

**THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION, AND EVALUATION OF A GRADE NINE  
ENGLISH SKILLS PROGRAM TO AID IN PREVENTING STUDENTS AT-RISK OF  
DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL**

**ELIZABETH ANN JAKOBSEN**

B.Ed., University of Calgary, 1979

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## Dedication

I AM

I am a teacher

I wonder if I'm making a difference

I hear the enthusiasm in the voices of my students

I see the improvements in my students' work

I want them all to lead productive, fulfilling lives

I am a teacher

I feel frustrated with limitations

I worry about what the future holds for certain students

I understand that there are some things I cannot change

I say that I will do all I can to make a difference

I will try to teach in a way that inspires students

I hope I am reaching them

I am a teacher

## Abstract

This project focuses on those students in our public school system considered to be at-risk of dropping out prior to high school graduation. This study involves one grade-nine English skills' class, the first one taught in my junior high school.

It was the objective of this study to provide tangible evidence of the inherent value of offering an English skills' course at the junior high level to meet the needs of students whose life skills and communication skills are lacking in varying degrees. It was my belief as a teacher that a number of students at this grade level could benefit from a class designed with their individual English academic needs and concerns as the focus, as opposed to being a curriculum-driven course.

Students identified as being at-risk, for the purpose of this study, often have problems ranging from behavior concerns to attendance problems, which can mean the end of their schooling at too early an age. This target group of students has not been diagnosed as having special needs but they are students who are often responsible for creating disruptions in the classroom. Also included are the students who do not seem motivated to complete any tasks assigned them, and as a result, are failing in a number of curricular areas.

Upon closer examination, one often finds that many of these students tend to have weak English/communication skills. By addressing the literacy and social needs of these individuals, at whatever level that might be, their chances of remaining in school are increased.

This study focuses upon on a class of students fitting this profile. The research

methodology is qualitative as well as quantitative in nature. Using action research (Hopkins, 1993), the data is recorded in the form of teacher journaling, interviews, questionnaires, the analysis of that information, the reflections that come of that analysis, and finally, recommendations based on the project in its entirety.

It was my working hypothesis that by offering an alternative to strictly academic English at the junior high level, we are then teaching to the realistic needs of certain students at-risk of dropping out of our schools. We can aide teachers working with these students in their classroom settings, and also, importantly, address the future needs of society itself by increasing the number of educated, responsible citizens in our communities.

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I would also like to thank the two gentlemen I interviewed for this paper. Their honesty in responding to the interview questions was much appreciated. Lastly, I must acknowledge the students I taught in the skills' class. These are the students, and many others like them, who make me want to do all I can to support them in the school setting, to give them the opportunity to feel good about who they are, and more importantly, to encourage them to look positively to the future.

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## CHAPTER 1: Project Overview

### Background

Since I began teaching, I have been interested in helping those students who somehow do not seem to fit into the academic classroom setting. I have always felt empathy for those individuals and have done what I could to help them realize success in my English classes at the junior high level.

The British Columbia grade nine Language Arts curriculum, at present, does not address the needs of those students whose more challenging lifestyle influences puts them at higher risk of dropping out of school prior to graduation. Many of these students are not realizing success in certain curriculum-mandated, academic programs within the school system. These individuals are not labeled as being at-risk of dropping out in a way that might help them be successful in their present classroom settings. Often, academic classes are operating at maximum numbers (26-29 students), the teacher is usually uninformed in regard to most student histories, and generally the teacher is unable to devote the time necessary to help these at-risk individuals to the degree required for success at that grade level. Research suggests a percentage of these students will continue to experience serious social problems. "Dropouts comprise nearly half the households on welfare, and a similar percentage of the prison population." (Schwartz, 1995, p. 2). This is a statistic the school system and society in general, literally, cannot afford to ignore. Many students dropping out of school today are doing so because they are not having their needs met and are frustrated with the present educational system. It is therefore

incumbent upon the educational system to attempt to meet the demands of our rapidly changing society, and the needs of the children who do not represent the norm, by providing an alternative to regular curricular English.

According to the British Columbia Language Arts Integrated Resource Package (1996),

The exchange of information takes place continually in everyday life. Having the ability to convey and respond to information is essential to students' success in school and the workplace, and prepares them for the responsibilities of citizenship

Using language for a variety of informational purposes and audiences helps.

students:

- communicate effectively and clearly using various technologies
- read and interpret technical directions and instructions
- gather, exchange, and manage information
- solve problems independently and in collaboration with others
- expand their knowledge base
- cultivate analytical and critical thinking.

(Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 1996, p.3).

There is a case to be made for classes at the junior high level to address the aforementioned needs of students considered to be at-risk of dropping out of school. Their communication skills are weak, and often times this impacts on the other curricular areas where reading and writing skills are required. These students often need to acquire, or improve upon, these basic communication skills in order to achieve success. These courses need to be a part of a realistic school curriculum, much like an introductory math course, whereby the skills necessary to move to higher levels are strengthened over a longer period of time.

This project answers those needs by demonstrating the value of providing an alternative English program to those students who are struggling or are at-risk of failing in the regular English classroom setting. The reasons many of these students struggle include lack of one-on-one interaction between students and teachers due to class size numbers, the increase of peer pressure at this grade level, and thus reluctance of individuals to seek out support, and finally, curricular expectations that are often not realistic for a number of these students. Frustration then becomes a part of the equation, and there is then an even greater risk of student failure.

If the educational system were to provide alternative, interesting, skill strengthening classes to students who had somehow missed learning these basic communication skills required to move on in the grade hierarchy, then perhaps more of these children would be motivated to continue their formal education, and ultimately graduate. We need to recognize that today's educational system must continue to move forward to meet society's ever changing demands; and it has in many ways. However, students requiring a level of instruction more individually focused are not having their needs met in the regular classroom. The delivery of the curriculum must be flexible enough to address these individual differences in the classroom. We, as educators must recognize and acknowledge the influences in certain student's lives that have not been taken into account in the English Language Arts Integrated Resource Package ( Ministry of Education, Skills and Training 1996). It is in this way that I believe we will be more successful in providing an opportunity to every child to work toward recognizing his or her potential, and ultimately in achieving personal success.

## Methodology

The method of study undertaken in this project is that of classroom-based action research inquiry (Hopkins, 1993). The teacher is focused on the existence of certain shortcomings in his or her educational setting, adopts an initial stance in regard to the problem, formulates a plan, carries out an intervention, evaluates the outcomes, and develops strategies in an iterative fashion. The research is therefore characterized by constraints and strengths given a research methodology intended to be a workable technique for the classroom teacher.

Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) pointed out that action research and the idea of the teacher as researcher, an idea he introduced as a way to improve education through empowering teachers by engaging them in curriculum development, were closely related. Richardson (1994) further defines action research in the classroom as a part of the teaching process that expert teachers have known about and employed for a long time. They observe situations in their classrooms that are less optimal, they identify the problem, they think about what and how to change, and they evaluate the impact of the change on the situation.

Choosing students for these classes might be considered by some to be a form of streaming; however, the objectives differ. The main goal of the course is to teach to each student's current English skill level in order to strengthen those areas perceived to be weak, as defined by the grade level English Language Arts Integrated Resource Package (Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 1996). These classes look to the English Language Arts IRP objectives for direction but are modified in order to realistically address the skill needs of those enrolled in the class. The second focus of the course is on teaching the life skills so many of these students are lacking. The study is a probability

sampling, as the students being studied are those who meet the criteria for the skills-based program. This study therefore separates these students from students in the general school population.

Evaluation of students, for the purpose of this study, is more qualitative than quantitative in nature, and each student's achievements have been measured according to his or her individual achievement. In each case, the teacher is instrumental in determining future objectives and goals for the student based on his or her semester evaluation.

Burns (1993) defined qualitative methodology as:

1. an alternative to the experimental method
2. primarily verbal, using language as data
3. primarily an inductive approach to data analysis
4. theoretically productive as a direct result of the data analysis.

My research reflects all of the above to some degree. Qualitative research, according to Eisner (1993), should also: be field-focused; consider the self as an instrument; be interpretive in character; use expressive language and the presence of voice in the text; pay attention to particulars (detail); and lastly, become believable because of its coherence, insight, and instrumental utility. Research data collection is in the form of interviews, teacher journaling, and student questionnaires. This information is then analyzed, interpreted and recommendations are made based on the results.

#### Potential Limitations of the Methodology

Bias might be considered possible due to the interviewer/researcher's personal investment in the study. One might have a variety of preconceived beliefs, but should focus on maintaining objectivity to avoid distorting the integrity of the research findings.

I believe that maintaining objectivity is possible, given my classroom experience teaching students at-risk over the past eleven years. Those involved in the research, also being aware of the reasons for the study, might be influenced to respond to questions in a way that they perceive presents them in a more socially desirable light.

In addressing these concerns, I have kept a journal documenting the daily interactions as they occurred in the classroom. This journaling allowed me to reflect upon what worked in reaching these students, and what did not. This reflective practice was my way of evaluating the course through the action research model (Hopkins, 1993).

#### Introduction to the Interview Subjects

The following two interviews (Chapters 2 and 3) have been transcribed and included in their entirety due to the inherent value of the in-depth discussions. The interview subjects themselves were chosen because they are representative of professionals who work with youth at-risk in the community on a regular basis, oftentimes outside of institutionalized settings. The nature of my interviewees' work brings them into regular contact with at-risk youth in our community as a result of juveniles' behavior. As such, my interviewees' experience working with youth in crisis have provided them with increased insight into many of these children's personal lives. It was my feeling that both interview subjects could offer valuable information about the lifestyle factors that influence the behaviors of children at-risk in both the school and community settings, and secondly, might provide increased support for my English skills course proposal.

My first interview subject is a local probation officer, and the other is an R.C.M.P. constable. Both individuals discuss these youth at-risk in the context of the correctional system, which is a perspective that represents the real world where these children are

concerned, as opposed to the institutional constraints of the classroom setting. Both subjects are committed to helping youth at-risk choose a more positive path in life. Their perspectives have provided me with most insightful research data.

## CHAPTER 2: Interview #1: Students At-Risk Interview With M

### Professional Background.

M has been a probation officer for seventeen years. He has a degree in recreation services and was required to take a twelve-week course in preparation to become a probation officer. He has been working in Cranbrook for the past seven years. There are two probation officers in Cranbrook, and on average M has eighty open files in his caseload.

M is recognized by other professionals in the community for his practical, forward thinking approach to working with youth in crisis in the Cranbrook area.

### Interview Setting.

I met with M at 4:00 P.M. in his office in the juvenile services area of the Cranbrook Court House. I had never met M before, but found him to be amiable and open during the interview. We spoke in a relaxed fashion prior to beginning the interview. I found him to be very knowledgeable and empathetic in regard to adolescents at-risk, as well as forward thinking when solutions were the topic of discussion.

### Interview #1.

Interview key:

E: Interview question

EQ: More in-depth inquiry

M: Interviewee #1

E: Can you describe the general background similarities of those students you'd consider to be at risk? Are there commonalities?

M: Yes, to some extent there are, but nobody fits into one category. Some come from backgrounds where there has been physical or sexual abuse, some kids come from separated families, some come from backgrounds that are too strict, and some come from overly permissive backgrounds. The commonality that would be present for kids at risk would be that it is not the event that they carry with them that is the problem. The problem is that they don't have the skills to do anything about it, and for one reason or another, the family is not helpful. The young person then, does not get the help they need to teach them how to cope with problems in their lives, so it doesn't matter what the triggering event is, it could be a car crash and their friend is killed, and suddenly, they go off the deep end. Recently in Cranbrook, a young man died in a car crash, and the kids became severely traumatized for a period of time. As a result, some of them got into a lot of trouble. So there are all kinds of events in life that could put a young person at risk, and it all boils down to, I think, that whatever that kid's family is like, determines what kinds of skills they learn to deal with the traumatic situations in their lives. The parents who deal with it at the kid's level will minimize the risk to that youth, and the ones who can't work at the child's level increase the risk. Another component is that if there is anything else wrong in the child's family, this compounds the problem. So it could be one event that puts the child over the edge, but there are usually other things that are wrong as well.

EQ: It sounds like a lack of communication.

M: Well, when we talk about communication, it's beyond just talking and 'yes' and 'no'. It's about a real connective understanding between the adult and youth. It's about really being able to connect, and not superficially connect. The superficially connected ones are the ones where the kid is at risk. Lots of these parents think they're connecting. They

say, “We talk”, but they’re aren’t connecting on an honest level. The youth doesn’t trust the adult enough to want to talk to them. So it’s a real trust thing. A lot of all parents don’t have that. Not all kids get into trouble though. Sometimes they solve their problems amongst their peers. So the effectiveness of the parent largely depends on their genuineness, and their willingness to talk honestly with their kids. That crosses all backgrounds. The people who can connect help reduce the numbers of students at risk. The kids who can communicate with adults who can connect definitely lower those kids’ risk connect do. The kids who don’t connect in a meaningful way are the ones we’re seeing. Some of these kids are being identified in grade eight, but most are already identified in grade seven. They’re the ones most at risk. We see very few twelve years olds, but the minute they’re thirteen (snap of fingers). So when they do come into the system at the age of thirteen, we already expect to see them.

EQ: ‘C’ seemed to think that teachers were often the ones who recognized behavior patterns in many of these kids. Do you think that affects how they are treated throughout their school careers?

M: Well, there don’t appear to be many effective early intervention strategies in the elementary years.

EQ: There doesn’t seem to be an easy answer.

M: Well, we can look at the child’s general background, the family can be an indicator of risk, the youth’s behavior is an indicator of risk, school performance is an indicator of risk. Those are all indicators of risk, and it seems we, somehow the system is not effective in intervening early to reduce those risks.

E: What would you suggest, from your experience, these individuals need at this point in their lives? What sorts of things do you do to help these kids?

M: Well, we see very few thirteen year olds, we see fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen year olds. We also see very few seventeen-year-olds, so what do these individuals need?

M: From what I've seen, most of them need structure, they need clear, consistent parenting, regardless of whether it's a husband and wife or a single parent or step-parents. All those involved have to be on the same page, and that can be really difficult because of emotional issues in these families. Again it comes down to the significant others in the family wanting to be there for the child and not just for themselves. There needs to be, in my experience, changes to the justice system. Most of these kids are involved with drugs and alcohol. These kids need a whole another set of structure that will assist them in staying away from drugs, especially. The kids coming into the system who have the most problems drink, smoke, and do drugs. This is amongst any other problems they have in their lives.

EQ: So that would be a commonality.

M: Some don't have all three, though about 90% have some usage problem.

E: Is that their way of coping with their problems?

M: Uh huh.

EQ: I've found many of these kids to be unhappy kids and some seem to be spiraling out of control behavior wise.

M: I think some of these kids don't understand the future.

E: Do you think they care; they just seem to worry about the present.

M: Well, in many cases, the way we deal with situations is outdated and not working. For

example, when we talk about teen sex we are preaching to the converted, and the ones who are using, tune us out. We think we're getting somewhere and we're not getting anywhere. I believe the majority of kids who are into alcohol and drugs are self-medicating, I wouldn't have always said that, but I would now. I think that a large part of the population is self-medicating. Addiction then becomes a problem. There's nobody there to hear them and so they may turn toward the use of substances. These kids coming into junior high are dealing with whatever is going on at home. They're dealing with their own emotional development, they're dealing with horrendous peer pressure, and peer to peer is often negative, and the kid will do anything to be accepted by their peers. This seems to be more important to many kids than acceptance by your parents. This creates horrendous conflicts and when you really don't think there's anyone there to talk to, then by using drugs you get a short term high. It may be the only good feeling they get, and the stuff is so readily available. My biggest frustration is that at the junior secondary level these kids start coming into the system. They already have social paths through the system, but they wind up at our desk, and these kids are functionally illiterate. Some are in the special education classes, and that's no reflection on teachers, but it's a reflection of the system. Kids get through up to a level and nobody works backwards to help them, they just go forwards from the point they were picked up at. They have no hope of being successful because whatever has been going on in their lives may have held them back. They may be in grade eight, but they're working at a grade four level. If there is hope for these kids, it's to get them up to at least a grade seven level. I've just seen so many kids struggling, and there's no hope.

E: Uh huh.

M: And there are so many factors that influence these kids. If school isn't good, and home isn't good, then we've got troubles. School is a social place to be, and that peer pressure has a powerful effect on their lives. I have quite a few kids who spend more time at school that they do at home. That can dictate what a kid is going to do positively or negatively.

EQ: And chances are they won't be with the ones who will influence them in a positive way.

M: Unfortunately, what happens is that kids get marginalized, not as quickly in elementary school as they do in junior high. The work is harder, the whole structure changes, and the whole set of dynamics become more complex. There's a lot more stuff that the kid has to cope with, and he could barely cope before.

E: Which agencies have you come to believe have the most potential to influence kids at this age?

M: Part of the answer to this would be the K.E.Y. Program (Kootenay East Youth). They deal with kids all over the province. They have an influence on kids that is positive. Basically they supply safety, consistent structure, consistent rules, and consistent consequences, and real dedication to doing whatever they can to encourage the kid to do well. They look at the skills the kids have, and they work on skill enhancement and some behavior correction, but a lot of it is skill enhancement. You take what the youth gives you to work with, and you share with them where they're making mistakes and you help them to do better. Like reading books. But they're expensive and there aren't enough of them.

EQ: Are these kids at highest risk, the ones who are in the court system already?

M: Well yeah they are, but I think the same thing applies. Those attributes are the ones that should be employed. The kids in the K.E. Y. Program are free to go, there'll be consequences, but they don't run away. The kids coming into the program are almost all on drugs. It also then becomes a detox. A problem in the schools today is that a significant number of kids are using drugs and / or alcohol.

EQ: What percentage of kids do you think use drugs?

M: Probably somewhere between 15-20%. That's why the K.E. Y. Program is successful because these kids are clean now and they do well, so they have a big advantage. The kids coming from the family backgrounds bring with them to school all the junk and they're not as clean, so it's harder then to deal with these kids because you're dealing with all their insecurities, whatever they may be. Even if they're not using, there will be significant other factors going on for them. It's a real challenge. It would be nice if we could get these kids to talk about things.

EQ: That need is addressed in the skills classes by keeping class size down to make the classroom more inviting and less threatening for them. This also allows for a better understanding of who each student is, and their particular skill needs.

M: I think if you teach low enough, to where their skill levels are, then they'll try.

E: What do you believe should be the role of the school in helping solve these problems in our society?

M: I think the school has a responsibility to create the best environment they can where kids can learn. I know there have been schools that have tried this. They take the approach that they are supportive of their entire student population. You encourage those doing well to do even better, and you encourage the strugglers by helping them to be

successful. Everything is not approached as being a problem. They look at everything in a way that promotes success, addressing that student's needs. If schools took this approach, I believe we would be kicking fewer kids out of school, we'd have fewer in school suspensions, we'd have a happier school environment, and the teachers will feel they're being successful, because they'll see that kids like what they're doing. I think that's where we've got to get to. We're using some really old-fashioned systems in a modern world. We've got structures placed on us with their standards and guidelines, but it still comes down to why do some kids do better than others, perhaps because some kids get support and others don't. The greatest opportunity for a kid's success in school is parental involvement; the greatest opportunity for failure of the system is parental involvement, because parents are only interested in outcome, my Johnny got through and can go on. They're very individualized about that; they don't care about anybody else. They don't care that the school provides for all the needs of the kids. They only want the school to address their child's needs. If he's special education they want more for their child, if the child is doing really well, then they want the kid to have more challenging work. The system has to be one where the school is addressing the needs of all, or in other words you treat every child as a child with potential. You take the negativism out.

EQ: Putting something like this into practice would be a tremendous amount of work.

We have some programs that try to address some of these needs, but often this comes with the risk of being labeled.

M: Then these kids find ways to escape from that by using drugs.

E: Can you suggest any ways in which schools might influence these students at risk in developing more positive life images?

M: Well, you've got the alternate program. It attempts to address some of their needs. It ends up being 'a do the best you can' type of situation, but where those kids should be learning is way below what is being taught. I think the volume of the kids going into the program speaks volumes about the system not meeting the needs of a lot of these kids. The school system is seeing the result of all the things in society that are going wrong; two parents working, parents drinking, parents that can't solve their own problems, all those kinds of things including all the complexities of the world. Some kids handle this stuff better than others do. These kids also have to go to school, and the ones who can't handle their lives, we soon see drift off from the mainstream and it's really hard to get those kids back.

E: Well, thank you very much for your support in my project; it is very much appreciated.

#### Summary of Interview #1.

The interview with M made it clear that there are concerns with the effectiveness of the school system in helping students at risk in today's society. He says many factors can influence adolescents, and those students who are unable to make a connection with an adult in a positive and meaningful way, for whatever reason, are at greater risk in society. He points to drug and other substance abuse as a prevalent and persistent problem involving a large number of adolescents in this age group. The availability of these substances makes it extremely difficult to control their use by adolescents, who seem increasingly to be self-medicating to cope with their lives.

The second point he makes involves peer pressure. He sees this to be a very powerful influence on students at the junior high level. He points out that kids are more often marginalized at this level, and thus are very concerned about fitting in.

Thirdly, he discusses the role of the family, the busy lives most people lead, the breakdown of the family structure and with it, clear, consistent parenting, regardless of the family structure.

A fourth concern he focuses upon is the methodology being employed by the various agencies in dealing with today's youth at-risk. He is concerned that the methodology being employed is often outdated and is not addressing the needs of those individuals.

His fifth concern relates directly to the student's educational needs. Too many of these at-risk youth are not having their needs met in the present school system, and end up being sent to the alternate program, which is rapidly becoming a dumping ground for these high risk individuals. It is M's belief that if we, as educators and as a community, were to focus on the positive qualities in these individuals, while teaching to the student's actual academic skill level, this might help cast a more positive light on learning for many of them.

Finally, he stresses that as adults, we need to learn how to communicate, and thus connect with adolescents, in a realistic way, in order that we may work toward helping reduce the numbers of these children at-risk in society today.

### CHAPTER 3: Interview # 2: Students At-Risk Interview With Constable C

#### Professional Background.

Constable C has been with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for twenty-four years, and has served in a number of British Columbia communities. He has been with the Cranbrook detachment for eight years and has established a solid working relationship with most agencies in the community, both public and private. He served as a liaison between the local police detachment and Laurie Junior Secondary School for five years. Laurie was the only one of the three secondary schools in Cranbrook to have a police officer in the building on a regular basis. Constable C would bring his paperwork to the school and would work in an office area shared with the school counselors.

It was his belief that by being visible and accessible to students at this age, both he and the students would benefit by opening communication lines between the students and the R.C.M.P. He was also accessible to teachers, and was very at ease in the classroom discussing a variety of topics of interests to students of this age.

C recently accepted another position with the Cranbrook detachment in and has been replaced with another officer.

#### Interview Setting.

Constable C and I met on the evening of October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999, at my home in Cranbrook, British Columbia. We had become acquainted through the school as C volunteered to be the school liaison five years ago. I have always felt comfortable talking to C with regard to students I have been concerned about in his capacity as a police officer. I have also spoken with him about certain juveniles on the street who were

causing some problems for other children in the community.

Constable C agreed to the interview and came to my home while on duty. We discussed the purpose of my project briefly, and then proceeded with the interview. The interview proceeded, and was comfortable, relaxed, and open.

Interview # 2.

Interview key:

E: Interview question

EQ: More in-depth inquiry

C: Interviewee #2

E: Can you describe the general background similarities of those students you'd considered to be at risk in life?

C: Most of the kids I deal from a police point of view are from families in crisis, that's why I went to Laurie, to meet kids who were normal, because the kids that I deal with, I'd say 85-90%, are from dysfunctional families. Show me a kid who's having a problem with us, and I'll show you some kind of drug use. Guaranteed.

E: What would you suggest, from your own experience, these individuals need at this point in their lives? Is there any support from the families, or have they given up?

C: I don't know that they've given up, they're just at their wit's end. They suspect Johnny or Mary is using some sort of substance, but they don't understand the depth of the use. Talking to these kids is like hitting a brick wall. They ask them, "Where were you?" But all they get in reply is, "Out."

There is simply no communication. So, after a while, the parents just give up. In some cases, the parents don't care, or their lives are so busy that they just don't take an active

enough interest in their kids' lives. Single moms in particular have an even more difficult time. They have to work so their kids can have the things they need to be a 'part' of society.

EQ: Are these kids you've been seeing from the elementary level?

C: Yeah, for the most part. Teachers can usually pick out the problem kids at an early age. The teacher is usually spending a lot of time trying to control that kid, so it's the teacher who recognizes the problems, whether it's caused by sexual abuse or beatings at home, the child becomes a problem in the classroom. Every teacher knows that this kid has a reputation as a troublemaker. They expect that at each grade level.

EQ: So is anything being done to address the problem? Which agencies have you come to believe have the most potential to influence kids at this age? Is there anything that can be done at that point to address their problems? Counseling maybe?

C: Some kids don't want to go to counseling, their friends think they're weak, or they are flawed; it's an embarrassment. Take for instance the X group from years ago. They were identified early, but some of these kids see it as a game. They want to be like that. I think someone needs to reach out to these kids, but most people don't have the skills or time to talk to kids today. They don't connect with them.

E: Can you explain why you feel certain agencies might be more influential, and how so?

C: Well, when I deal with these kids, I try to make sure they're released on conditions so they will be referred to probation, and there'll be some sort of follow-up. Most parents are in favor of that. One kid, who was a real problem, we got because he breached probation. He went to jail. Directing kids to probation and 'M' is one of the few hopes I have of seeing that the kid gets the help that they need. Mediation through social services,

drug and alcohol counseling, anger management; those are some of the interventions they need to change. We try to get them to move on in a more positive direction by working with parents, and social services. We try and fix the wheel before it goes back out.

EQ: And these institutions really make an effort to try to turn these kids around?

C: Yes, but the problem is that the probation officers are so busy, they usually have something like 85 open files, so the problem is that they can only deal with the top four or five files. The kids out there who don't cause waves, but don't talk to anyone about their problems either, they just slip through the cracks. There aren't enough hands to catch them.

EQ: But, if we can save a portion, address these needs earlier on, maybe deter some from ending up in the court system, on probation, or from being kicked out of school.

C: Yeah. I think also the breakdown of the traditional family causes a lot of the problems we're seeing today. Plus, kids are falling in love early, getting married, and they're not ready to have kids of their own. There are no guidelines as to how to deal with alcohol, drugs, and other problems in life; there's no book out there telling them how to cope.

EQ: Do you think that perhaps they don't respect adults or authority, either? Maybe this is because of the way they've been treated by significant adults in their lives? Maybe that carries over to how they behave in society. They don't respect authority, or themselves. They have low self-esteem, maybe because they need love. I think lack of, or a perceived lack- of- love causes emotional problems in these kids. Their behavior is masking this anger or insecurity or hurt.

C: Um, hmm, you're probably bang on. When I go to a house party, or bush party and actually acknowledge a kid in a friendly way, they just puff up. Their friends make a big

deal over the fact that I talked to them. They seem to shine.

E: What do you believe should be the role of the school in helping solve these problems in our society?

C: Well, what I see is that the school is already overtaxed, even though school is probably the best place for these kids, society is placing too much on the schools, even though it's probably the best part of the day for many of them.

EQ: So you think the school would be a good place to start; maybe at the elementary level?

C: Yeah, and it seems the main cause of problems in kids at this age is when their parents divorce. Many of these kids have had a really hard time with this. They take responsibility for the divorce; the guilt. So rather than deal with it, they start drinking, or taking drugs, or being the tough guy at parties, wearing the long coat, but it was just a cover up for what they feel inside.

EQ: As a teacher, when asking kids what the worst part of their life was, many do say, "When my parents got divorced," or "When my dad left."

C: Uh, huh. No more Christmas together, Dad supposed to pick you up every Thursday, but he doesn't show, or he's got Gyro, or whatever. He might already be with someone else and there are more kids involved, so it's pulling them in many different directions. I'd definitely say it's the parental break-up that's the biggest cause of problems for kids at risk; most of them are from divorced families. Twenty years ago only one or two kids in a classroom came from a divorced family. Now it's well over 50%.

EQ: That's what the statistics say. Research also points to kids being negatively affected by failure in school, and it also suggests that when parents don't emphasize the

importance of getting an education, the student's chances of graduating are also reduced.

C: Yeah, I could see that.

EQ: What should the school be doing to help these students? Should educators be targeting these students in some way?

C: If you can, definitely. You have them for the best hours of the day. You also have the skills to work with these kids. The problem is that when kids go to school things are pretty good, but then they go back to the same home situation and everything goes back to where it was.

EQ: I also believe that many of these kids feel 'no hope' in their lives, so they don't see a positive future for themselves. They've had many negative messages given them, and there doesn't seem to be much reason to care about anything or anyone.

C: And as soon as these kids find themselves there, they get into drugs and stuff.

EQ: And it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. These kids then group together and it becomes a type of family, a support system.

C: Uh, huh. And whenever I have encountered a kid with problem, he also had problem with social services, so we're all spending all of this separate time with the kid in trouble, 5 or 6 hours each. If we could pull him in, and all deal with him at the same table it would more effective. Maybe you could think about that. I also sit on the Child /Youth Committee. There are a number of agencies that meet regularly, though I don't feel as though I'm really contributing, because I don't have much to add. Some of the agencies represented there are Better Babies, Probation, Victim's Services, Social Services, pretty well every social agency. But if we could do something like that to work together to help the kids at risk. I know schools have kind of taken that on. I think people are so afraid of

the confidentiality thing. I believe there shouldn't be anything confidential. If you're trying to fix the problem, then let's dump everything out and fix it. Figure out what we can do to help the kid, deal with the facts. If we worked with one kid and did that, had all these agencies meet to come up with ideas and solutions. We dealt with a certain kid you know like that, and he's been okay ever since. At least we're not seeing him, so we managed to short-circuit him. This was a kid who was out on the streets when he was ten. That's certainly part of the solution.

EQ: That's one of our problems as teachers. We don't have a lot of background on these kids, and if you aren't aware of the existing problems you can do more damage to them.

C: Yeah, I try to stay in touch with the school, to call and tell them that a certain kid was in jail overnight and that's why he's not there that day.

EQ: But as teachers, we rarely receive that information, but actually we have, as a staff, agreed to set aside that time during our monthly staff meeting to discuss kids who are in difficulty.

C: Yeah, that would be really important to you guys, especially if you really care about kids. You can then say to a kid, "Look I know you're having problems but..." you don't have to be specific about the problem.

EQ: Those are the kids probably most at risk, the ones people don't recognize are experiencing these things. There are so many ethical issues that there is a fear about sharing too much.

C: But that's how you have to deal with these issues. There's The Canadian Charter of Rights that makes it so hard to deal with the issues. We need to put it all on the table to deal with it. If the guy's having problems it's hurting him not to deal with it by sharing it.

E: Can you suggest any ways in which school might influence these students at risk in developing more positive life images. I think that's what we've talked about. Having smaller classes and talking about personal issues, and crisis, the sorts of things they experience, and they tend to be more than willing to open up.

C: I know that when I said 'Hi' to a couple of kids down at the Junior Alternate Program, I was later told they talked about that for days. They thought that was so great. So if a person takes the time to take an interest in the student, that little wee thing, if that happened more and more to them from people who cared, I think you'd see tremendous results.

EQ: You do. That small amount of recognition that says you're valued.

C: That happened with X. He read at a grade 6 level at best, so he felt really uncomfortable in the regular classroom. So when he went to the alternate school, Z gave him tapes to read along with, in just a little while he'd really picked up. He wasn't to the level he should have been, but he really felt a lot more comfortable. It's just little things that teachers have picked up and obviously he never got read bedtime stories at home. There's a family that I really felt sorry for, for the kids' sake. These kids had potential but they had such disrespect for authority. Look at what their family did, what could you expect? They blamed the school and us for the way their kids were. Some of these kinds of kids I still follow. I just don't trust them. They're loose cannons still.

EQ: Do you find many parents blame the authorities, like the police and teachers for their kid's problems?

C: No, that was a high end one. Parents usually support the police and make their kids talk to us. The ones who won't answer, or who ask for a lawyer are usually guilty of what

we're talking to them about. If you get a parent who's truly concerned, then it's easy for us to talk to them, but if you get a parent who says, "My little Johnny wouldn't do that," then we have problems. But most parents make their kids tell talk to us, with them there. When we read the Charter and the kid wants a lawyer, then you can be pretty sure they're involved.

E: Well, I think we've covered all of the questions. Thank you very much for your time and help.

### Summary of Interview #2.

Three specific concerns emerge in reviewing the interview with Constable C. All seem to point to one overriding theme: communication between parties is lacking in most areas where students at-risk in society and those at-risk of dropping out of school are concerned.

The main area where there seems to be a marked lack communication is between children at-risk and the significant adults in their lives. Most often these relationships are with family members, and for whatever reason, there is an inability to communicate, often resulting in frustration on both sides. Substance abuse by youth at-risk is also often problematic, and tends to widen the existing communication gap.

The second area perceived by C to be in need of improvement is in the sharing of ideas amongst the social agencies regarding the welfare of these youth at-risk. It is C's belief that it would be beneficial if these agencies could collectively share helping strategies, and thus responsibility, for these individuals at-risk in our community. The caseload demands on professionals in certain social service agencies often tends to be prohibitive, and as a direct consequence, these individuals are often unable to provide the

attention required by those considered the borderline youth at-risk in our community. There also exists a need for follow-up intervention strategies in many instances to help high-risk individuals gain some measure of positive control in their lives.

C also felt illiteracy was a problem with certain at-risk students. He cited the success of one student who was taught using material that was appropriate to a realistic skill level. This level was considerably lower than his chronological age would suggest. The classroom setting was also less threatening, due in part to the reduced number of students in the Alternate Junior High Program. C specifically refers to the detrimental effects of divorce on certain children, and how negatively their lives are impacted as a result. These particularly disruptive issues in these students' lives might best be addressed in the smaller class setting, not unlike the skills class, where these topics may comfortably be discussed; specifically, these are issues of family dysfunction and working toward improving communication skills in their lives. Constable C points out that many of these individuals are in need of some form of attention, which unfortunately, more often than not, is negative. He points out that most often, elementary teachers are in a position to first recognize many of these children who are having difficulty coping in the school setting. It would seem then, the place to intervene or to begin consciously addressing the needs of youth at-risk would be at this level. It would then be incumbent upon both elementary and junior high personnel to maintain an open line of communication, providing a smooth transition and support for these children into the higher grades. If the schools were able to provide this guidance, in a setting that was comfortable and non-threatening where students wanted to spend time, then perhaps a percentage of these youth at-risk might acquire certain skills that would help enable them to cope with

personal problems. They might also be more trusting and open to seeking help from those in society who could provide additional support and guidance to them in the future. These were the concerns most apparent in the interview with C.

His solutions were similar to M's in many ways. He focused on the need for improved communication amongst the agencies working with at-risk youth in the community, which might include teachers becoming involved, and thus more vocal in helping provide solutions and support for the students we are seeing in the school system today.

Constable C also recognizes the need to realistically address the student's current academic level in order to increase their literacy skills, and thus their ability to cope with the many complex issues in their lives. Finally, he too felt it important that we focus on the positive attributes these children already possess, with the ultimate goal being that each individual will be encouraged to work toward achieving a measure of success in his/her life.

## CHAPTER 4: Review of the Literature

As a teacher with some experience working at the junior high level, I have become, through experience and professional development, more familiar and aware of students perceived to be at-risk of dropping out of school.

In reviewing literature on this subject, I hope to justify the importance, and thus the need to offer classes in English skill development at the junior high level. These classes would be designed specifically to aid those students at-risk of dropping out of school in improving both communication and life skills. Another important reason to offer a course such as this to these particular students was to address certain societal concerns which research indicates would likely improve with education.

The main factors this researcher found most influenced students at-risk of dropping out of school included, familial lifestyles, general school experiences, the school environment itself, and socioeconomic pressure.

Statistics Canada collected data on demographics and background, school experience, post-school experience, post-school labor market experience, and other outcomes, along with whether respondents were in school, had graduated, or had left before graduating (leavers). Leavers were more likely to come from single and no-parent families, from families who did not think high school completion was very important, and from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Employment and Immigration Canada and Statistics Canada, 1990).

High school departure was related to intervening variables such as school experiences, academic performance, employment during school, and deviant behaviors.

Leavers were more likely than graduates to report that they did not enjoy school, to express dissatisfaction with courses and rules, to have problems with teachers, to not participate in extracurricular activities, to participate less in classes, to have friends not attending any school, and to skip classes. The consequences of high school completion versus non-completion were examined in terms of labor force outcomes and broader quality of life issues like literacy and lifestyles. More leavers than graduates took no further education or training, worked in blue-collar occupations and service jobs, worked long weekly hours, had low incomes and were more dependent on unemployment insurance, social assistance, and family allowances (CERA, Centre for Educational Research and Assessment, 1996).

In *School Dropouts: New information about an old problem*, Schwartz (1995), states that according to research conducted by The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education, “Dropouts comprise nearly half the heads of households on welfare, and a similar percentage of the prison population” (p. 2). Statistics and longitudinal studies were the sources of the information analyzed by researchers at the Educational Testing Center (ETS) in New York City (Schwartz, 1995).

Research into understanding and addressing *at-risk* and *drop-out* students is abundant and consistent in its findings in both Canada and the United States, reflecting the reasons as stated earlier in this literature review. The focus of the review will be on recognizing, understanding, and helping at-risk students who have not mastered the reading and writing skills required to be successful at their current grade level. Though students with pronounced disabilities could fit this description, those students referred to in this study and future skills classes are those with less obvious handicaps; those

students who do not fall under the usual categories of disability and thus do not qualify for individual funding for academic support.

Current programs in operation at both the elementary and secondary levels report positive results in helping students experience success in the school setting. These are programs operating mainly in the United States, examples being COMET (Children of Many Educational Talents) for middle school students, and STAR (Success Through Academic Readiness) for students in high school, both operating successfully in New York City. STAR and COMET claim that 100% of their students remain in school, and that 96% go on to post secondary education. Unfortunately, these programs tend to be few and far between. According to Schwartz (1995), statistics indicate there is an increasing need to address the personal and social cost of dropping out of school. Concern has been voiced by some researchers that currently more programs are in place for those who quit school, encouraging them to return when they are older, than programs designed to aid students in remaining in the public system.

This literature review focuses on recognizing potential at-risk students, and how we might, as educators, address many of the concerns in the public school system by making a concerted effort to accommodate these at risk individuals and thus encourage them to stay in school and graduate.

My working hypothesis is that English skills courses designed to increase the life and communications skills of these under-performing students, offered at the junior high level, will provide an aid to those students who meet some, if not all of the criteria of being at-risk for the reasons outlined in the following research.

As previously mentioned, research has been consistent in its findings as to the reasons a certain percentage of students do not graduate from high school. The first general area of research indicates that familial life factors often strongly contribute to influencing a student's educational commitment. "These factors include family structure, marital status, and family responsibilities: parents' education and occupation; geographic location (urban or rural); cultural characteristics such as language and immigration status; and whether or not they have physical disabilities" (Gilbert, Barr, Clark, Blue, & Sunter, 1993, p. 19).

This national survey compared school leavers and high school graduates 18 to 20 years of age in Canada. Research indicates that family provides a stable environment for students, which in turn promotes learning. "And, indeed, the family situations of leavers and graduates differed sharply" (Gilbert et al., 1993, p. 24). Statistically, the chances a student will drop out increase if the student comes from a single parent home (25%), or if they live on their own (13%). Research also supports the finding that parental attitudes toward schooling, levels of education, and occupations were all associated with the likelihood that students would leave school before graduating (Gilbert et al., 1993).

In another study, *Qualitative Research on School Leavers, Summary Final Report* (Employment and Immigration Canada and Statistics Canada, 1990), school dropouts described home situations in which parents admonished them to do better in school, but could not assist them when they did not understand their assignments. Other drop-outs cited parental apathy toward their children's schooling as they had their own problems to cope with. Interestingly, there was often a family history of leaving school, and many of

the students questioned indicated they had brothers or sisters who had also dropped out of school.

A study undertaken by the Ontario Research Council, titled *Give Them a Reason to Stay* (Beauchemin, 1989), also cites similar predictors as to those students at risk beyond the influence of school. The study drew heavily from a research study on school retention conducted for the Ontario Ministry of Education. The findings were integrated with findings from other Canadian and American studies to sketch a profile of the school dropout and consider strategies to improve retention. “Virtually every study on school leaving has shown that dropouts are more likely to come from lower class homes with parents of less than post-secondary education and from broken homes, with single parents” (p. 8).

Another study also points to the relevancy of socioeconomic factors as powerful influences on a student’s decision to leave school, often more than their lack of actual academic ability. One specific group of dropout students related their particularly disadvantaged lifestyle as one of alcohol, drug, or sexual abuse. These youths had been dealing with these problems virtually all of their lives, and as a group, described school problems beginning very early (Employment and Immigration Canada and Statistics Canada, 1990). The report described findings from a study of students’ decisions to drop out of school before obtaining their high school diplomas.

The second general area of concern researchers studied was that of the school environment itself, and how it was not conducive to encouraging these at-risk students to complete their education. According to Tanner (1990), these adolescents object to the institutional means (traditional school setting) of achieving dominant success goals and,

by and large, are less tolerant of high school than are other adolescents.

Another common concern of students interviewed in the Tanner study claimed the process of being streamed, or labeled, (thus setting them apart from the mainstream students) strongly affected their attitude toward school. These particular students were often already dealing with the stigma of being socially or economically disadvantaged, and thus felt even less connection to the school.

The responsibility for encouraging marginal students to leave or stay in school fell school counselors. Previous research in the sociology of education has shown how schools categorize and process students, thereby preparing them for different occupational futures; usually the focus is upon the streaming or tracking system. It is important therefore to examine the role of school counselors. Researchers investigate the ways in which counselors construct categories of good and bad students and what the consequences are of the confirmation of those labels. We can extend this argument by suggesting that counselors help to filter poorly committed students out of the high school (Tanner, 1990, p. 5).

Tanner's research studied the attitudes and behaviors of 162 male and female high school dropouts in Edmonton, Alberta. The author found the overall picture is clear enough: school-based reasons are the most important self-reported explanation of dropping-out for all groups of adolescents. Neither gender nor class background modified this rank ordering, though he did find that more females than males (27 percent compared with 15 percent) cited the quality of family relationship as a reason for leaving.

Amy Wells, author of *Middle School Education – The Critical Link in Dropout Prevention* found in her research of middle schools that adolescents placed in lower

tracks became locked into dull, repetitive instructional programs, which led at best to minimal competencies. “Moreover, students who have difficulty in just one subject area often end up in the lower track for all their classes, preventing them from becoming high achievers in areas in which they excelled in elementary school” (Wells, 1989, p. 2).

Counselors at the junior and senior high school levels are often overwhelmed with their responsibilities in the administrative areas and in teaching their assigned classes. They often find student problems must be put on hold while they complete these tasks. In our district, there are two full-time elementary counselors who share an eight-school workload, which, having spoken to them both, can be daunting. One counselor recently resigned her position and returned to the classroom.

Research is similar in both American and Canadian studies in regard to student-identified feelings regarding the school environment itself. Commonly,

The process usually begins with a lack of involvement in school activities and a lack of friends at school. In some cases this represents a gradual withdrawal from participation in activities at school. In other cases, it represents a failure to become integrated and involved in school activities (E.A.I.S.C., 1990, p. 3).

According to the study by the Ontario Education Research Council, the single most outstanding feature of a dropout is a history of failure at school. The research paper goes on to say that many authors feel that dissatisfaction with, and dislike of school lead to poor performance (Beauchemin, 1989).

It is my belief that we see significant numbers of these students who have been labeled early on as slow learners or discipline problems. Often this labeling occurs at the elementary level and continues throughout the individual’s school career.

High school dropouts interviewed by Goldfarb said they felt they had been stereotyped or labeled at an early grade as slow on the basis of dress, appearance, behavior or socioeconomic background. This study found that one third of the students had problems in mathematics and/or English (Beauchemin, 1989, p. 23).

Beauchemin suggests that the elementary school setting is where we must begin to address the academic needs of the student at risk in order to bridge the grade 8/9 gap, yet there are too few examples of these types of programs in our schools. These are the children I am targeting with the English Skills Program. They should not be streamed, but there should be a recommendation from the elementary level that they take the English skills course to strengthen their reading and writing skills. They receive regular English credit, thereby not stigmatizing or limiting them from continuing in the academic stream in higher grade levels.

In referring again to the research paper by the Ontario Educational Research Council, a major dilemma for educators dealing with high risk students at the elementary level is in regard to non-promotion of students.

Being held back even one grade increases the risk of dropping out by 40 to 50%. But if children are not held back, they will not develop the skills to make use of educational opportunities in later grades and, frustrated, will probably drop out (Beauchemin, 1989, p. 22).

Students held back one or more years are much more likely to leave school before graduating. Being retained one grade increases a student's chances of dropping out by 40-50 percent; those retained two grades have a 90 percent of dropping out (Wells, 1989, p. 2).

The English Skills program would provide an English credit option for some students, or an alternative for students given the choice of either repeating a failed same grade English course, or of taking the skills class. Weak skill levels are a large part of the reason many students fail to complete or submit assigned work. These are the students whose needs might well be served by this type of course offering; it would provide a viable alternative to holding them back academically and socially this course might possibly help build self-esteem levels in these often already disadvantaged individuals.

A common concern voiced by dropout students in the literature was the perception that they were pressured more often than not, by the school system itself, to leave.

Some respondents also made it clear that their decision to leave school was not entirely a voluntary one – that rather than dropping out of school, they felt that they had, in fact been kicked out. Usually this was because of their attendance record (Tanner, 1990, p. 5).

In the report *Qualitative Research on School Leavers* (Employment and Immigration Canada and Statistics Canada, 1990), participants in the research reported feeling “... a lack of support for remaining in school.” (p. 9). In some cases they felt a lack of help or assistance when they had problems with school or school work. Some also felt their teachers were not approachable, though many had not actually gone to teachers for assistance; those who did reported mixed results. In addition to reporting a lack of support for remaining in school, some participants described a push to leave school. In particular, students who had behavioral or drug problems at school described schools as wanting them out and those in authority in the schools had then pushed for repeated suspensions, eventually leading to expulsion. Students whose appearance or manner of

dress was unusual frequently reported feeling that they were discriminated against and were pushed out of school because teachers felt they set a poor example, or were perceived as troublemakers. This was especially true in non-metropolitan areas (E.A.I.C.A.S.C. 1990).

We see these students, not in large numbers, but often enough to need to address this concern. Having taught a number of these students, it is my belief that some later become, if they are not already, what is known in the juvenile court system as low-risk offenders. Having had experience dealing with these students in and out of the school system, I have found that they are often repeat offenders who tend to be one of society's pervasive concerns. The reason, I believe, is because these individuals do not 'fit' into our current school system. Schools do not, for the most part, provide programs, including those in the English skills area, to these students, and often limited assistance is available to this small percentage of the school population. Ironically, this small percentage of our population often costs much in societal ills. This is why teachers dedicated to helping these students must be prepared to address the entire student's welfare.

Those teachers not teaching these specific programs should still have a working knowledge of how to recognize these youth at-risk, which ultimately would help them as educators work with these students more successfully in the regular classroom. Professional development might be one solution to aid teachers to become more aware of recognizing, understanding, supporting, and helping direct these students to those who can provide realistic systems of support. Another concern of relevance vocalized by dropouts was that courses did not interest them, and more specifically, were not addressing their needs, either present or future (E.A.I.C.A.S.C., 1990).

The priority that our respondents place upon vocational aspects of education is, we venture to suggest, an important reason why they dislike school: it is not vocational enough! Only 19% of our respondents felt that their schooling had helped them look for work (Tanner, 1990, p. 14).

English skills programs should be designed to address the needs of these students.

This means the issues and skills covered should be relevant and interesting enough to motivate the student to attend school. Rules and regulations must also be examined as to their inflexibility. Most research also found that many students had problems dealing with the rigidity of the school rules, as well as with authority in general.

Bhareman and Kopp (1989) found that students are less likely to leave school when they work with teachers who are flexible, positive, creative, and person-centered rather than rule-oriented. Effective teachers should also maintain high expectations for all of their students and show they care about their students' success (Wells, 1989, p. 3).

The final concern reviewed in the literature was the perception by many students who had dropped out that teachers simply did not care. Interestingly, most of these students had not actually approached the teacher for help, but had assumed they would not receive it. As Wells points out in her study of middle-class schools, the setting allows for more teacher expertise in a particular subject area, but it also leads to weaker teacher-student relationships as teachers try to deal with a very large number of students throughout the day. She also points out that teachers have limited time to contact parents or discuss student concerns with colleagues.

These issues and themes were the most pervasive I discovered in the research

literature, and the research is consistent regarding the importance of educating teachers to recognize and address the needs of students at-risk. At the junior high level, we see these students at a critical time in their schooling, and as Schwartz (1995) reports in her research paper, nearly two-thirds of the dropouts leave before the tenth grade, twenty percent leave by the eighth grade, and three percent do not even complete the fourth grade. According to these statistics, the majority of students tend to be dropping out at the junior high level. From the research it is clear there is a need for programs designed to meet the emotional and intellectual needs of these students, as well as a guidance /mentoring programs to help them in their career choices.

The decision about whether to program for the individuals or for groups depends on the perceived location of the problem. Is it with the individual child; is it in the child's environment; or is it in the teaching? If the problem is with the child, do we try to diagnose and treat it? Or do we simply sit and wait until the child is ready for learning? If the problem is in the environment, do we need to offer general enrichment or to teach specific school-related skills or perhaps both? If the problem is in the teaching, is it our responsibility to make sure that students master the basic skills, achieve specific outcomes? Or have we fulfilled our responsibility if we provide learning opportunities without regard to the level of skill mastery that children attain? The statistics on dropouts indicate that current approaches are not reaching all the children who need help. These statistics suggest that if we are going to make any significant difference to the dropout rate we are going to have to look for new approaches. School must offer students a variety of potential success experiences, curricular and extracurricular, and the variety of

job opportunities that do not require post-secondary education have to be acknowledged (Beauchemin, 1989).

The English Skills course designed for the grade nines focuses on teaching basic English grammatical skills, dealing with life themes, and drawing out each student's personal interests and feelings, using lesson plans with those goals in mind. The purpose of this program is to help each student achieve success by modifying the regular curricular objectives in a way that addresses the student's more immediate academic, social, and emotional needs.

Modified math courses have been offered for a number of years to assist students in strengthening their math skills prior to moving on to more difficult grade levels; why is the same modification not offered to strengthen English skills?

## CHAPTER 5: English Skills Nine Course Overview

### Introduction to the Skills Course

This is the first study undertaken in our school setting to examine the effectiveness of an English skills class designed specifically to help junior high students perceived to be at risk of failing in the regular English program. It is hoped this course will aid in developing communication skills which may then help these individuals achieve success in other areas of the curriculum as well.

The ultimate goal of the course is to encourage students believed to be at-risk of dropping out of school to stay in the public system to complete their high school education.

The purpose of this English skills pilot program is to aid in improving the eventual, more permanent structure of the program. The course is founded on the need to have such a course as an integral, regular component of the curriculum/I.R.P.s at the junior high level.

### English Skills Course Outline

This course is designed to increase student English skills, with the focus on the basics of reading, writing, spelling, and verbal communication. The course will follow the educational objectives prescribed by the Ministry of Education, while providing increased emphasis on communication skill development. This program is designed specifically for students who will benefit from more intensive instruction and emphasis in the aforementioned areas. Class size will be limited in order to promote more effective teaching/learning conditions.

A student must be recommended for this course by a previous language arts teacher, and the student, upon successful completion of the program, will be given credit for regular English 9, with a recommendation for future study in the English program.

Teaching / learning course objectives:

- Spelling strategies
- Mechanics of writing and editing skills
- Exploration of a variety of writing styles and sentence structure
- Development of thinking and oral skills through issue based discussion
- Career interest studies through library research skill development (as it relates to Career and Personal Planning)
- Independent novel studies; reading skill improvement
- Response journal writing; thought development
- Novel and short story studies; understanding of thematic development
- Poetry study and composition; reflective and creative skill development
- Media studies; understanding the impact of media sources

#### Alternative Forms of Course Evaluation

It is imperative there be a combination of both qualitative and quantitative forms of evaluation used when teaching a skills class. Students considered at-risk must be assessed in a way that incorporates evaluation of both personal and academic growth on an individual basis. The teacher must adjust personal, preconceived ideas of grade success, and consider the growth of each student based on his/her individual effort. The teacher should use some form to record and monitor the following non-academic expectations: preparedness, promptness, being respectful, participation, and effort. In this study, the

researcher used journal writing to record day to day events. In this way, improvements could be charted and areas in need of improvement focused upon. The students are also graded on the basis of assigned work and quizzes in order that the course meet I.R.P. requirements of the grade level. The teacher may assist the students in these tasks to a greater degree than he/she would normally do in a regular English class. Quizzes and assignments might also be modified to a degree, depending upon individual student ability.

English Nine Learning Outcomes and Objectives: English Nine British Columbia  
Ministry of Education Prescribed Learning Outcomes

These outcomes and objectives are used in the English Skills Nine course and are those recommended by the British Columbia Ministry of Education as well as by the English Language Arts in Western Canada:

- The student will use grammatically correct language when writing and speaking
- The student will demonstrate an understanding of the main ideas, events, or themes of a variety of novels, stories, poetry, and other print material, and electronic media
- The student will organize details and information about material they have read, heard, or viewed using a variety of written or graphic forms
- The student will develop repertoires of skills and strategies to use to anticipate, predict, and confirm meaning while reading, viewing, and listening
- The student will identify and explain connections between what he/she reads, hears, and views, and his/her personal ideas and beliefs
- The student will monitor his/her own work for correctness of spelling and punctuation

- The student will use language to help establish and maintain relationships within the school and community, to collaborate to get things done, and to value and support others
- The student will create a variety of personal, literary, technical, and academic communications, including poems, stories and personal essays
- The student will employ a variety of effective processes and strategies, including the use of electronic technology, to generate, gather, and organize information and ideas
- The student will use language to interact and collaborate with others to explore ideas and to accomplish goals
- The student will evaluate and modify his/her own roles in group interactions in a variety of contexts
- The student will draw reasoned conclusions from information found in various written, spoken, or visual communications and defend his/her conclusions rationally
- The student will be able to explain how mass media can influence social attitudes, self-perceptions, and lifestyles
- The student will use language to help establish and maintain relationships within the school and community, to collaborate to get things done, and to value and support others
- The student will apply his/her knowledge of the conventions of language and use appropriate vocabulary to talk about them.

### Procedure

The students in the English skills course are taught in a setting where the atmosphere is much less institutionally restricted, and where class size is limited in number to twenty per class. Ministry IRPs are modified to a degree, mainly in terms of the quantity of material covered. This is a result of the increased emphasis and time spent on teaching

and improving English skills.

The students in the course are required to meet certain academic criteria. This would aid in preventing misunderstanding regarding the purpose and intent of the program.

Data collection is in the form of journaling by both the teacher and students, a student questionnaire, and 30-second updates. The 30 second updates have been locally developed at our school in order for teachers and counselors to gain immediate feedback regarding the attitude, effort, and achievement of a particular student in other curricular areas.

## CHAPTER 6: Course Units, Implementation, and Lived Experience

### Overview of Course Units

The course consisted of three main thematic units, covering one semester of approximately 84 class periods. During some Friday classes, films were shown that directly related to the topics being studied, or for entertainment as a bonus. Other unstructured days were spent in discussion where students could voice their opinions on relevant issues. This unstructured time for discussion or films was used as a motivational tool to help encourage students to meet classroom expectations.

These expectations included attending class regularly, being on time and prepared, completing and submitting work, and acting appropriately at all times. These expectations varied in degree depending on the individual student, but were used as guidelines.

With few exceptions, each class focused on daily communication skill development through practicing the mechanics of reading, writing, and issue-based discussion.

### Unit One: Who am I ?

This unit included a total of 30 lessons.

Daily procedure:

Every class, throughout the semester, will begin with sustained silent reading. The ongoing goals are to improve each student's level of reading ability, to promote an interest in literature, and to use English skills to summarize their choice of silent reading book into a novel report.

After twenty minutes of individual reading, there will be a mini-lesson in English skill

development. The skills taught will reflect those for that grade level, but will incorporate resources appropriate to the skill level being taught. The skills focused on would include capitalization, commas, quotations, spelling, and a variety of others, depending on the students' assessed needs.

The areas of study covered in the skills class are the same as those of the regular English nine course. These areas of in-depth study include poetry, short stories, and a novel and film study and analysis. An overview of each area follows.

Poetry component:

The study of a variety of poetic forms, poetic devices, and poems with an emphasis on specific themes. Each student will create an individual poetry book using seven different styles of poems with the focus being on personal reflection.

Short story component:

The study of short stories will encompass a variety of themes chosen according to skill level, literary relevance, and interest factor based on class composition. Each student will complete a short story chart encompassing the main parts of each short story studied, including setting, protagonist, antagonist, climax, and theme.

Novel component / CAPP 9 (Career and Personal Planning: Abuse):

The teacher reads a portion of the novel *A Child Called "It"* (Pelzer, 1993) daily to the class, and students respond through discussion and with response journal writing. The class will also examine and discuss issues in relation to bullying, which will encompass article studies, written responses to questions and journal topics, and the discussion of various scenarios and personal experiences.

Values as they relate to students of this age group will comprise the final section. The class will identify teenage values and beliefs. This information will be graphed, based upon personal value preferences.

Unit evaluation:

The evaluation of this unit is based on a variety of criteria. Effort is the most valued of the criteria and should be discussed with the class on the first day, as part of the course expectations. Students working up to their ability on assignments, completing and submitting these assignments, listening honestly, behaving reasonably, attending class on time, and being prepared are the other criteria used to evaluate the progress of each student in the program.

#### Unit Two: Media and Popular Culture.

This unit will include a total of 20 lessons.

This unit focuses on the impact the various forms of media have on society, and in particular on teens. The all-encompassing objective is to help students learn the skills to deconstruct the various media they encounter daily.

Lesson topics:

- Key concepts of mass media and popular culture
- What makes culture popular?
- Your television viewing habits
- Why is it on television?
- Deconstructing the most popular shows: their choices
- The impact of celebrities in our lives
- Commercials and other advertising (deconstruction skills)
- Understanding violence in the media

- The real impact of violence in life

The media/popular culture unit lends itself to a great deal of discussion participation. The incentive to participate comes from the familiarity students feel with the topics discussed and issues examined.

Unit evaluation:

Evaluation of this unit is based on the degree of student participation during discussions, the quality of those class discussions, the courtesy exhibited by students during those discussions, the completion and quality of classroom assignments, attendance, and a final fill in the blanks quiz based on learned media terminology. An additional indicator of student understanding of the concepts taught becomes apparent when individual students comment on their new understanding of the codes and conventions presented in the different forms of media.

### Unit three: Real life and Where I'm Going.

This unit will include a total of 20 lessons.

Lesson topics:

- Wolves: research and field trip – community interaction/experience, and personal interest
- Court procedure: study, discussion, and field trip – community interaction/experience, and personal interest
- Career studies: individual research and written presentation

The final unit of the course will focus on hands on study and future career interest areas for each student. The students will spend time in the community, visiting a farm where wolves are raised, and spending time at the local courthouse observing the proceedings (both of which are field trips able to be undertaken). The final section of the

unit will have students researching all aspects of a realistic career of their choice. This information will be researched in the school library using print material available from a variety of post secondary institutions and career information accessed through the use of the internet. Each student will compile and present their research to the rest of the class.

Unit evaluation:

Evaluation will be based on student behavior in out-of-school settings, as well as through written work in the form of journal responses.

The degree to which each student responds to the opportunity to research realistic career choices and the future requirements demanded of those career choices.

The students will also be given the opportunity to present their researched information, and in this way, share their future hopes with their classmates. In addition, these career research projects will be submitted for evaluation.

#### Course Implementation / Lived Experience.

In any relationship, individuals must often cautiously feel their way to create a comfort zone. This effort is very important when establishing a working relationship with students in the classroom. For the most part, expectations of the general student population are clear at the junior high level. What I have discovered in working with the skills students however, is that the relationship forged with them is somewhat different from that of regular English classes. The feeling I experienced was that of being a parent/mentor. There is a deeper element of trust established between the teacher and the individual students, as well as a group connection that does not seem to exist in the regular classroom setting. This may be due in part to the limitation in class size, but it also seems to be a result of the sharing/intimacy that is a part of the class dynamic.

It is imperative to have limited numbers of students in the skills program, thus providing increased opportunity for each student to find a voice in the classroom. It is incumbent upon the teacher to help each student find that voice without fear of being belittled or ignored. The teacher must encourage all students, most often the quiet ones, to speak up, and must also diplomatically teach the more vocal individuals to exercise restraint. My level of frustration with the latter type of student is evident in a number of my journal entries. One cannot confront these students in a way that is seen as a challenge or attack. This tends to make this type of situation much worse, and nothing is resolved. I learned this early on. Each student must be treated as an individual and the methods used to work with each student vary. I have learned the value of patience in working with these students, as well, I have learned not to take everything personally.

The students in the English skills class need positive feedback on a regular basis, as well as a great deal of direction in order to complete assigned tasks. Complimenting students on the smallest successes helps motivate them to continue to stay focused and complete their work. Marks are also important to these students, and they thrive when they are doing well. I then made sure there were enough smaller assignments they could manage in order to achieve a good mark. I also made a point of phoning all of their parents/guardians to talk to them about how well their student was doing in my class. This was a very positive form of reinforcement, and thus I would highly recommend taking the time to make these calls.

Providing many different forms of rewards for success also works as an incentive. A supply of candy and the possibility of watching movies on alternating Fridays were the incentives I used to encourage students to complete their work in class and to behave appropriately. These students, as previously mentioned, are also motivated by marks. I

discovered the positive effects of marking student work using written commentary, which allowed for rewrites with corrections, and in tutoring individual students. The results were made apparent in the quality of work submitted, and in that they did complete and submit these assignments. Second and third chances for these individuals are very important.

It became apparent early on, as recorded in several journal entries, that being highly organized was an important part of teaching a skills class. There must be a limited amount of student free time, as several students used this as an excuse to move around the classroom, usually over to where I had originally moved them from, to visit and cause a disturbance. This too eventually became a behavior incentive. If the student completed the assigned work, and behaved reasonably, I would allow him to move somewhere he preferred to sit on the following day. As the term progressed, these individuals became more responsible and much better behaved. Classroom seating was not the issue it had been at the beginning of the term. Even considering the reduced number of students in the class, originally it was still difficult to isolate certain individuals who caused a great deal of commotion in the class. Being mainly a class of boys, this occasionally had the potential to escalate into a physical 'see who is stronger and tougher' situation. They were not being 'bad,' they were just showing off.

A significant number of these students also tend to lose their focus quite easily, and are off task if given the freedom to work at their own pace. I learned this early on as well. They are not like a regular class of English students, where you teach a lesson and students then work individually on the assignment over a period of time. Tasks must be very specific, short in duration, with the directions, steps, and expectations explained clearly and concisely.

I also found that it was very important to begin the class focused on a quiet activity, like individual, sustained, silent reading. This relaxed them and helped provide a smooth transition into the grammar portions of the lesson plan which required them all to focus on what was being taught.

It was also apparent in my early journal entries that I was very concerned about the lack of self-discipline the majority of the students exhibited, and as they were mainly teenage boys, they tested me by ignoring my requests for them to settle down.

“This group needs close supervision as a number of them are quite immature; I can see I’ll be focusing on behavior modification” (Journal, September 7, 1999).

“Hard settling them down, very difficult – no focus – sent two out into the hall – asked them to transfer somewhere they might be happier. Several other students have problems that I, as a classroom teacher, simply am not trained to address. These individuals need more help than I can give them. I must recognize personal limitations and consequently my inability to deal with certain students” (Journal, September 8, 1999).

Two weeks into the class, the one boy who was extremely disruptive and unmanageable was suspended for drug use. While he was gone, the class began to improve; however, as soon as he returned, things began to fall apart. He would yell across the room, swear at people, and take things from them without asking. I didn’t know what to do, and when I spoke to the student services teacher, she told me it was only a matter of time and he’d be gone. Sure enough, he was permanently suspended only days later. I found out he had, to this point, a very tragic life, and his behavior in general was very anti-social. I realized that I actually feared him while he was in the class, and worried about what he might do if he were to become upset. This is the type of student one must

be careful of embracing into the skills class. It must not become a 'dumping ground' for those students whose behavior precludes them from being in the regular classroom. The students who remained in the program were individuals whose overall communication skills were weak. These students remaining in the course required a more focused, one-on-one effort be placed on helping them improve in these areas.

Two other students also posed problems in the class. They were often absent, and when they were present, one did nothing, and the other was very vocal and disruptive. This was not done in a negative way, but she occupied much of my time and attention with her neediness for attention. These students attended sporadically for about six weeks and then withdrew. One quit school completely, and the other moved to another town. Once those students were no longer in the class, the atmosphere changed considerably. I'd felt that had those students continued to attend class, even sporadically, there was a possibility we could have gotten through to them at some level. The student who was still living in the area since returned to our school, but attends only in the special needs classroom. I am hopeful the other student will attempt to return to school in the town she moved to.

The next concern was with a student who was determined to get out of my class and return to the special needs room. He was very vocal about how he would quit school before he'd stay in my class. We were patient and by working one on one with him, encouraging him each step of the way, it soon became apparent that he was fearful of failing in front of his peers. He eventually became more comfortable and worked very hard to achieve success. Mrs. F, the childcare worker, began reading a novel he had chosen aloud to him up in the library during silent reading time. They began by reading *The Outsiders* each day for twenty minutes, and went on to read two other S. E. Hinton

novels as a result of his interest in the subject matter. He required help to do his book reports, but he completed both assignments. This boy turned out to be one of our greatest successes.

Over the course of the first month, daily journal entries almost regularly mentioned the problem with attendance and late occurrences. I was also feeling mentally stressed, mainly due to the seemingly diverse academic levels of the students in the class. I wrote,

“It seems it is always the same students contributing to class discussions, while others are just disruptive and are making no effort to be a part of the group. They seem to be interested in what is being studied, but cannot seem to work independently” (Journal, September 23, 1999).

I found that by discussing my concerns with them, and allowing them to respond through discussion, we resolved the issues. I would explain how I felt about what was happening and how I planned to resolve the problem. I began by rearranging the seating plan so that certain students were no longer able to carry on private conversations with the individuals they chose to buddy up with. They didn't like this, but I assured them, if things improved, they could eventually move back. I also explained how I felt it was important they not miss class, as we would always be covering something important and relevant. I pointed out that it was their responsibility to see me to catch up on missed work, and if they were absent for a longer periods of time, they should contact me and have work sent home. This happened with four students, and they did complete the work at home. Though there were still problems with certain students' levels of maturity, these became less pronounced as time went on, and they all seemed to try harder to work independently in class.

My other concern with the diverse academic levels of the students was resolved within the first month when I asked the student services teacher for help. She suggested administering a TOWL (Test of Written Language) to the class, and she then analyzed the results. The test revealed that all of the students in the class were academically in the lower range of the midpoint for their age group. In reading the journal entry on the day I got the results back, I wrote, "Discussed the general test results with the class, as they had been hounding me about them. I told them they had all done quite well, and the results indicated there was no reason they couldn't learn everything we were going to cover in class, and that it was virtually the same work the other English 9 classes covered. They were very happy to hear about the results. I think it is the need to hear that they are capable of being successful. Even one boy who originally felt he was too advanced for the class, no longer wishes to transfer to a regular English class" (Journal, October 12, 1999). At this point I really felt I was beginning to make headway, and I was really enjoying them as a class.

It is very important that the resources used in this course interest students at this age. One must also focus on themes they can relate to and clearly understand.

These students are all very different, for very different reasons, but they have the ability to achieve success if given the opportunity. It is imperative that time is spent discussing issues. Many valuable skills are learned, and self-confidence in one's ability to speak in front of others improves. Every student is encouraged to share his/her ideas, and all students are encouraged to partake in the discussions. Students open up over time, and those who monopolize and bully in the discussions are reasoned with in a way that allows them the opportunity to alter their own behavior in a positive way. This negotiation affords each student a safe place to share his/her experiences and ideas. The topics

covered in the class were extensive, and almost regularly, every student contributed to the discussion at some point. When it was required they write a journal response to the topic discussed, all students completed and submitted their work. This led me to believe that issues covered were relevant and promoted individual thought. I was regularly pleased that they did complete and submit their assignments, with a few exceptions. The book report tended to be the stumbling block for a few of the students. I was not sure if this was a result of lack of interest in the book chosen by the individual, or a lack of skill required to read the book. These same students were always forgetting to bring their novels to class, but seemed to remember to bring their special interest magazines. This difficulty with motivation in regard to reading a novel is an area I would re-examine in future. Perhaps these individuals could be allowed to do one report on their special interest magazines.

I consider myself to be flexible and able to recognize a teachable moment when it arises. There was an incident during the term where one boy in the class was 'beaten up' by a group of boys from the school. He was not badly hurt physically, but was quite emotionally upset. We discussed the incident as several students were called to the office one by one to relate their version of the story. One student then told the class of his recent in-school suspension (the student is isolated in a small room in school for the day) for talking back to a teacher who accused him of something he did not do – he felt the teacher was not listening to him, and that he had been unjustly accused, so he swore at the teacher.

At this point it became the golden opportunity to talk about appropriate behavior, and how one person feels when they are 'bullied' by others. The teacher must be prepared to teach in this fashion, as it is at times like these that 'teachable moments' present

themselves. Other students in the class related their various experiences and I think it became somewhat cathartic for several relating their experiences.

There were many days when I felt we'd really experienced something special in class, and Mrs. F and I would excitedly talk about what happened. The days where I felt frustrated were the ones where there was not enough structure to keep certain students on task, and the class was unproductive. Mrs. F and I would talk on those days about what I could have done differently, and I would still feel as though something positive came out of the lesson, if only for me.

I could continue to write about our experiences, both the high and low points of the class, but what I recorded most often in my journal entries were the good feelings I had teaching this class. In addition, the responses I received on the Class Response Questionnaire (Appendix B) by the students were all positive, in that the students chose either *agree* or *strongly agree* in answering all four questions. This surprised me as I didn't expect such an overwhelmingly positive response. Students have since also indicated that they wish to enroll in the English Skills 10 class if it is offered.

It is my hope as an educator that the students who shared this class with me will recall some of those experiences and feelings and learning from our time together; I know I will.

## CHAPTER 7: Reflections

### Reflections

Teaching a class of junior high students who do not represent the norm and are challenging to work with is not a choice every teacher would make. It is, however, very rewarding if undertaken with the understanding that each child will grow if given the right environment and stimulation. These students require that a teacher teach in a way that always emphasizes the positive, which means giving second and third chances on a regular basis. It is a task that has been very rewarding for me, and I would choose to work with these students at any time.

The classroom environment is more relaxed than the norm, allowing for an openness that is not common to most other classroom settings. Behavior expectations are similar to those of the regular classroom, but the academic expectations vary from student to student, which means the teacher must always make use of reflection in determining the immediate and future goals for each individual in the class. These are individuals who need someone to find the time to care a little more about each of them. In undertaking to teach this type of class, one should be prepared to become a personal mentor to a degree, as well as a classroom teacher.

Initially, I was quite upset by the class composition. These were not the students we, as an English department, had targeted for the skills class. Later, we became aware that the administrators had not hand-timetabled the requested students into the course. They claimed they were unable to do so, and the students who ended up in the class were mainly coded as mild 'behavior' problem students, or they were from the 'special needs'

classroom and were being integrated into the English classes.

My first impression of the class was not a positive one. I went to see the administrators immediately following the first day to request I receive a fulltime childcare worker. They said they would see what they could do, and within the week, (I was persistent), I was assigned an experienced childcare worker who became my right hand. This type of support became integral to the success of the skills class.

While teaching this class, there were days when I became frustrated with individual behavior, as one does with students in the 'regular' classroom. After several experiences in dealing with undesirable individual behavior, I quickly came to realize that it was important to avoid becoming confrontational. I would pause to consider how far that student had come (reflection), and would then pleasantly request the student cease doing whatever it was he or she were doing. If he or she continued to behave badly, I would go over to them, put my hand on their shoulder, and repeat my original request. This worked effectively to diffuse these situations.

The importance of recognizing and rewarding each student's success cannot be understated. I used verbal and written commentary, candy, and I would reward them with a movie every other Friday if they worked hard, completed and submitted their work, and met the classroom expectations. I also treated them with respect and would extend deadlines for their work. I did not deduct late marks, but let them know I preferred they hand in assignments on time, and the reasons for that expectation. The students I taught in this class were very diversified in their needs. Generally speaking, they were all academically weak, but they had very different personalities, from outgoing and loud to introverted and very needy. They all, however, learned to share themselves with the rest

of the class, and one individual who was mercilessly picked on in the building, and initially in the classroom, was accepted as a regular member of the group. He eventually felt comfortable in talking to the rest of the class about how it felt to be bullied and ridiculed by one's peers. That was a wonderful learning experience for the entire class. There were many moments like this, and it was because they felt safe talking about these feelings that we were able to share and learn from their individual anecdotes.

These students are the ones I feel the greatest pride in when I see them in the hallways, and it gives me great pleasure that they tell other students how much they enjoy my class. That is the greatest compliment one can receive as an educator, especially at the junior high level. It is my hope that these students will remember the academic skills, lessons learned regarding societal issues (bullying), and the stories shared in our class for many years to come.

If students successfully complete the course and leave feeling more confident in their communication skills, and thus in themselves, then offering English skills as an alternative to the regular program at the junior high level can only lead to positive changes in those students' lives, and thus in society.

I have become a more reflective educator as a result of teaching this class and of taking my master's degree, and as a result I am better able to see how we, as teachers, can make a difference in a child's life.

Being positive and upbeat, having a sense of humor, being creative, and most importantly, clearly understanding the term *flexibility*, makes one the ideal candidate to work with students at-risk of dropping out of school. It is a rewarding experience knowing you have possibly helped these children to feel successful and valued.

It is my hope that by spending time in an English skills classroom, each student will learn to become a little more compassionate and more clearly understand the value in taking responsibility for his or her future. I want students to believe that each of them is capable of being successful in life, and that school is an important part of realizing that success.

## CHAPTER 8: Project Recommendations

### Project Recommendations

The students I'm teaching today are very different from those I taught ten years ago. Our society is changing ever more rapidly and dramatically as technology and mass media impact relationships in the home and in the community. It is imperative, as a society, that we recognize the effects of these changes on our children, and conscientiously work toward meeting the needs that arise as a result of these changes to the best of our collective ability.

As a society, we claim to be aware of the impact of divorce, abuse, violence, substance abuse, and of learning disabilities on our children, yet schools do not seem to be effectively addressing the needs of many of the children impacted by these forces. Too many of these at-risk children fall through the cracks and end up dropping out of school. The reasons they leave vary, but the end result is the same.

The education system has in recent years been reworking itself, not always successfully, but in ways that are child focused. Inclusion has been a positive move toward creating a kind of equality in the classroom, and in many ways, mirrors the setting of real life. Introductory math courses have been in place for years to assist students in strengthening their math skills, yet communication skills, important in all areas of life, are not given the same focus of importance in our schools.

As both subjects I interviewed for this paper pointed out, the majority of juveniles they encounter in their respective areas of expertise are academically weak. They both believe as well that when these at-risk youth are educated, based on their current

academic level, they experience success. These are students we see at the junior high level who have obvious learning gaps that need to be addressed before they can move to the next academic level. These are the students who would benefit in taking English skills classes.

What we have learned as an English department is that we need to work directly with the school counselors when timetabling the students we would like to see in the program.

We have also decided not to call it an English skills class. This in effect labels the program, and certain students then perceive it as the 'slow' class; their euphemism. Though the students in the class eventually get past that connotation, initially it is difficult to encourage enrollment in the course.

We are doing wonderful things for the children in our schools today, and most thrive and flourish. There is, however that small percentage of the school population not flourishing. They would like to, but circumstances do not afford them a nourishing lifestyle. They represent the majority of the at-risk youth in our schools. These children might be disruptive in the classroom setting; they might miss too much school; they might be angry and volatile, or they might be withdrawn. What is consistent amongst them all however, is that they need some extra, positive attention.

As mentioned earlier, teachers impact daily on students' lives, and those teaching in the language arts programs are afforded the best opportunity to positively influence their students through the use of literature that is interesting and relevant to their own lives. If we are prepared to teach the English skills classes as outlined in this paper, we might affect change in the percentage of at-risk students dropping out of school at the junior high level.

As pressure to perform academically increases in the high school years – the students who (for many and varied reason) are not able to compete, tend to withdraw and find camaraderie with others who are in that position. These are the students who often find themselves attending Alternate Programs (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1998).

Today's teachers are more aware of individual student needs and are more open to change in favor of children. To teach a skills class, the teacher must possess personal attributes that lend themselves to creating an open, honest, nurturing classroom where each student is encouraged to strive for success in a nonjudgmental environment. The teacher must be very supportive and patient with students, yet there must be structure and individual student expectations.

Today there are many opportunities for professional development in the area of recognizing youth at-risk. All educators should be familiar with the signs that might indicate a student needs some extra support. Schools in British Columbia are now mandating all teachers attend a one hour educational session on recognizing and helping abused children in our classrooms. This is a positive step in becoming more aware of certain youth at-risk in our schools today.

Many educators today are capable of teaching the English skills course, however, these programs must be supported by the school administration in order to exist. A dialogue must then be a priority between the teachers supporting these programs and the administrators who have the ability to ensure English skills classes will be a part of the curriculum.

The British Columbia Minister of Education recently delivered a public radio message

to British Columbians in regard to the main educational goal for the new millenium.

“It is the mandate of the Ministry to provide caring public schooling for the future.”

I think the English skills classes would work toward meeting that goal, and I will continue to work toward providing those classes to the students in our building. Perhaps we will eventually realize that goal throughout the district as well.

The main objective in offering this type of course to students at risk of dropping out is to help build their self-esteem in an environment where they are encouraged to learn to the best of their ability, and where each student is recognized for his/her individual achievements. These students, like the two girls and fourteen boys who successfully completed the skills course which was the focus of this paper demonstrated to me, want to feel good about themselves and to fit in with the rest of the students in the building.

The students in these classes are not likely ever going to be academically strong, but they have the potential to realize success in their lives. It is incumbent upon us, then, to teach them emotional, behavioral, and educational skills in a way that will help them to lead fulfilling lives, by giving them the tools to achieve individual, personal power.

We have the means to address our children's needs and it requires we offer these alternative classes to the students in our schools, embracing those individuals we recognize as needing that extra attention and care. Iyanla Vanzant (1998) aptly summarizes in her book, *Yesterday, I Cried*, my beliefs in regard to teaching children in our schools today. Thus I close this paper with her thoughts, which mirror my own.

If there is one point that I hope has come through in this story, it is that children must be celebrated and taught to celebrate themselves. Positive reinforcement is absolutely essential to the development of a healthy sense of self. When children are allowed to

live day to day, learning, and accomplishing without being recognized or celebrated, their sense of value is diminished. More important, children must be celebrated, honored and valued not for what they do, but because they are (p. 263).

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## Appendix A

### Students At-Risk Interview Questions

Can you describe the general background of those students you would consider to be *at-risk* in life?

What would you suggest, from your own experience, these individuals need at this point in their lives?

Which agencies have you come to believe have the most potential to influence kids at this age?

Can you explain why you feel they are most influential; how so?

What do you believe should be the role of the school in helping solve these problems in our society?

Can you suggest any ways in which schools might influence these students *at-risk* in developing more positive life images?

## Appendix B

## Class Response Questionnaire

On a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree*, please answer the following by circling the appropriate number.

1) I believe my English and communication skills have improved as a result of taking this course.

1. strongly disagree
2. disagree
3. somewhat agree
4. agree
5. strongly agree

2) The skills I learned in this class will help me achieve success in other classes.

1. strongly disagree
2. disagree
3. somewhat agree
4. agree
5. strongly agree

3) The work we did mattered, and I feel I learned new and relevant information that will help me in my life.

1. strongly disagree
2. disagree
3. somewhat agree
4. agree
5. strongly agree

4) This course should be made available to students at the junior high level.

1. strongly disagree
2. disagree
3. somewhat agree
4. agree
5. strongly agree

## Appendix C

### Sample Lesson Plan: Teenage Personal Values

#### Objectives:

- the students will more clearly understand the concept of personal values
- the students will individually order the teenage values in the order they perceive their personal importance
- the students will graph these values according to that assessment
- the class will discuss their choices as a class

#### Materials:

- chart listing the 10 teenage values
- graph paper
- completed sample graph

#### Procedure:

The teacher writes the word values on the board

The class brainstorms the meaning of the word

The teacher hands out sheet with teenage values to be rated

The teacher and students discuss the meaning of the values on the sheet

The students individually rate the list of values according to individual preference

The students each receive graph paper and a sample graph

The students complete their own graph (worth 30 marks)

The class discuss their individual value choices and the reason for their choices

Lesson evaluation:

The evaluation will be both qualitative and quantitative, as it is with most lessons.

Student participation in the discussions will be one measure of the value of the lesson, which will demonstrate student understanding of the concept of values, and how it relates to them individually.

Completion and submission of the graph by students will be the second measure of the success of the lesson.

## Appendix D

Top Ten Teenage Personal Values

Personal friendships

Being loved

Individual freedom

Personal success

Living a comfortable life

Personal privacy

Family life

Living an exciting life

Acceptance by God

Personal recognition

Being popular

(Bibby & Poterski, 1993)