't asked of me". She also protested by doing only the work that she could finish at school:

If I didn't have time to do it in class, then I just wouldn't do it...And because I figured, at school, that was school time but at home, that was my time.

Of equal importance was her parents inability to get her to engage in her schooling. Still in elementary school, she knew that "They (her parents) couldn't make me do it, they'd tell me to, but they couldn't really make me".

Through a mixture of her constitution and her experience A had developed some important and powerful skills. By the time she left elementary school she had learned to handle her parents, her teachers and the school system. Obstinate and feeling under attack, she fended off her teachers and the school by limiting her participation. Her parents, she recognized, were limited in their ability to affect her. Shy by nature, traumatized by her abuse and feeling abandoned by her family, she was becoming increasingly more alone. Ironically, the very means that she had discovered to fend off the world would serve to entrap her. For though she was learning how to cope with and even control different aspects of her life, A was losing her ability to trust.

### The Middle

The move to high school represented a time of both increased risk and increased possibility. Some subjects allowed for genuine engagement:

I took the best class I ever had (Communications 8). The teacher was great. It was the first time I felt comfortable in any class interacting with other students...First there was me and Jackie...And then there was a couple of other guys who we became friends with...and then it just kind of grew. We'd go down to Kentucky Fried Chicken at lunch and bring back something for everybody.

In other classes a sense of resignation seemed to surface and she continued on in her drift away from academics:

Socials I've always been bad at. Math, I barely passed Math because of the jump from [grade] 7 honors to [grade] 9 honors...It was distressing...pretty hard to deal with...We (she and Jackie) were both kind of sinking. And we both knew there was something wrong with the class. So we just let it go at that and we barely passed. I mentioned a few things at home here and there but nothing major.

Socially, A was making choices which would increase her isolation:

I wasn't into group activity in high school. I didn't join any sports. I quit singing. I gave up the ukulele. I didn't join band

Almost as if by accident she discovered a new power in her quiet and unprovocative mannerisms which would, ultimately, move her deeper into her disengagement:

The first time I remember skipping out was at a fire alarm. I was in French (grade 8) and Jackie and I contemplated on the chances of getting caught. And so we decided to go for it. And she got caught and I didn't. So it was like 'Okay, this is cool' which kind of worked out right because we'd be talking in class and she'd get in trouble and I wouldn't...because she was loud and I was quiet. And I could start and initiate everything and still not get in trouble. I learned real fast that I could talk my way out of anything. It meant that I could skip out and I could go and talk to the principal and once or twice I'd get busted but the rest of the time I'd just talk my way

out of it. I learned that because I was quiet, they never really noticed if I was there.

At the deepest and most secretive part of her being the struggles with her memories of abuse continued:

Then in grade 8 I started getting really depressed, saying no it didn't happen. It's something that I took out of my mind somewhere. [Even though] it was always there I just said 'No, I'm insane'. I thought I was insane for years. And then I started to get really, really depressed.

Increasingly alone and unhappy, A attempted to fight her growing depression by enlisting her parents' help:

[At 13] I started smoking too, probably cause I wanted my parents to catch me. I wanted confrontation of some kind. I was upset a lot of the time. I was very depressed. And nobody ever asked me why. And I guess I got hurt, I got mad and wanted something that I knew would dig in and get them. And I knew smoking was it. It was for my mom because she was always so against it. But they never, they never did. They, they caught me when I was 17.

At other times her anger prevented her from engaging:

My parents would fight...and I'd comfort her. But then again there was nobody there comforting me. And so for a while I was really, really angry. Yeah, my mom wanted, as I called it at the time, play family. And I was really snotty about it because the sense that I got was that she was too busy with work and we never really did anything and then at thirteen, she got more time and, and she wanted to do things as a family. And at that time I was, I'd spent so much time on my own, I didn't want to be this family unit.

The cumulative effect of her home and school life resulted in feelings of profound isolation. Ironically the invisibility that enabled her to manipulate situations at school was becoming a curse:

I walked around invisible. That's how I felt. I really thought that people didn't see me. They saw through me. Yeah, my parents always said, 'Well, why don't you try harder. You should get this done'. And I always thought, 'Why bother'.

Other than the brief hiatus offered by Communications 8, the first few years of high school proved to be a continuation and a deepening of the disengagement that she first experienced in grade 4. Academically, she was drifting into doing less. She was just surviving in subjects that she had formerly excelled at. Socially she was becoming more isolated. Activities that she had been a part of (singing, band, choir) she no longer joined. Life at home was becoming more difficult as a result of her relationships with her parents and with her brother. More than ever she was haunted by memories of the abuse. And perhaps most significantly, her efforts to contact her parents went unnoticed, an experience that was mirrored at school.

#### The End

A continued to sink into her aloneness. Somewhere during grade 11 she seemed to hit bottom:

I didn't want to feel anymore...I didn't want to care anymore...I didn't want to talk to anybody really...I didn't want to become involved. I honestly didn't think I'd be around long enough [to get involved].

She would not move out of this stillness until after she left school, disclosed about the abuse and received help. While in grade 11:



[School was] an annoyance or a distraction [from her pain] depending which class it was.

The degree and extent of her disengagement from school became most noticeable in grade 12:

Oh it steadily got worse. By grade 12, if I didn't skip an hour out of the day it was unusual. Usually, I'd go home at lunch and not come back. I never actually even thought of dropping out. It's just if I showed up, I showed up. If I didn't, I didn't. Which is basically the same thing, because in my school I never really heard of people dropping out.

There is no point at which A formally disengaged from school. Officially, she was recorded as having finished her grade 12 year without graduating. Invited back to re-take English 12, Socials 12, and Math 12, she declined.

In many ways leaving school was a relief. As A explained it:

I didn't like the whole system of school. I didn't like the way it was run. I didn't like the people who ran it.

At the same time, her disengagement from school can be seen as the culmination of a way of being over which she appeared to have little control:

If you let someone get too close, they can hurt you. If you keep people at a distance then you may be surprised, shocked, but you won't be hurt.

#### Commentary.

A identified grade 4 as the start of her disengagement from school. This was the year when the vibrant, curious, and involved little girl started to withdraw. Withdrawing

was both an extension of her shyness and a response to being abandoned. It also served to distance her from the pain of her abuse. By the time it was employed at school, this need driven capacity to control the world by withdrawing, was a potent, well established force. Mixed with the ever present sadness that entered her life when she turned seven, A's soon to be habitual response to the world, would serve to confuse, distance, and isolate her. During her stay at elementary school A had developed a way of being, that limited personal risk. With limited risk came limited opportunity. Adolescence, instead of being a period of expansion and growth became a time of atrophy.

Caught in an encapsulating and debilitating silence that was fueled by her own defensiveness, A spent her early high school years cutting herself off from everything that could re-route her. Consequently, her confidence withered and her pain deepened into depression. Increasingly the world became a place that she could not trust. Slowly her refusal to participate became an inability to participate. Quiet, polite, and demure, she was assisted in this emotional asphyxiation by a school which didn't notice her and by parents who were out of touch with her.

## Chapter 6

### Case Study 3: R

I'd be a little kid and I'd you know, you'd break a you know, a little glass or something and he'd whack. And I'd look at her [his mother] and I remember now, but then I'm like, 'you bitch', why aren't you doing anything. And she'd just have her head down. Cause if she stepped in, she'd get it.

I'd smoke a joint in the morning, before school. I had to, I couldn't go, I couldn't go straight.

Right now I just have a lot of anger towards my father. Like a lot, even more than when I was a kid. Just cause now I realize what he was doing and how he affected my life.

### Introduction

Interviewing R was not easy. Several times throughout our exchange he became so angry that he had to calm himself. In part this anger came about because he was exploring aspects of his life for the first time. As he explained, "the big joke is that I have no feelings cause I really don't talk about stuff like this even to [my wife]" . Mostly however, his anger was associated with unresolved rage towards his father. Near the end of the exchange some bitterness towards his mother also surfaced.

I found these points in the interview very difficult. While very interested in all aspects of his story, I felt it inappropriate to pursue some lines of questioning. Certain queries seemed more suited to a therapy session than to our interview. At the same time he had contemplated his school

experience in preparation for our meeting and wanted to tell his story. Moreover, R's anger and his tendency to hold things in constituted a significant aspect of the context for understanding his disengagement from school.

At 22, R described himself as someone who never found school easy. Success, when it did come, was always connected to a sense of personal contact with his teachers. Personal contact was significant for several reasons.

On a practical level it enabled R to get one on one help with his school work. Given some extra time and instruction school became not only manageable but enjoyable as well. R experienced this shift from confusion and frustration to clarity and satisfaction on several occasions during his school life. It was just such an experience that would enable him to complete his grade 12 when he returned to school.

Personal contact however, was perhaps even more significant in terms of the attention it provided R. Inherent in this attention was a sense of caring. When he felt cared for R seemed capable of persisting at his task. Often persistence translated into short term success and a budding belief that he "could do this stuff".

He first learned to write when he was promised a "magic pencil" by his grade 3 teacher. R explained how he (and his two friends) got taken "hook, line, and sinker" by his grade 3 teacher who promised him a primary pencil if R would behave and try to learn to write.

If we were good for a week we'd get a magic pencil. Well he just did that for two weeks and kind of, we kind of smartened up after two weeks and we just, all we did, we wanted to get that magic pencil, all of a sudden I'm done, I'm doing better, I can write now. All because of this magic pencil. But it was me the whole time.

At the heart of his effort to stay in school was R's ongoing struggle to sustain his spirit. The magic pencil was associated not only with success and attention but also with hope and possibility. It wasn't just that he did succeed at learning to write, but more significantly that he could succeed. Unfortunately there were few "magic pencil" moments in R's school life. There were even fewer in his home life. In many ways R's disengagement from school is a story of a growing hopelessness. His home life lacked support, kindness and direction. It was a life permeated with neglect and meanness. Indeed, much of his home life existed in stark contrast to the type of relationship that he had with his grade 3 teacher. When relationships weren't established, hope dwindled and disengagement deepened.

R dropped out of school when he was 15. His disengagement from school has its roots in his father's alcoholic and abusive behavior and his parents' failed marriage. R's subsequent involvement with and dependency on drugs and the school's inability to reach him are also key factors.

### The Beginning

R was born into an abusive home. The youngest of four children, he was the only child in the household by the time he was nine. Each of his siblings left home when they turned 16 in order to escape their father's emotional and physical abuse. When he was 10 his parents divorced and R ended up living with his father for three years. He has a clear memory of the breakup:

There I am and they (his siblings) all left and I can remember they're (his parents) asking me [who I want to live with]. My mom still, she regrets, like she didn't, like she wanted me but my dad just used the money, you know like you can't play hockey if you live with your mom and you know when you're 10 years old what's more important...Hockey. Hockey was, for me, I mean, I loved hockey and he's telling me this and I can buy you this and your mom can't, you know. And I'm thinking, I'm going to live with my dad... and the first year was great. He kind of brainwashed me in a way...he bought me a dog, anything, anything a 10 year old kid wanted, I got.

Even though the first year with his father was "great" there were significant difficulties.

We didn't really talk. We did like father son things (going to hockey games). At that time he wasn't drinking that I saw. He wasn't drinking in front of me. He'd go out and then he'd come home drunk cause I'd be by myself, 10 years old, all night. Maybe that's why he bought me the dog. Like I mean you're 10 years old. I, you know, it's 12 o'clock at night and your dad's not home.

The feeling of being abandoned by his father was mirrored in his school and social life. R was attending a new school and living in a different neighborhood. What he

remembers most about grade 5 is that he didn't have any friends. Sometimes he managed to cope.

Grade 5, I was still in shock of what had happened. I wasn't doing bad, you know, I was never really good in school but I wasn't causing any trouble, I'm getting stuff (school work) done. I'm seeing my mom every now and then.

It was during this period though, that a tendency to withdraw started to emerge, a tendency which over time would have a devastating effect on his chances of surviving the school system.

When the divorce came I just, like I went into a shell and I just didn't want anyone to touch me, to help me, nothing, I just, I just sat there in school. All of a sudden it's like I got stupid. I'd look at it and I'd just go 'I can't do it'. And I would, I'd just sit there. No drive. Like see when I had the pencil I had something to work for.

Life took a turn for the worse in grade 6. His father was drinking regularly, openly and becoming more abusive. R was becoming more withdrawn.

I was in my own world. I never talked. I was too scared. That's when he started getting, like, if I didn't rinse out my milk glass it's 'What are you doing? Smack! Rinse it out'.

R was also cut off from the refuge that his mother offered.

When grade 6 and 7 came I never saw my mom at all. I was too scared to ask to go to mom's on the weekends cause I knew what he would do. So I just wouldn't, so I didn't see my mom for a good year, cause she'd call and that. [He'd lie, telling her] He's at his friends and I'd hear him.

At home, R was alone and terrorized. His primary sanctuary was hockey.

My only release like, to get away was hockey. I think that's why I really loved hockey when I was a kid, cause I was around other people. I wasn't allowed out, but the hockey, for an hour on the ice, that was just me. And I loved it.

Unfortunately the joy and comfort that R found on the ice didn't seem to help him in other parts of his life. At school, R started to act out.

Grade 6 is when I kind of went out of control. I was just a mouthy kid. I had a Mr. Field, he didn't like me. I was just anything, anything to get a laugh. I remember the time but I like I think back and I think and it's just, I don't know why I just, I just, I just needed to do it. I had to do something. It was more just to get attention cause I wasn't getting attention at home. Besides getting hit.

He did however find some solace in his new neighborhood. After grade 6 he and his father moved to a townhouse complex. No longer physically isolated (they used to live in a shack in a neighborhood bereft of children) R found support and understanding from his peers. Without it ever being discussed, R's friends seemed to understand about his father's meanness.

Like they knew, you know, they'd ask me to come out and play hide and seek and that's what we used to do. They knew, like when I said 'No I can't come out', that was it, like they knew there's no point asking me and I'd just sit up in my room and watch them playing.

(Regardless of the day, the situation, the season, or his age, R's father never allowed his son to play outside after dinner - 6 pm. This was a family rule that could not be appealed).



Encouraged by his new friendships and drawn by their companionship, R learned an all important lesson. For the first time in his life he managed to escape his father's tyranny. Confined to the aloneness of his house, R learned to sneak out.

They're just like your normal townhouse complex, the bedrooms are up. I could go onto the garage roof and it's only like 8 feet. I'd kind of go downstairs and I'd see he's passed out. Well then I'd say, 'Well I'm going to bed'. Go up, down onto the garage and I did that for a good couple of, well grade 6 and 7. That's how I got out of the house. Cause he'd be like Friday and Saturday, he'd be passed out.

Learning to sneak out of his home offered some relief but it did little to address his growing difficulties at school. Part way through grade 7 R got kicked out of his elementary school. In the final interview between his dad and the principal, R's father demonstrated some of his characteristic brutality towards his son.

(R was sitting outside the principal's office when his father walked in). I'll never forget it for the rest of my life. He (his father) came in, didn't say a word. (The principal introduced himself and invited R and his father into his office). I got up and as soon as I was walking he (his father) grabbed my head and he just kind of moved me like threw me into the office and the principal was a small guy, and I think he was more afraid than anything. And he brought in the vice-principal who was a really big man and then my dad kind of calmed down.

After this incident R ended up moving in with his mother, with whom he would continue to live. During the last few months of his grade 7 year he attended his old elementary school (where he had gone for grades 1 - 3) and re-connected with old school friends. For awhile he settled down, tried

to work and seemed to find some success. Though the year ended on a hopeful note, R finished elementary school ill prepared for the transition to high school.

R's last 3 years in elementary school did little to improve his academic skills. The abuse and terror that he experienced at his father's hands contributed to his feeling defensive and withdrawn. In contrast to the overly controlled life that he had come to know while living with his dad, life with his mother was marked by a lack of parental control. He quickly discovered that he could ignore his mother's directions and admonitions. Perhaps his greatest difficulty was that he had to continue to shoulder his pain alone.

#### The Middle

R's experience in Junior High deepened his disengagement from school. Though he initially made a sincere effort to do his school work, the difficulty of the task and some teachers' attitudes overwhelmed him. Once again he was left feeling like an outsider.

I'm like I'm trying, this is hard, like this is really hard. I mean I just could not grasp it and I had the long hair and some of the teachers were prejudiced against guys with long hair cause I noticed my other friends who were longhairs, we wouldn't get the one on one as much as say the little geeky kid over there in the corner who couldn't get it.

Experiences like these would add to his sense of being picked on and unfairly treated. It would increase his growing isolation and aloneness. On the other hand, the few

teachers that managed to establish some rapport with R seemed to tap into a different person.

I had a few teachers who did push me. Mr. M. was my Socials and P.E. teacher. He treated me like a person. Like most of my teachers talked down to me. He always treated me like an equal, and like, I always did well for him in Socials and that. I always tried my best for him cause of how he treated me and that

A complicating factor in R's efforts to stay in school was his growing familiarity with pot.

I didn't really start doing acid and mushrooms and that until grade 9. Grade 8 was just smoking dope. I'd smoke every day at lunch. And then at night, not every night, but pretty much.

R's use of drugs played a complex role in his life. The darker side of his growing habit presented itself first in his relationship with his mother.

It (drugs) was all I wanted to do. I'd do anything to get it. That's when I started being a real asshole to my mom and I just, I'd call her a f-ing bitch just, you know, I had no respect for her whatsoever. I'd just come home and you know 2 o'clock in the morning and she'd be waiting there 'Well, what are you doing? Coming home this late. You can't do that'. And I'm like, you know, 'Yes I can'. There's nothing you can do. I come and go as I please.

On the other hand, drugs seemed to provide a solution and a temporary escape from social isolation.

It would take me away from my problems. It would make me feel happy and I'd start being a goof and everyone'd laugh. Everyone liked me cause I was funny. Cause I was stoned all the time.

Though socially accepted, R was nevertheless, quite alone.

I was shy. I would never really talk. Like sit down and talk one on one like with you, I always, I was never really into that. I think that's why I was also bad in school cause I could never express myself.

Over time his aloneness, inability to express himself and difficulty with his school work translated into tremendous frustration. Coupled with this frustration was R's "do as I please" attitude, made possible by his mother's helplessness and fueled by his drug habit. Alienated and out of control, R was most vulnerable when teachers tried to control him.

I was just, you know, a big knot tied in there and I'm like, somebody [try to] control me and I'd burst and fuck you and everything.

R's reactions to the school's expectations and efforts had inevitable consequences. The routine detentions, visits to the principal's office and suspensions served only to further disengage him from school. With the exception of one or two teachers, grade 8 and 9 constituted a primarily negative experience. While the work was getting harder his ability and willingness to make an effort steadily decreased. Describing himself as "stoned almost constantly", the notion of attending school to learn was virtually an alien concept.

#### The End

By grade 10 detentions and suspensions turned to school expulsions. R started off his grade 10 year repeating most of his grade 9 courses. A month into his grade 10 year he had his first encounter with the new principal.

I was late for school and I got a detention and he was a real prick. He says 'You're doing garbage duty by the smoke pit'. And I said, 'Hey, I'll do garbage duty anywhere on the school but I'm not doing it in the smoke pit'. And he goes 'Well no'. And then I said 'Well, fuck you'.

(Cleaning up the smoking pit was the most humiliating punishment that could be issued. Since R's friends' smoked they would witness his detention. Accepting this punishment would result in a major loss of face. Insisting that a student such as R clean up the smoking pit would have been, in my experience as an administrator, the easiest way to have him expelled ie. R's response was inevitable.)

R was expelled from his high school after the exchange with the principal. Since he was only 15 he had the legal right to attend another school in the district. His experience in his new school only served to increase his disengagement.

After I went to [my new school] I met some other guys, that's when I started really getting into the bigtime. I was doing acid like every weekend. Two doubles a night, I'd take a double, wait an hour, take the other double. And then I'd be smoking dope and in the meantime I'd be drinking beer. I took mushrooms once and O'D'd.

R lasted in his new school for only two weeks. Suspended for a day for getting into a fight, he and a friend decided to stop off at R's old school on their way home.

I go there and I see a guy, and to this day I still don't know why I did it. I was on a double (acid), and I just we did him right there. I'm not blaming the acid, it was me. And then my friend started kicking him, and I'm just standing there and like holy fuck!

Like I'm just in shock, I finally realized, like holy, I realized what I was doing.

R was charged for assault and trespassing and was not allowed to attend another school in the district.

That ended my schooling. In a way it was the worst day of my life.

Though R officially dropped out at 15, he started disengaging from school as early as grade 4. Dropping out was the culminating event in a process that started when R was in elementary school. It was a process marked by R's struggle to sustain his hope in the face of the inevitable hopelessness that would engulf him.

In grade 3 he was buoyed temporarily by his "magic pencil" and the possibility to dream that such an experience offered. Over the next few years he would use hockey, friendships, and his wit to attempt to sustain his spirit and keep this hope alive. In Junior High a few teachers gained his trust and helped to keep him going. Even his initial use of drugs constituted an effort to support himself. These efforts however, paled in comparison to the pain, confusion and brutality that he experienced regularly.

When R started grade 4 his parents divorced. Frightened and confused, his ability to concentrate withered which made school work even more difficult than it had always been. The next three years, spent with his father, resulted in little academic success and much emotional and physical abuse. Feeling abandoned and overwhelmed he responded by withdrawing. Junior High increased his

aloneness and frustration and deepened his disengagement. He found the work extremely difficult and he had little skill or inclination to seek help. Most teachers were experienced as indifferent or prejudiced which increased his already well established mistrust of adults. His growing drug habit distanced him both from school and from his mother. Abused, alienated and beyond the control of his mother, he lacked both the skills and the tolerance to meet the school's rules and expectations. By the time he left his hopelessness was such that not even his much loved hockey mattered.

I didn't care about anything else. Dope and hockey. That's it. You know. After, towards the end not even hockey, it's just dope.

Commentary.

R was born into an abused family that was terrorized by an alcoholic father. By the time he could speak R had an impression of adults as negative. His father was physically and emotionally abusive. His mother was constantly ill at ease, increasingly withdrawn, and seldom protective. Instead of being driven by curiosity and enthusiasm, R was increasingly cautious, frightened and distrustful. These were his experiences of the world; this is what he brought to school.

School did little to dispel these feelings. Though there were exceptions (grade 3) much of his experience at elementary school was frustrating and embarrassing. In part

this was due to his limited ability, in part it was due to his deteriorating home life. His parents divorce added to his insecurity. Abandoned by his mother he was left alone to deal with his drunken father. As the beatings increased and the emotional isolation deepened, R's behavior at school became more disruptive and non-compliant. In an effort to cope, he took on the persona of a clown, a role that offered protection and acceptance. Drugs helped to buffer this increasingly defensive posture; adolescence and high school only complicated matters.

As school became more demanding R became more distant. A buffoon on the outside, the private R was angry, isolated, and helpless. No one could control him, few offered direction, and he lacked the means to articulate his own needs. What was formerly a posture, now became a stance. To live was to defend. R's actions were the result of his continual need to escape. His dreadful world of embarrassment and humiliation left him constantly yearning for the self he experienced only through hockey. His joyful moments on the ice however, offered only a temporary respite. No real hope was available. As his energy to defend dissipated, and his drug intake increased, he gave in and simply withdrew.



## Chapter 7

Case Study 4: G

I don't think my mom really knew how I felt [about school]. I know when I dropped out she was really disappointed. Cause she dropped out young, when she was young too. I think my dad dropped out young too. But they've always worked.

Introduction

For the most part, my interview with G was straightforward. She seemed cooperative and quite willing to answer any questions asked. G described herself as driven by events. At the same time however, she offered little in the way of detail or elaboration. In an attempt to respect her story and her way of telling it, I hesitated to turn my probes into badgering. Over time G's matter-of-fact rendition of her experience started to fit with her process of disengagement. Her story had a listless quality to it and reflected a lack of agency. Leaving school did not involve a dramatic break or complex transition point. G never went from being deeply engaged as a student to becoming a dropout. Rather, like a poorly anchored ship, G started to drift with the first change of tide. Though her drifting was motivated by a desire to belong, her resources would fail her. Not able to direct herself and often unnoticed by both parents and teachers, she moved from student to dropout in what appeared to be a rather uneventful fashion.

In general, she found school difficult and boring. The success that she did experience was usually associated with

teachers that she liked and with whom she felt comfortable. Though popular and active socially (she was always invited to parties, went to all the dances, had an older boyfriend) she never really engaged on an academic level. As she moved into adolescence her lackluster academic involvement dissolved to disengagement with the aid of drugs. Drawing on her experience as a mother, (she has a 2 year old daughter), G mused that perhaps stronger boundaries between herself and her mother may have helped her to stay in school longer. Dwindling parental authority and direction, brought about by a divorce, contributed to G's disengagement from school.

#### The Beginning

G's memories of the first few years of elementary school are vague. The few incidents that she could recall were not positive.

I was shy. I was really shy when I was young and I remember I use to have to go to counsellors when I was really young, cause I had a behavioral problem. I remember I use to stand on the back of my desk and get into lots of trouble all the time. I would just do really stupid things like standing up on a chair and yelling.

By grade 2 the school had categorized her as a behavior problem. At this time she was seeing a psychiatrist. These visits were initiated by her parents in response to the abuse that G had suffered. She was molested by a male babysitter earlier on in the year. Beyond the initial trauma

and the acting out at school, G didn't feel that there were any lasting effects from the abuse.

Socially, G remembered herself as quiet and somewhat alone, especially during her first three years at school.

I didn't get along with the other kids ever. I had my friends but I don't really remember having close friends.

In grade 4 G moved to a different elementary school where she remained until the end of grade 7. These years were a marked improvement. She got along with her peers, her label as a behavior problem got left behind, and she developed some close friendships. By the time she reached grade 7 G was accepted by the "in crowd".

We formed a little clique. It was about 6 or 7 girls and we were like really cool. I wasn't that bad. There's like one or two that were bad out of us, that had done drugs and smoked and things like that. And they kind of brought us, made us try these things and stuff.

Academically, G found school difficult and uninteresting from the start.

I just barely made it by. Not interesting at all. I found school boring, like I really did not like school at all.

In many ways G remembered elementary school as a manageable struggle. She found the work difficult and boring, and for the first few years she was quite alone. At a very early age she was labeled as a behavior problem. Even after she developed some close friendships she remained

shy and somewhat withdrawn. This tendency to withdraw would not leave her until she left elementary school.

### The Middle

G's efforts to fit in and ways of doing so. brought her to the periphery of being a student. The transition to high school served to deepen her disengagement. Prior to starting grade 8 she discovered alcohol and drugs.

That summer I guess that's when I started getting into drugs. The first time I drank was grade 7 summer. Drugs provided social comfort. She discovered that while under the influence she would become less shy and even gutsy. At the same time G found her initiation into this world somewhat bewildering. Prompted by a conversation with a friend, G attempted to distance herself from the group by going to a different high school than all of her friends. Ironically, she had even greater access to drugs and alcohol at her new school.

That's when I got heavily into drugs and drinking. I met this other girl, M, and her mom, I guess sold [pot] all the time. So we used to steal it from her and smoke pot and drink.

Increasingly, school was becoming associated with "partying and having fun". Along the way G's will seemed to have been seduced.

Well I kind of, I remember always kind of knowing right from wrong. I knew what was right and I knew what was wrong and I always knew what I was doing was wrong. And I always thought, well maybe, you know, maybe I should stop. Maybe I should change this or that but it was just the drugs that you know. It was cool, kind of thing. It was kind of peer pressure and stuff.

Her introduction to high school was also marked by significant discipline problems. While short on specific memories G recalled that in grade 8 "she got in a lot of trouble". These types of experiences intensified her sense of school as an increasing hassle. Coupled with this growing conflict at school was an expanding freedom at home.

Near the end of Elementary school, G's home life started to change. Around grade 6 or 7, her grandparents moved out of G's house. Since both her parents worked, G and her sister would return from school to the freedom of an empty house.

We'd just come home to the house, to ourselves which was fine. We'd have all our friends over and eat my parents, all the groceries (laughing). We got in trouble for that kind of thing.

When G did encounter resistance to her desire to do as she pleased she found ways to get around the rules.

My girlfriend Trina, she had more freedom than I did, so I'd sleep over and we'd sleep in the basement and sneak out at night and go out with all our friends and things like that. The ones that were allowed out late. So, there was always, there was always a way of getting out of there.

Somewhere during her transition from Elementary school to Junior High, her parents, who G described as "fighting all the time" started divorce proceedings.

I remember walking in the house and there were banana boxes all over the house with our stuff packed in it. and that's when I knew that was it.

At the time the divorce came as a relief. Her parents' relationship had been disintegrating for some time.

"Screaming, shouting, and throwing cups and glasses" were common place. When her parents separated, G moved in with her mother and her older sister. Over the next couple of years she and her mother developed a "pretty good friendship". In part, this was due to G's new found freedom.

I just got all the freedom in the world as soon as they divorced, right. And I was kind of glad. But I missed my dad.

While she grew closer to her mother her relationship with her father started to wither. Blaming her father for the divorce, G became more distant. This distance played a role in her increasing disengagement from school.

The last time I had a real sense of boundaries was when I lived with my dad and my mom (grade 7). Even though I was starting to push, push off but my parents, my dad had always been like no, no this is not the way you act. And I was afraid of him. Like I didn't want to get into trouble. I didn't like him for it but at least my homework got done, and I was at home at a certain time. I wasn't tired for school and things like that.

Living with her mother meant that G became completely responsible for her schooling. It was a responsibility that she often shirked.

Well [my mom] was at work, right, and we didn't have baby-sitters or anything like that. So I'd just come home and after school, watch T.V. or do whatever I wanted and when she came home, 'yeah, homework is done' or, I'd just say it was done.

The freedom and sense of abandon that G discovered during grade 8 increased in the following year. For grade 9

G moved back to her neighborhood high school where her drug habit escalated.

In grade 9 I was selling it for my boyfriend at school cause he [went to another school]. So we'd, at lunchtime, we'd get stoned and then after school we'd get stoned. That's when I started skipping school because he didn't go to my school so we'd skip out and go play video games at 7-eleven.

Though G was steadily moving away from being a student, her school appears to have done little to arrest or delay the process. Her only recollection of any discussion about her behavior (skipping, coming to school stoned) occurred in a disciplinary context. Upon returning to school after a suspension she might get harassed.

You know the principal is like 'Why are you doing this, Why are you skipping, Why are you fighting'?

Other than being chastised however, nobody ever actually talked to G about her behavior. She doesn't have any recollection of a teacher or counsellor trying to reach her. On occasion, the school's response seemed to facilitate G's increasing disengagement. She recalled one particular suspension.

I got suspended for skipping out for three days. So I got suspended for three days which was kind of stupid, they're just giving me more time.

Throughout Junior High however, G managed to stay afloat academically. She enjoyed practical subjects like woodwork, cooking, and physical education. A couple of her teachers (Science and Socials) were seen as nice or cool and she therefore made an effort in their classes. Other

subjects, like Math and English, were very difficult for her. G's approach to school work enabled her to survive but did little to prepare her to continue her education.

I would cram for a test. The reason is because I wouldn't get it (in class) but I wouldn't put up my hand and say 'Look, I'm not getting this'. So I'd just kind of study, study, study, just til I got past the test and then I'd completely forget what I'd just studied. I think I've always been that way. I'd learn something just for the test and then I'd forget.

G's grade 10 year brought some changes but nothing that altered her steady movement away from school. While her dope smoking subsided (she had become really sick of pot) G's social life was still increasingly engaging. School continued to diminish in importance.

I didn't have time to do the homework so I was rushing to get everything done, where I could have done better if I took the time to do it.

At home, life was becoming more complex. Though she continued to get on well with her mother, their roles at times, seemed to reverse. This was particularly true in the conflict that surfaced between G's sister and her mother.

I could always pretty much talk to [my mother] and when my sister beat her up and stuff it was like, we kind of went through it together. It was tough love. And I remember laying in bed hearing my sister ringing the doorbell like a hundred times and banging on the doors and screaming. And I really found it hard. So, I felt like I almost had to protect my mom sometimes, from my sister if she ever tried anything again.

Near the end of grade 10 G got pregnant and ended up having an abortion. She remembered it as a very harrowing experience.



It was really, really hard on me. It was really hard. I cried a lot. I have, like dreams about little babies. Like I always thought it was a boy. Cause I'd have nightmares about a little boy screaming. Like it was a really bad experience for someone that young.

She never received any counselling or professional support with this part of her life.

#### The End

In the summer between grade 10 and 11 G discovered cocaine and acid. The following September she registered in grade 11 at the local Senior High School.

I remember it was really, really hard. Like I found that Junior High didn't prepare you for Senior Secondary school. It's more fast paced. When I went to English and Socials it was really, really hard for me and I was falling behind more and more. I remember being in Socials and um, I didn't like my teacher as it was, but he went so fast and I remember going back looking in my books and I had nothing done.

G dropped out of school 2 months into the school year.

I quit. And then I started hanging around with a different crowd. I just dropped out and I partied. Like all the time. That's all I did, for about 6 months.

For G, dropping out was the final act in a series of almost inevitable steps. Never well grounded as a student, she started to drift with the first social pressures that she encountered. While she was immersing herself in the world of drugs and parties, her parents started ending their relationship. At a time when she was feeling most buffeted, her primary source of guidance and direction, her father, disappeared. Teachers, counsellors and administrators

failed to reach her or never really tried. At home she had more freedom than she could manage; at school she had the choice between boredom and difficulty on the one hand and social acceptance and feeling good on the other. Drifting and forgetting and indulging in fantasy became the order of the day.

I didn't even think. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I, I just thought, I've always had this feeling I was gonna win the lottery kind of thing (laughing). There's got to be an easy way for me, that kind of thing. I always wanted the easy way out or marry rich or something. I never really thought along the lines of a career or anything like that, til I had Taylor (her daughter).

By the time she reached grade 11 the difficulty of the subject matter and the pace proved to be more than G could handle.

#### Commentary.

From the very beginning, G found it difficult to feel that she belonged at school. Her first 4 years were associated with feelings of isolation, struggle and oddness. She was shy and therefor often alone. The subject matter was difficult and put academic engagement out of grasp. A victim of abuse, she started acting out in class and was referred to counselling to address her inappropriate behavior. When she transferred schools at the end of grade 3, fitting in remained an issue of significant proportions. Though her social life improved over the next few years it was not until grade 7 that a means of grounding herself

became available to G. Near the end of grade 7, G experienced a level of affirmation at school that she had never known. It came from a potent group of her peers and it was fueled by behavior that the school would neither condone nor tolerate. Unfortunately, the acceptance that she received was rooted in what would be seen as a stance of opposition, a stance which would simultaneously offer her identity while it continued to distance her from academic involvement. Moreover, it came at a time when she was getting ready to leave elementary school and transfer to junior high.

At this critical juncture, when she was still very open to the more difficult task (working at school vs. drifting towards partying) the limited support and guidance that her home offered, evaporated. G's grandparents were no longer available to supervise the children (G, her sister, and their friends) when they returned from school. Home became a hangout, a place where, for a few hours a day curiosity and mischief had free reign. Shortly thereafter, her parent's divorced and G's experiment in temporary carefree living turned into a permanent reality. This experience would help move G beyond the grasp of adult authority. When her father, the disciplinarian, moved out of the home he also moved out of her life. In turn, G was given unfettered freedom and unmanageable responsibility. G's transition to high school then, was made more difficult by her lack of academic skills, a level of freedom that she couldn't

manage, and her still present shyness. At the age of 13 she found herself faced with a choice marked by struggle, hardship, pain and aloneness on the one hand and ease, comfort, acceptance, and recognition on the other. Though she felt it was wrong, she lacked the will to counter her drift towards disengagement. She accepted the freedom and increasingly ignored the responsibility.

High school quickly became a place to meet people who liked to party and who had access to drugs. Not only did G like these activities, she was also good at them. She discovered that under the influence of drugs she lost her shyness. Coupled with her physical attraction, this new G found a way to be, in an environment that had seldom offered her comfort, let alone acceptance. Now the shy, withdrawn, isolated little girl started becoming an outgoing, and popular adolescent. As her social status increased and her identity as a party girl took form, her interest in school decreased. Her grounding in this quick, effortless, lifestyle was enhanced when she acquired an older boyfriend for whom she sold pot. So engaging and complete was this world, that by grade 10 she was attending to school work only when she had the time.

Once again her home failed her. Instead of being a source of guidance and direction her mother, pulled her into a parenting role. Her mother's need added to G's growing illusion of being an adult while making her increasingly less connected to school. Accustomed to making her own

decisions, and now involved in protecting her mother, G soon moved beyond the school's sphere of influence. When the school utilized its power through suspensions, G's free time and disengagement increased. At the age of 16, G was needed and relied upon by her mother, valued and envied by her peers, and increasingly helpless when it came to her schooling. The pregnancy, abortion, and depression that followed brought to a head the competing, though uneven forces in her life. Faced with the overwhelming difficulty of grade 11, G cut herself off from the ever increasing pain of the would-be student and cocooned herself in an illusionary world of drugs and parties.

## Chapter 8

### Case Study 5: L

Some days I remember going into school thinking, okay, today I'm going to do really, really, good. And I'd think about it all the time. But then I'd get there and it wouldn't turn out that way.

When I think about it now, it's like yea, I wasted lots of time. Lots of time. [As to dropping out] I'd say probably 70% was my fault and 30% was because of the school.

No one ever really came down hard and said like, you have to show up and you have to do this. And, I was just kind of floated up from grade eight to grade ten and then finally, they, I guess said no more.

### Introduction

L's open and honest manner made certain aspects of the interview quite easy. She readily described and willingly acknowledged her role in the process of disengaging from school. L was also very adept at articulating parts of the system that failed her. She seemed to have a good understanding of the role that home life played in her school experience. In many ways L seemed very much at peace with her story.

At the same time, I found her experience extremely frustrating. Having worked as an educator for the past 17 years, I couldn't let go of the feeling that she should have made it. L is bright and energetic. As a student she was very interested in sports, well accepted socially, and seemed to belong. Though she was not particularly interested in the subject matter, she could and at times

did, excel. Many teachers seemed to like her. Very strong willed, L not only knew how to cope but also overcame several difficulties. Though she knew how to skip and get away with it, L could and did refrain from skipping when she was engaged in her schooling. Even though she had access to drugs and at times smoked pot excessively, L managed to curb this desire when she decided to apply herself academically. When she failed grade 10 she changed schools, repeated the grade and had a successful year. This focused effort and engagement stands in stark contrast to much of the rest of her academic experience. It demonstrates L's ability, potential, and capacity to utilize her will. At the same time, L's flash of success was not enough to counter the power of habit and ingrained belief. Much of her schooling (especially her Junior High experience) was an exercise in disengagement and indifference. This force of habit was only temporarily halted by her successful grade 10 year. In many ways, L's disengagement is the story of her failure to become a student.

### The Beginning

One of L's earliest school memories is of grade 5.

Probably the first day in grade five, my dad came to school with me, took the teacher out in the hallway and said that I had an attitude problem. Told the teacher I didn't like being told what to do and if the teacher was having any problems with me to give my dad a call.

Contrary to her dad's point of view, L doesn't recall having an attitude problem. She did however, have some difficulty

with school rules, specifically with issues of authority. School routines, like needing to get permission to get a drink or to go to the bathroom, were irksome for her. At the heart of the issue was L's characteristic stubbornness. Routines therefore, always carried the possibility of becoming encounters.

On a general level she never seemed to take school too seriously. As she remembered it, "School was just like a place to joke around". Yet, L recalled that she was a good student. Her teachers shared this opinion.

I read back on my report cards and they say that L is a good student but she could apply herself better.

L's memories of her elementary school educators are quite positive. Many were remembered as fine teachers whom she got along with most of the time. Socially, L was popular and had lots of friends. She always excelled at sports.

L also demonstrated a high degree of flexibility. In total she went to three different elementary schools. These moves, brought about due to changing school populations and subsequent boundary adjustments, appear to have been handled with ease.

I didn't mind it cause one of my girlfriends came with me so it wasn't a big thing at all.

In short, life at elementary school appears to have been a rather satisfactory experience for L. She was well liked by both her peers and by her teachers. Though her



strong will could readily help transform everyday events into problems, L managed to contain herself. Athletically, L was very active and successful; academically, she was seen as very capable though less than fully engaged.

Life at home was somewhat less stable. The difficulties in her parents' relationship, which had been present for some time, were beginning to surface.

They were always fighting, all the time. I hated it. I always stuck up for my mom. My dad had cheated on my mom, with my aunt. I guess it went on for a long, long time. And I remember telling my mom when I was probably in grade 6 or 7 that I heard them (father and aunt) kissing. So she accused him and he denied it, but I swore all along that I knew. Then I found out [that it was true] and we moved out. It was the summer of grade 7 going into grade 8.

### The Middle

In some ways Junior High was a continuation of elementary school. L was still in French Immersion and she remained active physically through cheerleading and soccer. Academically, her involvement remained quite limited and her grades quite low. Her life at home, though different in that her parents had split up, was in some ways unchanged.

[My mom] tried to keep us in a routine. She was pretty strict and I listened to her.

This strictness however, had never really applied to school issues.

They never really gave me trouble for it (teachers' this, you have to apply yourself and, but they never ever, like, took away the T.V. or grounded me or nothing. They were pretty lenient that way. Maybe if they would have done more, I would have went right through (school). But you can't really blame them.

It's more me. I should have applied myself when I was there.

In contrast to her easygoing years at elementary school, grade 8 was associated with a heightened level of tension. Though much of the detail escapes her, L recalled that grade 8 was fraught with social turmoil.

I was mean, I know that, really mean. I always got into fights at school.

Some subject areas and a couple of teachers proved to be particularly troublesome. Though she often came to school determined to do well, math class was difficult to survive.

I'd walk in the math class and he would come in or whatever and tell us to sit down and say, he might say to me, L, sit over there, cause I was never allowed to sit with any of my friends. And I'd be like, no, I'm going to sit right here. Cause in my head I'm thinking, okay, today I'm going to do what I'm supposed to do. But as soon as he'd come in he'd say, no, you sit here. Forget it, I'm going to sit here. And that would just start it and then I'd yell at him and he'd yell back and he'd just, okay get out. So that didn't work.

One experience verged on the bizarre.

I don't know if it was just his attitude, but the whole class didn't like him and I don't think he liked us. One day he freaked out and I remember him picking up the back of my desk and flipping it backwards [with L in it] and I went down to the principal's office and told him.

While L saw him as a mean teacher and though she felt stupid and humiliated by this incident, she never discussed it with her parents. She kept it to herself because L felt that "she was probably being the class clown".

Other classes started off well and ended poorly.

I really, really, liked my Consumer Ed. teacher and she really liked me. I was doing really, really good cause I really liked the teacher so I'd want to please the

teacher by doing good. I'd always do my homework, I'd always do what I was supposed to do. And she left for a while and we had a substitute. The substitute used to phone my mom all the time and say, I really like L, I think she's like totally nice but we have a personality conflict. And she'd always kick me out of class, always.

Getting kicked out of class became a common experience for L. Unlike in the past however, her academic efforts were now affecting her athletic pursuits.

When the time came to go on, like the team trips, I could never go. But they would never say you can't go until the day before we were supposed to be leaving. I guess, in my head I would think, oh, they'll let me go. Like they need me, more or less kind of thing. But no, I never got to go.

This difficulty in recognizing that consequences existed continued to be a problem. When L failed grade 8 the school offered her a choice of repeating grade 8 French Immersion or going into the grade 9 English program. She opted for grade 9 and carried on with increasing disengagement. Her grade 9 year and her first try at grade 10 were marked by a growing indifference about school.

It (junior high) was all more or less the same. You just kind of went and if you didn't feel like going you'd leave. Sometimes I'd skip the whole day, sometimes maybe a couple of classes.

L's disengagement was deepened by her experimentation with drugs.

I'd just sleep in some of my classes cause you'd get so stoned at lunchtime you'd just sleep. Sometimes before school too.

During this 2 year period her parents never learned that L was skipping. The school, in turn, never discovered her drug habit. L managed to make it through grade 9 but ended up failing grade 10. It was a painful experience that shook her out of her indifference and provided her with a real opportunity to engage.

I hated failing. It was embarrassing and it was more embarrassing that all my friends were all leaving and going to a different school (senior high). And I didn't want to be with all the, like the grade nines going into grade ten. That's why I left and went to a different school. I seemed to apply myself there.

L did very well her second time through grade 10. She stopped skipping, seldom indulged in drugs and applied herself academically. So complete was her turnaround that she overcame one of her biggest academic hurdles--math. She credits her teacher for this success.

Like I'm useless at math, like if I have money I can count it but that's about it. But he (her grade 10 teacher) took the time and he'd explain it step by step if you didn't understand it. He'd do it again and again and again until you understood it. And I got it and I got an "A" in Math.

Repeating grade 10 proved to be a positive experience. In addition to math, L did very well in her other subjects as well. At long last she was using her strong will to her benefit. When she finished grade 10, L moved on to Senior High with genuine hope and possibility. Academic success appeared to be within her grasp.

## The End

During her first month of grade 11 L worked very hard.

I'd say for the first month I was doing, like, school all day long and then I was doing night school. I was going to school during the day and at night cause I wanted to try and get everything and get into grade 12 and graduate with the rest of my class.

Her success and her effort were short lived. By the end of L's first month in senior high she was running into difficulties.

I was in math and I couldn't, I hated the teacher, I couldn't stand him. You'd ask him to explain it and he'd be like, I already did. So I just gave up.

Though she had always found Math difficult, the deeper issue was the relationship between L and her instructors. Impatient teachers tended to defeat L quickly.

Just the way they're talking, explaining it to you. Then you feel stupid cause you've already asked once and you don't want to ask again cause you can tell that they're thinking in their head 'Well, why don't you understand this Yet? Everyone else seems to get it, why don't you?' You just feel dumb asking anymore. So then it's like, forget it. I'm not even gonna ask.

L's experience in math brought her back to her course of disengagement. The difficulty of the subject coupled with her perception of the teacher's attitude, unhinged her. Somewhere during the second month of school she stopped going to Math. Since the same teacher taught Consumer Education, she stopped going to this class as well.

As in the past, the school didn't seem to notice.

Nobody ever said anything to me about missing these classes. Well, at first the computer that used to phone home for not being there would phone home but I'd just hear it and hang up.

Increasingly discouraged, L also dropped her courses at night school. With this, her slide towards disengagement rapidly turned into a freefall.

Just before I dropped out I started partying all the time and doing drugs.

Somewhere during her third month into grade 11 L decided to leave school.

I phoned my mom at work and said I quit today. She's like why and all this stuff. And it's like I'm not doing it. Forget it. I'm not going to pass anyway so I'm not going to do it.

Though capable and at times interested, L spent most of her time at school as an observer. Participation when it did occur, was usually the byproduct of a relationship. When she found teachers with whom she could connect L applied herself. To often though, she occupied a position of indifference. In the end this established way of being proved to difficult to overcome with mere intention and desire.

#### Commentary.

L's story of disengagement has a simplistic, straight forwardness about it. She did not like school, had a hard time taking it seriously and never managed to get beyond the

bad habits (limited effort, skipping, predictable confrontation) one might associate with such an approach. At the same time, L's failure is about lost opportunities. These went hand in hand with an emotional frailness, a thin skinned, too easily generated defensiveness. When she experienced opposition and criticism she became stubborn, argumentative, and ultimately self-destructive. When she could develop a rapport she engaged and found success. Both her parents and the school, albeit inadvertently, played a roll in L's failures. Her story of disengagement is about L's defensive and stubborn tendencies and the quality of her relationships. This combination of a way of being and relationship, to often translated into an oppositional stance on L's part.

Sometimes those who cared offered her a self-defeating stance. When she was only 10, her father signaled his frustration and resignation with L through his invitation to her grade 5 teacher. Rather than helping L with her "attitude problem" he was determined to defeat it. His implied threat though proved to be hollow. Her home life was strict, but this strictness didn't pertain to matters of school. Beyond talking to L about her lack of effort, her parents did little to foster a different approach to school.

On other occasions, opportunities for contact were lost through a lack of imagination. At a critical juncture in her school life (grade eight) the high school bumbled an opportunity to entice her to belong. Instead of using L's

athletic abilities to pull her into the system, the school's "do or die" approach provided her with another oppositional opportunity. Numerous teachers played out the same role thereby increasing her defiance. While the source of L's defensive stubbornness remains ambiguous, her parents and the school's inability to help her overcome this drawback is clear. Over time, the oppositional stance became a habit that she couldn't get beyond.



## Chapter 9

Case Study 6: B

I had a wonderful teacher in grade 5. Of course I got pulled out of grade 5. She was great. She was just wonderful. She was just uhm, there was enough of a strong hand, so there was enough of a constriction and stuff and yet enough freedom, creativity, you know, not just do what you want but do what you want within these guidelines.

No, I still believe that it was my parents fault. Not, not that they were bad parents but I think if I hadn't gone through all that uhm, I truly believe if I had stayed in grade six and gone on to grade seven like, like, you know. I was pulled out of so many of my circle of friends, so many times. And so many different programs, I just, I think if I had stayed with that group who all graduated and went on to, you know, do lovely things.

I still look at it and you know, all those people did it, why couldn't I. I still feel that way. It's like why couldn't I graduate. Everyone else did. I could have done it, I should have done it, but I didn't.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold  
(The Second Coming  
W.B.Yeats)

Introduction

Though she was honest and forthright, interviewing B was not straightforward. Often her responses were strewn with partial sentences, musings, and thoughts in the process of being developed. At other times, she was clear, precise and to the point. On a few occasions B offered a perspective of her life as a student only to dismiss it as too analytical. This mixture of clarity and ambiguity, sureness and uncertainty captures her struggle to make sense

of that period of her life. She accepts, in part, her responsibility for the outcome. At the same time, there is a sense of somehow, having been inappropriately launched. Her story is somewhat akin to a spark bouncing between the two poles of "if only" and "I should have".

B dropped out of school when she was 15. There was no singular issue or event that caused her to leave. To this day, she finds her failure to graduate frustrating, even somewhat puzzling. B is bright and articulate. She has led a rich and in some ways even privileged life. At the same time, she was anything but cocooned. In many ways B's life experience was well beyond her age. Capable, at times haughty, and always more vulnerable than her presentation would suggest, B never established roots that would sustain her. Ungrounded, her abilities and experiences often facilitated her disengagement.

#### The Beginning

B's memories of her early school experiences were very positive.

I did kindergarten, grade 1 and 2 back east. School was great. Got straight A's. Came out her and was a little bored. Still got straight A's though. I still liked school. I was very social. Had lots of friends.

When she entered grade 5 her grades dropped to C's and D's (from straight A's) and the school decided to have her tested.

So they pulled me out of grade 5 and figured out that I was quite bright and put me into grade 6 right away. I got straight A's again that year. It wasn't a great year. They all thought, the grade 6's all thought I should be in grade 5.

Over time B worked through the other kids' resentment and by the end of the year "it was all fine and dandy". No sooner had she settled in than it was time to move.

Then my mom decides that French Immersion would be a really neat idea. And, none of these decisions were mine. I didn't say, I didn't get to choose whether I would be in grade 6 or grade 5. They just put me into grade 6. Anyway, my mom decided that this would be a really nifty thing for me to do and so I had to do grade 6 over again and I'm like, well why did you make me do grade 6, so that, at that point I got a little, I got a little, you know. I'm with a totally different group of people, and if you check that class, this is sort of interesting, that grade 6 class, the French Immersion one, four people graduated, out of 23 students. So I mean there were some problems.

Once again though, B excelled (straight A's). She enjoyed the year and found "it was neat learning a new language".

Grade 7, on the other hand, presented some difficulty.

We had a teacher who was quite horrible. I mean I got a "B" in Math but we never opened a math book. I mean, never. Not once. She was just very, umh, she couldn't control herself at all. I mean she would run out of the classroom crying and she just, she didn't do a lot of teaching that year. It was really tough when we went into Junior High.

Towards the end of grade 7 B's social life started to change, as did her relationship with her parents.

I remember I started lying to my parents in grade seven, cause I mean the older kids went out and drank and stuff and so. You know we wanted to, so we did. You know I'd say we'd been to the movies but we didn't. And it was only very mild in grade 7, you know you're only 12. How much alcohol can you get, eh?

While she was relatively innocent and naive socially, in other ways B was quite experienced. Though she couldn't fully articulate it at the time, B was the first member of the family to openly recognize and address her mother's alcoholism.

I just remember not wanting to go home. Like I would walk home crying. I didn't want her to be home. Probably at 11 or so I started telling my mom that she had a problem. I used to take care of her when she got home and she was drunk. If I asked my brother for help he'd just leave. If I asked my dad for help he'd just say 'Oh she's fine. Just put her to bed, she's not feeling well'. And so, no one would admit it except me. I handled her for years. You know, you become the parent. Only when she was drinking.

B parented her mother for the next 4 years. Painful and often bewildering, the experience forced on her a level of independence and responsibility far beyond her age. Other aspects of B's upbringing also required her to be very independent.

My parents were always very, and this is not a gripe against them. They weren't home a lot growing up. So that we (she and her brother) were very independent. They were there when we needed them. When we moved out here, we didn't have sitters, we were just that independent. We made dinner for ourselves. Yea, we had a lot of freedom. Maybe too much, I'm not sure.

By the time she left elementary school, B was, in many ways, her own person. Her upbringing and the experience of looking after her mother fostered a sense of independence and bravado. Success at school validated her belief and trust in her intelligence and abilities. Poised, confident, and at times, very mature she appeared well prepared for her

transition to junior high. At the same time her grade 7 year was a poor preparation for grade 8. Her troubled teacher's incompetence created an environment which lacked order. Once again her experience made self reliance a natural option. The surface image that was taking hold belied the twelve year old that resided within.

I've always been a goody two-shoes on the inside. You know what I mean, I'm just so honest.

### The Middle

B started junior high with the typical apprehensions shared by most grade 8's (bigger kids, new teachers, unknown situations). She was still in French Immersion which meant she was with many of her friends from elementary school. While this group provided comfort and security, it also had certain drawbacks.

We were a rougher crowd than the rest of the school and that was bizarre cause of course you were the select group. I mean there were some, guess you'd call them goody-two-shoes but the rest were pretty rough. And, we started the drugs then. I don't know how or why. I guess cause we always hung around older kids. Of course they were doing it.

With the drugs came a more lackadaisical approach to school, some skipping and routine detentions. Confronting teachers also started to become routine.

I was a troublemaker. I was really mouthy, really mouthy, very cheeky. If the teacher was causing me some distress I just got very cheeky and it didn't matter to me if it was in front of everybody or not, whether it was appropriate or not.

Her willingness and ability to confront authority made B a formidable challenge to any adult. Exercising this power in the classroom had inevitable consequences.

Instead of letting fly, I'd make fun of them. I knew I was intelligent that way. If I just yell and call them asshole, it doesn't do much to a teacher. But if you can make them look stupid. Well, I had control of the situation (confrontation) but I still had to leave the classroom.

A contributing factor to B's difficulties with authority was her view of respect.

I think for me, the problem was most people look up to their teachers. For me, I don't think everybody, I don't care how old you are, I mean I don't look down on people who are younger than me and I don't look up to people who are older than me. I just think, you're on the same level. You should start there anyway. Like, teachers, they all want respect. Right? Well, why should I give it to you, if you, you know, you're not going to have any for me.

The turmoil of grade 8 was increased by unexpected academic difficulties.

I've always been sort of fairly confident in my intelligence. But in Math, I don't understand. When we were doing like Algebra in grade 6, cause we had a special group, I was fine. And then I started to do Algebra in grade 8 and I couldn't, I couldn't grasp it and I don't understand cause I used to be able to do it.

B's difficulties in math were compounded by her impatience.

Normally I learn things very quickly and if I can't, I don't want to. Like if I don't get it the first time, I don't want to learn it. So when we got to that, my dad and I would just get into arguments because I got back into Algebra and I couldn't do it. I couldn't understand why. I'd get very mad and frustrated and get mad at him but of course it wasn't his fault. So he stopped teaching me.

While B was having some difficulties in the classroom, socially she was very engaged with school life.

I was in band, I was in choir, I was a tomboy so I played all the sports. I was never embarrassed about the things that I was involved in. Like, most kids weren't involved in band and that kind of stuff. But I always enjoyed it. I could be gay, you know, it didn't matter.

This exuberance and "can do" sensibility was also prevalent at home.

Uhm, in grade 7, I lied to them. So in grade 8 I realized I can still do these things. They can everything which I'm not sure whether it was a good or bad thing for them. There's the drugs, you know, I smoke, I drink, you know. Hey mom, I had sex. So I told them everything. I never hid anything from them from that point on. Not much anyway. And you know, like I went out and they said stay home, and I went out all night, you know. I would phone and tell them where I was, you know, even though I wasn't supposed to be there. Like goody-two-shoes. Hey mom, piss on you but here's the phone number where I'll be.

Overall, grade 8 turned out to be a difficult year, especially academically. B's budding social life and growing disengagement from school was reflected in her grades.

The first term I got A's and B's. And then the next I got B's and C's. And then I just barely passed the year.

At the end of grade 8 B decided to leave French Immersion and enrolled in an English program for grade 9. In September she attended another school. Quick to make

friends, she soon had access to a constant supply of free drugs.

Grade nine, we did drugs the whole year. I don't remember much of grade 9. We'd smoke in the morning, at lunch, all the time. It's so weird, I don't have that, I mean, I don't see myself as that kind of person.

In addition to further disengaging her from school, B's drug use seems to have had a more devastating effect.

What's really bizarre is that I used to be very, very, outgoing in terms of, you know I could go up and sing in front of people and it didn't matter. Like after the drugs things started to change, I know that for sure. Like grade 8, I still remember doing a skit and being fine. I hit grade 9 and I lost it. I mean I'd give up a percentage of my mark just cause I didn't want to say anything. I just remember being, all of a sudden, this person who wouldn't speak in front of a group.

While this new fear prevented B from speaking in front of a group it didn't curtail her behavior. Two months after school started, she was asked to leave. B remembers it as a painful experience.

Well inside it was, I was upset. How could this happen. You know, although I was always a troublemaker, I was always thought of as a fairly good person. But on the outside it was always kind of cool, you were hanging around with a rough crowd, you got kicked out of school, you know.

B returned to the school she had attended the previous year. At the end of the school year she was, once again, kicked out. Academically, grade 9 turned out worse than grade 8.

I failed two classes. I did summer school. I got 98% in both classes and went on my merry way. And so I was



like, well, how come I can do that and I can't do it in school. It just, you know, baffled my mind.

The other significant development in B's life was that she moved out of her home. She was 14 years old. The initial move occurred when she went to summer school and didn't result in any acrimony between B and her parents. Classes would be easier to attend if she stayed at a friend's place. From this point on she would move in and out of her home at will. Other moves were filled with tension and conflict.

I mean it wasn't them (parents). I think it's just, you know, the arrogant attitude. Conquering the world. A teenager. I know everything. And they didn't have much control. Cause I figured out, they tell me I'm grounded, I go out. More grounding, I mean ground me till I'm dead, who cares.

By the time she had finished grade 9, B was beyond the control of any adult in her life. Though she had managed adult responsibilities, she lacked the patience, perspective, and sensibility that sometimes come with age. What she could do for her mother she could not do for herself. Though many teachers liked her, she was hard to tolerate in class. Her intelligence and skills were a pale substitute for emotional maturity and security. Her independence and self-reliance, which helped her to cope at home and thrive at school (when she applied herself) contributed to her ability and willingness to confront. At a time when she was desperately in need of guidance, she was on her own. Lacking direction, her energies were regularly

misspent and often resulted in forced change. The security and belonging that comes with a predictable, safe environment never materialized. Over time the gap between the cool, controlled veneer and the goody-two-shoes inside her was widening. Most frightening and debilitating of all, she was losing her public voice.

### The End

B went to another school for grade 10. She stayed for 4 days.

I don't know why I had ever enrolled. I skated on a team. So we were close. A lot of them went there so that's why I thought I'd go. But, outside of skating I didn't really have much in common with them.

Even though she had been kicked out in grade 9, B returned to her old school.

The principal really liked me, even though I was a troublemaker. And I went back and pleaded my case. Like, you know, I was all gung-ho in doing school and being so good. You always start out that way. You've got your notebook, you know.

This time around there was a marked improvement in her behavior, although her spirit seemed to be withering.

I wasn't as mouthy or cheeky. I was more shy, I was more refined. Like I wasn't, no, not refined, more strong. I'm not sure if the drugs did that to me or what, but I wouldn't speak in front of my classes anymore. I didn't raise, you know, any trouble cause I was too shy. But my grades were horrible.

Part way through the year B was moved to another school. She can't remember how it came about, but it wasn't her

decision. It was the fifth time she had changed schools since she left elementary school.

At her new school, B applied herself and made it on the honor role for the next reporting period. She couldn't recall why she had suddenly found more success other than the fact that she didn't have any established friendships. Her success didn't last.

It's really stupid. One day I wanted to go home, I was not feeling well or whatever. I said, you know, I'm going to go home. And he says, no you're not. And I said, yeah, I'm going home. And he said, if you go home, you can't come back. And I went home and I never came back. It's really stupid. Like even then I knew it was stupid. But I wasn't angry. You know, oh fine, that's your decision. I can move to another school. That's when I dropped out. Then I moved out, again.

B's process of disengagement from school is in some ways the story of her unbridled independence. A logical extension of her home and school experience, her self-reliance became a liability as she moved into the confusion of adolescence. Though she could adjust socially, and achieve academically, she never learned to trust adequately. Not since her short stay in grade 5 had she encountered an educator whose direction she would accept. Trusting others was much more difficult than relinquishing control. As she put it, "I always have to be in control but I don't think I like being controlling". The more control that she mustered the less able she was of taking direction. Alienated by circumstance and blinded by the illusion of her own

omnipotence, she managed to stay at the wheel until she drove her ship ashore.

Commentary.

B's disengagement from school is rooted in her premature independence, her parent's difficulties, and her substantial abilities. Elementary school provided her with experiences of success and feelings of insecurity. The former she took for granted; the latter she tried to overcome. This imbalance between her academic accomplishments and her emotional needs was complicated by her mother's alcoholism, her father's denial of the problem, and her parent's inaccessibility. These factors fostered a level of confidence and competence that was false, unsustainable and well beyond her emotional development. Before she started high school B had developed an intolerance for personal failure, an independence that was daunting, and a sense of adults as her equals. Her mother's keeper and her father's little girl, she entered adolescence unfettered and unguided.

Alone, in charge, and confused, she filled the void with activity. When drugs were available she took them, as sex became possible she participated, and if teachers bothered her she confronted them. Though active, she was not engaged. Very capable, she was starting to fail. Her difficulties in math added to B's frustration while further distancing her from her father. The many school changes added to the sense of being groundless and started to sap

her spirit. As the meaninglessness increased she became more alienated and uncharacteristically silent. By the time she dropped out, leaving made as much sense as staying.

## Chapter 10

Case Study 7: M

I can only remember bad things when I was a little girl.

I had so many ideas and I was just walking around and there was a smile on my face and me and my mom were always so good to each other. I can remember my mom hugging me and holding me and telling me she was always going to be there for me. And then when I hit nine, nothing mattered anymore.

I always wanted to be so called normal. Have a normal life, a normal house, a normal dog, and a normal family. But it doesn't ever work out anymore. Don't get married if you're going to get divorced. Don't have children if you can't take care of yourself. You know. I don't want fucking kids. I don't want to bring somebody into this hell-hole when I don't even want to be here. I'm at the point in my life where I'm not going to go out and meet people because I don't really enjoy being hurt. I don't really have the patience to go through all the bullshit with people and I think my life has made me that way. I have no friends now. Not one. I've got a boyfriend. I've got my mother. I've got a cousin. And that's it. That's all the people I ever talk to. It's pretty fucking lame at 16 years old, you know. I feel like I'm fucking 40 or something.

Introduction

Listening to M's story was a numbing experience. Her life was so riddled with ugliness, cruelty, and pain that on several occasions I caught myself withdrawing from the interview. This attempt to protect myself by retreating, mirrors in some ways, M's efforts to cope with her life. When the insanity that was her life started to spill into school, she reacted by escaping to the street. Running to the street was more than the last step in her process of

disengagement from school, it was primarily, the necessary act of a child trying to shield herself from an unbearable existence.

M entered the world as the first and only child of a single, 17-year-old mother. Ostracized by her parents over the pregnancy and already a victim of incest, M's mother had little more to offer than good intentions. At times even these were lacking. Caught up in her own problems and driven by her unfulfilled needs, she would often fail to nurture or even protect her daughter. Born into this limiting household, the notion of attending school, let alone learning, often presented itself as a cruel hoax to M. For a brief period of time, she appeared to have a chance to survive in the system. This possibility though, was short lived. In the end disengagement was more of a necessity than a choice.

### The Beginning

M's earliest memory is of a near death experience. She and her mother were at Circus Circus in Los Vegas.

I was floating with my cousin and I was in one of those tubes and I wedged off and I floated all the way to the bottom, or I sunk all the way to the bottom. And I couldn't breathe and my cousin swam down and got me. He saved my life cause my mom didn't know how to swim. She was just screaming. It was so weird.

In many ways, this avoidable incident captured the flavor of what life and school had to offer M.

My second memory was when I was molested. It was my mom's boyfriend's little brother. He was a teenager.

I don't know I always looked at him like, like family or something. Cause I grew up with my mom's boyfriends. I called him dad and everything. And I didn't tell anybody cause he was like family. And I didn't really understand at the time what was going on. And I forgot it. And then I saw him (several years later) and the memory came back.

M was in grade 1 when she recalled the event. Her memory was triggered by a visit she and her mother paid to mom's old boyfriend. Though she recalled the incident, she still didn't attach any meaning or significance to it. When she started kindergarten then, M acted in many ways like a typical child.

I remember walking in the doors with my lunchkit and smelling glue. We always used glue, that white paste stuff. You had to use popsicle sticks to do it and macaroni's and stuff like that. I just remember that it was a fun time in my life

Grade 1 was even better. Here she encountered a level of care, compassion and competence that she had never known.

She was my favorite teacher ever. And, we would have to pray on our desk before we started work. And, at the end of the year, we all went to her house and she made us bouillon. And I learned what a "couple" and what a "few" meant. She was always interested in, in everything. We did a project with chicks and they were all running around and everything. When I left there, she sent me a Christmas card.

In addition to being kind and giving, her grade 1 teacher also picked up on M's academic needs.

She put me into learning assistance class because I was not really all there. For my reading and stuff. Cause I just wasn't interested in doing it.



Two weeks into grade 2 M changed schools. She remembered it as a disorienting experience.

They moved me to JR. JR was like lower class compared to HS and all my friends from HS didn't like me any more cause I went to JR. And everybody at JR called me a snob cause I was from HS. (Sarcastically) So I had like, just so much fun in grade 2.

M did not adjust quickly. What started out as disorientation ended up as fear.

I got scared when I went there cause HS was like, all the rich kids went there. Like, all Persian kitties and I mean everybody lived in that, that area. everybody had their own houses and, and you could walk to your friends house and I mean it was just a totally different atmosphere and then when I went to JR everybody was like, you know, playing with fire and getting into trouble and, you know, smoking. I mean it was just too much.

In time M would adjust. Whatever "Persian kitten" aspirations she had soon vanished. Poorly prepared to attend school from the start, she now found herself in an environment where being an attentive student was frowned upon by many of her peers. While numerous experiences would play a part in this transition, the single most significant event occurred when she was nine.

### The Middle

Alone for some time, M's mother returned home one day with a new boyfriend. She had met him at a Hell's Angels party.

She started going out with this biker guy. And I told my mom I don't like him. He's weird. Even from the very beginning, the very moment I met him I knew there was something wrong. And she never really listened to

me about it and then, and then the guy's screwing me. But, I kind of blame my mom for it I think.

It would take 2 years for the court system to address the assault. Both the event and the due process of law had a devastating effect on M. At school, it affected her ability to learn.

Ever since I was molested I had problems, ever since I was molested I've had problems in school. My grades slipped. Big time slipped. Whoosh. You know, in subjects I was normally good at. Uhm, my lack of concentration, my lack of trust.

Socially, stories about the abuse turned her into a freak.

I guess it got around that I was molested and I walked into the girls' bathroom and these girls were talking about it. And I was still in elementary [school]. It was embarrassing.

Even the process of going to therapy had its price, especially with her peers.

I remember him [the therapist] giving me bubble gum. But I was always different after that. And I was like, every single time I remember I was like "Why do I have to go mom?" I'm okay, I'm normal." You know. But I knew I wasn't. But I didn't want to, I didn't want to wait in this office with these crazy people, you know. I felt crazy. And at school like, it was always, where are you going, M? No where. Well why do you always leave school at two, you know, two half hours early every [week]? Because. Well because why? Fuck you! And that's why I started fighting. Because people were always prying. People always wanted to know everything about me.

On a broader scale, the experience took from M any vestiges of innocence that remained.

Yeah. Yeah. When I, when I was nine, that's when I realized that the system was not there to protect you.

The system is there to fuck you over. That's when I knew that I had no reason to live because, because they say that they're there to help and protect you, why do they let these things happen to you then? Like my mother! She said she was there to help me and protect me. Why'd that happen to me then. There is no excuses. I don't care what anyone says. It should not have happened but it did anyway. So who's to blame. Sure as fuck not me! I was just a total different person. In school I mean, I felt older than the rest of my peers because I, I mean I had already gone to court, I'd already, you know.

The process of justice added to and prolonged her pain. Even those who tried to help ended up traumatizing her.

It was hell. It was hell. Well, I, okay I remember, these are the memories I have about that whole scenario. Okay. My first Pap test when I was nine years old. I'm sitting in the hospital for hours and hours. Uhm, sitting in the police station because he threatened to blow our heads off. Being at school and being taken away from hop-scotch and skipping because there was a man of his description around the playground and I wasn't allowed to be outside because he had threatened that he was going to chop off my fingers and my tongue.

At a time when she most needed people the world abandoned her. Rather than moving to support her, M's grandparents reacted with shame and concern about the family name.

And my grandparents told her [my mother] to put it in the closet. You know, keep it in the closet. And it was hell, with my family. And they were all embarrassed because of it and my mother's friends were embarrassed.

The biggest hurt though, came from her mother. Once again, M's needs took on a secondary role to her mother's needs. The experience left M feeling alone and abandoned.

Well my mom brought her friends to court and I hated her for that. Fucking hated her for that because I did not want them there. Hey man I had to spill my guts.

Why should she bring her fucking friends. But it was an open courtroom so anybody could go. His family was there. The guy's family who molested me was there. So, whatever. That was fine, my mom said she needed her support too. Nobody fucking cared about me, you know. I know that the night that it happened my cousin was crying, Diane (mom's friend) was crying. My mom was crying. I was just sitting there. Like, why is everyone crying. It didn't happen to them, it fucking happened to me. That's why I got this rage. I was sad for grade 5 and I was a good little girl because I was scared for my life too. Because he was threatening to kill us.

Even though her life was in turmoil, M managed to survive grade 5. Near the end of her grade 5 year the case went to court. Between the end of her court case and the start of grade 6, M entered puberty. Accompanying her physiological change was a profound shift in attitude.

Like grade 6, you know, I got my first bra, I got my period, I was going to be a real woman now, right. So I had to act like a real woman. I had to do real woman things. And I just changed the way I looked at life pretty much. Grade 6, that's when I got my first boyfriend and I started feeling grown up.

The quiet and withdrawn M of grade 5 was now filled with contempt and rage. She dropped old friends' and made new ones. She was no longer an outsider in the school that had once frightened her.

I remember I got into a lot of fights. I was getting into fights like all the time, all the time. And I was just "So fucking what! You going to suspend me? Fuck you! You're going to do this, you're going to do that, go fucking ahead. Big fucking deal." You know. That was my whole outlook. It was just like "So fucking what! I don't care." And that pissed them off real bad.

Her behavior generated a litany of detentions and suspensions. M's metamorphosis though was not yet complete.

As the year wore on she became increasingly preoccupied with sex.

I thought, everyone in this world only thinks about sex. And then I started screwing around with everyone because I thought that that's how I got attention. I lost my virginity willingly when I was 12. I remember telling my mom "Mom I lost my virginity last night." She was drinking, ah, I know, this is so tacky but she was drinking this drink at Knight and Day and she had a cherry in it, and she says "Do you want your cherry back?" And I was like "Oh oh." I was dead. (laughing) My mom always raised me to tell her everything.

When they got home her mother responded by grounding M for her sexual activity. Her mother's erratic responses were part of a long established pattern.

Family life sucked because my mom always had different boyfriends and it was never stable. We were always moving and I really hated it, because it seemed like every year or every couple of years there would be a new guy and he'd be in there telling me what to do

Part of M's difficulty was that she would become attached to these men only to be abandoned by them. In the absence of a boyfriend M's mother increased the hurt and pain in her daughter's life as she behaved brutally towards M.

She was crazy. She'd treat me like shit because I was the closest person to her. She'd like, throw everything around the house and scream and yell and "What the fuck are you looking at?" I'd cry and I'd run to my room. I'd be scared and everything. She was abusive, not sexually but verbally, emotionally. But I didn't know, I didn't really see it then. I thought it was normal. I thought everyone did that. I didn't know that they didn't. And I got spankings since I was little. I got the belt. The belt really hurt. I didn't think that was very fair.

On the other hand, M's home was often unpleasant even when her mother was with a man.

My mom was violent with her boyfriends. Like, I remember with Mike, they were fighting and she had one of those butcher knives, those square ones, and she sliced him on the face, like, on the forehead. And he had a big cut across his forehead and that scared me so bad. I was like six or seven. That was the first violence I ever saw. And then there was Gord. Gord was like an alcoholic. Gord was a biker. And then my mom got violent with him and it was a nuthouse that we're living in. They were fighting and I was there and umh, my mom took scissors. She grabbed anything she could see, like, and I was standing right there and she stabbed him. Right in the vein [pointing at her wrist] there and blood squirted out everywhere and it got on me and on the door. And I was so scared and I was calling the cops and stuff but everyone got mad at me, and the phone got broken. Gord was with my mom when I got molested. Then I saw my mom stab somebody else, I think it was Leroy. Leroy beat the fucking shit out of my mother. Leroy was an ecstasy head. Leroy was the guy who stalked me and my mother.

When she turned 12 M responded by moving in with a friend. Between grade 6 and grade 8 she moved back and forth between her mom's house and her friend's house. She went to several different schools during this period. M recalls this period of her life with characteristic frankness.

My mom let me live [at my friends] because she knew I was growing up, I needed some freedom. But I wish I never moved there. I don't know, I kind of wish I was never born. I fucked up a lot. I got taken advantage of a lot.

By the time she reached the end of elementary school M was well on the way to hitting the street. Brutalized and humiliated throughout her earlier years she had learned to lash out, almost habitually. By grade 6 she terrorized

those who feared her, and frustrated and infuriated the few who might have helped her. Life at home added to M's difficulties and hardened her resolve to live for the moment. With no future orientation, the purpose and meaning of school escaped her. Academically, she was so far behind her peers that she couldn't manage to risk making an effort. At the same time she was desperately alone. Physically mature and emotionally starved she used her body to find human contact. Soon, this effort to cope would also be undermined.

#### The End

M was 12 years old when she started high school. Near the end of grade 7 she had convinced her mother to sign her up for a new experimental program in September. The high school was trying out a pilot project (a school within a school) with about 60 grade 8's. M wanted to attend because she liked the idea of going on the "big field trip" scheduled for early in the school year. (Secondary school counsellors had explained this when they promoted the new program in feeder elementary schools the previous May/June). She also liked the idea of being with this group of people, though she felt out of place from the start.

They were all kind of just, different, not like me. They were just like "good gracious". Like, you know, they were all just like normal. You know, like the people that went there had like, good families and stuff like that, that wanted them to like, you know, go far. That was how it was. So I wanted to go cause I wanted to fit in with that good crowd and everything, right.

In part this difference had to do with the atypical fear that M carried with her daily. While most grade 8's were concerned about the transition to high school, M's was a deeper, more permanent all encompassing fear.

Violence, that's all I've ever been scared of was violence, being beaten up, or pushed around, or anything. Just abuse. That's all, that's all I ever thought of. I didn't care if I had friends or not. As long as they didn't beat me up I was fine.

She was also out of sync in terms of her social mores. When, during the field trip she was chastised by a female teacher for her overly provocative swim attire, M responded by stripping.

I seem to remember this incident like it was yesterday because it pissed me off so bad. I was wearing a black body suit and it looked exactly like a bathing suit but it wasn't. And I was more developed than the rest of the girls. And this one teacher pulled me aside and told me that, like probably I should put on a jacket because the boys were young and they've got hormones raging and this and that, and I told her "it's not my fault". And I, I've just been secluded like, taken out of the group, like I feel like an alien. Like all my life I've felt like an alien because people made me feel like an alien. So I ended up taking all my clothes off and jumping in the lake, just to piss them off.

In what was becoming a typical fashion, M's response simultaneously drew complete attention to her and painted her as odd. Her mother echoed this oddness by complaining to the school board that her daughter had caught "a bad cold" as a result of the teacher's behavior. In class M



stood out because of her sporadic attendance and her obvious indifference.

I wasn't there a lot and I walked into math class and I never brung anything with me and I never did anything. I just walked to the back of room and sat down and put my feet up on the desk and they're all like "Oh, what's your name? like they didn't even know me.

Outside of school, M was also out of control. Her home environment (she was once again living with a friend) offered no direction or guidance. M described her friend's mother as a woman whose "eyes were closed". Given free reign M did as she pleased even though it frightened her.

Like once I started getting into like sex and drugs (at high school), like, whoa, I'm fucked up, you know. I don't know how to react to anything. Because I started getting myself into things I couldn't necessarily get myself out of and it scared me. Just drugs and the people I was hanging out with, just low lives. People who were a lot older than me and knew a hell of a lot more than I did and could persuade me into anything. Like stupid things I would never have done on my own. Like smoking in the hallways. Things started being like, let's see if we get caught. And it was just exciting and stuff.

As her life continued to spin out of control she started to drift into a meaner and uglier world.

I started hanging around with this chick and her and her boyfriend jumped people for their stuff. So I was starting to jump people for their things, and like, we had knives and stuff. And I remember this one kid. We followed him from Metrotown. He was walking and it was so sad because it was a brand new jacket and I remember him crying and he was probably like my age now (16) and he was crying and he was "please don't, I just got this jacket yesterday". And I was like, holy fuck, I actually did that. You know. Like it made a big difference in somebody's life. And I felt so bad actually. It was just like, power.

Soon the ugliness that she was living turned on her.

I was 12 right. I told my mom that I was going to a movie with a friend or something and then I went to this guy's house and he got me really fucking stoned and I was just totally out of it right. And all of a sudden there are three of them and I was with one of my girlfriends but she had to go home. So she left and I was just by myself with these three guys and I just thought, they're teenagers, they won't be able to do nothing to me. And they were just like, they just jumped on me and they wouldn't let me go. And I kept thinking like, what happened". And I got my clothes on and I ran and ran and I took a bus and when I got home quickly had a shower. And my mom's like "What's wrong with you"? "Nothing don't worry about it". Right, like what a weird night.

M's assailants were 16 and 17 year olds who attended her high school. Proximity, rather than causing them any concern about their behavior, seemed to invite more of it.

They'd always come up to me [at school] and like "Hey M, how's it going. What are you doing after school. Let's go to the mall". I was so scared of them and this lasted for 2 months. They'd just follow me everywhere. And rape me, regularly. And I was just too insecure and I was, I couldn't tell no one because I couldn't believe that this was happening to me again. They would take me wherever and it would happen. I was raped by four different guys. I could go to court again, that's why I didn't tell anybody.

M transferred to another school after being asked to leave due to her skipping. Though attendance had been a difficulty ever since she started school, skipping out was now also a means of protecting herself. If they couldn't find her they couldn't rape her. After transferring, M attended three high schools over the next 2 months. From there she went to live on the street. M informed her mother

about the rapes 3 years later when she was hospitalized after a suicide attempt.

Commentary.

Though her story is horrendous, M's process of leaving school is relatively straightforward. Disengagement is rooted in her homelife. Grounded in a radically different ethos, the school's role in M's disengagement is confined largely to an inability to redress long standing family difficulties.

Born to a mother whose own needs were always placed above her daughter's, M started life with a distinct disadvantage. Not only did her home fail to provide any security, it was also the source of her ongoing neglect and abuse. By the time she was nine, M had concluded that her mother could not be trusted, that people she called "dad" did not stay, and that the world was, at best, indifferent to her plight. Still in grade 3, M was bewildered, groundless, and without guidance. Confusion rather than hope filled her days. Lacking anything akin to a future orientation, she ended up living for the moment. Longing for emotional contact, she gravitated toward sexual activity. As she entered puberty, her body became a commodity and rage became an ever present emotion. Frenetic unacceptable activity (skipping, stealing, intimidating) as well as sex and drugs offered the best defense against a consciousness of her lived experience. Alone, constantly afraid, and completely self-reliant, she became increasingly

incapable of accepting direction or help. Pessimism had replaced confusion. When the amoral world in which she spent most of her time turned on her, M started to become desperate. A victim in her home and an alien in the world of school, she drifted to the comatose comfort of the street.

## Chapter 11

### Case Study 8: S

Everything I can remember has been good. My mom's brought me up with morals and beliefs and stuff like that and I've done church when I was younger. My mom did the best that she could.

When my brother's dad was around, he dealt, dealt weed and stuff like that. That was, I remember when I was a little kid, like when I was three or four years old, five years old that, I'd pass the joint around the room, you know. Like, I remember it, little things like filling up a glass with smoke on the coffee table right. Having the glass turned upside down, doing a hot knife of hash into the glass or something like that and then sucking it out of the glass. I remember little things like that. They'd give me the joint to pass around the room. It'd be like here S, hand this over to so and so across the room. And my baby-sitters would smoke it and stuff like that. My mom didn't like that and that's why I think they divorced. It's kind of been a lifestyle. A lot of things seemed to revolve around it. Like, I notice I keep talking about things and that, that one thing (marijuana) keeps reoccurring in the subject.

It wasn't that I decided to stop going [to school]. It kind of slowly dropped off you know. Like, I would go one day here or a day there but it would be like the whole week I didn't go except for that one day. The weeks would pass by and I'd go a day and it just slowly dropped off to the point where I just didn't go anymore.

### Introduction

My interview with S was straightforward. He was very honest and open about his past. S's dwindling interest in school, his relative freedom, and neighborhood mores played a part in his process of disengagement. At the same time certain aspects of his story struck him as novel. For instance, he seemed surprised by the role that drugs played

in his premature departure from school. Starting out as a pre-adolescent curiosity, drugs became a major focus of his everyday life. Marijuana and cocaine affected his relationships, changed his habits, and limited his efforts at school.

### The Beginning

S's elementary school experiences were mainly positive.

Elementary school from kindergarten to about grade 5 was pretty much, seems like it was all the same. I was all in one school. I remember I had fun. I was in the sports stuff. My mom put me in a soccer league. I was playing soccer and baseball in those years.

His younger years were particularly productive and hopeful. With his mother's support, school was both enjoyable and fun.

It was more of a fun thing back then, In kindergarten it was fun. You didn't have to do work. [Grades] one, two and three, my mom would teach me stuff at home, you know. She'd have these books at home that I could work on to do schooling. My mom always helped me out with that. I didn't have a problem between kindergarten and grade 5 and. Everything was pretty much fine.

For grade 6 S went to a different school because the family moved. The only significance that S attached to this period of his life was that "his grades were going down". The move however, exposed S to a segment of society that presented him with a radically different lifestyle to what his mother wanted for her son.

We moved behind this apartment building. Those apartments are more like run down places, [where a number of my friends lived]. Almost all the drug dealers and stuff like that happens there. You know,

cops are always showing up there, domestic disputes and stuff like that right. That's the kind of area that I grew up in right. Playing in the playgrounds there, doing whatever, having fun, playing, riding our bikes.

Socially, significant changes started to occur in grade

7.

Up until grade seven I was just a normal kid you know. Playing hockey cards or doing whatever. In grade 7, about half way through the school year we had this guy named Ron, and he came to the school and, I guess he failed a year. So he was an older kid, came in with jeans, the jean jacket, long hair, total, total, looked like an outcast in the room. Just didn't look like he'd fit in. I put up my hand and decided that I'd show him around the school. Let him know where everything was and so got to be his friend. He was a smoker and so because of him, you know, I was going to be friends with him so I started smoking and whatever. We smoked, we used to smoke drugs and he had two older brothers and they were 17 and 19 and they were always doing drugs and acid and stuff like that right. So that's how I got into that scene. Because of this person and wanting to impress him and be his friend and you know after that I started dressing the same way, you know. Wearing the jean jacket and wearing the jeans with rips in it. So that kind of divided me from the other people in elementary school. It was just more me and R after that.

Once his interest was sparked his access to drugs increased substantially.

I remember one time, we had this little Indian kid [in the neighborhood]. He's about nine or ten at the time and I was about 12 or 13, when I was in grade 7. And I guess this little kid's dad was a dealer and he'd (the son) rip him off. Like he'd take a whole ounce and he'd take all his money and he'd come over to my house first thing in the morning and he'd bring this big bag of weed and all this money. And I'd like sell him my toys and stuff like that. And he'd pay me for it. It was like nothing to him cause it was stolen money so I had lot's of money. The kid would give me lots of weed so I had lots of free weed all the time and this happened for a long time. I was getting free weed and money. So I'd have money to go out and buy beer and [video] games.

As availability and usage increased, his approach to school changed.

I'd skip out, not very much because it was just starting into that phase of life, you know. It wasn't, I wasn't that type of person who'd go out and just skip. It started because of the weed and it's like you'd get high in the morning and you wouldn't want to go to school.

By the end of his grade 7 year S's grades had dropped to D's and E's. Both his approach to school and his growing preoccupation with drugs were factors in S's limited effort. These difficulties were made worse by his mother's return to school. His mother's focus on work and school meant that S had more unsupervised time. As S filled his days with activities of his own choosing, he started his drift away from school.

#### The Middle

S remembered the transition to high school as "just moving on". He wasn't particularly concerned other than maybe getting "beat up by a grade 10". The onslaught of adolescence only served to deepen his disengagement.

It seemed to me that I had a whole lot of trouble when I was at B. I used to take all of my friends out back during school time. It would be like, I'd show up at school, I'd have all this weed and I'd go across the street to where the catwalk was where all the rockers hung out and smoked cigarettes. And I'd go, just to make friends you know, I'd offer whoever was there to smoke a joint. You know, hey guys you want to smoke a joint? We'd all walk across the street to where the park was. And so in a way that helped me to make a lot of friends. You just want to be known. You want people to recognize you, you know, who you are, you just feel important.



Making friends was important to S. Though he wasn't a loner, he had experienced some difficulty finding a niche.

I wasn't always the best at making friends. I'm not an outgoing person. I feel more outgoing than I used to be, but then at that time I had really bad zits and stuff like that. I had really bad self-esteem and because of that I probably tried harder to have more friends. That was basically the reason for doing that (offering drugs to everybody), just to feel important and wanted, you know.

The most important event in grade 8 was meeting D. Over the next 5 years they developed a friendship which S remembered was like having "the brother that I always wanted". This friendship was also significant because of the increased freedom that it afforded S.

In a lot of ways I'd say his mom didn't really care. Like she was never there. It was always D.'s sister. That was the cool thing, hanging out at D's. Come the weekend, the minute they (D's parents) got home after work they'd start packing their stuff, gone within a half hour. They'd leave, they wouldn't come home till Monday night. They'd just go straight to work from where they lived (on the weekend). And his sister was there, and his sister was older so we'd get her boyfriends to go out and bootleg for us. D's house was like a party house. In a lot of ways I don't think that his parents cared.

S's lifestyle quickly affected his approach to school. He failed grade 8. His first year in high school was a whirlwind of drugs, parties, and skipping class. He took a similar approach to school the following September.

I went back the next year and tried to do it again. Got through the first month like, and I was just skipping out, smoking weed still, you know. Wasn't going to make it that semester, and so I transferred myself out of school without my mom knowing. What happened was, I met this guy named T and he was another

rocker, long hair, jean jacket, the whole bit. He took me to Whalley just for the day, and I kind of hung out with him at the school for the day. And it was like, I was just instantly popular when I got there. It was just like, me and Terry would walk down the hall and we'd be wearing our ripped up jeans and our jean jackets and all the chicks would be eyeing us. We're walking down there and people are talking to us and stuff like that and it was like really cool. It was like being popular, you know. People liked me at that school. I wanted to go to that school just because I had a lot more friends and stuff like that. Wanting to be wanted. So I transferred myself in there and my mom wasn't too happy about that but either way I managed to do it and everything stayed that way.

S's difficulties at school were compounded by his growing distance from his mother.

She's tried extra hard cause there was only one of her to do it. So she, our relationship was good but I, I wouldn't talk to my mom, you know. I guess my mom was female or whatever. I had my friends to talk to. I didn't have my mom to talk to. I wouldn't tell my mom personal things. I'd with-hold information from my mom and stuff like, so we had a good relationship but I think I've been the one to with-hold it from my mom. In a way it hasn't been like a very personal relationship until recently.

On those few occasions when he tried to explain his feelings, they failed to connect.

Like I think at one time I would say I have low self-esteem and my mom would be like, "well why do you have a low self-esteem, you know, you've been in baseball, you've been in soccer, I put you in guitar lessons. You've got friends. What's the problem?" That's what she couldn't understand. She didn't think I had a low self-esteem. When I went inside I knew how I felt, right. So I just let it slide and wouldn't try to explain it to her.

As he moved into his adolescent years the balance of power in S's relationship with his mother seemed increasingly, to be a matter decided by his discretion.

Well, if like my mom punished me or something like that, if I got grounded uhm, nobody really accepts it but, you know, I went along with the rules, you know. My mom had power only because I respected her. Like, my mom's not a big person and I mean, there's been times where my mom said "hey stay home". I remember when I was in West W, one night I was super choked about something and I came home and my mom was by the fireplace and she was like "no, you can't go out." She tried to stop me. She grabbed my arm and I just said "Let me fucking go". You know, and totally kind of pushed her away. My mom really doesn't have power other than the fact that I respect her for who she is and I respect the consequences of my actions.

Respecting the consequences of his actions however, did little to direct his choices or alter his behavior. With each experience his disengagement from school deepened.

When I was in W I hooked up with another guy named R and R's brother had big bags of weed, you know, and he'd steal it off his brother and he'd bring it to school. He'd be like "six bucks for a gram". You know, what's like six bucks, right. And so again I had lots of weed and was able to say, "hey guys, lets go into the park, smoke a joint". You know, all the time, right. I was there from about November till about January and they kicked me out, expelled me because yeah, I'd been skipping out so much.

S was forced to transfer schools half way through the year. Life at his third high school did not start off well. Soon after he started, S got caught smoking hash. He remembers it as another emotional moment in his life with his mother.

I remember her picking me up from school, driving home. It was another one of them emotional times. I don't think there was a punishment for it. I think my mom was understanding. It was okay, he's trying drugs, you know, she did it in her time too, you know so, she was understanding about it. I don't think I got punished because of it but I think it was another emotional time. I think me and my mom were really close in that

way. I'm emotional like my mom is. We were driving home and another emotional issue--how come you're smoking drugs and so on and so forth.

The school responded by restricting his freedom. A tighter rein translated into academic success for the first time since grade 5.

They put me on a school suspension where I had to go to school but at lunch time and before school I had to report to the office and sit there till the bell and stuff like that. The basic moral to the story is I passed out of grade 8 on the B honor roll. It was because there was nobody there that I really knew. I wasn't trying to be popular. I wasn't trying to impress nobody. I was, it was my last chance. I was actually trying. And when I actually tried, that's when I managed to accomplish.

This was S's first and last real experience of success in high school. He passed into grade 9.

#### The End

When he returned to school the following September, he reverted back to his old ways.

Grade 9, went back to GP, failing badly again. Got trough like the first month and then didn't have much, didn't have anything [completed] basically. Went to the counsellor, he said that I wasn't going to pass that semester. Same pattern. Just skipping out. GP was a little ways away so I always had to catch the bus. It'd be like, wake up in the morning and I'd only have like five minutes to get to the bus stop. You know get ready, ahhh the hell with it, you know. Find something better to do today. My mom was never around during the days so it was easy just to stay home and nobody would know, right. Cause she'd go to school. She left the responsibility to us. You know, it's your decision, you're the one who has to live with the consequences.

Bored with school and increasingly in charge of his time S started to engage in petty crime. Along the way he drifted into using cocaine.

It's just one night, you know, it's like we got no money. Well, let's go out and see what we can scam. You know, go check out sheds and stuff like that. With J. it was like you could pawn off power tools, stuff like that. J. was my friend's mom, the dealer. The one that would sell us weed at the ages that we were. Like I don't think that normally most people would be like okay we'll sell this kid weed, cause we were so young. But we had an inside connection, and it was like, people would come over to her and they'd, stolen goods went through that house and stuff like that, right. She liked crystal, so if we ever got our hands on crystal, or something like that she'd be willing to take it. Forty bucks for a power saw, here's an eighth. Wow a bonus, smoke, smoke weed all day, so we'd go out. We'd steal whatever, you know, weed eaters, lawn mowers, you name it. You could pretty much get away with anything. Right around then, I said, pot wasn't seeming to do it, so started slowly getting into coke.

Part way through grade 9 S transferred to a different school, one that allowed S to attend part time and work part time. Somewhere around 15 S replaced his petty thievery (for awhile) with part time work. His attendance at school however, was still very sporadic. In three years he failed to make any progress. When he quit his job he went back to stealing, only now he was more serious. In part this was due to his drug habit.

It was nice to do it (coke) every now and then. We ended up ripping off Darcy's mom for about 10,000 dollars worth of gold and jewelry, emeralds and rubies and stuff like that. My mom and the gold that she had, it's no longer there.

When his mother found out he had been stealing from her she kicked him out of the house. S ended up on welfare living at a dealer's house. School slowly faded from the picture. A year later S moved to a smaller city, got a part-time job and tried his hand at school. This arrangement lasted for a month. When S left school as an eighteen year old he had successfully completed grade 8.

Commentary.

S's disengagement from school was facilitated by his mom's absence, neighborhood mores, and his increasing interest and ultimate preoccupation with drugs. These factors would provide him with an inordinate amount of freedom, numerous inappropriate ways to spend his time, and an anesthetic to dull his pain and confusion.

Living with a single working mom who was also attending school meant that too often S was left to fend for himself. Given the time to wander in a neighborhood where delinquency was the norm, it was only a matter of time before he adopted the ways of his environment. Before he left elementary school S was dabbling in behaviors (skipping, stealing, drugs) which would serve to overwhelm him. His biggest problem would come in the form of drugs.

S's engagement with drugs was very much like his disengagement from school. Each process felt natural, developed and took hold slowly and seemed to be recognized only after the fact. As a toddler he passed joints for his father. His mother only stopped using drugs because her

second husband disapproved. S first experimented with marijuana in grade seven. By the time he entered high school the experiment had become a habit. In his world drugs and school had a reciprocal relationship, the more S engaged with drugs the more he disengaged from school. Drugs filled an emotional void, were used as a currency for procuring acquaintances, and provided him with a purpose. Near the end of his school career, by which time he had graduated to cocaine, attaining his chosen form of escape was the major preoccupation of his existence. By this point school had about as much meaning as the spent ash at the tip of his cigarette.

## Chapter 12

### Case Study 9: B

Life, like at home, it was good until grade 8. No. Till grade 7, we got into things like do the dishes - no I don't want to. Well go to your room. Mostly my mom but then once things got out of control and he heard it, then my dad would jump in and that would be the end of me.

My mom always tried to help me with my school work but I had ADA, ADD or whatever it's called, my entire life, so I wouldn't listen pretty much when she'd like, try to sit down with me and I'd do it [school work] for about ten minutes and then she'd think that I got it and I'd just forget it. That would be it. They didn't find out until, they didn't figure that out until probably about two years now. But my mom figured that I've had it pretty much ever since I was born.

### Introduction

At 17 B was well on the way to putting her life back together. She was living in her own place and had returned to school. For the first time in a long while there was stability in her life. This stability was a marked contrast to her life experience during her early teen years. Between the ages of 12 to 15, B's world was chaotic; she was alone and largely out of control. Engulfed in this confusion school became an impossible task to manage. B was kicked out of school near the end of her grade 10 year, she was 15 years old.

### The Beginning

B's first two years in school were quite satisfying. She loved her Kindergarten and her grade 1 teacher and did well both in and out of class. Her first negative experience was associated with grade 2.



She was horrible. We were in a split grade 2-3 class. My cousin was in my class with me and the teacher was just horrible. She was a wicked teacher. I can't remember what my cousin did, but she got so mad she threw a chalk brush at her and she had a real temper problem. She wasn't mean to me but other kids she was mean to. Like, troublemaker kids. You'd have to be polite or else she'd be mean to you.

Even though she was apprehensive around her grade 2 teacher, the year turned out fine. It wasn't until grade 4 that B ran into any serious difficulty.

I passed in everything except for Math. I passed but just barely. I was really bad in math. It was like embarrassing pretty much cause, there's stuff everybody else knew how to do except me.

Life at school continued to deteriorate in grade 5 and 6.

Grade 5, Mr. C. was pretty much one of my worst teachers. When it came to Math, he sometimes would write stuff on the board and you'd have to go up and do it. Well, I remember one time he picked on me to do something and I couldn't figure it out. I got it wrong and uhm, he like kept on making me do it over and over and over again. I couldn't do it and he just got me so upset that I cried. Like he raised his voice cause I couldn't do it, like he got mad cause I couldn't do it. And so he took me down to the paper room and he apologized and everything. And he's like I'll never do it again. I'll never try to embarrass you and then he comes back into the class and ten minutes later he picked Meghan to go up. He made Meghan cry. He was just horrible. And then I had him for grade 6 again. He was the same way. He called a meeting with my mom just to talk about my schooling and he made my mom so upset, like he was calling me stupid and I was just holding in my tears. And he made my mom cry. I hated him. I totally despised him. My mom knew that I hated him. We both hated him.

Grade 7 was a better year. Her teacher was kind and they got along. Life at home was still quite stable.

I liked grade 7. Mr. B. was a great teacher. I don't know, school work was pretty good except for math. I can't really remember doing very much homework at all. I wasn't into the homework thing. I'd rather do something else. But my mom, she'd make us do a half hour of homework before we could go anywhere.

Socially, B's life was still very uncomplicated.

We decided we'd get a little airband because the boys that were ahead of us always had airbands in the summertime, so we decided we'd get one going. So that's pretty much what we did all summer of grade 6 and grade seven. We just got out my tape recorder in my room every day, and I forget which song it was, but we did little dances to it and everything. We never got into trouble.

B's elementary school experience did not prepare her well for high school. Math had crystallized as a subject to be avoided. One of her teachers had labelled her stupid. And, regardless of her mother's efforts B remained a reluctant student.

As early as grade 4 I think that I just gave up, not gave up but just like slacked off.

The exact role that her ADD played in B's work ethic is difficult to surmise. She did recall that prior to being diagnosed and medicated she "couldn't concentrate".

### The Middle

B's transition to high school involved both anxiety and some unexpected comfort.

Yeah pretty scary at first. I don't know, I was expecting some huge school. Afraid of, just like, the new people, so many new people. I wasn't sure if I'd get along with the new people. But uhm, the first day uhm, was pretty good actually. I couldn't find a couple of classes but that was no problem, just ask somebody. The teachers were all good and it was pretty good. Like I liked it actually. I liked it a lot better than elementary school.

While B may have liked the students and felt comfortable with teachers she had little interest in her school work. What started out as comfort quickly turned to buffoonery.

I was pretty mouthy towards the teachers. Like I wouldn't swear at them or anything but I would piss them off on purpose. I was pretty much the class clown. Cause I thought it was funny. I thought it was a riot to piss teachers off.

Some teachers seemed to play into B's idea of fun and were treated as if they were part of the game. Others, she regarded with much more caution, even respect.

Like Mr. R., he was funny. Like he'd take it at first, and he'd just get so angry I just thought it was a riot. He'd get so mad he'd just kick me out into the hall. Like whoopeyding. I'm not in class, good. That's all I pretty much wanted. I didn't like school. I was lazy I guess.

A different B emerged with Mr. K.

Well in Math, I was with Mr. K. and me and him didn't get along. But I never caused trouble with him. He was a pretty strict teacher. Cause he doesn't take nothing. It'd be like straight to the office. Straight to the office. Like barely ever he'd say sit in the hall cause he just didn't put up with me cause he knew how I was. Yeah I worked, I worked in his class.

Beyond math class though, B did very little school work. She could not recall ever doing any homework during her first year in high school. While her academic efforts at school were coming to a standstill, her life at home was spinning out of control.

Grade 8, that's when my parents just couldn't handle me any more. I was just, I didn't care about anything at home. Like I chose my friends over home. It was just stupid things like, do the dishes, no. Or I'd just sit

there and keep on watching T.V. and my dad would get real mad and that's when he started hitting me and stuff. He'd just give me a slap in the head and whatever and I'd get pissed off, right, and I'd swear at him and he'd hit me more and he'd like drag me to the dishes and say do them. So I'd do them or else I'd just take off to my room and pull the dresser in front of the door so he couldn't get in. I don't know, my dad, me and him have the same temper.

What started off as incidental arguments quickly turned into a way of being. Most weeks there were "three of four" violent exchanges between B and her father.

I remember one time I was sitting there, M. some friends were visiting me. We were just standing outside and I was eating an orange and they were leaving and I can't remember if my dad came by or he was just there or something. And I threw orange peels off the balcony. He's like go pick them up. And I was like, why? Why bother picking them up? The birds are going to eat them and they'll just disintegrate. He's like go pick them up now. And I kept going on with like why. So he grabbed my hair and dragged me down the stairs and like pushed my face in them and told me to pick them up.

Once she started fighting with her parents the opportunities for conflict seemed endless.

Me and N. were the head cheerleaders for our team and we told everybody to meet at the park for a 7 o'clock meeting. My mom didn't want me to go that early for some reason. And I was like have to go, I told the whole team to be there. And she said, no, no, no, and I was fighting with her. And she said that's it, I'm going to get your grandmother. And I went and grabbed my lunch and my grandmother beat me to the door. Beat me to the door and tied me to the rocking chair with these scarves and she's like that's it. And I kept on yelling and she's that's it, I'm going to get the stick. Tied to the chair. My arms and feet were tied to the chair. And like, thank god, N. came by, like when my grandmother was outside [getting the stick], N. came by and untied me and we ran out the front door.

Part way through grade eight one of B's friends called Social Services. Shortly thereafter B moved out. For awhile she lived with a friend. It was the start of a very unsettled existence.

I moved from M.'s back to my parent's place. My parent's lasted about a week and then I think I moved into my boyfriend's house. I stayed with him for about a month. His mom was never around. She'd leave us money for dinner and things were good, but uhm, he cheated on me. And I was right downstairs. He was like my first real boyfriend that I cared about and I thought I had something serious with him. And so I phoned up my [paternal] grandparents and they, like everybody was worried because nobody knew where I'd been for about a month. So I didn't go to school much around the end of grade 8. I missed like maybe two or three months.

B moved in with her grandparents and lived there for the rest of grade 8. Academically, grade 8 was a very difficult year. She barely passed the year. B recalls her mother's reaction to the report card.

She wanted me to get a tutor but I was totally against it, I thought I had better things to do. It was more the fun years. Like, screw school.

Life with her grandparents quickly became problematic.

I moved in with my grandparents and things were good there at first. Cause my grandparents they, they used to spoil me, they're rich and everything. But once I moved in there they didn't spoil me as much. They treated me like I was their own kid. Except for they'd never give me money, ever. Like I was always broke. So I was pretty bummed for money. I remember I told my grandpa that I was going to go ice skating so I could get money. There was a whole bunch of us and we all just decided we'd go eat at McDonald's or something. So I spent my money on a pack of smokes and McDonalds and I got busted. They were upset for me lying. They didn't want me lying. I guess that's when things got a little rough at my grandparents. My grandma always hated all my friends. She'd always bicker about my friends. Friends this, friends that. Stop hanging

around with them and I'd be like Mind your own business. So that's what we always fought about, my friends.

At the start of grade 9 B was again living with her parents. Academically, she continued to drift.

Grade 9 was pretty much all the same [as grade 8]. I was still pissed off with teachers and stuff. Getting suspended and stuff.

Shortly after the start of the school year B left home and continued moving from place to place.

I loved it. I could do anything wanted to except for, when I was living under a friend's roof I'd always like, go by the parent's rules and everything. I'd always, like I totally respected them and everything and would listen to them. I'd be like their dream child pretty much, like I was really good to whoever let me stay.

These living arrangements were usually good for a few weeks. When she wasn't staying with friends B lived in group homes.

The first group home that I moved into was WH so I was pretty much late every day for school. If I even showed up, I'd show after lunch or at lunch. I was like scared at first to move into a group home cause i was expecting like total juvenile delinquents. Like I thought I'd get beat up and stuff. When I got there they introduced me to this girl S. She was really nice to me. And they took me downstairs and they're like this is D. and she looks up and it's DT. So it's like, right on. I hadn't seen her in two years. I was supposed to be there for a month but I was there for like three or four months. Then I moved to L. house. I loved L. house. There was a girl named S. She was like a biker chick. She went around with an older biker type guy.

Grade 9 ended in much the same fashion as it had started. B barely passed the year. During her first two years in high school B spent much of her energy harassing

teachers, getting kicked out of class, and generally goofing off. As her school had a "no fail" policy she was advanced to the next grade level. Her approach to school was further complicated by her ever-changing living arrangements.

Having severed, in a very practical way, the bonds with her parents B was largely under her own direction. Her stewardship took her further away from school.

### The End

At the start of her grade 10 year B was again living at home. In early September she went camping in a local park with a group of her new friends.

My mom didn't want me to go out that night. It was a Friday night, I didn't understand why. We'd go sleep at a friend's I was telling her and uh, so I took off and she said if I took off I was getting kicked out. And I told M. this and she's like oh you can come stay at my place. The next night after we stayed in the park I went to M.'s house and we talked non-stop for like 6 or 7 hours. It was just like unbelievable that I'd be able to sit down and talk to somebody for that long. Like we were, like sisters reunited like. together all the time. That's when the stoner club got started, after that night, after the camping trip.

The camping trip marked the start of the "stoner club" and B's increasing use of drugs. It was also the start of her last stint at home. She was now living with M. who had limitless freedom and had lived on the street as a 12 year old. The stoner's club soon influenced her behavior at school. Going to school now seemed to be an extension of her camping trip.

We would smoke dope all the time. All the time. We'd go to classes once in a while but we'd pretty much, we

were all in different grades so we'd say we'll meet in the bathroom at one o'clock or whatever. That was the life I thought except that school went totally downhill. We were just always partying. Like that was the party year. All we did was party, party, party. We'd go to school, we'd meet up, we'd smoke joints in the morning, then we'd go home early. Probably I think we'd wander the halls for the first period and then we'd go out on break and smoke another joint and lunch, we'd just sit there smoke joints, and like we were always stoned.

B continued to drift from home to home. The only constant in her life was drugs.

I was into acid a lot in grade 10. We were acid freaks on the weekends. Like we loved the stuff.

Most of the time she got her drugs free from friends who stole acid and grass from their parents. When these sources dried up she turned to her own resources.

I pawned lots of stuff. We'd break into cars and we'd steal tapes and little things and we'd pawn them.

B left school shortly after Christmas of her grade 10 year. She was 16 years old.

#### Commentary.

At the age of 16, shortly after she was diagnosed, B started taking medication for Attention Deficit Disorder. Her ability to concentrate improved dramatically. B's medical condition affected both her school life and her home life. The degree to which ADD affected her ability to learn and her ability to cope is difficult to surmise; that it had a negative influence on her life seems certain.

B's story of disengagement started in grade 4. This was the first year that she failed Math. It was also the



first time that she started to "slack off" at school. By the time she left elementary school Math had become a problem to be avoided, school work was only done under duress, and some teachers had been experienced as mean and untrustworthy. Before she became an adolescent she was starting to drift away from school.

High school accelerated B's disengagement exponentially. Once she got over her initial fear of being in high school, B became a prankster. While life at school was becoming a joke, life at home was spinning out of control. Part way through the year she was removed from her home by Social Services. Whatever vestiges of control had been present in her life vanished. The vagabond lifestyle that followed started to put school out of reach. Any chance of surviving in the system vanished when her curiosity about drugs became a habit.

## Chapter 13

Case Study 10: C

I was the type of person, who if he [vice-principal] had anything to say to me that was derogatory towards what I'm doing or trying to do or anything, I would jump right back. Anytime I was caught smoking or whatever, he'd give me a lecture, he'd be screaming at me about something, I'd be screaming right back at him. Like I didn't stand, I didn't take it sitting down. I was very mouthy I guess you'd say.

Introduction

Capturing C's story of disengagement was difficult. In part this was due to a lack of detail. A willing participant, she at times couldn't recall specifics and therefore some of her narrative remained vague and unclear. The nature of the events recalled also contributed to the difficulty. For the most part they were ordinary, typical, age appropriate experiences, a sort of "every student's" life at school. Missing, are any overt disturbances that might explain her failure to graduate. C was a good student in elementary school, had some difficulties and some successes in junior high and dropped out after her first semester in senior high. The nondescript nature of this shift from success to failure made her story a challenge to articulate. The ease with which failure came about was disturbing; if C could find the system overwhelming so could any student.

### The Beginning

C's elementary school experience was mainly positive. Although her memories of the first few years were vague she remembered liking school and getting along quite well.

I remember being teacher's pet in grade 1. That was about the best thing about the whole thing. She'd get me to do things for her. Usually let me get away with things. She had something set up about rules in the classroom. Uhm, like speeding, stopping and you know like regular traffic rules that were put together in the classroom and she let me get away with a lot of that.

Grade 2 provided a similar level of comfort. It was not until grade 3 that C experienced any difficulty at school.

I was in a split class in grade 3. Grade 2 and grade 3 in one class. I remember that was really difficult. I don't know if this classroom was any bigger than normal but you know it was, you had to follow your own little path even though something else was going on. I mean I could follow it but she was doing something with one group while I'm left to do something on my own.

Her other memory of grade 3 was that the teacher wasn't warm or friendly. C's grade 4 teacher was equally unimpressive.

The teacher was, she wasn't cold, she wasn't warm, she was just sort, sort of there I guess.

Grade 4 was also significant because it was the year that the family moved.

I didn't change schools but I changed the area that I lived in. That made a big difference. The friends that I would walk home from school with were going in the opposite direction. I did get to know people that were in the area that I moved to but the people that I knew from the previous place didn't, they sort of kept to themselves. It was hard being far apart, from one friendship to the other. Also, letting go was hard. I didn't have much of a problem making friends. Letting go of the old ones that was about the only problem.

Over the next few years school life carried on at about the same pace. Grade 5 was remembered fondly.

My grade 5 teacher was really nice. She was nice to everyone. She got to know everyone and sort of dipped a little into personal lives or whatever. She was more involved.

The next year had a similar feel of easy comfort.

The teacher that we had she wasn't very friendly but between her and the class, she was, she was really fun. I remember turning off all the lights, hiding behind her desk, the whole group of us and she walks in the room. She was light hearted about it all. I know it got to the point where it got to be too much, but she laughed through the whole thing

Grade 7 stood out as an enjoyable year. I had a really good teacher that year. He was, he joked all the time. He was young. Not too young but younger he was always laughing, always joking always, you know, always having a good time. Putting his humour into what we were learning as well.

It was also a good year socially.

I got a lot of new friends that year. One faded away and another came up. Just something that happened. It was interesting, fun. Meeting new people. That was when, I guess at that point was, I had given up on my friends in the old neighborhood.

Academically, C had always been a good student.

[At school] I was doing well. I did what I had to do. I think everything was measured in numbers at that point. From 1 to 6. I was usually in the high one's or two's.

The success and comfort that she experienced at school seemed to be matched at home. She remembered her parents as stable, supportive, and predictable.

Life at home was good. Yeah, it was, you know, getting around the dinner table, what did you do today, that sort of thing. Other than every year, trying to trick my mom, she is very gullible, that I failed all the grades. I'd do that every year. But my mom fell for

it every year. It was dumb but well,...I had always done well, so at that time, it was never an issue.

The summer between grade 7 and 8 was the start of a substantial transition.

I got into a lot of trouble that summer before school. I got into smoking, drugs and that sort of thing. I started out with one friend and sort of moved on with others. I was more of a follower.

The shift that started during the summer continued when she started grade 8.

That year totally changed me. I was good in school in elementary school but high school was totally different. I didn't have a lot of problems but I guess my interests were elsewhere for that point in time. So I ended up with Cs, C+s. For the whole year, yeah. I was more interested in friends and socializing and that sort of thing than going to school.

While she was making new friends and finding new interests C encountered some social difficulties.

I was always the one that was picked on. They were all in the same area. Walked home the same way. There was a church next door to the school and parking lot which was where we used to gather, you know, and have our lunch and whatever. She would harass and threaten me, to the point where if she came around I'd be trying to sneak out the back door sort of speak.

What made matters worse was that C's appeals for help were not acted on.

Unfortunately there wasn't a lot they [the school] could do. They were sympathetic but if I got into a fight, the rule was that both of us would get suspended. There wasn't like an instigator penalty or anything like that so there wasn't a whole lot that they could do without, without proof. I remember missing school, not wanting to go. [So that left me feeling] helpless. You know there wasn't that much I

could do. Except change my ways or you know, go a different way to school every day or something.

Her parents were not effective in addressing the situation either.

Well they'd drive me to school. For them it was common because of my brother. You know he, boys get into fights all the time. For them it's, you know, it sort of flattens itself out as time goes by so I guess that's what they were expecting. They cared but that's about all they could do at that point.

This situation went on for the entire year. It was finally resolved because C grew taller and therefore was not as easy to intimidate physically. While physical maturation resolved some of her difficulties, other problems surfaced.

Although I think the only reason why she did it, she was more of a user. There were a lot of things that I had that she wanted, that she got. So I think that was the only reason why she became friends. She didn't see any reason to pick on me anymore. She found other things that I was useful for I guess.

Other friends also let her down.

My girlfriend set me up to test my friendship. And I guess I failed. She put me through a test. Just to see if I'd lie to her. I can't really remember exactly what it was about but obviously I failed the test. you know if you if you have pair of pants, you go to your friend, your really close friend and say well how do these pants look. If they look hideous on you, you'd hope that they'd say something instead of saying they look okay on you. Well that was sort of the situation and she took it that I lied to her. And so I ended up, she beat me up pretty badly she and her friends. They both did. That was tough. She was the one I got to know in grade 7. She was a close friend.

In some ways however, grade 8 was a good year.

I went to every dance. I was involved in the track team and I think I was involved in basketball.

Academically, C's interests were limited.

Math was a strong subject for me. But as far as English and Science, I never liked those subjects.

Her grades dropped to C's and C-'s, but C was perceived as trying and her report card comments indicated that she was making a good effort.

I had a lot of G's [good effort] so my parents saw low grades but a "G", they were happy. Yeah, They weren't really strict parents. They weren't expecting A's and B's out of me. You know, I guess they sort of understood what it was like. [And I was] sort of, ah who cares, it's not a hassle so I won't think about it.

C's attitude towards school was also slipping out through some of her behavior.

Me and a girlfriend, well there were three of us and we'd sit together. We'd sit there long enough for roll call to be taken and then we'd sneak out the door and go on our way. The teacher was so, he was very old, very slow, he didn't pay much attention to what was going on around him. You know, he just sort of gave us directions and that was it. He didn't even notice. We just tried to see how far we could get away with this. If we could get away with it - fine.

Before the year ended, C was suspended several times for skipping school and for smoking on school property. These suspensions had several repercussions. Each suspension was accompanied with a grounding from home, usually executed by her mother. For the most part this tended to be a short term affair that curtailed her social activity. A longer lasting consequence came about through her relationship with the vice-principal, the person who suspended her.

The vice-principal, he tended to make things out to be a lot worse than they were. And between my mom and I we'd catch him lying to her about things that I had done.

The sense of injustice that C experienced added significantly to her growing disengagement. It was a problem that would grow worse in her grade 9 year. For the time being however, life went on relatively undisturbed. C passed grade 8 with C's and C+'s. While this was a significant drop in her level of performance, it posed no real problems at the time.

#### The Middle

During the summer between grade 8 and 9 C's social life became more active. Her circle of friends and acquaintances increased as did her consumption of alcohol and drugs. As the pace and breadth of her social life increased her major concern centered around the limitations to her freedom.

I mean, my parents, like probably didn't trust me cause of all the problems I had in school but, but that was about the only problem area I had. It bothered me, that my parents didn't trust me, because I felt that I was trustworthy. When I was going to school, that was a totally different thing but, they didn't trust me on anything.

In practice this lack of trust translated into rules about dating. Strong willed and resourceful, C found it rather easy to get around these expectations.

I was good at lying. My mom's gullible so, she fell for it every time. I'd tell her, like I wasn't allowed boyfriends until I was 16 or something so I had make believe friends left right and center that I was going to and uh, my mom never said anything. She sort of, rather than asking me why my friends never came over to



the house, she'd sort of, she'd never bother me about that. I was, I guess, just accepting it the way it was and hiding my boyfriends all over the place.

Although her father represented more of a disciplinary force, she had to deal with him only occasionally.

My dad wasn't around. Like, my mom would deal with me and ground me or do whatever she had to do but she would, sometimes she wouldn't even tell my dad. She would sort of keep it from him and there were times when she would tell him and you know, he'd come out and he'd yell and scream at me, that would be it.

The relative freedom that C acquired allowed her to pursue her social interests. She became more involved with boys, continued to increase her circle of friends and attended most of the social functions. At the same time, C managed to keep her party activities quite separate from her school life. Most of her drug and alcohol consumption was limited to weekends. Although her marks deteriorated slightly, she did not attribute this to her increased freedom. Increasingly uninterested in school, success seemed to depend most on the quality of her relationships with teachers.

I enjoyed typing and I enjoyed band. the teacher was a little Chinese man. I can't remember his name but he was really nice and really, you know, always, I don't know, he had personality, you know, he was really quick, really, you know, always happy and always. He was easy to, to learn from, easy to be in the room with. He always gave us sort of outside projects to work on to help our grades, that sort of thing.

With other teachers potentially positive experiences turned sour and feed her sense of injustice.

I had a science teacher, not a science, socials, who, he accused me of doing something that I didn't do. I took too long between breaks between classes to get to his class and he accused me that I was socializing with my friends or something and I liked him at that point and then once I realized, I think he even swore at me at that point and at that point for me, that, you know. I was really shocked and after that I hated him throughout the whole year.

Her biggest problem though was the vice-principal.

The vice principal took every person who had ever been in trouble with him in grade 9 and made the math class. I was not pleased. I could not stand this guy and he made it so that we couldn't get out of the class, we couldn't switch or anything, we were stuck. And for me I guess math was one of my better subjects and I guess because of what he had done, it was forced upon us, I hated it. I totally hated it, I hated going, I hated pleasing him, I hated everything. I failed it, I think I failed it. Yes I did, I failed it.

In addition to failing math, C was suspended five times throughout her grade 9 year. Her offences once again were smoking on school property and skipping school. She recalled that during grade 9 she would skip class a little more often. Like grade 8, C's grade 9 year was a mix of positive and negative experiences. Socially, she was increasingly successful. New friendships were formed, parties and dances were attended regularly, and the freedom desired was made available. Academically, C continued to slide. Her main academic interest (math) was undermined as a result of her antagonistic relationship with the vice principal. Other subjects and teachers failed to capture her interest. Academic engagement was increasingly dependant on the quality of her relationships with teachers.

Albeit at a barely perceptible pace, grade 9 furthered her disengagement.

The summer between grade 9 and 10 added to her social life.

I was involved, there was a boy's and girl's club and I guess a couple of friends, we ended up going there. You know, video games, pool tables, things like that.

The most significant event of the summer centered around a new relationship.

I met this guy. It affected me big time. Cause that was the first relationship, the first love sort of thing.

On the strength of this relationship C transferred schools. In addition to being with her boyfriend, C rekindled old friendships.

A lot more friends. There were a lot of friends I had had in elementary school that I never saw through grade 8 and grade 9 that were at my new school that I got to know again. Probably a group of about 80 people that all knew each other. So it was a lot more fun.

The start of grade 10 also presented a genuine possibility for academic engagement. While C's academic interests were dormant, there was a new resolve to attend regularly.

Well attending school was something that my boyfriend and I actually agreed that we would, we would go to school all the time together. We knew the importance of it so we made an effort. I always knew school was important, it depended on whether I cared or not.

Unfortunately, when her relationship ended so did C's resolve to attend regularly. She went back to skipping once in a while and here and there came to school under the influence of drugs. Nevertheless C still managed to pass the year. Near the end of grade 10 she met a new boyfriend and once again attempted to change her lifestyle.

It just happened. Well the guy that I was with, he was, I wanted to walk away from it [alcohol and drugs]. It's just difficult when you're constantly around it. And he wanted me, you know he wanted to make sure that everything was clean and you know that sort of thing. Like not into drugs, he didn't like alcohol, didn't like anything like that.

Even though they argued regularly about her drinking, the relationship gave C a sense of being settled and she found the summer a lot more relaxed.

#### The End

When she started grade 11 this positive tone accompanied her.

I don't think that I had any classes to start with that I didn't like. I did a guitar class just for a point of interest. That was fun. I had an economics class that I really enjoyed. It was interesting. It was the first time it was, I guess it was a socials studies class, and it was, it was fun, I could understand it. It was, the person teaching it made it very interesting.

Before long however, things started to crumble. The first academic difficulty that arose was her foods class.

I was not a morning person. I didn't like to get up early in the morning, that sort of thing and I was late for her class a few times. And I remember she told me that if I was ever late again, not to show up, so I was

late every day. So I never showed up to any of the rest of her classes. I ended up dropping her class.

Socially, life was not as comfortable as it had been in the past. Her new school was a senior high with a population three times that of her previous school. C felt lost and confused.

It was just too big of a change I think. I think it [feeling lost and confused] started almost right away. I was just so overwhelmed to see people that I hung out with who wouldn't even acknowledge me. You know people would be hanging with people that I didn't even know, you know, it just seemed so strange cause everything [used to be] so nice and tightly knit. I mean everyone was doing their own thing. I had my close friend and my boyfriend but neither of them went to school.

C's school experience ended in confusion. In her first semester in grade 11 she failed every class except guitar.

I have no idea what happened. It just, everything fell apart I guess. It was so different I guess, such a big jump. Like this school, it's three levels, it's huge and I went from a small one level school. I dropped out halfway, it was the start of the last semester.

During what turned out to be her last school meeting the counsellor informed C's parents that their daughter was the type of person who couldn't stand school and refused to work with anyone. C agreed with this analysis.

I didn't like the rules. I didn't like the way everything was set up so perfectly, you know with all the blocks and you get an hour here, and 5 minutes between classes. I just, I didn't like it. Just the structured system and the teachers, the way they treated you, I mean you're just about, you're very close to being an adult and you're not quite there but as far as you're concerned you are and they're treating you like little kids. You've got to bring in your little note from your mother, you know, and that sort of thing.

At the start of grade 11 C didn't have a class that she didn't like. Four months later she dropped out, completely overwhelmed.

Commentary.

C's story of disengagement has an eerie, illusional quality about it. On the surface she appeared academically capable, and, for the most part, socially successful. Her home seemed stable and supportive. At different times, C presented as quite mature and independent. The nature of her demise and departure as a student however, suggests that she was never really quite grounded.

Her academic ability was most evident in elementary school. Here she was a better than average student. C's waning academic interest and social preoccupation explained her limited academic accomplishment in junior high. Her failure and premature departure in grade 11 was more a matter of social alienation than academic limitation.

It is in her social life however, that the first crack in this veneer of success started to appear. In grade 4 she moved and found it difficult to leave her old friendships. In grade 8 C seemed both to have many friends and to be picked on regularly. Popular and socially very active, she, nevertheless, changed schools so that she could be with her boyfriend. When she reached grade 11 she was ostracized even though she knew many people, and had previously experienced them as part of a tightly knit group. Combined

these episodes present the portrait of a person who was more needy and alone than grounded and in charge.

This aloneness originated in C's home and was the greatest source of her difficulties. C's father was often absent. When he was available his involvement was curtailed by his wife's interpretation of what was prudent. According to C, her mother was most concerned that tension resulting from her daughter's behavior at school not impede on the relationship between father and daughter. C's mom, on the other hand, was gullible and easily managed when C desired more freedom. The parents' limited skills translated into an inordinate amount of control and freedom being placed into C's inexperienced hands. Unguided and largely responsible for her own affairs she grew increasingly dependent on friendships and boyfriends for emotional support. When she found herself in a school without this support she lost her will to make an effort. The only way to bring the reigning chaos to an end was to withdraw from school.

## Chapter 14

### Introduction

Narrative accounts were analyzed in order to compare disengagement patterns and the meanings derived from these experiences. The central question was whether premature departure from school followed common patterns of experience or uniquely individual ones. Initial and follow up interviews, the co-authored stories, and the researcher's recollections were utilized in this process.

During the initial interviews, there was a qualitative difference in participants' accounts. For instance, some stories were rich in detail, delivered with passion, and often contained images and metaphors that encapsulated the narrator's experience. Other speakers were not as articulate. These renditions were at times bland, more often delivered in a monotone, and tended to lack clarity and precision.

Another general distinction was the participants' positioning in relation to their narratives. Those whose language allowed for a richer narrative appeared more in control and seemed to have come to terms with some of their memories. These participants presented as if their process of disengagement was an historical event. They would recall a particular moment, capture and present the poignancy of the experience, and continue with the story. A certain sense of peace accompanied their stories even though some



confusion and pain remained. Others, who were less articulate, seemed in some way to be still struggling with the past. Some would describe an incident and appear to get caught up in their own musings. Memories would generate powerful feelings and cause participants to become agitated. Gestures, sighs, reddening of the face, and swearing were evident until appropriate words could be found (often with the help of the researcher) to describe their memories. At times they would linger in the moment, become quite sad, and end with a shrug or an "oh well".

Interviews also varied in terms of the magnitude of the events described. Most of the more passionate, articulate, participants had stories with gruesome, violent episodes. The less articulate group's narratives tended to follow a less volatile plot line. The degree to which this was a matter of language as opposed to experience is a question that remains to be answered.

Narrative styles and abilities coupled with the nature of actual events and the relationships formed during the study provided this researcher with a variety of challenges.

The first three participants (case study 1,2,3) offered detailed interviews which readily translated into stories of disengagement. Distinct memories of specific events allowed for relatively clear-cut paths to be charted quickly. This sense of progress generated feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment. At the same time there was some confusion and awkwardness. Several times during the initial

interviews, narratives invited probes that would have led the conversation into areas of the participants' lives well beyond the scope of this research. At these intersections there was the potential that research would drift into the domain of life planning, personal counselling, or psychotherapy. Such moments were made even more difficult by some participants' willingness to engage in a more formal therapeutic relationship. Since my research rekindled their painful memories I felt drawn to participate in any movement towards a resolution. Although these situations were addressed appropriately (referrals, discussions about the limited nature of our relationship) remnants of dissatisfaction remained. On a research level however, these first interviews were most encouraging.

In contrast to the sense of satisfaction accrued from the first three interviews, the next two (case study 4 & 5) generated initial feelings of frustration in me. Having completed interviews with more articulate speakers, I had to adjust to participants whose narratives were more difficult to gather. These interviews required me to draw on my counselling skills (paraphrasing, clarifying, probing) much more often. Being a more active listener helped bring clarity and detail to general statements. For instance, what started off as "grade 8 was boring" might have been fleshed out into a context that included academic difficulties in various subject areas, confusing events unfolding in the home, and a compromised sense of self as a

12 year old. This process sometimes helped participants make connections between what had formerly been disparate parts of their lives. For me these experiences generated mixed emotions. While this more detailed story helped meet my needs as a researcher, I struggled with questions of invasiveness. Especially during these two interviews, I had an almost constant desire to seek permission and approval for my line of inquiry. It took some time to accept that the type of narrative being offered had more to do with the speaker's narrative style and relative inarticulateness as opposed to reluctance or desired privacy. As might be expected, these experiences substantially increased my range as an interviewer. By the end of the fifth story, I was more clear about which issues were mine and which were the participants'. I had learned to be more trusting of my ability to pursue difficult questions without feeling invasive. And perhaps most importantly, I had learned to trust in the participants' abilities to take care of themselves.

Some narratives brought problems that were harder to address. Of the 10 interviews the most difficult to conduct was the seventh. M's narrative (case study 7), filled with so much ugliness and pain, was overwhelming. She seemed destined to be a dropout statistic while she was still in kindergarten. The lack of hope conveyed through her narrative reminded me of the many others I'd witnessed in my 17 years as an educator. After this interview I felt

saturated and withdrew from the study. Unlike other unproductive times in the course of the research, this withdrawal was a deliberate act of self-protection. The futility and lack of hope that filled her life caused me to question my work as an educator and my efforts as a researcher. I lingered for months. After several attempts I was able to review my interview with M. This time around I was more aware of M's anger than her pain. I used her anger to rekindle my interest in the process and re-engaged in the study. When I did attempt to write her story it came quite quickly.

The last phase of the study, comparing the narratives, reminded me about how difficult it was to hear somebody else's story. Working through the narratives I had developed a bias in favor of the more articulate speakers. Their experiences I associated with greater pain, truthfulness and worth. I imagined that leaving school was somehow less significant for the quieter group. This process of being misjudged mirrored the indignities that some of the participants had suffered while disengaging from school. Too often, inappropriate motives had been attributed to their behaviors. For instance, failure to complete an assignment might be attributed to low career aspiration. Arriving late for class was easily associated with poor attitude or indifference. Assumptions of this sort often exacerbated an already problematic situation. The ease with which I was willing to ascribe a faulty motive

to behavior constituted my most embarrassing moment in the study. Left unchecked, my assumption would have minimized several participants' experiences. On the other hand, recognizing this bias helped bring clarity and focus to the analyses. Through this struggle some common ground to the participants' disengagement process started to emerge.

While the 10 participants' stories of disengagement constituted unique individual experiences, three overriding movements towards dropping out were discovered. Each of the participants experienced: (1) an escalating cumulation of problems; (2) increased school maladjustment; and (3) an increased engulfment in a spoiled identity. These three movements were grounded in family and environmental circumstances, individuals' interpretations of experience, and the nature of the school system.

The circumstances of the individual participants' lives contributed to the attitudes and behaviors that they lived out at school. Family difficulties undermined parents' abilities to guide and support their children which in turn had a direct effect on their sons' and daughters' chances of surviving and thriving in the school system. Participants' interpretations of life events and their inherent makeup also played a role in their school experience. For instance, some would respond to their school experience by becoming angry and hostile, while others faded quietly and seemed to accept their lot. The destructive contribution that participants' interpretations played in their demise as

students was felt primarily at the secondary level. During their elementary school years most were managing to cope. Some were very successful. In part, this can be attributed to the softer, more protective and watchful atmosphere that is often a part of elementary school culture. Another factor that made elementary school life manageable was the age of the children. Though a number of individuals had experienced and witnessed substantial pain and disappointment, much of this was still buried. Few had ventured into the world yet. Poised to embark on their sojourn into adolescence and high school, they were in different stages of preparedness. Some were academically skilled and had known success; others were not as fortunate. All however, were quite alone. Though it had not yet become manifest, each of the individual participants was charged with a degree of responsibility and freedom that would prove to be overwhelming. Their efforts to manage and to make sense of their individual circumstances would increase their difficulties at school and would result in the creation of spoiled identities. The end result was personal failure. This failure crystallized in the participants' premature departure from school; it was the final act in a long and at times painful process.

#### Escalating Cumulation of Problems

As children, each of the participants experienced a variety of problems that, over a period of time, escalated in scope and intensity. These difficulties had a number of

sources, and became manifest in different ways. Some (like physical and sexual abuse) were obvious and were experienced as immediately devastating. Other difficulties (lost friendships, moments of neglect, inappropriate role models) lingered in the background virtually invisible; these were taken in first as little hurts and confusions, but often ended up becoming powerful forces of disruption.

One group of problems emanated from their parents' lives. Six participants (case study 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, & 8) came from homes where adult relationships had failed or were badly faltering. Other issues arose out of drug and alcohol abuse. M (case 1) has vivid memories of coming home to find his mother passed out on the couch. R's (case 3) father would become violent when he drank and he did so often. Well before she entered adolescence, B (case 6) remembered tending to her mother's drunken body. One of S's (case 8) earliest memories is of passing a lit joint from adult to adult. A key problem area for some, was their parents' preoccupation with career. B's (case 6) successful parents often left her in the hands of sitters until well into the evening. A's (case 2) parents were unavailable to her when she needed them. Still other unresolved parental difficulties involved sexual abuse and mental illness. M's (case 1) mother was schizophrenic. M's (case 7) mother had been sexually abused and raped.

These adult problems created numerous, specific hardships for their children. Some participants felt

neglected and abandoned. Others became protective and took on the roles of parents. Feelings of confusion, fear, and uncertainty were common. Regardless of the specific nature of the family problem, each participant was exposed to an environment where the parents' abilities to offer guidance and direction were compromised.

The convergence of individual tendencies, mannerisms, shortcomings, and abilities within the school milieu, generated another set of difficulties. Being short statured made school life more difficult for M (case 1). A (case 2) and G (case 4) both suffered from extreme shyness. B's (case 6) academic success resulted in her skipping a grade, an experience that led to feelings of displacement. Limited academic ability left R (case 3) and G (case 4) feeling exposed and vulnerable. By the age of 10, L's (case 5) father had labeled her as a problem child who needed discipline. In some circumstances school engagement was limited by influences beyond the control of parents, teachers, or the participants themselves.

A number of participants (case 2, 4, & 7) were sexually abused. Others suffered physical or emotional abuse. R (case 3) was often hit by his drunken father; his mother was beaten regularly. M (case 1) was ostracized and neglected.

The quality of guidance and support available through peer friendships also contributed to some participants' difficulties. The socioeconomic environment that they resided in affected both S's (case 8) and M's (case 7) views



of school. Each grew up in neighborhoods where violence and drugs were commonplace. School success carried little status in this culture. A lack of sustained friendships made the world more frightening for those who moved regularly. B (case 6) was shifted from group to group because of her parents' desire to expose her to different experiences (French immersion, gifted programs). M's (case 1) efforts to fit in were undermined by changing schools and by his uncle's summertime efforts to rescue him from his mother. M, (case 7) and C (case 10) reported feeling displaced due to relocating. In short, a lack of appropriate and sustained friendships added to participants' escalating cumulation of problems.

Left unsettled, time only served to compound participants' original problems. Dysfunctional backgrounds translated into inordinate degrees of personal freedom and responsibility. Lacking helping relationships, children failed to learn how to resolve personal and school related difficulties. Thrust into roles that required far more maturity and capability, participants became increasingly overwhelmed and confused.

Progressive incapacitation and disintegration of their life structure resulted in a lingering personal chaos. This had a detrimental or at least stultifying effect on their trust, confidence and security. Its expression took a variety of forms. M's (case 1) early recollections are filled with feelings of being an outsider in his own family.

By the time he left elementary school he had developed a deep and desperate need to belong. A (case 2) saw her seeming bravado and independence as an acquired means of addressing her aloneness and sexual abuse. Over time she became caught up in her own facade, a process that deepened and intensified her alienation. R's (case 3) major escape from his father's alcohol-driven violence was the hockey rink. Other forms of escape came in the form of drugs and the role of the class clown. Molested, assaulted, raped and exposed to the court system by the time she was ten, M (case 7) first withdrew and then became increasingly defiant. By the time she was twelve, only life on the street could offer her comfort and support. Others responded to their personal circumstances in quieter less noticeable ways, some by withdrawing, some through chronic and misdirected rage, others through drugs.

Their experiences placed each of the participants into a uniquely paradoxical position. To varying degrees they were overly distrustful of adults and very much in need of adult direction. As they entered high school the effects of their increasingly troubled personal circumstances started to appear. In general, participants' debilitating experiences resulted in feelings of reduced agency and increased vulnerability. Their exposure to the world's vagaries left them with a reduced ability to trust. Subsequent manifestations of this reduced trust came in the form of an increased self reliance or a more defiant

attitude towards authority. At school, success would depend more often on the quality of their relationships with teachers than on academic interests. These relationships offered the emotional support that their backgrounds had failed to provide. Contact provided a temporary sense of belonging and fostered academic engagement. A lack of relationship on the other hand, fostered disengagement. Poor or weak contact made for a somewhat more complicated, slightly more vulnerable and difficult to reach adolescent. Within the classroom context they might be characterized as overly difficult, argumentative, or belligerent (case 1, 5, 6, & 9) on the one extreme or withdrawn, lost or unknown on the other (case 2, 3, 4, 7, & 10). Each stance, though fueled by a desire to engage and belong, was clothed in a distancing manner. Although it existed outside of their realm of control, this manner added to their school problems and decreased their chances of success. While manifested in different ways, over time there was a discernible pattern that emerged. It started with a generalized frustration that grew into fear and ended in resignation. This withering of hope, endemic to the disengagement process, was fostered by the escalating cumulation of problems. During the first movement then, there was a sustained loosening of the supportive backdrop that makes school success a practical possibility.

### Increased School Maladjustment

The participants' strained personal foundations were further complicated and ruffled by the nature of the school system, the locus of the second movement. Regular public schools have a task to accomplish and a time within which to complete it. Regardless of their good intentions, schools can only tolerate a limited amount of personal ambiguity on the part of students. What systemic tolerance exists in the secondary school system is present only as an isolated phenomenon. Personal uncertainty and confusion therefore, have a limited time in which to be resolved. Each of the participants ran out of time; the demands of the system outstripped the participants' abilities to adjust. Their transition from childhood to adolescence therefore, was marked by growing frustration and self-doubt. These troubles were now added to the already present uncertainty and confusion.

Sorting out who they were and identifying, finding, or creating their niche in the school system became a task of major proportions. From one perspective it can be viewed as a question of balance. The need to fit in and belong was out of proportion to the patience, trust, support, and flexibility required to sustain the search and successfully complete the task. Nonetheless, numerous efforts to ground themselves were made.

One type of effort involved academic engagement. At various points during their high school years each

individual attempted to devote him/herself to school work. Some did so because they were threatened with expulsion if they didn't change their ways. Others would apply themselves in subjects where they had established comfortable and trusting relationships with teachers. A few had known academic accomplishment when they were younger and found it easy to excel when they managed to apply themselves.

Various levels of success were realized as a result of these efforts. Some improved or even excelled in a particular subject. Others made it on the honor role. These achievements however, were at best, temporary. Regardless of the individual nature of their success, none were able to sustain it. Success failed to generate or promote any long standing sense of membership. The positive associations (approval, recognition, praise) which accompanied academic achievement, somehow failed to be internalized. In part this failure can be attributed to circumstance. For some participants, effort and achievement were not part of a deeply rooted attitude nursed and cultivated by family mores. With others, although academic success was expected, there was no supportive structure to facilitate their efforts. Effort and achievement therefore had the appearance of a free floating phenomenon seemingly drawn upon at will one day but inaccessible the next. In actual fact, school success was a contextualized experience; it came about when other factors (friendships, teacher's

support, temporary peace at home) were taken care of. As their emotional context changed however, their success started to wither. Regardless of their accomplishments, participants continued to have a pawn-like relationship with achievement. No internal mechanism had developed which would enable them to act with agency. Over time their positive academic experiences decreased, their failures increased and their resolve to achieve weakened.

Other efforts to ground themselves had a social orientation. Here, school clubs, activities, and athletics were some of the vehicles to membership. Several of the participants took these routes and for a time seemed to settle in. Others never explored these avenues or never felt welcomed when they made an effort. Whatever their immediate experience, a sense of belonging was not attained. In the long run the common feeling was emptiness.

These failed efforts to adjust need to be considered in the context of the participants' troubled lives. In an effort to cope, over time each participant adopted a defensive posture. Regardless of their abilities or successes therefore, each strove to make sense of his/her world within the context of a reduced emotional resiliency. Where other students might bounce back from the daily barbs (real or imagined) that fill adolescent school life, the participants could not do so sufficiently to attain a sense of peace and belonging. Instead of being a new start, all too quickly high school became a continuation of their

troubled past. Grounded in a problem-riddled story line and lacking access to a perspective that might help to absorb, deflect, or interpret some of their pain in a more useful manner, participants learned to expect, anticipate, and often prepare for the worst. Successes failed to register, whereas failures deepened their pain and reduced their resolve to try. Making an effort at school became increasingly difficult. Since success was as void of meaning as failure, indifference took hold. Lacking external support and guidance, this indifference became insurmountable. "Whatever" became the articulated, philosophical bottom line and the best means of defending against the system's request for effort and commitment. Mood ruled the day. Simultaneously, they were too often interpreted by their educators as lazy, unconcerned or indifferent students. Behavior was regularly and inappropriately translated into motive. Now, feelings of injustice were added to the long standing pain and the growing confusion. Lacking adequate intervention and direction, their defensive postures started to shift into what would become more permanent, defensive styles.

Some began to experiment with an aggressive style. B (case 6) became increasingly rude and belligerent. She started to specialize in humiliating teachers by making them look stupid. M (case 1) moved from challenging teachers to berating them. Others started to adopt a more passive style. R (case 3), G (case 4), S (case 8), and B (case 9)

used drugs to distance themselves. A (case 2) learned to become more still, making it increasingly difficult for the system to notice her. C (case 10) was belligerent when confronted and indifferent when ignored.

Considered as a whole, the second movement was a period of wavering. At its most obvious level, the wavering was captured through overt behavior. Hope was withering, problems were increasing, and defiant and distancing tendencies were crystallizing, yet most participants were still managing to hold on. They attended school most of the time; once in a while they made an effort. To a degree this was a matter of habit. They had gone to school for most of their lives; there was nowhere else to go. At the same time, this habit reflected their hopes and desires. Raised in a world where education was valued, they yearned to belong and to succeed. At a deeper level this habit constituted their final and most desperate defense. Worse than the sense of failure and defeat that would accompany dropping out, was the terror of freedom. They had been students ever since they could remember; they had no other identity.

#### An Increased Engulfment in a Spoiled Identity

The third movement involved a crystallizing of previous experiences and attitudes within the context of increasingly complex personal demands. These demands involved a deeper and ever-present desire to belong and a yearning for meaning, both of which manifested themselves in a striving



for identity. Couched in fear, rage, and reactivity, this process of becoming was incapable of meeting the increased demands of the system. At the same time, each participant needed a resolution of the troubles in which they were embroiled. The spoiled identity that was brought into being was the best available solution to the reigning chaos; it was the only available means of preserving dignity.

In an attempt to make sense of their lives, participants interpreted and filtered their home, school, and street experiences. By early adolescence, most felt exposed, unprotected, and alone. Efforts to fit in failed to reap the sense of belonging desired. Experiences in academic failure resulted in personal distancing from mainstream school activity. Out of this arose a search for other types of membership. This change of direction however, was not a deliberate act of agency. Rather, their actions were more in keeping with a river that has overflowed its banks; unleashed, the water is merely looking for a new place to settle.

As their disengagement from school deepened and took hold, participants employed a variety of means to manage the pain associated with a faltering identity. Many opted for drugs. Crime often accompanied this choice of anesthetic. Beyond providing money, criminal activity also offered excitement and belonging. New identities became available through membership in fringe groups (thieves, dopers, street people). More time became available for personal

relationships and sexual involvement. Skipping class became a useful way to minimize the daily pain of school.

Whatever the chosen means of distancing from school (physical, emotional, or intellectual), the common effect was an increased sense of security, albeit a false one. Distance made school success less likely. With decreasing possibility came a saving of face. Failure could now be associated not with an inability to cope but rather with a lifestyle. One simply had better things to do. The initial pain (embarrassment, failure, social rejection) was managed through various lies (indifference, anger, drugs, crime) which in turn resulted in a deadening of the spirit. This deadening of the spirit was by now synonymous with attending school. Like refugees, they had to leave in order to live.

Where they ended up settling varied. The course of least resistance was a major factor for S (case 8). He finally gave way to the world of drugs which he had first encountered as a toddler. G's (case 4) success and popularity as a party girl was too difficult to resist. In this role she was comfortable, successful and powerful. At a party she knew no shyness. M (case 1) and M (case 7) took their rage to the street. A (case 2) withered into virtual nonexistence. B's (case 6) acerbic tongue lost its gunslinger quality but her rage was not tamed. Given a choice to either comply or leave, she opted to leave. C (case 10) simply buckled under the weight of her aloneness. Regardless of the individual variations, the identity each

person forged was similar in that it was spoiled. A spoiled identity had several common features.

First, it was marked by a sense of resignation. The positions adopted were void of any sense of striving, there was no sense of having arrived. Survival had replaced accomplishment as a goal. Second, this new identity was often buttressed by false fronts which carried an illusion of agency. Drugs, sex, and common-law relationships supported this false agency for some. A sense of abandon and living by one's wits gave those who had turned to the street their sense of potency. The activities that each became immersed in buffeted participants temporarily from the pain of failure and the horror of their new found freedom. Finally, this spoiled identity can be seen as the crystallization of a process that had started when their parents relinquished or lost control of their children. In most cases this break had occurred before the confusion and anxiety of adolescence had set in. As the participants moved into their adolescent years and started to rebel or redefine relationships with their parents, they met with little effective resistance. What should have been a struggle turned into a rout. Confused by this premature agency, yearning to belong, and unable to make the sustained effort which school required, they fell into identities that would undermine their abilities to cope. Out of this personal chaos emerged identities that at least enabled them to survive.

### The Meaning of Dropping Out

Dropping out of school carried with it a host of meanings. It was both a beginning and an end. Dropping out was associated with hope and possibility as well as shame and defeat. For some it was the continuation of a slide into a pawn-like existence, for others it was the point at which a re-positioning into agency started to occur. Still others used it as a temporary resting place in a long, meandering, and still present confusion.

Where school had been a painful experience, leaving was welcomed primarily as relief. M (case 1) was glad to leave an environment which for him was like a tomb. A's (case 2) existence at school had become empty and shadow-like. For her, leaving carried with it the possibility and hope that she might become visible again. To C (case 10) leaving meant an end to feelings of aloneness and confusion. In these cases though, dropping out also offered a new opportunity. After they finished with what had become their ordeal of high school, each of the three participants collected their energies, addressed their problems and, after some time, took charge of their lives.

For some, dropping out resulted in feelings of inadequacy, increased self-doubt, and a growing sense of shame. For these students premature departure was linked with personal failure. R (case 3) remembered the day he left as the worst day in his life. In some cases the regret and pain took some time to take hold. Here, premature

departure brought instant relief, followed later by a deeper, more poignant fear and confusion. When M (case 7) left school she could stop feeling like, and living the life of a freak. On the street she found acceptance and a relative, though temporary peace. When the brutality of her new life became overwhelming, she was stuck between two impossible worlds. She still resides in this "neither here nor there" locale. In A's (case 4) situation, being freed from the unrealizable and embarrassing demands of the system translated into a rather lengthy streak of exhilaration. Her denial lasted until she became a single mother. Faced with the responsibility of raising her daughter, A (case 4) started to face her past failures and is making an effort to finish her education. At this point in her life dropping out is associated with shame and regret.

In some circumstances dropping out was associated most with compulsivity and bewilderment. Neither B (case 6) nor L (case 5) could quite believe how their final departure came about. B (case 6) felt her behavior was stupid; L (case 5) said she would have returned if somebody had called her back. Both left on the spur of the moment. Neither has come to terms with how or why they dropped out.

With B (case 9), dropping out is associated most with her raucous, drug riddled behaviour. Recently, she has started to wonder about the role that Attention Deficit Disorder may have played in her experience.

Of the 10, perhaps the most confused and overwhelmed is S (case 8). He sees himself as the prime, if not the sole architect in his demise as a student. When we last talked, he was thinking of giving school another try. Characteristically, his tone belied his intention.

## Chapter 15

### Discussion

#### Introduction

In this study the researcher interviewed 10 participants individually on two separate occasions. Participants varied in age from 16 to 22. The research product was twofold. First, it resulted in 10 stories of disengagement from school which captured individual participants' lived experiences of dropping out. Narratives provided a context for the numerous variables involved in the process of disengaging and offered some insight into the culminating act of dropping out. Second, a comparative analysis of the 10 stories yielded three common movements or patterns of disengagement: (a) escalating cumulation of problems, (b) increased school maladjustment; and (c) an increased engulfment in a spoiled identity. These indicated that the multifaceted complexity involved in disengagement is perhaps best understood from a broader ecological perspective.

Disengagement originated from a loosening of supportive structures and increased through an intensification of private confusion and growing academic demands. Disengagement culminated in a process best described as a striving for dignity that went awry. The three movements involved home, school, and community experiences and included a combination of circumstance and individual acts

of interpretation. Dropping out, the final public act in this process, held a variety of meanings.

Aloneness, coupled with a dwindling sense of personal agency, was a common intrapersonal experience. Relationships with parents and friends resulted in feelings of increased helplessness and confusion. As the need to fit in and belong at school increased, dependence on the quality of rapport with teachers became a touchstone of a tentative institutional existence. Increasingly unprotected from the external world, individuals became overwhelmed and opted to leave.

#### Limitations of the Study

This study generated and clarified three streams of movement that resulted in premature departure from school for the ten participants. The degree to which these themes captured the disengagement process warrants further investigation. More research is required in order to confirm, broaden, or revise the stated patterns.

The study was also limited by participants' abilities to articulate their individual experiences of disengagement. Some appeared to have a firm grasp and a clear recollection of this portion of their lives and provided rich, detailed accounts. Others were far less articulate and offered stories that were more sparse. On the other hand, all narratives were affected by participants' biases, levels of self-awareness, and memory.



Another limitation was the number and the source of participants. All 10 participants were recruited from a lower mainland suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia. How representative their stories of disengagement are of the general population of dropouts, remains to be established.

The study was also limited by the researcher's perspective. The research tried to address potential biases by utilizing the following procedures. Each narrative was reviewed by the individual participant, by two external reviewers, and by the supervisor. Through this process corrections were made, some biases were removed and stories were verified as accurate portrayals of individual lives.

#### Implications for Theory

The present study supported the broad range of reasons associated with dropping out that have been documented in previous research. Across the 10 stories there is evidence linking dropping out with low socioeconomic status (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Kolstad & Owings, 1986; Rumberger, 1983), family structure (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Gilbert et al., 1993), family functioning (Page & Joyce, 1994), and parenting style (Dornbusch et al., 1987; Lamborn et al., 1991; Rumberger, 1995; Steinberg et al., 1989). Dropping out was also connected to a number of school related factors such as poor achievement, low test scores, poor attendance and unacceptable behavior (Gilbert et al., 1993; Natreillo et al., 1988). Other school experiences that participants said contributed to

disengagement included alienation from peers (Newman, 1981), perceived lack of teacher interest (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), school policy and classroom structure (Fine, 1987). As with previous research (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), the relationship between self-esteem and dropping out was mixed. Some of the narratives indicated a loss of self-esteem as a result of leaving school, other individuals experienced leaving as a positive, self-asserting act.

In a similar fashion, the present study offered limited support for two theories of disengagement: (a) the frustration-self-esteem model, and (b) the participation-identification model (Finn, 1989). The need for a theory of disengagement has been articulated by various researchers (Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 1987). A framework of disengagement would help illuminate how various personal, social, and educational factors contributed to premature departure from school. The three movements towards disengagement identified in this study offered some qualified support for existing theories of disengagement. Specifically, support was found for relationships between disengagement and different categories of factors but not for either theory as a whole.

The frustration-self-esteem model postulated that 3 general categories contributed to the act of dropping out: (a) school performance (Bloom, 1976; Ford & Nickols, 1987;), (b) self view (Ford, 1987; Bloom, 1976; Byrne, 1984; Gold & Mann, 1984; Hansford & Hattie, 1982 and Shavelson & Bolus,

1982), and (c) oppositional behavior (Ford, 1987; Gold & Mann, 1984, Polk & Halferty, 1972). The three movements indicated that associations exist between school performance and self view (Bloom, 1976; Ford & Nickols, 1987; Hansford & Hattie, 1982); between school performance and the influence of family and peers (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982); and between oppositional behavior and self view (Gold & Mann, 1984; Ford, 1987; Polk & Halferty, 1982).

This study also offered qualified support for the two general categories of the participation-identification model: (a) identification with school (Firestone & Rosenbloom, 1988; Gold & Mann, 1984; Polk & Halferty, 1972), and (b) participation in school (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Kerr et al., 1986; McKinney et al., 1975). The second and third movements supported the role of identification with school (Gold & Mann, 1984; Firestone & Rosenbloom, 1988) and participation in school (McKinney et al., 1975, Kerr et al., 1986, and Ekstrom et al., 1986) as contributing factors in the disengagement process.

While my study did support the general categories as being important to the disengagement process, it questioned several assumptions in such research. First, this study raised doubts about the possibility of separating various influences like school, community, and peers. Second, it indicated that though a search for factors and categories may be an economical way to conduct research, it is potentially misleading.

It is not easy to separate the influences of school, community and peers on the disengagement process. For instance in the first case study M, during a grade 10 drama class, aggressively confronted his teacher and ended up getting suspended. Outbursts of this type played a significant role in M's premature departure from school. To what degree this moment (or many others) can be attributed to anger towards his mother or his school as opposed to the pull of his friends on the street though, is difficult to say. At the same time it is virtually impossible to see this exchange as the result of anything other than the influences of the various relationships in his life. He was disgusted with his mother, and school was experienced as meaningless and abusive. The street, on the other hand, was alluring, inviting, and exciting. All of his relationships contributed to a reigning sense of what he described as "an anarchy within". Within the context of this anarchy all causes or influences are fused. An analysis of the various influences as separate entities can only occur outside of the anarchy, that is outside of M. Like different types of grapes that have been made into a wine, the individual contributions are significant but no longer distinct. In order to understand the moment in question, M's behavior and the influences of his different relationships must be considered and taken as a whole. Just as with metaphor, the experience can only be grasped in its entirety. Beyond the difficulty of attempting to partition the process into

various influences or factors there is also a danger with such an approach.

The problem with factors or categories is that they cannot convey the story. Without the story there is a loss of individual experience, understanding, and meaning, all of which are required if disengagement is to be understood and if engagement is to be given an opportunity to occur. Moreover, a focus on any given category or factor is apt to be misleading. Take for instance the idea that poor academic achievement is a cause of students dropping out of school. Several participants' stories indicated that while poor academic achievement furthered their disengagement process, a number of these same participants (case 1, 6, 8, and 10) realized substantial academic success. During different points in their high school careers each of these students excelled academically (GPA of 3.00 or better). Three of the four students demonstrated this academic ability shortly before they dropped out. At the same time each of them went through bouts where they presented as if they were poor students. Only within the context of an individual life, conveyed through story, is it possible to make sense of how this mix of accomplishment and growing disengagement could co-exist. A focus on factors alone might link disengagement with poor performance which would be misleading, or, from a different perspective disengagement could also be tied to academic success--which strikes one as absurd.

The stories collected in this study indicated that a comprehensive theory of disengagement must be built on a holistic perspective. To be understood, dropping out needs to be seen as the cumulation of a whole life up to the point of premature departure. Beyond the events and experiences that constitute an individual existence, questions of individual interpretation and meaning must also be considered. This study set out to capture lived experience in the hope that it would be richer in context than the cumulation of constructs. In fact this turned out to be the case. Capturing this context requires a broader ecological approach that includes family, school, and community. The multigenerational relationships within and between these different systems are all part of the 5-year-old kindergarten student entering school. Comprehending, for instance, why one student responds to discipline with renewed vigor and a determination to try harder while another moves towards resignation requires, at the very least, a substantial tolerance of ambiguity. A theory of disengagement must have the plasticity to hold and illuminate a multifaceted, living entity that is grounded in individual comprehension and construction of reality.

#### Implications for Practice

A critical feature in the disengagement process was the quality of participants' relationships with both parents and teachers. Sound relationships with teachers were often accompanied by academic success and the possibility of

finding a sense of belonging at school. Poor relationships with teachers were linked with decreased academic performance, growing behavior problems, and increased indifference. Weak relationships in the home generated a false agency that led to confusion, frustration, and resignation. Establishing rapport and building relationships provide a major vehicle for entry into potential dropouts' stories. Increasing the quality of teacher-student contact could be accomplished through various means.

The significance of teacher-student relationships to learning could be explored and articulated through the development of a comprehensive guidance program. The design and implementation of such a program would have several goals. First, the lived experiences of some of today's youth should be collected so that their diverse and complex needs might be better understood. Such information would enable us both to understand the nature of the problem and the scope of the challenge. Second, the program would aim to inform teachers about how best to address the emotional needs of their students. For instance, it would be useful for teachers to become aware of which situations to address directly, which situations to address indirectly, and which to refer to other professionals. Finally, the existence of such a program would legitimize special training so that teachers could be provided with the skills to address some of the diverse needs that they encounter in the classroom.

Towards this end, teachers' training programs might include courses in listening skills, group processes, career counselling, and family dynamics.

Another way to facilitate relationship building is by controlling school size. With a typical secondary school being 3 - 4 times the size of an elementary school, potential dropouts have an increased chance of going unnoticed. Limiting the size of secondary institutions enables school personnel to invest more time in engaging students instead of controlling them. Also, a smaller structure allows for more immediate contact among adults. For instance in a school of 500 the needs of a particular student or group can be dealt with immediately, whereas in a school of 1500 issues are more often addressed through a bureaucratized, time consuming process. Having the capacity to address students' needs as they arise increases adults' opportunities to make and sustain contact. In the case of potential dropouts, this contact is a lifeline.

Another way to address potential dropouts' needs for contact and guidance is by recognizing the significance of the teacher-student relationship to student success. At the secondary classroom level a more holistic, child centered approach to teaching, learning, and evaluation is required. Teachers need to find ways to create more tangibly caring and supportive structures like those offered to elementary school students. Particularly at the junior high school level student engagement, belonging, and security need to



become more of a priority. A common goal might be increased student agency. Building relationships that foster student agency would require a shift in focus among educators, a re-balancing of priorities and a better understanding of the audience. Such changes could only come about with the active support of both counsellors and administrators.

Counsellors could facilitate changes of this type at both an individual and a group level. A touchstone of such support is the quality of the relationship between counsellors and individual teachers. This relationship must be grounded in the lived experience of the classroom teacher. Whatever ideas, comments, or suggestions that counsellors make, they need to take into account both the personality of the individual adult and the makeup of the particular classroom. A respectful approach built on an understanding of the strengths and challenges of the audience, models the type of plasticity required to meet the needs of some of today's students.

Counsellors could also play a useful role in the construction of group norms and practices at the classroom level. In conjunction with teachers, counsellors could help construct and implement group practices that would serve to meet individual student needs of belonging, safety, and security.

School administrators could facilitate relationship building through goal setting and timetable manipulation. By articulating the quality of teacher-student contact as a

legitimate school goal, the significance of relationship to students' success and sense of belonging could be better understood. Once the profile was raised, opportunity for improved and increased contact could be provided through timetable manipulation. A goal here might be to reduce the number of students that a high school teacher is responsible for (eg. from 200 to 100). Such a structure would enable interested adults to forge more meaningful relationships with at risk students.

The participants' stories also have implications for the structurally limited relationships that exist between institutions. Since engulfment in a spoiled identity often resulted in problems with the law, the relationship between the justice system and the education system is worthy of consideration. Structurally, each institution is quite similar. Both conduct business in a specialized, difficult to access language. Neither is known for its hospitality towards or acceptance of outsiders. Overall, each can be characterized as fairly rigid and engulfed by virtually impenetrable boundaries. If these boundaries were more permeable, the needs of potential and actual dropouts could be more effectively met. For example rather than asking youth to form new relationships with justice personnel, previously established school relationships could be drawn upon. Informed counsellors could help contextualize criminal activity by providing the justice system with an understanding of the dropouts' life story. By drawing on

the established relationship, counsellors could facilitate a dialogue, perhaps even understanding, between the young offender and the legal system. At the very least, counsellors could offer troubled youth much needed support and understanding at such a critical juncture in their lives. More permeable boundaries then, would help disengaged youth by stemming growing alienation, by instilling hope and possibility, and by becoming a centerpiece in the process of engagement.

#### Implications for Future Research

Further research is required in order to establish whether the accounts of disengagement gathered in this study are representative of a broader population. Dropouts from different school districts and provinces need to be interviewed, their stories collected, and a process of disengagement articulated. Beyond additional case studies, findings of the present research need to be queried and extended through surveys. For example, a survey could be designed to collect data about the context of disengagement. Questions would need to generate data about significant relationships, meaningful experiences, and individual interpretations of events.

If the results of the present study are replicated, intervention efforts need to be implemented that would allow researchers to evaluate and validate data while providing potential dropouts with support. In a school district this might involve large scale, ongoing co-ordination, of many

different people in the field. By simultaneously drawing on the views of educators, parents, and potential or actual dropouts a multifaceted, detailed perspective of the disengagement process could be generated.

Consideration also needs to be given to making someone in each school district responsible for potential dropouts. Properly designed, this role might allow for a liaison between jurisdictions (education, health, justice) that would help systems anticipate and better meet the needs of disengaging youth.

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## Appendix A

Recruitment Notice

Researcher: I am a doctoral student in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. I have worked in school counselling for the past 6 years; in education for the past 18. The faculty advisor for this project is Dr. Larry Cochran (822-6139).

Study: My research study is aimed at better understanding the process of disengagement from school as experienced by students who left before graduating. The information gathered in this study will be included in my Ph.D. dissertation.

Participants: I am seeking volunteers to participate in this study. The requirements are that he or she left school before graduating, and is willing and able to discuss the experience.

Time: The study will consist of two interviews. These are private interviews with only the participant and the researcher present. The location and time will be arranged to be convenient for the participant. The two interviews will take 3 - 5 hours. Volunteers are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

For further information please contact:

Researcher: Mel Loncaric

Telephone:        936 8513 (H)    588 1248 (w)

## Appendix B

Participant Consent FormResearch Study about the Process of Disengagement  
from Secondary School

I \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research project about my experience of dropping out of high school. I understand that participation in this study is voluntary, that I am free to withdraw at any time and that I may refuse to answer any questions. I am aware that the researcher will answer any questions that I may have at any time concerning the research project.

I understand that this project will require me to talk with the researcher for about three hours about my experience of dropping out of high school. In addition I will be contacted for a follow up interview to confirm the researcher's findings. The total time commitment will be three to five hours.

I also give permission to have these interviews audio taped with the understanding that the contents of the interview will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. These taped interviews will be labeled with a randomly selected number and erased upon completion.

I understand that the research project is being conducted by Mel Loncaric as part of his doctoral dissertation.

Signature of Participant

Telephone

Signature of Researcher

Telephone

Date

Random #

I hereby acknowledge the receipt of a copy of this form.

Thank you for your assistance

Mel Loncaric (Researcher and PhD  
Candidate in Counselling Psychology)

Dr. Larry Cochran (Advisor: Dept.  
of Counselling Psychology, UBC)

## Appendix C

Sample Transcript

M: Where were you born? And what do you remember about being a kid and all that?

C: Okay, I was born in England and...

M: Whereabouts?

C: In Ledes, Yorkshire.

M: Okay.

C: And then I guess for the first couple of years we lived in Ireland.

M: Uh-huh.

C: And then we came back to Canada. Cause that's where my dad's from.

M: Okay. So were your brothers born here or back in...

C: No. Uhm, my oldest brother was born in London in the hospital. Duncan was born in Ireland, and I was born in Ledes in my grandmother's house.

M: Ah, neat.

C: Yeah, they still have the same house too, so when I went back in 83, I think. I went and I saw the room that I was born in which was kind of neat.

M: Yeah, I was born in Yugoslavia in a, in a little village, literally five houses and I remember going back there, oh gees, when I was about 19. It was wonderful and all sorts of memories flashed in. I remember biting into a fig and just a flood of memories came back.

C: (laughter)

M: It was really, really weird, but neat.

C: Yeah. I didn't have any memories but it was incredible to go and visit the castles and the countryside.

M: A different world eh.

C: Totally. It's really neat there.

M: Yeah. So you were born, when were you born, what year?

C: Uh, 72. In the summer. And we moved here when I was three.

M: Okay.

C: We came over by boat.

M: Do you remember anything of the trip?

C: No, not really. I knew we came by boat and then by train.

M: Uh-huh.

C: And that we were all well behaved.

M: (laughter)

C: Which my mom was very proud of.

M: So those were stories you've heard. That you were well behaved.

C: Yeah. And I saw a picture and it looked like we had fun. But I myself don't remember it.

M: Okay. So then you landed in Montreal.

C: Yeah.

M: Okay.

C: Or...I think it was Montreal.

M: Back east somewhere, it could have been Halifax.

C: Yeah.

M: And you took a train out to...?

C: Out to Surrey.

M: Oh really!

C: We lived with my dad's parents for a while.

M: So, you took a train out to Surrey.

C: Yeah, somewhere, we got out to Surrey. Lived there for 6 months, which apparently was dreadful.

M: Yeah. What was dreadful about it? What story did you hear about that?

C: Uhm. Well I didn't like my grandmother's cooking to begin with and I wouldn't eat it.

M: Uh-huh.

C: And my grandmother used to get really mad and my mom would stick up for me and she would bring me something to eat every once in a while.

M: Do you get any memories of that or is that a story still?

C: Those are stories still. But I can believe it because I've gone back and I still don't like her cooking.

M: (laughter) Does she still hold it against you?

C: Uhm. Not that. She tried to get us to be racist.

M: Oh, okay.

C: Cause she has this strong belief that oh, probably anybody who's not in the immediate family is evil.

M: Okay.

C: So, I didn't go for it, and my older brother didn't go for it, but the middle one did.

M: So tell about, tell me about that, that's interesting, about what do you remember about her trying to make you racist.

C: Oh God, uhm...East Indians are bad, Catholics are bad. Uhm, I have a cousin who married someone who's Catholic.

M: Uh-huh.

C: And she wouldn't go to the wedding unless they got married in a Christian church. They couldn't have a Catholic wedding.

M: What's Christian, cause Catholic is Christian too, in my mind.

C: Uhm.

M: What would she think was Christian?

C: Protestant, Lutheran or..

M: Oh, okay.

C: Something that's not Catholic.

M: Non-roman, right, right, right.

C: (laughter) Yeh, and uh,...

M: So do you remember any specific stories of her trying to sort of turn you into a racist. Do you remember any incidents or events?

C: When I was 17 or 18 I was dating a man who was black. And my grandmother didn't know this. And up until that point she had heard about him and she said "Well, he sounds like a wonderful person" and this and that. And I don't know how it got out but somehow it got out that he was black, and she said "Don't bother, he'll cheat on you, he's no good for you, he's just worthless." And I didn't speak to him for, er speak to her for about a year.

M: Okay.

C: And then I went back and she mentioned something else and I told my dad to tell her that if she wants to have a grand-daughter or this particular grand-daughter, she can't go making comments like that.

M: Yeah.

C: Cause that's just not right.

M: How did she take that, how did she take you standing up to her?

C: Uhm, well I think she expected it from me.

M: How come? That's interesting, she suspected, she expected it from you?

C: Yeah, because uhm, I guess because I used to stand up to her and wouldn't eat her cooking uhm, I didn't understand how she could be racist when I was little.

M: Uh-huh.

C: Like I was, like what? Why is that person bad just because of their color, why?

M: Oh, so even when you were little you..

C: Yeah, I never, I never understood it, got the grasp of it.

M: It didn't make sense.

C: No.

M: Okay. So you're in Surrey and you're living with your grandmother who's cooking you don't like, who's trying to turn you into a racist. And you're there for 6 months?

C: Yeah. And then we moved to Aldergrove.

M: So what were you now, about 3 1/2, 4 or?

C: Three and a half probably. We moved just before I turned three.

M: Okay, so what's your earliest memory of Aldergrove?

C: Uhm, probably when I was 4, I didn't want to wear any clothes and so I was walking outside with no clothes on and the neighbor was over.

M: Uh-huh.

C: And my brother was talking to the neighbor and I go trotting up to them cause I wanted to talk too, and my mother yelled at me to come back in the house and put my clothes on and I go "No, why mommy, why?"

M: So "Why mommy, why?" was that, were you always a kind of questioning sort of child? Like you describe with your grandmother you kind of stood up to her and...

C: Yeah, yeah. Well my mom described it as I always walked to the beat of my own drummer. I always had a very strong sense of what was right and what I thought was right.



M: Okay. When you sit there and you think of that memory, can you see it clearly?

C: Yeah.

M: Sunny day? Foggy day?

C: Oh, it was sunny, it was summer. I was walking with no shoes. I can still feel the grass between my toes.

M: Is that right?

C: Yeah.

M: Now did you live in the suburb or in the country?

C: In the country. Very much country. There was like, lots of land. We used to go playing in the woods, picking huckleberries and blackberries and it was great.

M: So you're 4 years old and that's your earliest memory. What do you remember about, when did you start kindergarten or did you go to Sunday school?

C: No, I went to a preschool.

M: Okay, how old were you when...

C: Four.

M: What was that like? Tell me about preschool.

C: I liked preschool. I liked my preschool teacher, Mrs. Peacock, I think her name was. No, Petrie, Peacock was grade one. Mrs. Petrie, she was wonderful. She would take us out and show us things out in the, in her back yard or something.

M: M-hmm.

C: And I still have, it's just a piece of bark with 2 mushrooms on it. And I was so proud of it because I went and I collected it myself.

M: Yeah, yeah.

C: So I had it up until I think about a year ago.

M: Wow! Really a meaningful thing for you.

C: Yeah. Yeah, and I also met my first best friend there.

M: Who was, who is?

C: Julie.

M: Okay.

C: And I kept in touch with her up until grade 3. But we didn't go to the same school. She went to a school a few miles away.

M: What made Julie a best friend?

C: Uhm....we talked, we had fun. We related as young children do.

M: You just clicked together.

C: Yeah.

M: So you're, how often did you go to preschool?

C: I don't remember. It feels like every day. But I think it was only 2 or 3 times a week.

M: Okay. Any negative memories of preschool?

C: No.

M: It was a good time.

C: Yeah. Yeah, preschool was fun. I liked preschool.

M: Right. And then you went from preschool to kindergarten?

C: Yeah.

M: What was that like.

C: Uhm....kindergarten was okay. Kindergarten to grade 3 was good.

M: What do you remember about that? Do you remember the school?

C: Yeah, yeah.

M: Where did you go?

C: I went to County Line Elementary. It was right up the road, so we could walk back and forth. It was a good

school. It was small, very intimate, the classes. My class had 17 people at the most, I think.

M: And what did you like about it, what made it good?

C: Uhm, the teachers. They were very nice, the first couple that I had and...

M: Now what does nice mean? When you think back or when you remember the feelings, what's nice amount to?

C: They listened, they cared if you had a problem. Uhm,

M: So there's a feeling of being attended to and, and kind of secure.

C: Yeah.....I remember, uhm....actually I didn't remember this until recently, when I was in grade 2, I didn't like to wear shoes and socks.

M: Okay.

C: And I'd go out in winter in shorts and walk up to school like it was nothing and so I was in grade 2 and I took off my shoes and socks and I left them in the cloakroom. And Mrs. Erisman, my teacher at the time, she found them there and asked who's they were. I didn't say anything, I was just kind of hiding in my seat and .....

M: Yeh, yeh.

C: And she noticed that I had no shoes on and she asked me why. And I really didn't have an answer. It's just, I didn't like them. And I never realized that I did that until, until my mom mentioned it because she was talking to my school teacher.

M: Uh-huh.

C: And I thought that was really neat.

M: How did your teacher respond to your not having shoes on? Did she take it any further than what you just said or..?

C: No, because I was very stubborn and I think I still am. But I wouldn't have put them on if she had asked me to.

M: So, it feels neat just that you didn't have these shoes on cause you didn't want to have them on and you didn't really have a reason for it and that feels nice, you like that.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah. What do you like about that? I like it too, but...

C: Because, because it's my decision. Because it's something, it's not affecting anybody else, it's not hurting anybody if I don't wear them and....

M: You did it and it felt right and that's all the reason you need.

C: Yeah. Nobody else did it.

M: Yeh, yeh. Okay.

C: I wasn't causing anybody else to do it. I didn't see any harm in it.

M: Okay. Did you have any recollection of the teacher's response? Was she okay with it or...?

C: I think she was. Yeah. I think she just let it go. She said "Oh, okay." and let it go.... I was just that way. I'd go and make up stories and have the other kids act them out and....

M: Very imaginative.

C: Yeah. Yeah, I was. We had a trampoline and there was a, I made up a bunny game.

M: Uh-huh.

C: Where you'd go up, I don't know if you remember the trampolines they had big holes in the corners,

M: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

C: You'd hop up.

M: Oh yeah, okay, okay. Like a bunny coming out of the ground.

C: Yeah. Yeah.

M: Yeh, oh neat.

C: And there's all sorts of little things that I made up. Me and my friend, when it was frosty, we were at her house

and you know how there's big icicles that form on the ground, in the mud.

M: Yeh, yeh.

C: We had, we had whole towns and castles and cities made up and a dog came tromping into our little world and we got so upset because our little world was gone.

M: This monster dog..

C: Yeah. (laughing)

M: crushed your world.

C: Yeah, we started screaming at the dog cause he was hurting the people and killing the homes and...

M: So those are very clear memories for you.

C: Yeah.

M: So you were what, 7 years old, 6 years old?

C: Yeah.

M: That's grade 2.

C: Yep. Yeah. Grade 3 was good too. Mr. Sawatsky. Everybody thought he was gay and at the time I didn't know or didn't care. I just knew he was a great teacher, he was wonderful. He'd really pay attention. He'd listen, he really cared.

M: M-hmm. How did you know he cared? What did he do that, when you think about it, what do you?

C: Uhm. Well, I was shy believe it or not. Even though I was imaginative, I was shy. And he'd listen, he'd get me to give my answer out. He'd be patient. He'...he never screamed at us, he never made us feel stupid for not knowing.

M: M-hmm. How did he help you to get your answers out. How did he do that?

C: He'd just be patient and not demand it and just be very relaxed about it.

M: So, was he the sort of person who, you know, would say "A, what did you think of that story?" and then just give

you the time to come to your answer. You kind of got used to, this is okay I can...

C: Yeah.

M: I can be who I am here. I don't have to be real fast or...

C: Yeah.

M: Are you cold? Do you want me to get the heater?

C: I'm a little bit cold.

M: Let me just get the heater. Okay, so, grade 3 you liked the guy cause he was patient and helped to pull you out of yourself.

C: Yeah.

M: Cause you were shy.

C: When I went to grade 4 and Mr. Anthony, he put me in Learning Assistance.

M: How come?

C: Uhm. Cause I didn't do homework. Cause he thought that I was stupid.

M: How did that feel?

C: I was mad. I was really mad. Cause I know I'm not stupid.

M: Yeah, yeh. How did that come about? Do you remember how all that came about? Like when did you go into learning assistance, was it in the beginning of the year, Christmas or....

C: Shortly after school started. I think he didn't like me right away because both my brothers, he had taught both my brothers and I guess they were a problem and...

M: Yeh, yeh.

C: He just didn't like me right off the bat. And I could tell and so I didn't want to work for him so he put me in learning assistance.

M: How could you tell? That he didn't like you? What did he, what .....

C: It was just a feeling. I don't know, just a feeling.

M: Uh-huh.

C: But I uh, my mom was really mad that I was in learning assistance. Because she knows that I was a bright kid.

M: Yeah.

C: And uh, she phoned my third grade teacher and he said "That's just ridiculous." That I should never have been put in that.

M: Now did he put you in before your mom knew or?

C: Yeah.

M: What do you remember about that.

C: I came home...

M: Do you remember the day you went in and all that? Can you take me through that?

C: Uhm.

M: Was it a Monday, a Wednesday? What do you remember?

C: I don't know the day of the week.

M: Okay.

C: It was probably in the middle of the week though.

M: Morning, afternoon, after recess?

C: After recess. I was told uhm,

M: So you came back from outside from recess and you go to your desk or does he stop you as you're coming in?

C: I was stopped. I don't think I went to sit down. He said that I was supposed to go and talk to somebody and so I went down to the L.A. room and...

M: What are you thinking as you're going down to the L.A. room?

C: Jush, "Why am I going down?" It's like, "What did I do now?"

M: M-hmm. Am I in trouble sort of thing?

C: Yeah, yeah. And the teacher down there or counsellor said that she thought I'd been having some problems and if I wanted to come in once a week or she said it would be a good idea. Not that I had a choice in the matter. So that's how I started.

M: What did you say to her?

C: I just said "Okay."

M: And how were you feeling, at that point? Did you know what was going on?

C: No, I didn't really think about it. I didn't want to know. And then I started to think about it and it really made me feel bad. I really didn't deserve to go there.

M: It made you feel bad. What does bad mean?

C: Like there was something wrong with me. Because we were shut out from the rest of the school. Even if it was only 1 day, we were still put in a classroom and everybody knew that we were in here because we had a problem and...

M: Right. So there was a sense of being isolated and cut off from your friends.

C: Yeah. Yeah. And there was only 3 of us from our class.

M: Okay.

C: One because uhm, she couldn't pronounce "r". She'd pronounce it "w".

M: Okay.

C: Peter, he was in there probably for the same reason I was. Just because he wasn't liked. Because, Mr. Anthony didn't like him.

M: So Mr. Anthony wasn't patient with you.

C: No! He had a very nasty temper. Oh. Even at the sports day or fun day or whatever the schools call it now.

M: Do you remember anything about that sports day.



C: If things weren't going right, if we didn't line up right, if we, if we didn't work hard enough, he'd be mad.

M: Do you remember a specific incident of anything? Of him?

C: No. I do remember him yelling. I don't know what about.

M: Okay. Okay, so you end up in learning assistance and you're there for, that's your first day. And you go home and you tell your mom or?

C: I don't even think I told her the first day. I think I waited a little while before I told her. Cause I wanted to get it straight in my head before I talked to her about it.

M: You're feeling confused and angry and isolated.

C: Yeah.

M: So how long before you told her?

C: Probably a week.

M: Do you remember what you were doing during that week?

C: Ah, just going on doing my work.

M: How are you feeling while you're in there day after day?

C: Actually, I thought it was fine. After a while it didn't bother me cause I'd work at my own pace and I wouldn't get asked if I knew the answer. It wasn't...you worked for a little bit and then you stopped. You can work the whole way through.

M: Yeah.

C: So, that I didn't mind. And then, what at Halloween, I think we got a big ball of popcorn, colored popcorn, and nobody else in the class got it but us three. So we were feeling pretty happy about that.

M: Yeh. So then you tell your mom at some point. What happens then?

C: She went up. She went up to talk to Mr. Anthony.

M: M-hmm.

C: And he kind of said that she, well, she's staying in. And that's it.

M: Were you there when she was talking?

C: No. No, she went up by herself. She didn't say too much about it. She, she just said that she was mad and he was an idiot.

M: You remember her telling you that?

C: Yeah, yeah. Oh, for years, she's said he was an idiot. I can talk to her about it now and she'll still say that he's an idiot.

M: That he's an idiot.

C: (laughing)

M: So that's grade 4.

C: Yeah.

M: Anything else happen in grade 4 that, that, how long were you in there, for the whole year?

C: Yeah. I was in there up until I left.

M: Left the school?

C: Yeh.

M: And so, till grade 7.

C: Yeah.

M: Wow! Did you ever get any more, did anyone explain ever along the way why you were in there?

C: No. No. They never said that.

M: And you still don't know today why you were in Learning Assistance.

C: No. Probably because I didn't do my homework. Because I, I...I got irritated and I decided I'm not doing it and they put me in this which made me more irritated, which made me want to do it less.

M: Yeh, yeh, yeh. Have you ever had any problems in school? Do you ever remember having difficulty with anything in elementary school?

C: Learning?

M: Yeh.

C: No! I was in honors math in grade 7.

M: (Laughing)!! And you're in learning assistance.

C: Yeah. Yeah, that made no sense.

M: Yeh, yeh.

C: One thing I didn't like was French. I didn't like speaking French.

M: M-hmm. What about reading? Did you like to read?

C: Oh, I loved to read.

M: You loved to read. So you could read well, you could do math, you were in honors math. What about writing? Did you like to write?

C: I ah...once I got over the printing to writing thing and actually learned to write, I liked writing.

M: But composing stories, making things up, you, you?

C: Oh, great.

M: You loved that.

C: Yeah, great.

M: Yeh, yeh. And you're still in learning assistance for 4 years.

C: For nothing. So.

M: When you think of it now it still...

C: It, it still..

M: Your face.

C: Yeah, it still makes me mad.

M: Yeah, yeah.

C: Cause there's no reason for it. I was smart. I knew what I was doing.

M: Yeh, yeh.

C: When it came to tests, I did good.

M: Yeh, yeh.

C: I just didn't do my homework. Because they made me mad.

M: Yeh. Now did they make you mad before they put you in there? Was there something about?

C: Oh, oh Mr. Anthony always made me mad. He'd make a little comment and I'd be grrr!

M: So, the guy in grade 3, could he get you to do your homework.

C: Yeah, I always did my homework. We had the phonic book and I'd do that.

M: Uh-huh. So grade 3 is not a problem, you do your homework.

C: No.

M: Love your teacher in grade, what's the difference...I'm your teacher in grade 3 and I'm your teacher in grade 4. What's the difference in me? As you see it, as you remember it? I'm loud or I'm mean or I'm not as patient, is there anything else?

C: Uhm, I didn't get put down.

M: The grade 4 teacher put you down. Do you remember any of that?

C: I just remember feeling so bad because he'd make a comment.

M: Like what?

C: And just based at me. Uhm....if I didn't know the answer, "I'm not surprised you didn't know." Or something to that effect. And when you hear it enough you just don't want to hear it anymore and you don't want to listen to what he has to say.

M: So that was a real sense of, of an affront, a put down, a slap in the face.

C: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I didn't like him.

M: But you didn't take him on like you did your grandmother.

C: No. Because it was nothing that I could take him on about.

M: Okay. You couldn't fight back.

C: No.

M: It must have made you crazy with anger.

C: Yeah, yeah. It really...there was nothing I could do about it. I remember in grade 2, I had uh, I was up at the playground with my friends, and a bunch of older guys, I don't know, grade 8, they came up to the playground and they wanted to throw me off. And so I clung to the thing, uhm, just a wooden plank that was at the top of the playground, or the top of the jungle gym, and I held on. And there was these 3 guys trying to get me off, and I wouldn't budge. And I was just holding on, and I was just holding on and finally after 10 minutes, they said "Okay, forget it, you can go down." So I let go and then they try and pounce on me again and I just held on and I held on and I waited until they were down before I'd come down the slide.

M: (Laughter)

C: And I start walking home and my friend who went to get help was bringing her dad up. And meanwhile I was just walking down, but I was scared. But at least then I felt powerful cause they couldn't get to me. They couldn't..

M: They couldn't budge you.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah. You also felt powerful on the way home, is that what you're saying?

C: Well not so much on the way home, because I was shaking at that point.

M: Yeh.

C: Because, you never know.

M: But when you were up on the swing and that, or on the slide, that's where the feeling of power came because they couldn't budge you.

C: Yeah, yeah. It's like, nobody's going to move me. I'm not moving.

M: The look of determination on your face is like you're right back there.

C: (Laughter)

M: You're not moving, that's great. So that's, so here you're really powerful in one way and in grade 4 this guy is putting you down but you're, you don't know how to be powerful with him.

C: Yeah. I guess, I guess verbally.

M: Verbally you can't fight back.

C: Yeah.

M: But you remember, so how, so your response to him would be...

C: Wouldn't say anything.

M: Okay. And in terms of work that he gave you and stuff like that, your response would be?

C: Well, if I didn't have time to do it in class, then I just wouldn't do it. And because, I figured, at school, that was school time but at home, that was my time.

M: Okay.

C: And he wasn't going to interfere in my time.

M: Now, he wasn't going to interfere because he was a jerk?

C: Yeh.

M: And the grade 3 guy, would you let him interfere?

C: Yeah. I didn't mind doing homework.

M: For him. Or the grade 2 or the grade 1 teachers.

C: Yeah.

M: Okay, alright. Okay, so, anything else in grade 4. This is great.

C: (Laughter)

M: It really is. It's fascinating.

C: Uhm. Grade 4....I don't think so. I know I started choir or music in grade 4, and I'm terrible at music. I just really suck.

M: (Laughter)

C: And we had to play the Ukelele.

M: Uh-huh.

C: And I was no good. And then on top of that, there was singing. I went into the choir and I couldn't sing. And the choir teacher, she said that. But me and my friends, we got together and we started singing together as a group, and she comes by and she goes "Oh, that's wonderful. Very nice, wonderful, I've never heard it sound so good." And you know we're just mocking the song.

M: (Laughter)

C: And so we're thinking that she's really stupid.

M: Yeh, yeh. That was grade, the end of grade 4?

C: Yeah. Yeah.

M: So what's grade 5 like? What happens in grade 5?

C: Oh, another wonderful teacher. He used to get mad, he used to throw chalk or erasers, big erasers. So if you turned your back and were talking to somebody behind you, you'd get whapped with a piece of chalk or something.

M: Wonderful - you're being sarcastic.

C: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Very sarcastic.

M: Alright. What was his name.

C: Mr. M.

M: Mr. M. So what was A like in grade 5?

C: Uhm. Just very quiet. Pretty much a loner. I'd go off and walk by myself. Well that was half the time and the other half of the time I'd be with my friends playing kickball or, or bugging the boys or something.

M: The loner part, when did that start? Or were you always a loner.

C: Uhm. I was always a loner. Yeah. In grade 1, I had, I was off on a walk and one of my friends said to another of my friends, "Go play with her, she's lonely." And she said "No." This other one said "No. She wants to be by herself." And she goes "Go play with her. I'm going to get my brothers to beat you up." And she's like, "No." And I didn't want any company. I was happy on my own.

M: The, the aloness, did that exist in your family too? Were you alone in the family?

C: Oh, yeah, yeah. My brothers...I don't know, I think Duncan was jealous, because I was into a lot of activities. I was into dancing and uhm, soccer, and so mom spent a lot of time taking me here and there.

M: M-hmm.

C: And so he quit some of his sports and activities because he didn't want the competition. So he started calling me fat and ugly and a cow. And it just did wonderful things for the self-esteem there.

M: So how old were you when he started calling you that?

C: Eight.

M: Eight, and you remember it very clearly.

C: Yeah.

M: That really hurt.

C: Yeah.

M: And how would your mom respond? Would she, or your dad, or....

C: Well my dad, he sometimes made fun of me too. But it's not that he was trying to hurt me, he was just trying to have fun and...

M: What would he say to you?



C: Uhm. I don't know. Uhm...The only thing that I clearly remember him saying was, I had ripped jeans that were comfortable and I liked them and they were my favorite jeans, and he said something, that I had nothing better than ripped jeans or something to that effect.

M: So it was pretty light stuff. It didn't

C: It was light but I still took offense to it.

M: Okay.

C: Because..

M: Because it was your dad.

C: Yeah.

M: So Duncan calling you a cow and ugly and all of this stuff, meanwhile you're into a lot of activities.

C: Yeah, yeah.

M: How is your mom handling Duncan and you?

C: Uhm, well, mom had a hard time. She was working and she was doing her courses. I always remember her doing courses, and she always freaks out about her courses. I remember her running down the hall, or down the stairs with her hands on her head because Duncan and I were squalling. She was running down the stairs with her hands on her head screaming and ah. We thought she, we just started laughing.

M: (Laughter)

C: We started laughing and that made her even more mad.

M: What kind of courses was she doing?

C: Uhm, she's a nurse and she was taking something to do with nursing.

M: Okay.

C: I don't know, there's been so many courses that... But it's good, it keeps her busy.

M: Yeah. So grade 5, you've got some dorky teacher who throws chalk and erasers, and what else do you remember about grade 5?

C: Uhm, grade 5...I remember dancing in front of another school. Something I started a few years back. And I didn't like doing it because it was in front of the whole school. It kind of makes you nervous. And...uhm, everybody watching, it really makes you nervous.

M: You didn't like that at all.

C: No. I liked performing, I liked performing when we went to old age homes or, when there was a few of us, but me being alone, on stage, I didn't like it.

M: In front of all the kids, yeah, that would be hard.

C: Especially when it's in front of all your schoolmates.

M: Yeah, yeah.

C: I mean, when it's with, at the old age home, you don't know anybody. You go around and say hi, but you're never going to see them again until next time, so that's fine.

M: Yeah, yeah. So what was grade 5 like academically? You're still in learning assistance?

C: Still in learning assistance. Uhm, it was pretty much the same.

M: Still not doing your homework?

C: Still not. No. Doing it more, but, but not all the time.

M: How come you're doing it more? That's interesting.

C: Well, cause you get detentions and you don't really want to stay after and when you get too many you get known as being, well, I didn't want to be the one with the most detentions.

M: Right, right.

C: So..

M: So you started doing it. What's your mom like, and your dad like, as far as your homework and that goes? What are they saying to you?

C: Well, they'd always say that I'm smart and I never apply myself and that if I did it I could be a straight A student

and I always remember my mom saying I was a smart cookie. But they couldn't make me do it. They'd tell me to, but they couldn't really make me.

M: M-hmm. When did you know that they couldn't make you?

C: Oh, I'd always known.

M: You always knew that.

C: I always knew. And I didn't, if I needed help I didn't want to go asking for help anyway.

M: Ask teachers or your parents?

C: My parents. Oh, I wouldn't ask the teachers, cause...

M: Cause he's a jerk.

C: Yeah. I didn't want to talk to him any more than I really had to.

M: Okay. Why wouldn't you ask your parents?

C: Uhm. For a while with my dad, I tried. Because he's a teacher himself and...he knowing how smart I am, got very impatient very quickly.

M: Okay.

C: So. He's a great teacher, just, not for his own kids.

M: Other kids.

C: Yeah.

M: So patience is an important thing to you or seems to be. People being patient with you.

C: Yeah, I guess so. Because I need time to think things out in my own head before I say them. And if somebody doesn't give me the time then, I just spurt off nonsense and I don't know what I'm talking about so nobody else is going to know either.

M: Okay. Anything stick out in grade 5 in particular, in any shape or form?

C: Uhm, just spending a lot of time with my friends.

M: So you've got lots of friends?

C: Yeah, well it was such a small class and there can be as less as 13 people. So we all knew each other very well.

M: Uh-huh.

C: And everybody pretty much stayed from kindergarten right up to grade 7.

M: Right, right. Meanwhile, you're doing okay in school other than the learning assistance junk?

C: Yeah, passing.

M: Passing.

C: Passing in everything.

M: Okay. So what's grade 6 like? What happens in grade 6?

C: In grade 6 we had the principal for the teacher.

M: Okay.

C: And uhm, she had these big bug eyes. But if you did something wrong she'd just spout.

M: (Laughter)

C: Oh, you didn't want to make her mad cause she'd just boil and her face would all go, blow up and her eyes would be popping out. But, she was a good teacher, she was good.

M: What made her good?

C: Well, comparative to the last two teachers, she was good.

M: Oh, okay.

C: Uhm, we didn't like the fact that she was a principal because, I don't know why. It was just something about that, that didn't seem right to us.

M: M-hmm. How did you like her? Yourself?

C: We got along. I did like her. Uhm, she was pretty understanding when you didn't push her too far.

M: So what were you like as a student?

C: I was better. I was doing my homework more regularly. Uhm, I was happier in that grade. Uhm, it was, it was a good year, it was a good year. Nothing really sticks out about it.

M: Okay. What about grade 7?

C: Grade 7 and Mr. M. Uhm, well, we all thought that he was a pervert.

M: Because?

C: Uhm, because he would look up and down at the more developed girls. And we didn't think that was right.

M: Okay.

C: We didn't approve of it. Uhm,...

M: When did you guys become aware of it? Was it a rumor that you heard of before, first day, or...

C: No, he was a, he was a new, he was a new teacher to our class.

M: Okay, okay.

C: First year. Uhm, we just saw it.

M: It was obvious real soon.

C: Well yeah. Real soon. That and picking his beard, I don't know what he was doing but,

M: (Laughing) I should have shaved.

C: (Laughing)

M: Okay. What do you remember about grade 7. You've got this pervert now.

C: I got put in honors math. High math.

M: How did that come about?

C: I was one of the best students in math. There was three of us put up.

M: M-hmm. How was that, how did that feel?

C: Felt great.

M: You liked it.

C: Yeah.

M: So what are you doing in learning assistance, what are you literally doing in grade 7 in learning assistance, at this time? A typical day in there, you do what, for a period?

C: Go in and read. If there is any work to be done, I'll do the work. There's nothing that I really did in there.

M: You did what you wanted to basically.

C: Yeah, yeah.

M: No one is telling you "Do this." or "Do that." or trying to put you through a special program.

C: No. There was really no reason for me to be there.

M: And how are you feeling about being in there now?

C: Well I didn't mind cause me and Peter would talk or, we'd, that's basically it, we'd talk. Cause usually it was just the two of us. Andrea learned how to pronounce the letter "r".

M: (Laughter)

C: So she got bumped out. So, there usually wasn't work to be done, or some, if there was, we'd do it then. But it wasn't anything major. I didn't mind going anymore.

M: M-hmm. So did anything happen in grade 7 that sticks out?

C: Uhm....Just that I really didn't like Mr. M.

M: Did you have any run-ins with him?

C: No, no. He was just a pervert.

M: Was he creepy feeling to you?

C: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, he'd have no book and he'd be scratching himself.

M: Scratching his beard or his moustache?

C: No! Uhm, his genitals.

M: His genitals.

C: And so we'd just kind of back away and not want to hand anything in, cause that's kind of disgusting.

M: Yeah. So did you talk to your parents about this guy or did anybody talk to the parents?

C: I don't think so. I know I never mentioned anything. We talked about it amongst ourselves.

M: M-hmm.

C: I don't think anyone told their parents.

M: What about homework, are you doing homework now, more or less or the same?

C: Probably more, yeah.

M: So are you less stubborn in grade 7?

C: Uhm, I don't think so. I think I maintained being stubborn.

M: And you're doing your homework though.

C: Yeah.

M: You're doing more of it.

C: Yeah, yeah. But I figured I'd do it on my terms.

M: Okay.

C: But I was, I was really proud to go up in math.

M: In math.

C: That was really good.

M: Do you remember your parents response or other people's response.

C: Oh, my dad was proud. Yeah, my mom was too.

M: It felt good. Finally someone sees that intelligence.

C: Yeah. We were supposed to go up to 8 honors math. But the class up in high school was 9 honors, so we had learnt for 8 honors but got bumped up an extra year. And that teacher didn't do anything either. He was trying to teach us university level stuff and he'd tell us that this was university...

M: Material?

C: Material. Thank you. And he was trying to prepare us or something. There was 2 students who got it. One was an absolute genius and the other one was really smart. He worked hard. But it was the kind of stuff you don't teach grade 8's.

M: M-hmm, m-hmm. Or grade 7's.

C: Yeah.

M: Hmmm. So, anything else in elementary school or in grade 7 that sticks out as a memory?

C: Uhm...the only thing, our farewell song. I remember that. We all got together as a class and sang "Up Where We Belong". And that was neat. Everybody coming together and trying to get this thing together. It was neat.

M: So, if you had to sort of sum up elementary school, how was it for you?

C: Uhm...for the most part I liked it. I guess when I had a good teacher, I had a good year.

M: Okay.

C: And when I had a bad teacher, I had a bad year.

M: And socially you were okay. You had friends.

C: Yeah. More friends than I really wanted.

M: Okay.

C: Or needed.

M: Cause being alone was quite comfortable for you.

C: Yeah.

M: If you could change anything in elementary school, what would you have changed.



C: Uhm...Mr. Anthony.

M: And he was the grade...

C: The grade 4 teacher.

M: So he was the worst.

C: Yeah. Yeah, I found out years later that my brother, who also had problems with Mr. Anthony, who then again had a great teacher, Mr. Justice, who really, was really strict and really gave him back his self confidence.

M: M-hmm.

C: But Mr. Anthony screwed up Al too.

M: Okay.

C: But by the time I got to grade 5, Mr. Justice was gone.

M: Okay. Now where were you in terms of confidence and all that kind of stuff in elementary school.

C: Uhm. I didn't have too much. I was very shy. Very nervous child. Very jumpy.

M: And where is that, uh, what sense do you make of that

C: Why was I jumpy?

M: Yeah, how did you get to be jumpy? Like I mean, you were bright, you were capable, where does the jumpiness come from?

C: Uh, I've always been jumpy, nervous energy.

M: Okay. Did that present many problems or any problems?

C: No. Just when somebody unexpectedly appears, I'll jump.

M: Okay.

C: It scares them more than me. My reaction to it.

M: But that didn't have any effect with how you got along with people or what people thought of you.

C: No, no.

M: And yet you had a feeling of being, you say, not confident?

C: Well, when you get put down at home then that interferes with how you feel even in school. Even if you're not put down.

M: Can you tell me about that, about being put down at home? Like that seems to be something that looms rather large.

C: Well, Duncan and I started squabbling probably in grade 2. Before that we were the best of friends. And then we started squabbling and fighting. I broke a Rubick's Cube over his head. He pushed me into the side shelves. Uhm...

M: He's calling you names.

C: Yeah. Which really hurt because I looked up to him. He was the middle child but he was my big brother. We shared the same room. I looked up to him. And it hurt.

M: How long did it go on for?

C: Till I was 15.

M: Wow. So what's life like with Duncan when you're in grade 7?

C: Uhm, very physical. He was a punchy sort of person until my dad threatened to kick him out, I think. Or was going to hit him back because he uhm, he kicked me in the stomach and I'd lost my breath and I couldn't breathe.

M: How old were then?

C: Uh, twelve.

M: Twelve.

C: Thirteen.

M: Grade 7 or 8.

C: Yeah.

M: He kicks you in the stomach and you can't breathe, and then what happened.

C: My parents come home and I was still gasping and my dad saw me and I was in tears and I was gasping and he lost it. I don't know. And then he hit me a couple of times after

that and dad just said "That's it. If you do again you're out." sort of thing. And since then he didn't do it.

M: So that's, you're around 14 or 15 when your dad said that.

C: Yeah.

M: And what kind of things is he saying to you when you're 13, 14, 15? How is he putting you down?

C: Uhm, same stuff. The same stuff. You're ugly, you're fat. Uhm...

M: Did you believe him?

C: Yeah. Yeah, I still look at myself and think "holy, I'm fat".

M: Really, wow.

C: And I quit smoking so I gained a little bit of weight, so I'm contemplating starting again so I'd lose the weight. Cause I'd rather be skinny and smoke than be overweight. Because in my family it was such a sin or something.

M: To be overweight, or to smoke.

C: Oh, both.

M: Both.

C: But, I, I don't know, I started smoking to, probably cause I wanted my parents to catch me. For the stupidest reason, I think.

M: Why did you want them to catch you?

C: To confront me. I wanted confrontation of some kind. I don't know.

M: And you are, how old were you then.

C: Thirteen.

M: So you're in grade...you started smoking cause you wanted your parents to confront you.

C: Yeah.

M: Where does that come from? What sense do you make of that?

TURN TAPE

M: So you're in grade 8 and you want them to confront you because they were...ignoring you or?

C: Yeah. I don't know.

M: Tell me about that.

C: I was upset a lot of the time. I was very depressed. And nobody ever asked me why. And I guess I got hurt, I got mad and wanted something that I know would dig in and get them. And I knew smoking was it. It was it for my mom, because she was always so against it. But they never, they never did. They, they caught me when I was 17. And that's 4 years, so I'm not going to quit just when they tell me to after that.

M: What were you depressed about.?

C: Uhm, life in general.

M: If I'm asking you things that you don't want to talk about just say I don't want to talk about that. So that we feel very free. I mean I'm interested in everything but I don't want to cross a boundary. And the other thing is if you ever say something and you think about it later and say take that out, let me know and I'll just take it out too. Okay.

C: Okay.

M: So you're the editor completely. Okay. "Life in general", when did you start getting depressed.

C: Uhm, thirteen. Thirteen, yeah.

M: When you turned 13?

C: No, it's around about then. I couldn't say exactly. I'd been sad for a long time but...

M: You had been sad, so were you sad through elementary school?

C: Yeah.

M: Do you remember when you first started being sad?

C: Uhm, probably grade 2.

M: Why, what made you sad?

C: Uhm...well I was abused when I was younger and that's something I don't really want to get into.

M: Okay.

C: But uhm, that's a part of why I became a loner, that's why I secluded myself.

M: M-hmm.

C: Uhm...sometimes I don't want to, no description nothing like that.

M: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Of course, of course. Okay. So you want to tell me about that in whatever way you want to?

C: Okay. Oh, it happened as far back as I can remember. Uhm, still elementary, other than certain memories are really vague. Like there's parts that I don't remember anything up until hmm, grade 6, other than little blotches here and there which is what I've been telling you.

M: Yeah. Can I ask was it within the family? Or is that a question you don't want to deal with?

C: I don't want to deal with that.

M: Alright. Uhm...okay go on.

C: And then in grade 8, I started getting really depressed, saying no it didn't happen. It's something that I took out of my mind somewhere.

M: You started remembering it? Did it start coming back to you or was it always a memory?

C: It was always there. And I just said "No I'm insane." I thought I was insane for years. Uhm, and then I started getting really, really depressed. I contemplated suicide. And...

M: Did you start believing that it was true in grade 8? Or were you still saying "No, I'm insane".

C: No, I'm insane.

M: I'm insane.

C: Yeah. But I guess deep down I believed it because I didn't want to live it, I didn't want to...I thought if it was so bad then....I don't know. It's just uhm...

M: It's really hard stuff for you.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah.

C: I mean I don't mind talking about it if it will help somebody else.

M: Have you dealt with it.

C: I've seen a counsellor, I went to S.A.R.A.

M: Right.

C: Which is a great program.

M: Good.

C: A wonderful program.

M: And that helped.

C: Yeah.

M: When did you go to S.A.R.A.?

C: When I was 17.

M: Okay.

C: Actually after uhm, my first really bad car accident. I was like, I've got to talk or I'm going to go crazy.

M: Yeah, yeah.

C: So I told mom that I want to see a psychiatrist and she goes why, and I go, well I just want to talk. Because she had asked me before if something had happened and I lied, I lied.

M: She was suspicious.

C: Yeah.

M: So you're in grade 8 and you're really depressed and you want them to pay attention and they're not paying attention. They don't pay attention and you're remembering all these things more and more or?

C: Yeah, yeah. And spending more time alone. I had my best friend in grade 8. I had really good friends earlier but they went their way and Jackie and I went our way. We were still all friends but...And Jackie was from an alcoholic background.

M: Okay.

C: And although I didn't know all of her past and she didn't know my past, we still knew enough that we related to each other.

M: A bond of misery.

C: Well no, no. We both whipped on that little smile and everything was wonderful and hide behind the laughter.

M: But underneath it I mean.

C: Yeah, yeah.

M: What, what pulled you together? Do you have any sense of that?

C: Well, we went to elementary school together. And we, we weren't really friends, and I asked her about that years later. Actually I think that was just about a year ago and she said she always thought that I was above everybody. That I had an air of something that I was, I was above.

M: Aloofness sort of thing?

C: I'm not sure if it was aloofness. Uhm...she just thought that I was better and I never understood that because I didn't think that I portrayed that.

M: M-hmm. And you didn't feel that you were better.

C: No, not at all.

M: So did you guys have a sense of each other's, you said that you had a partial sense of each other's background, like did she know that things had happened that were bugging you and you knew that she was from an alcoholic family or did you have any sense of that?

C: No. No not in the beginning. After a while I learned that her mother was an alcoholic, and how bad it was. And years later I told her what happened. But that was years and years later.

M: Okay.

C: I was so happy for her when she moved out.

M: M-hmm.

C: I had been telling her for years to stand up to her mother cause her mother would get drunk and she'd take care of her and get her dressed and showered and put to bed and everything. And it's just too much for a child to do.

M: It's not fair.

C: Yeah. So when I learned how bad it was and I said "Just don't do it. You can't." She had to stand up to her mom.

M: Yeah. So what else happened for you in grade 8? I mean you're depressed, what's it like schoolwise?

C: School? Uhm...I took the best class I ever had.

M: Which was?

C: Communications 8.

M: Okay.

C: And...

M: What was so good about it?

C: Uhm, it was a very interesting class to begin with. The teacher was great. It was just fantastic. It was, it's the first time I felt comfortable in any class interacting with other students.

M: Oh. Okay. Now how did that come about? How did you start feeling comfortable?

C: Well first there was me and Jackie and we had talked back and forth. And then there was a couple of other guys in the class who we became friends with and then that was, it was the four of us and then it just kind of grew.

M: Oh, okay. So there was real bonds and friendship happening.



C: Yes.

M: Was this right from the beginning of the year?

C: Uhm, pretty close, yeah. Yeah, we'd go down to Kentucky Fried Chicken at lunch and bring back something for everybody or something for the teacher or...

M: Wow, so real group thing happening. And is this a junior high or a high school.

C: High school, 7 or 8 to 12.

M: 8 to 12. Okay. So Communications 8 is great. What else do you remember about grade 8.

C: Shop.

M: Shop?

C: I loved Shop. I hated sewing and I hated cooking cause I already knew how to cook. I didn't want to learn to sew but I loved Shop. I was great at it.

M: Yeah. What did you love about it?

C: I loved, uhm, I loved playing with the machines. I loved drafting. I loved woodwork. I just, it was great.

M: Using your hands and your mind.

C: Yeah, putting everything together.

M: Yeh. What about math? How are you doing in math? Are you still doing great in math?

C: Uhm...I barely passed math because of the jump from 8 honors or 7 honors to 9 honors.

M: Oh, so you were in 9 honors now?

C: Yeah, which jumped to the university level and the teacher didn't take the time to explain, what we needed to.

M: How did that feel?

C: Uhm...it was distressing. We, we couldn't explain it to him, that he needed to slow down because there was two students who could keep up to him.

M: M-hmm. How did you feel as a student in math, though, I mean you were here, you were a year ago in honors math and...

C: And now I'm not getting it.

M: What was that like?

C: That was pretty hard to deal with.

M: So what did you do with that? Did you talk to anybody about it? How did you process that?

C: Well, Jackie was in the same class. Same honors class, and we were both kind of sinking. And we both knew that it wasn't right, the class, there was something wrong with the class. So we just let it go at that and we barely passed.

M: You didn't say anything to anybody?

C: I mentioned a few things at home here and there. But nothing major.

M: Did they respond?

C: Not too much, no. No, there wasn't much to really say. They couldn't really go to the teacher and say "Well, you're teaching way ahead of what these kids are doing." Because he would know us and he was a vice-principal and a bigshot and he was going to do things his way.

M: Okay. What about the other subjects, how are you doing in English and Socials?

C: Socials, I've always been bad at and the History part. Geography I was good at. Science, I was good at. Uhm...

M: Communications, is that English?

C: Uhm, it's separate. English, English was okay.

M: Okay. So what were you doing in Communications? Like what kind of stuff would you do in there?

C: Uhm, current affairs, we kept a journal, stories up to date. It was a great class.

M: Okay. What about socially, what are things like for you socially in grade 8?

C: Good. I didn't spend as much time alone. Because there wasn't usually anywhere to go that you could be alone. I'd sit in the hallways sometimes but there was always people coming by.

M: M-hmm. Did that bug you that you couldn't be alone or was that okay?

C: Uhm, it was okay. I hung around with Jackie a lot. We went out for lunch. Hung out in the smoke hall.

M: Were you playing any sports? Did you have any extra-curricular stuff?

C: No.

M: Didn't like that?

C: No. I wasn't into group activity in high-school.

M: Okay.

C: I didn't join any sports.

M: Are you still doing your singing?

C: No. I quit singing. I gave up the ukelele. I didn't join band.

M: M-hmm. What about dances and stuff like that? Are you doing any of, going to dances or are there any dances?

C: The sock hops?

M: Sock hops?

C: Yeah

M: How are those?

C: Lonely.

M: Because?

C: Because being so quiet people didn't really realize I was there.

M: Okay.

C: And Jackie being so outgoing, she was automatically a magnet

M: So she's a magnet, she's got a lot of attention and you, you're not getting much attention.

C: Yeah.

M: What about boys? Are boys beginning to happen for you?

C: Not for me, no, no.

M: But are you noticing them? Are you...

C: Yeah. Yeah.

M: Yeah. So what's that like?

C: Uhm, I don't know. In grade 9, there were guys bugging me saying that there's one that wanted to go out with me. And they were doing this in class and I was, I was embarrassed. And by the time that he finally asked me out I said no because the whole class knew and I'd been bugged so much about it. I really feel bad.

M: You still feel badly?

C: I still feel bad.

M: That you said no.]

C: Yeah. Cause he was such a nice guy. And I mean, I think he was embarrassed too. But he wanted some way to, to talk to me without feeling as vulnerable as he would normally. And I just, I didn't handle it very well. I just kind of "No, I don't really have the time." Which wasn't very nice, but. I wasn't experienced at rejecting people either, so.

M: How are you at talking about it now, what's it like for you as you sit here going through this stuff?

C: I still feel bad. I mean, I've seen him, I saw him a few years ago in where he was working, the store. And I said "Hi, how's it going." and we talked but it was still, oh I feel bad. (Laughter) Cause he was a really nice guy and I did date somebody in grade 10.

M: Okay. What was that like?

C: Uhm....not good and I found out later that it was a bet. Two people flipped a coin to see who was going to be the one to ask me out.

M: Okay.

C: I didn't find this out until later.

M: What did that feel like?

C: Uhm...I was flattered that they were interested in me but I didn't like the way that it was approached. Uhm...we only went out I think for 2 weeks. My choice and for 1 week I sat in the hall and said "No, I don't want to go anywhere, I don't want to do anything." "No, I got homework to do." So he got the hint pretty quick.

M: So when did you drop out of the regular system?

C: I went right to grade 12, and I was a few credits short because grade, as soon as I got my car I started missing a whole lot of school.

M: Oh, okay. So you didn't graduate from grade 12, you were short when you finished.

C: Yeah. There was classes that I was really good in, typing and shop, and journalism.

M: When did you switch from the regular program to Brian's program. Is that where you went to pick up the..

C: Credits.

M: credits.

C: Yeah.

M: Okay.

C: Yeah, that was 91.

M: So what's, so you're in grade 8. Take me through grades 9, 10, 11 in terms of school and what's happening to you as a student.

C: Grade 8 uhm, the first time I remember skipping out was at a fire alarm. There was a fire alarm. I was in french and Jackie and I contemplated on the chances of getting caught. And so we decided to go for it anyway. So we went down to the store and she got caught and I didn't. So it was like "Okay, this is cool" which kind of worked out right because we'd be talking in class and she'd get in trouble and I wouldn't.

M: M-hmm.

C: Just because she was loud and I was quiet. And I could start and initiate everything and still not get in trouble.

M: So what did you learn from that? What would that whole?

C: I learned real fast that I could talk my way out of anything.

M: Okay. And how did that play itself out in terms of school.

C: Uhm, it meant that I could skip out and I could go and talk to the principal and once or twice I'd get busted but the rest of the time I'd just talk my way out of it.

M: What kinds of things would you, how would you talk your way out of it? Do you remember any specific times?

C: No. Saying I don't feel well, I'm going to go home.

M: Signing out.

C: Yeah. Signing out. Or just going home for lunch and not coming back. Or, going to the mall and not coming back, and just going home on the bus.

M: So you were, were you skipping much in grade 8.

C: Once in a while. I learned, I learned that because I was quiet they never really noticed if I was there.

M: Okay.

C: Well not too much anyway.

M: Okay. What was grade 9 like, as far as skipping and that?

C: Oh it steadily got worse. By grade 12, if I didn't skip an hour out of the day it was unusual.

M: So what's school like for you now, grade 12?

C: Uhm...it's okay. It was kind of lonely. But I had my friends. Barb Falahehe. She was from Tonga. She was a really neat woman.

M: Um-hmm.

C: And her brother Maca. We went to volunteer together, only I made it and he didn't. But that was interesting.

M: And how are you doing in your subjects?

C: Science, not so good. English, not so good, just because I didn't do my homework. Uhm, shop, I showed up for and I did pretty good. I think B's. Uhm, typing, I did good. I got an A.

M: Uh-hmm.

C: Uhm. Socials, not good.

M: What about Math. Are you doing Math?

C: Algebra 11, yeah.

M: How are you doing in that?

C: Uhm, well I lost a year. I think I lost, yeah, at least one year.

M: How did that come about?

C: Uhm, well I was in 10 honors and I didn't pass that.

M: Okay.

C: So I went down to 10 regular, which is where I lost the year or where I went back to normal. And then Algebra 11, I didn't pass the first time around. So I went down a year.

M: So what's happened in Math for you? Like where is this bright kid in Math?

C: If I'd been shown the proper steps to take I would have done really well. But because there's a huge gap that I was never taught, uhm, that just interfered with everything in Math.

M: And what about your parents? How are they responding to this? Like here is their daughter who is, they know is bright, who's done well...

C: They just said study and I told them to stop nagging.

M: What's your relationship like with them at this point when you're in grade 10, 11, 12?

C: Uhm, well I knew how to get what I wanted. I said that I wanted the car just to go to school because I wasn't going to take the bus and if they wanted me to go school then they'd give it to me.

M: Okay.

C: And so they did.

M: And how did that feel?

C: Well it felt good but I know I went about it wrong.

M: What do you mean?

C: I shouldn't have demanded that they give me the car. I shouldn't have bribed them.

M: How did you bribe, oh I'll go to school if you give me the car.

C: Yeah.

M: Why shouldn't you have bribed them? You got what you wanted to.

C: Yeah but that also put them out. If they needed the car for some reason then it was a hassle because I was not going to take the bus.

M: To your stubbornness, kicking back.

C: Yeah. Uhm, let's see. I was very tough on my mom. She'd just want me to do good in school and I'd just tell her that it wasn't her business it was my life and if I wanted to do it, I'd do it. So I was very hard on her.

M: So, on the one hand you want them to notice you, to make contact with you and on the other hand you're very much in charge and "it's my life and I'll do what I want". Tell me about that, that seeming paradox.

C: Uhm, I've always been very independent and at the same time I always wanted their approval. So I guess sometimes my independence led over me needing approval. A lot of the time it did. So...

M: So the independence overpowered the need for approval?

C: Yeah.



M: But the need for approval was still there.

C: Yeah.

M: How would that play itself out in the family. For you.

C: For me schoolwise, I would do my homework...I would do it a lot of the time. Some of the time I wouldn't turn it in.

M: M-hmm.

C: Cause I was a perfectionist.

M: Ah, okay.

C: Which, and a procrastinator and those two don't go together very well.

M: When did you become a perfectionist and when did you become aware that you were a perfectionist?

C: I became aware of it in grade 10 when I'd have an assignment done or an essay done and it wouldn't be good enough or the spelling wasn't right or, or something needed to be added and I'd be forever changing it until it was too late.

M: M-hmm. And so did anyone pick up on that, that you were a perfectionist?

C: My mom. Cause she's the same way. Everything has to be perfect with her.

M: And how did she handle that with you.

C: Uhm, she didn't know how to. She, she was a procrastinator too.

M: M-hmm.

C: And a perfectionist. And she was forever saying that she was going to fail her courses and she'd always get an A. And that used to drive me nuts!

M: Why?

C: Because she'd be saying, "I'm going to fail. I'm going to fail. I'm going to fail." Meanwhile she's got 96%. I mean it's like it makes no sense. But to her it does because it's a motivator I think.

M: Okay. So how are your teachers response, are you getting, are there many assignments that you're not getting handed in?

C: For Science and English, yeah. For Socials, a lot of the time.

M: You're not getting them in there either.

C: No. But for Math or something, I usually could do it in class.

M: Okay.

C: So I'd always have that done.

M: So are you passing grade 9, 10, 11, are you passing all of your stuff, or some of your stuff or?

C: Most of it. Socials Studies I don't think I passed one year.

M: They just kept pushing you on?

C: Mmm, I'd have to go to summer school. I think I went to summer school every year for Socials.

M: Oh, okay. So what's that doing to you as a student, like what's school becoming for you, what's it like?

C: It's more a chore. I mean I like, I liked learning but I didn't like the fact that I had to take Socials. I didn't like the fact that I had to take anything because I wanted to choose and if my choices were the same as what they were telling me then at least that's my choice.

M: M-hmm.

C: But Socials wasn't something that I liked. It wasn't something that I was good at. It wasn't something that I needed or I felt that I needed. So I didn't feel that I should have to take it.

M: Okay. What about English?

C: English I was good at. I was very good at writing stories, at punctuation, at etiquette for language.

M: And how were, but you weren't doing very well in English or were you?

C: Uhm, what I did, I did very well on.

M: Okay.

C: But I just didn't do enough to give me a good grade.

M: And why didn't you do enough?

C: Uhm, I don't know. In English it was, I liked English enough. I just, I guess I figured it was my time and they didn't give me a spare period to get my homework done.

M: My time. Home time is my time.

C: Home time, yeah.

M: So that's an ongoing thing, right from when you were a little girl.

C: Yeah.

M: Home time is my time.

C: It's just like at work. Work is work. And you don't interact the two.

M: Okay, okay. So you're capable of doing this stuff but you're just not managing to get it done because it's at home and "I'm not going to do it at home".

C: Yeah.

M: What are you doing at home when you're not going to school?

C: Uhm,

M: Like when you're not doing school work. Did you do much school work at all or?

C: At home I'd do it sometimes but I'd play on the computer, I would read, watch t.v., make dinner, go to my friends. There was always something to do instead of doing...work.

M: M-hmm, m-hmm. Uhm, so when you finished grade 12, you were short courses.

C: Yeah, 3 courses.

M: What were you short?

C: Socials, English, uh....I don't know what the third course was. Maybe Math.

M: Math.

C: Or Physics, it could have been Physics.

M: Did you pass Algebra 11? In high school?

C: Yeah, yeah, second time around I did.

M: Second time around in?

C: In high school, yeah.

M: Okay. So you never really, you didn't drop out.

C: No, no.

M: But you became more disengaged from it all as you were going along.

C: Yeah. I never actually even thought of dropping out.

M: M-hmm.

C: It's just if I showed up, I showed up. If I didn't, I didn't.

M: Okay.

C: Which is basically the same thing. Because in my school I never really heard of people dropping out.

M: Okay.

C: I heard of people getting expelled.

M: Alright. What would you have to do to get expelled?

C: Uhm, vandalism.

M: Okay.

C: Uhm, I don't know, I guess if you missed too much school you would get expelled.

M: How much school did you miss in grade 12, roughly? You'd skip how often, every day?

C: Yeah. Usually, unless, like usually, I'd go home at lunch and not come back.

M: Okay. And that wasn't enough to get you kicked out?

C: No. Like I said they didn't really notice me because I was quiet.

M: Okay.

C: I would come back and actually teachers would watch me come back because I knew the teachers and I'd wave at them and say "how is it going" and they're like "shouldn't you be in school" and I'd be like "yeah, I should be."

M: So what kind of sense did you make of that? Like what did that tell you or?

C: That nobody cared. Nobody cared. Well some of the teachers did. Some went out of their way to help me and now I appreciate it.

M: But at the time you..

C: At the time I didn't. There were some really good teachers but then again there were some teachers who didn't care, they didn't want to know, they didn't want to deal with it.

M: Okay. So how old were you when you, when you, when you disclosed over the abuse stuff? Was that, that was?

C: Seventeen.

M: That was a big thing for you?

C: Yeah.

M: Who did you disclose this to?

C: Before I went to a counsellor I talked to a friend and he was very understanding.

M: And then you went to a counsellor?

C: Yeh. Then I went to a counsellor and he said he'd have to call Social Services.

M: Right.

C: And so all that dragged in. And I stayed away from home for a couple of days and I called mom and said "Hi", and she asked me to come home and I came home and we talked.

M: Okay. How did all that work out for you?

C: Uhm, it worked out for the best. I was no longer keeping secrets. I no longer wanted to keep secrets. I no longer had to be alone with or, yeah, I didn't have to alone because if I said something then it's not something I'd get in trouble for. Uhm...

M: Was there a time when you'd get in trouble for saying things?

C: No, not really. But with something like this, then...you don't really know, you don't know what to expect. You don't know if you're going to get blamed or how psycho somebody is going to become when they learn of it.

M: Okay. And so how did that affect your relationships with teachers in school or did it, did it? How did all that play itself out for you when you look at it now?

C: Uhm,

M: The not knowing, the secretness, the being alone?

C: The not knowing didn't really affect anything. At school it was just, I was dealing with my own things. I didn't need school to interfere. It's more, school was more a distraction.

M: Okay. So this was quite a preoccupation in your life.

C: Yeah.

M: Like every day.

C: Yeah. Well it's not something that was talked about so it's something that I had to, it was sort of like talking with myself.

M: Yeh, yeh. And school is a distraction from that pain, or that confusion?

C: Yeah.

M: Or my craziness or whatever.

C: Yeah. An annoyance or a distraction depending which class it was.

M: M-hmm, m-hmm. When you look at high-school was there much that you were engaged, I mean you liked woodwork and you liked metalwork, and you liked shops and you liked typing, on a sort of scale of 1 to 10 in terms of engagement were you really engaged, partially engaged, you know?

C: In school?

M: Yeah. With school.

C: Uh, partially.

M: Partially.

C: Yeah.

M: And that sort of dwindled as you went along from 8 to 12?

C: Yeah.

M: So the last time you were really engaged in school was?

C: Grade 3.

M: Grade 3.

C: Yeah, Mr. Anthony pissed me off for the next four years.

M: Okay.

C: And after that I was on my own. Pick and choose what I, what courses I liked what I wanted to stay around for and what I didn't. Nobody ever gave me grief about it. Couple of detentions here and there. And that was it.

M: So you really learned how to handle people in the system quite well and at a young age. Is that true? You look almost embarrassed.

C: (Laughter)

M: Is that true?

C: Yeah. Yeah.

M: And yet there's an interesting mixture there of handling and a desire to be contacted happening for you.

C: Yeah.

M: Like you're alone with this st, your own stuff, with the abuse stuff. You're alone in terms of shyness, and yet...

C: But I was very giving with my friends. If they ever needed help I was there for them. If they needed a couple of bucks I'd have it for them.

M: M-hmm.

C: I was very open in a sense with them.

M: In a giving sense.

C: In a giving sense. Yeah.

M: That was quite easy for you to do.

C: Oh yeah. Yeah. I care a lot about people and who they are.

M: Okay. If you could redo grade 8 to 12 and you had a magic wand to just pop things in however you wanted to, what would you switch?

C: Uhm....I'd do my work. I really would.

M: Because?

C: Because right now I see where not doing my work has taken me and how much further ahead I would have gotten.

M: But that stubbornness. You couldn't handle your stubbornness, is that what kept you from doing your work?

C: I think it was stubbornness. It's not that I was lazy, cause I wasn't lazy.

M: Ah no, nothing you've said suggests laziness. I mean you were very active upstairs.

C: Yeah.

M: You're not slow, you're not dull, you're not, were, were you into a lot of dope or stuff like that?

C: Experimenting but I think every kid goes through that.

M: Yeah, yeah, but you weren't stoned 6 months in a row.



C: Oh no, no.

M: Yeh. So you were never fried in school, like I mean regularly.

C: No.

M: You weren't a stoner.

C: No. No.

M: Yeh. But you were adrift somewhere on your own.

C: Yeah. I'd go to school and I'd be looking out the window and I'd be a million miles away. And nobody would notice that I wasn't paying attention.

M: And you wanted someone to notice?

C: Yeah.

M: Someone like your grade 3 teacher?

C: Yeah.

M: He could have pulled you in. Would that have worked?

C: Yeah. I think so.

M: And your parents. You wanted them to notice too.

C: Yeah. If I had someone to talk to, someone to be open with, then I think things would have changed. But now, like a lot of kids, there's not too much communication within the family.

M: M-hmm.

C: And that's too bad. It messes up a lot of children.

M: Yes. Yeh. You look sad over that. Is it a sad memory.

C: Oh I was just thinking about all the kids who don't have anybody to talk to. And don't get me wrong. I think Southwest is a wonderful school but it's just sad that so many have to end up there because they don't anybody to talk to. Or nobody to care about them.

M: Did you feel that you had people who cared about you in grade 8, 9, 10?

C: At the time I didn't think so. At the time I felt alone, I felt abandoned, I felt sad. But looking back I know that there were always people there that cared.

M: But there, but that aloneness, that feeling of aloneness, of being abandoned, that kicked in at a very young age?

C: Yeah. Five.

M: At five? Can you remember that, can you remember that sense of loss of security or whatever it felt like?

C: Yeah.

M: What happened?

C: See, okay. My mom was working and my dad was working graveyard.

M: Uh-huh.

C: And so, he'd be sleeping when I got home from school and we'd be there to take care of ourselves. Or we had a babysitter for awhile but she didn't pay any attention to me. And I felt alone a lot of the time. And I talked to my parents about that and they'd say that I wasn't alone that much but to me I was.

M: You felt alone.

C: Yeah. To me I remember taking care of myself a lot of the time because my brothers were off doing their thing, they were older. They were off doing guy things because they were boys. Whatever it was and I was the only girl, I was alone.

M: M-hmm.

C: And so I had to learn, I had to learn my independence really young. I had to take care of myself, set my own values and goals and try to figure things out. But they said that I wasn't alone that much but how much, how much is a lot to a child.

M: That's right and the other thing is who cares what they say, it's what you know.

C: Yeah.

M: And you felt alone.

C: I know that they really tried.

M: Yeh, yeh.

C: Of course all parents are going to make mistakes and everything. And that's how I perceive it. But there's still a part that's hurt because I was alone.

M: So you developed this independence, this really strong stubborn, capable, even manipulative person as you get older.

C: Yeah.

M: And I don't mean that in a negative sense.

C: I don't like to think of it as manipulative. But I guess it is.

M: I'm not thinking of it in terms of the ugly side of the word but just that you could handle things, you could handle people, you could handle the system.

C: Oh yeah. I could, I could handle my parents too.

M: Yeah. You handled everybody.

C: You talk to them the right way and...

M: It happens.

C: Yeah.

M: So it's kind of, there's this interesting, my sense is that there's this interesting mixture of this little alone girl on the inside and on the outside this quite capable person handling the world and ironically somehow keeps the world away from her and yet she needs the world to contact her. Does that fit?

C: Yeah, yeah. And then later I got that from, I made friends with people who needed something, who were missing something.

M: M-hmm.

C: Either somebody to talk to, somebody to listen, somebody to just to be there.

M: Yeh, yeh.

C: And I found that I could provide that and that sense of being needed filled a gap, I guess.

M: But it didn't take care of your aloneness

C: No. No.

M: When did that happen? When did your aloneness start being taken care of or has it?

C: Tod has helped me a great deal.

M: With what?

C: With a lot. And I'm not as shy as I used to be, I'm not as insecure as I used to be. I've learned how to be open and honest. Not that I wasn't honest before.

M: M-hmm, m-hmm.

C: I'd just be quiet and I wouldn't divulge anything that wasn't asked of me.

M: M-hmm.

C: But S.A.R.A. also helped too. The group. I wasn't talking too much in the group but being a part of it, it really helped. It was a wonderful program.

M: Is there anything on your list that we haven't gone through? My sense as I listen to you is, in a sort of a nutshell is, part of what I'm doing is putting the story together in part of my brain, is that, here's a kid who's capable, bright and has a lot of ability, has, your story as you tell it is quite animated in the first couple of years. Your face was animated, you had little worlds that you were building.

C: (Laughter)

M: You know, that goes along really nicely until you hit this guy in grade 4 and something, I mean he's, you know he does this learning assistance thing and all the rest of that but somehow in there you really get whacked hard and you don't get crushed by it but it just kicks into that resentment that independent, that stubbornness in you.

C: Yeah, he's like the boogeyman or something.

M: Yeh. The next 3 or 4 years, you're kind of, I have a sense of an increased aloneness for you all the way along. I mean does that fit?

C: Yeah.

M: I mean you've got friends and all that but you're still within a very private world.

C: Yeah. I had lots of friends but at the same time I was isolated.

M: Yeah. Was, were there feelings of wanting to break out of that.

C: Oh yeah. All the time.

M: All the time. But you didn't know how?

C: I didn't know how. I didn't know how people would react, I didn't know how they would take it.

M: So, the breaking out has to do with the abuse, talking about all of that.

C: Yeah.

M: So that's really a core for you, all the way along?

C: Yeah.

M: And you can't break out without talking about that, is that, is that what it's like?

C: Yeah. I used to think that I couldn't get into a relationship unless somebody knew.

M: Okay.

C: Because then I'd be bringing up my messed up feelings into a relationship.

M: M-hmm.

C: And I'd freak out at them and they wouldn't know why.

M: M-hmm.

C: Whereas I figured if they knew, then if I freaked out at them then they'd know why.

M: Okay.

C: Or if they said something that I didn't like or...

M: So is it fair to call that like a real sense of deep self-doubt?

C: Yeah.

M: Does that fit or not?

C: Uhm....doubt about the world, about...I don't know. I questioned life in general, I questioned my place in life. If I was really there because sometimes I felt like I was walking around but nobody was seeing me.

M: Felt invisible.

C: Yeah.

M: Doubt about the world. Tell me about that, doubt about the world.

C: How people can hurt children, how somebody can let that happen.

M: Who let that happen?

C: My parents for not knowing, I guess. I was angry for a long time because I was hurting and they never knew.

M: They didn't protect you.

C: Yeah.

M: They let you down.

C: Yeah. And when my parents would have a fight I'd go and comfort them and help them along because my mom would sometimes be really upset and I'd go and I'd comfort her.

M: M-hmm.

C: But then again there was nobody there comforting me.

M: Yeah. Yeah.

C: And so for a while I was really really angry.

M: When were you, when were, when were you that, when is that angriest period?

C: Thirteen.

M: Thirteen. It really kicked in at thirteen.

C: Yeah, my mom wanted, as I called it at the time, play family. And I was really snotty about it because the sense that I got was that she was too busy with work and we never really did anything and then at thirteen, she got more time and, and she wanted to do things as a family. And at that time I was, I'd spent so much time on my own, I didn't want to be this family unit.

M: It was too late.

C: Yeah. And my brother felt that too. Because we talked about that.

M: Duncan.

C: Yeah.

M: Okay.

C: Only I grew out of it and he didn't.

M: Can you take me through your family life a little bit, just in terms of those kinds of things for you? That kind of be aloneness, the way that one day ?????

C: Uhm, Duncan and I, we used to be really close. When we had problems we'd run away together. I remember one time we were running away and we ran up and we hid in this big green mailbox. A, a newspaper box, and we went and we both knelt down in it and we hid and we saw my parents drive up and my dad get out of the car and start walking and we were snickering behind this thing and it was neat because it was something we were doing together.

M: M-hmm.

C: And after that, well, I don't know, as time goes on we got farther and farther apart.

M: You and Duncan.

C: Well Duncan and the whole family.

M: Okay.

C: Now we've always been close and we're closer than anybody else, well he's closer to me than anybody else in the family. Which is good but we still don't talk that often because he's got stuff that he's not ready to deal with.

And I don't want, I know that and I don't want to force him to deal with it.

M: Yeah.

C: But at the same time I want to give him a little bit of a nudge.

M: Yeah, yeah. Does he have your courage or gutsiness.

C: Uhm, I don't think so, I uh, he, I think he lets things get to him a little bit more than I do.

M: He doesn't know how to protect himself.

C: No. He held it in too much, in a different way then I did. He withdrew and that also comes from his schooling and how his friends teased him and he let that get to him a little bit more than I did.

M: Were you teased at school much?

C: Yeah. I was teased about my name, about my clothes because I used to wear these ugly brown courduroys that were handed down from my brothers. So I got bugged about that.

M: When, what year was this at?

C: Grade 1 and 2.

M: 1 and 2, okay.

C: Yeah. They were the ugliest pants I've ever seen. They worked, I mean.

M: But high-school. You didn't get bugged in high-school, you didn't get teased in high-school?

C: Not too much, no.

M: It doesn't stick out as a memorable sort of thing?

C: No. There was a couple of guys who bugged me.

M: What were they bugging you about?

C: Uhm. Nothing in particular. They just bugged.

M: Was it mean or just goofing around?

C: Goofing around.



M: Okay.

C: No, nobody was really mean. They said I was a snob because I was really quiet and they didn't understand that.

M: You didn't understand that?

C: No, they didn't understand that I was just quiet and I wasn't a snob.

M: Oh cause you were probably the last thing - (tape change) You'd be willing to talk to anybody if they came up and talked to you.

C: Yeah.

M: But you didn't know how to initiate?

C: No. No, I was very within myself. I didn't, I didn't feel comfortable going up and starting a conversation. I didn't, I didn't understand small talk.

M: M-hmm.

C: Because it's not something our family ever engaged in.

M: M-hmm.

C: And so I didn't know what to go up and say, I couldn't go up and say "Hey, how's it going?" cause I didn't understand that that's what you do.

M: Yeah. And yet you wanted to.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah.

C: And Duncan is the same way. He doesn't know how to, to go up and talk to people. He, he'll help anybody, he'll talk to anybody but they have to start it.

M: Okay.

C: I mean Duncan's the most generous person in the world. I've gone out, uhm, I went to Playland with him, I went to a car show and I was going to pay my own way but he decided he's treating, he's taking me.

M: M-hmm.

C: And I never knew that about him until we got older and we got I guess closer in that respect, and we started talking about the past a little bit.

M: M-hmm.

C: But we never really got into anything.

M: Yeah. Does he know about your past.

C: No, no.

M: By your choice obviously?

C: No, no. I figure, well I would hope that it would help him to open up if he saw that I could open up.

M: But you haven't told him about yourself?

C: No, uhm....I keep wanting to, but I guess I don't have the guts or I don't have the courage because it always seems like it's not the right time, it's somebody's birthday, it's Christmas coming up and you don't really want to rock the boat and...

M: Yeh, yeh. Are there things on the list that we've left off or that you haven't mentioned.

C: Uhm. I don't think so. The last thing I have written out there is moved out.

M: When did you move out?

C: The first time I moved out was in 91.

M: How old were..

C: No in 92.

M: How old were you?

C: Nineteen.

M: Okay. How was that?

C: Awful.

M: Because?

C: Uhm, my room-mate. I've known her since I was four years old, we've been really good friends. I move out with her, a couple of months later, she becomes a prostitute.

M: Oh, wow.

C: A little side street that I never even knew about.

M: Yeh.

C: Dreamed about.

M: Wow.

C: So, and there were some problems.

M: I'll bet.

C: Yeah. She had her boyfriend move in. He was her pimp, which was real cute.

M: Yeah.

C: And uh, just before I moved out, well that's what I just, when I just decided to move out, I was raped and her and her boyfriend were in the next room, and they let it happen. So that kind of killed that friendship.

M: That's horrific.

C: And uhm, it's unbelievable.

M: Yeah, I'm stunned.

C: Yeah. You wouldn't think that somebody you've grown up with your whole life, somebody who has been there and protected you and I've protected her...we're like sisters. Or we were. And something comes up like this. And the sad thing is, she wouldn't stand up for me. I went to the police and she was angry. Uhm, I went to court and I asked her if she would come and testify for me and she wouldn't. And then she comes oh, a year later and says "I'm sorry, will you forgive me." And I said, well she's really changed then, I'll forgive her. So we go and she's taking her hairdressing and she's doing this and she's doing that and then I find out that she's gotten back into it, and she still won't come to court with me and...that just did it. I wouldn't talk to her, I wouldn't accept her phone calls, I wouldn't call her back. And so it's been, almost two years since I've seen her.

M: Wow. Did it ever go to court?

C: It went to court, or it went to pre-trial. And it was going to go to court because they wanted his statement taken out because he confessed and they wanted his statement taken out and the judge wouldn't do it and they said that they're going to plead guilty. So it didn't go through court, it went through pre-trial and.....it went to sentencing. He got a year and a half. He was up for parole, November. And declined. Because he's not a model citizen. He doesn't believe that what he did was wrong. Uhm, well he's from Africa where they treat women as objects and I don't know, I guess where he comes from it was right. And, he doesn't get it.

M: God almighty!

C: So that was my first move out. Then my next moving out, I moved out with another friend who had changed without me knowing. He, I lived with him for three months. A little while after we moved in he started dealing drugs. I didn't know about it for awhile. And he had friends coming over and he had this and that and the other and....One of his friends stole money and I said "Forget it. I'm not dealing with the bullshit anymore." And I had my parents take my T.V. because it was the only valuable thing that I had and well, along with a few other things that I didn't want taken. And my friends came and moved me out shortly after.

M: So, there's a real sort of series of being let down by people in your life. The abuse stuff, the grade 4 teacher,

C: Yeah.

M: By your parents, in their own unintentional way, your brother Duncan, lots of people have let you down.

C: Yeah.

M: So that the world as you put it, the world out there is hard to trust.

C: I don't think so. Because everybody is different. Everybody was raised differently. Not everybody is bad.

M: So you still manage to, to have hope.

C: Well without hope, what is there.

M: Yeah, yeah. That's great. I, it's just that there's so, you know there's so many different incidents of,

C: Well I've, I've been through hell and back and if I don't have hope then, I wouldn't have made it through.

M: Yeah.

C: And now I have Tod and I'm very lucky and he's wonderful.

M: And you have your courage and your experiences.

C: Yeah, and I can write a book. (Laughter)

M: Yeah, you can. Wow.

C: But I figure my experiences, no matter how bad, or how good, they all help me become the person that I am. They all taught me something. And obviously it was a lesson I needed to learn if I had to keep being bashed. Keep being bashed and keep going back is something you really have to learn. (Laughter)

M: (Laughter) Is there anything else that you want to talk about, in terms of school or relations or anything, that you think fits with the whole idea of again disengaging, drifting away?

C: Uhm, when I went to Southwest it was great, it was wonderful.

M: What was great about it?

C: We could move at our own pace. The teachers really cared. They listened, they came up and they talked and they wanted to hear what you had to say. They, they were wonderful. They let me be. They let me do my work and they didn't hound me. They let me go at my own pace. They were really wonderful, really supportive.

M: And that was a lot different than your teachers in high-school? Were you different or?

C: No, the school was different. I didn't like the structure system in high-school.

M: Okay.

C: I didn't like that you had to raise your hand to go to the washroom or answer a question. Uhm, in Southwest we didn't have to do that.

M: So what was, was there a feeling of being controlled in high-school?

C: Yeah. Yeah. It's like we couldn't talk, we couldn't chew gum, we couldn't move from our desks unless we asked.

M: And that just was very much against that independence that you...

C: I didn't like it, I didn't like, I didn't like the whole system of school. I didn't like the way that it was run. I didn't like the people who ran it.

M: But does that fit, that it, that it kind of went against the grain. I mean you were a very independent person by force in some ways.

C: Yeah.

M: And so, here's these people running around telling you, you have to do this, you have to do that, and that bothers you.

C: It doesn't, it doesn't work.

M: It doesn't work with A. So, so if I was your teacher in grade 11, I could have been successful with you if I took a low key, "How do you want to go about doing this, okay A, I mean we've got English 11 here, you know in order to get through you need to do X amount of things, how do you want to go about doing this?" If I took that approach could that have worked with you?

C: Yeah.

M: And that would have...

C: Or say you have to have 4 essays by the end of the year.

M: Okay.

C: And have a deadline for each one, that's okay. I'll go do it.

M: You would have done that.

C: Just leave me alone and...

M: Okay.

C: I'll read my books, I'll do my work.

M: But don't bug me.

C: Yeah.

M: You really resented that.

C: Yeah. I was very relaxed. Very quiet and very relaxed but you just didn't push it.

M: And very alone at the same time.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah, yeah. Was it a fragile existence or not? You don't strike me as fragile at all but I'm wondering if there's any of that in there for you.

C: Well, being breakable? There are times, there was times when I felt that I was teetering on the edge. I was walking a tightrope and on either side was the big cliff.

M: When was that?

C: About the same time that I was depressed, at about thirteen.

M: Okay. So grade 8, thirteen, this is one of the hardest times in your life?

C: Yeah, thirteen to probably fifteen.

M: Yeah. And is that when the whole sort of thing of the abuse thing was really hitting hard in your mind?

C: Yeah.

M: And, and the desire to be contacted by your parents which they didn't see.

C: It's just everything. Home life, I wasn't happy at home.

M: What, what was making you unhappy at home? I mean beyond what you've said?

C: Uhm, I'm not sure why I was unhappy. I guess I figured that everybody else had it better than I did.

M: You were resentful.

C: Yeah. Yeah, I'd go to my friends places and they'd be eating dinner together and set the table and have the whole family scenario and talk and everything and when I'd get

home, everybody cooks for themselves, everybody eats at different times.

M: So you really didn't have a sense of a family unit.

C: No.

M: And you wanted that. Or did you?

C: I did but I didn't.

M: You wanted the connection but not the interference.

C: Yeah. Well my parents had a curfew for awhile for me but after that, no, because I'd go off on my own anyways.

M: When was the last time your parents had control over you? Did they ever?

C: Complete control?

M: No, when you felt it was going to be their way not your way.

C: Seven.

M: When you were seven.

C: Yeah.

M: Was that frightening? Or was that anger provoking?

C: I don't know if I was really angry about it. I just decided that I was doing things my own way. If I let them know or if I didn't let them know, then in my mind it would still be my way. And if I gave into something it would be in my terms.

M: And was there during all of that a desire for someone to break through and just grab A.

C: Yeah.

M: And embrace her with warmth and kindness?

C: Yeah.

M: Dispell the aloneness?

C: Yeah but at the same time I was always scared of that too.



M: Because?

C: If you let someone get too close and they can hurt you. If you keep people at a distance then you may be surprised, shocked, but you won't be hurt.

M: Does that go back to the abuse?

C: I don't, I don't think so, I don't think so. I mean, you just.

M: Where did you learn that?

C: Well, if people let you down enough, you learn to depend on yourself.

M: So, it goes back to that. This sense of not, you were let down all the time by people.

C: Yeah.

M: But you knew this by the time you were seven or did you? When did you have that sense of "I can't let people too close to me."

C: It was really early. It was really early.

M: So where did you learn that? You said if you're let down enough. So by seven you were already let down that much?

C: Well, by my brother. Being beat up, by him telling me the things that he told me and hurting me that way. It was, I don't know. And then, and then the friends that I had, they were. Some of them were superficial and they'd go from one friend to another friend to another friend.

M: Now how old are you when this is happening.

C: It started off in grade one. It's like the class has always been like that.

M: Okay.

C: And so for awhile there would be a few people who would be your friend but the rest wouldn't.

M: M-hmm.

C: And then I'd move to another person and another person.

M: M-hmm.

C: And, people were just fickle. Bouncing back and forth.

M: You weren't fickle.

C: No.

M: But it was, it was, with your brother, it was that that really kind of

C: Yeah.

M: That really cut deep.

C: Yeah, well he was my best friend.

M: Yeah. And he let you down.

C: Yeah.

M: You look sad. You thinking about him.

C: Yeah. I miss the way that we used to be. And it's hard sometimes. But hopefully it, it'll get back. Enough patience, and it'll work.

M: M-hmm.

C: He'll grow up too. He needs a little bit of time.

M: I kind of have a sense that we've come to an end. How do you feel? Or are there things that you haven't talked about that you want to bring up?

C: No, not really.

M: Okay.

M: When did you drop out from life, or how did you, when did you become aware that you had dropped out of life?

C: Probably sixteen. I just, I didn't want to feel anymore I didn't want to care anymore. So, other than the few really close friends that I had, I didn't want to talk with anybody really. I didn't want to become involved.

M: You were just shutting down everywhere.

C: Yeah. Well that was like at the beginning of school, I never joined any programs.

M: M-hmm.

C: Even though there were ones that I would have been interested in. I didn't really want to get involved.

M: Because?

C: Uhm, I honestly didn't think I'd be around long enough.

M: You thought you were going to kill yourself.

C: Yeah.

M: Okay.

C: And I knew that I wouldn't but there was always that thought.

M: What's the point, I'm not going to be here anyway.

C: Yeah.

M: Wow.

C: Well I didn't feel I'd kill myself at that time. I always thought I'd die at 23.

M: Because? Where did that come from?

C: The age 23?

M: Well, yeah.

C: I don't know. I guess I had a lot of time to think about it. And I never thought that I'd get into a relationship. I never thought that I'd have children. And when I was young I thought 23 was old. You had finished school, you had begun work and everything would become repetition after that.

M: I never thought I'd get into a relationship because I can't tell anybody who I really am?

C: Well actually, I kind of thought that I was too ugly.

M: Okay.

C: And I never thought that anyone would want to be with me.

M: Uh-huh.

C: Or if they did then they'd be crazy so why would I get involved with them anyway.

M: Right, right. So if I'm not worthy of a relationship, life isn't worth anything anyway or...?

C: Yeah. I didn't want to live alone. I don't want to die alone. I don't want to be alone.

M: Cause I've been alone for so long, I hate this.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeh, yeh. So engaging with life was a real challenge for you.

C: Yeah. Well like I said before, I walked around invisible. That's how I felt. I really thought that people didn't see me. They saw through me. So...

M: So school was never, school is kind of a passing diversion.

C: Yeah. Yeah, my parents always said, "Well, why don't you try harder. You should get this done." And I always thought "why bother".

M: What's the point.

C: Yeah. So...I mean I had some fun. There were some good classes. But other than that there was, I saw no real point to it.

M: But now with Tod in your life if you could go back you'd be a very different student if you...

C: Yeah.

M: had this understanding.

C: But then again if I went back and changed, if I changed anything, then I would have never been where I was in order to meet Tod. So I think I'd rather, then go through it all again just the way it was and be where I am now and who I am now.

M: Cause you like who you are.

C: Yeah, yeah, finally.

M: Yeh, yeh.

C: So...it was all worth it.

M: Yeh, yeh.