

**WHAT MAKES SCHOOL A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FOR 12 JUNIOR HIGH  
SCHOOL STUDENTS?**

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### **Dedication**

**To my students, past and present, who have made me the teacher I am today.**

**To my teachers, past and present, who have made me the student I am today.**

**To my first teachers: my parents. They believed even when I could not.**

**I offer my sincere thanks to all of you.**

## **ABSTRACT**

**This study examined the perceptions and needs of junior high school students considering the question, What makes school a positive experience for 12 junior high school students? Previous research indicates that many students view school negatively (Bibby & Posterski, 1992). This conclusion is an alarming statement considering the significant number of years students spend in school. Using student written responses and interviews, this study explored the perceptions of junior high school students in relation to school. Qualitative research method was used as it allowed the researcher to collect and document rich data that helped to shed light on students' views of junior high school. Twelve students, 2 males and 2 females, from each of the three junior high grades (7, 8, and 9) participated in the study. The students were asked to respond, in writing, to five prompts: 1) Junior high school is... 2) What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be? 3) What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be? 4) The best thing about my school is... 5) The worst thing about my school is... . Those same students then met in grade level groups for an interview used to clarify and expand upon the themes that emerged in their written responses. The final data-gathering technique was for the students to reflect upon what the ideal school might look like. Overall, the results of this study indicate that students value relationships with both teachers and peers and wish to belong to the safe and student-centered community of school. The insights of junior high school students about their schooling experience will assist in the organization of programs designed to meet the needs of adolescents within an educational setting.**

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## **Introduction**

**I teach in a mid-sized school in Southern Alberta. The school is identified as the only school in the district to offer junior high level French Immersion education as well as having a grade configuration of kindergarten to grade nine. I came to this level quite by chance, having never considered teaching students beyond division one, grades kindergarten to three. As part of my Bachelor of Education degree, I even completed the requirements for a specialization in Early Childhood Education. The last place I expected to teach was at the junior high level.**

**My journey as a teacher began in 1992 when I accepted a half-time position teaching “Foods” in a junior high school. It was January and I had been substitute teaching for the year since completing my Bachelor of Education degree. I had spent that year honing my survival skills and counting the days of work each month until I reached that magic number which meant I could now cover my living costs. As a substitute teacher, I had become better at walking into completely strange staff rooms and classrooms, but still did not relish the act. The chance of obtaining a full-time teaching position, even if it was at a level unknown to me and, for that matter, a subject equally unknown, was too good to let pass.**

**The first two months were difficult. I questioned my decision to tackle junior high school many times over. At times, I even found myself questioning my choice of career. However, at some point during those first two arduous months, I started to view my situation differently. I started to look beyond my own feelings of inadequacy and began to see why I chose teaching in the first place - the students. It was at this point in my career that I began to glean the importance of getting to know those whom I was**

teaching. This realization, that I need to know my students well and particularly, my junior high students well to be an effective teacher, has impacted my choice of research topic.

As a teacher, I often found myself teaching upwards of 180 students each year. There were times when I found it very difficult to really know who these people were and, as a result, was always looking for ways in which students could share a little of themselves in class. I would try to teach using projects that allowed for personal creativity and freedom as the base because I was often amazed at what students could develop, given the chance to generate their own ideas. This process was also beneficial to me as I discovered learning styles and personal interests of my students. As well, it allowed me the chance to see ideas that I would not have fathomed. As Smith (1994) puts it, “classrooms, schools wherein the people in charge cannot lay themselves open to the new life in their midst, always exist in a state of war from which children are driven either inward or outward but never forward” (p. 192).

Another way to learn about my students was through their writing. Writing allows the students to explore their own feelings and sense of belonging. I found that asking the students to write about themselves and their opinions was often more successful than asking them to write a book report. It was not until I asked them their opinion of the book that I began to see some honest writing. Through writing, “young people can learn to express their true feelings, understand themselves, create, re-create, and explore who they are and want to be” (Mirriam-Goldberg, 1999).



### **Purpose and Focus of the Study**

The research question guiding this study is: What makes school a positive experience for 12 Junior High School students?

Bibby and Posterski (1992) make the statement that, “fewer than one in two (students) admit to school’s [sic] being a place they really enjoy” (p. 229). It seems to me that the natural question is, why is school a negative place for students? Considering they spend a significant number of years in school, the fact that it is not viewed positively by many students is a frightening prospect.

The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand the perceptions and needs of the students I teach. Simmons (as cited in Perry-Sheldon & Allain, 1987), in her discussion on educational reform, states that “if teaching is to be a true profession, then teachers must become active participants in the study of teaching, which involves examining the roles of the teacher, the instructional processes, and other influences on effective teacher-student interactions in the classroom” (p.10). It is the understanding of teacher-student interactions that I find most compelling. For example I was attending a professional development activity recently and the question, “What do you teach?” was asked. The answer given was “children.” At that point the questioner realized what she had done and rephrased her question, “What subject do you teach?” We all laughed and moved on. The short conversation stayed with me. We do, so often, respond to the first question with an answer based on our teaching assignment. We may teach curriculum but, more importantly, we teach children. According to Schurr, Thomason, Thompson, and Lounsbury (1995), “while there is little question that mutual respect, a sense of purposefulness, classroom control, and a professional demeanor are important as teachers

work with young adolescents, one more thing may be just as important if not more so – the good relationship that can form between ten- to fourteen-year-olds and their teacher” (p. 61).

## **Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the three main bodies of literature that apply to this study; adolescence, school satisfaction, and qualitative research. As the purpose of the study is to determine what makes school a positive experience for 12 junior high school students, I feel it is imperative that we understand the world of the adolescent. For this reason, the first body of literature deals with adolescence and the myriad of changes and challenges that adolescents face during this time in their lives. The second body of literature pertains to school satisfaction and the final focus is dedicated to the qualitative methodology that is used in this study.

### **Adolescence**

Before we make the move to understand what makes school a positive experience for junior high school students it is important to understand the environment of the adolescent.

There are many definitions of adolescence. Smith (1997) points out that although adolescence may be described as simply “the time between childhood and adulthood” (p. 258) or the time when a person “reaches the final stages of physical and mental development” (p. 248), it is, importantly, a time of turmoil and challenges for both the adolescent and those spending time with them. There are a myriad of changes occurring in the lives of adolescents. Friedenberg (as cited in Elkind, 1984) defines adolescence as “a distinct stage of life in those societies so complicated and differentiated that each individual’s social role and function takes years to define and to learn. When years of special preparation for adult life are required, these years become a distinguishable period with it own customs, rules and relationships” (p. 20). Mosher

(1979) considers adolescence to be a time “when change is so significant that it can be compared to the child’s acquisition of language” (p. 2).

To better understand the effects of adolescence on adolescents, the discussion has been organized into the following areas of development: physical, cognitive, psychological, and social development.

Physical. The most notable change physically for adolescent development is that the body becomes capable of reproduction (Smith, 1997). Haviland and Scarborough (1981) designate two main physical changes that characterize adolescence: the growth spurt and sexual maturation (p. 22). Adolescents will experience growth spurts and hormonal surges at different times in their lives, some maturing early, others maturing late. Also important to note is the fact that girls will often experience physical maturation earlier than the boys. The range in maturation for both genders can cause worry and esteem problems for those maturing particularly early or late. They are, at this time in their lives, different from their peers. “Physical change has a great impact on psychological development in adolescents” (Haviland & Scarborough, 1981, p. 35).

Adolescents are often characterized as high-energy beings (Wood, 1997). Due to this high energy, they need changes in activities fairly regularly. Many adolescents will have difficulty sitting still for prolonged periods of time. This is an important observation that will likely influence a junior high school student’s view of school. If, for instance, students are expected to remain seated in desks and chairs for long periods of time, when physically, this is a more difficult task for them, it is reasonable to assume such aspects of the junior high school experience may be viewed negatively. George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane (1992) concur with Wood’s (1997) characterization of adolescents

being high-energy beings and take that statement one step further as they discuss the importance of variety in programming for adolescents. “Early adolescents are characterized by flighty actions, rapidly changing and superficial interests, short attention spans, slavish compliance to peer group norms, and generally ‘strange’ behaviors” (Wood, 1997, p. 82). The authors then proceed to present ideas such as exploratory classes, optional classes chosen by the students, that a school committed to programming to meet the developmental needs of adolescents should provide. These classes offer students a variety of activities and allow them to try new and interesting things in hopes of discovering new interests and abilities.

Cognitive. Cognitive development includes “ perception, language, memory, reasoning, and problem-solving” (Haviland & Scarborough, 1981, p. 40). Elkind (1984) believes that the most difficult adjustment for adolescents is not the physical changes but the mental changes. He views the fact that adolescents need to learn to think “at a higher level, ... in a new way” (Elkind, 1984, p. 23) as far more challenging than the physical changes they undergo. The reason for this, according to Elkind, is that the ability to think is directly linked to perception of self, how adolescents see themselves. Their adjustment to their physical body is coloured by their perceptions. “For example, the self-consciousness so common in the early teen years is a result of a change in thinking and not just a product of the physical changes (or lack of them) themselves” (Elkind, 1984, p. 23).

Haviland and Scarborough (1981) state that one of the primary cognitive changes involves things like increased vocabulary due to the fact that the student has simply experienced more of life as he/she grows older. However, it is important to note that,

“The adolescent not only knows *more*; he or she also appears to think *differently*” (Haviland & Scarborough, 1981, p. 47). These changes can best be described as “qualitative and include strategic memorization, logical reasoning, and scientific problem-solving” (Haviland & Scarborough, 1981, p. 47). These changes would indicate that students at this age need a variety of learning opportunities and approaches in order to fully appreciate their capabilities as they experience these developmental changes.

Psychological. Personality changes are common in adolescents. “They are in a struggle, wanting to be independent and mature while continuing to need the psychological support provided to them by significant adults in their environments” (Smith, 1997, p. 259). The support from adults becomes particularly important due to the fact that the many physical changes adolescents undergo may cause confusion and worry. “Because of marked individual differences in rate of growth and because of their concern with appearance and self-image, adolescents have many questions about their growth. These questions sometimes represent their fears about changing and about being abnormal” (Haviland & Scarborough, 1981). McCown et al. (as cited by Smith, 1997) states, “The developmental crisis of adolescence centers on the youth’s attempt to discover his or her identity” (p. 259). Woolfolk (as cited by Smith, 1997) states that,

Often, the personalities of adolescents change dramatically. They may become moody, self-centered, and very self-conscious. Friendships and status within peer groups take on an increasingly important role, while the role of parents and authority figures such as teachers often declines (p. 259).

The time spent with friends and peers would, it appears, become far more important to students of this age than time spent with adults. What role do adults play in the lives of

adolescents if they are trying to distance themselves from us? The state of relationships between students and teachers may have a marked effect on the views students have of their school experiences.

Social. The idealism, so evident in adolescence, may lead to disagreements with figures of authority as well as alignment with like-minded peers (Mosher, 1979).

Adolescents are desperately trying to make sense of their world, and their place in that world. They will often argue with adults just because they can (Elkind, 1984, p. 32).

Wood (1997) notes that adolescents develop stronger ties to their friends than to adults.

This, however, does not mean that adolescents do not want approval from adults. Wood believes that teacher activities such as showing parents their child's school work are just as important at this stage in a student's education as it was in early elementary school.

Adolescents want to feel liked and successful. Sometimes they just don't know how to articulate that need to adults.

Friendships are of ultimate importance to adolescents (Bibby and Posterski, 1994; Elkind, 1994; Hopkins, 1983; Wood, 1997). Feelings of security, self-worth, and being needed are closely linked to the quality of friendships (Hopkins, 1983). Many adolescents will evaluate their own self-worth based on the existence of friends in their lives and are often fiercely devoted to friends (Wood, 1997). Wood also points out that boys will generally spend time with large groups while girls tend to value close friendships. The devotion to friends can become complicated when feelings are hurt. Loyalty is very important to adolescents (Wood, 1997).

### **Summary of Adolescent Development**

Smith (1997, p. 259) lists the following developmental tasks that occur during adolescence:

1. creation of sense of sexual identity;
2. development of self-confidence in social situations;
3. integration of social values into an individual code of conduct;
4. acceptance of physical changes;
5. attainment of sense of emotional independence;
6. exploration of career goals;
7. identification of individual interests;
8. awareness of strengths and limitations;
9. development of sexual interests;
10. development of peer relationships;
11. completion of formal, mandatory education; as well as,
12. preparation for marriage, parenting, and adult relationships.

It is easy to see why adolescence can be such a busy time when we look at the list of developmental tasks. Scales (1991) notes that adolescence is a unique time of life and deserves attention from those who work with and are committed to understanding adolescents and adolescence. He believes that schools need to take notice of this unique time and program accordingly. The complexity of adolescence requires that teachers recognize the developmental needs of the students with whom they work. Scales (1991) characterizes adolescence through the use of seven key developmental needs:

1. positive social interaction with adults and peers;



2. structure and clear limits;
3. physical activity;
4. creative expression;
5. competence and achievement;
6. meaningful participation in families, school, and communities; and
7. opportunities for self-definition.

The seven key developmental needs are particularly important in the educational programming for adolescents. Upon inspection of the list, it is clear that students may view school positively or negatively based on the ability of the school to meet these needs. It also seems evident that positive relationships are of great importance as the existence of these relationships link to so many of the other needs on the list. Structure and clear limits would relate due to the fact that if a relationship is positive, communication would be open and clear. It is reasonable to assume that feelings of competence and achievement as well as opportunities for self-definition and creative expression, may exist within positive relationships because the development of a positive relationship suggests a caring attitude. Meaningful participation in families, school, and communities suggests the desire to belong to a group or community.

#### School Satisfaction

The second body of literature deals with school satisfaction from the perspective of students. The topic of school satisfaction is important because schools are created for students and if we are not aware of the things that make school positive for students, then we may be making decisions for ourselves rather than for the students. Students, according to the above list of seven key developmental needs must feel that they are

participating in a meaningful way in the activities of school. School satisfaction illustrates for us the aspects of school that are considered positive or meaningful by students.

Lounsbury and Clark (1990) participated in a grade eight shadow program where a researcher literally “shadowed”, or followed, an eighth grader for a day. The purpose of this program was to allow the researchers a clearer look at a grade eight student’s typical day. In the process, students were asked to identify, “good things about school.” Commonly, students answered, “friends and teachers” (p. 42). The authors remind us that it is the relationship between teacher and student that facilitates learning at the junior high level, not necessarily the content that is being taught. Therefore, it is important to consider the teacher-student relationship as well as peer relationships as two areas that potentially make for a positive school experience for junior high students.

Bibby and Posterski (1992), in a seminal Canadian study on adolescent views, readily agree with the notion that friends play the most important role in an adolescent’s life both in and out of school. It is vital that teachers of adolescents recognize the importance of friends as well as the desire to be heard and understood. Bibby and Posterski go further, by saying, if we know and accept that adolescents are social beings, then it must make sense that they “learn better when they’re able to talk with each other rather than when they are told to sit in silence and figure things out on their own” (p. 241). This statement relates directly to the stages of social development that adolescents experience. Schools that can meet these needs may find they have more successful students as they are realizing their own self-worth through socialization. It is with peers that adolescents learn how to relate to others in the world.

Rich (1997), in her article, “7 Habits of Good Teachers Today”, believes that students should be involved in their own learning (p. 4). According to Rich (1997), students need to collaborate not only with each other but also with their teachers. They need to feel important, needed, and cared about. She supports the solicitation of student feedback in the classroom. This approach not only involves the students but also places, with the student, some of the responsibility of making the classroom a positive place in which to spend time (p.5).

Bibby and Posterski (1992) view the teacher-student relationship as one, which has greatly changed over the years (p. 239). The notion of feeling respected is “highly valued by 75 percent of students” (p. 14), although it seems to need to come from the teachers first. What this statement means, according to Bibby and Posterski, is that those teachers who respect their students are more likely to receive respect in return. Age and assumed wisdom is no longer a guarantee of respect from young people, it must be earned. Bibby and Posterski conclude their discussion regarding respect with an equation, “PERSONAL RAPPORT + EARNED RESPECT = EFFECTIVENESS” (p. 240).

Baksh and Martin (1986), in their discussion of effective teachers, involve students in the evaluation of teachers. They examined student responses to a final question on a survey administered to 20,351 high school students in four Atlantic provinces. The final question of the survey asked students to share general school experiences as well as their views about school and teachers. According to Baksh and Martin, one of the most important factors of teacher effectiveness is the teachers’ involvement in their students’ lives in a positive manner. One student felt that good teachers are the ones who don’t “just teach the class and forget about you, they try to get to know each student better” (p.

58). According to the students, teachers should also care if students pass or fail.

Generally, the students who admitted to disliking a teacher did so due to the perception that the teacher disliked students. Students also seemed to need to feel that their teachers liked teaching and were not simply “in it for the money.” Liking teaching was directly linked to liking students.

Rich (1998) discovered some important viewpoints shared by parents in Anchorage, Alaska, and Rochester, New York. Parents were asked to evaluate the teachers of their children as part of a survey administered by the aforementioned school divisions. Rich (1998) condensed much of the information into three main areas: “how well teachers know and care (1) about teaching, (2) about their children, and (3) about communicating with parents” (p. 37). Under the second point, caring about their children, most parents wanted the teacher to treat their children “fairly and with respect” (p. 38). Rich (1997) believes that education is “about relationships between people” (p. 3). Furthermore, her research suggests that parents believe teachers are responsible for winning “over the hearts of their students” (p. 3). Rich (1997) believes that education is all about “what’s happening between people, in and out of the classroom” (p. 3).

Bibby and Posterski (1992) agree that humanization is the way of entering the world of the adolescent. “Relate to me, then teach me” (p. 241) is the message they believe most students send to their teachers. Bibby and Posterski share the thought that many of us can relate to the idea that, “when students look back at their school experiences and think about their teachers, they will remember them far more for how they treated their students rather than for what they taught them” (p. 242).

Doda, George, and McEwin (1987) in their article, “Ten Current Truths About Effective Schools”, share their views regarding what makes an effective school for adolescent learners:

1. Effective middle level schools work hard to reduce the size of the group to which students belong.
2. Effective middle level schools are more like elementary schools in climate and tone, than they are like high schools.
3. Effective middle level schools make it possible for students and teachers to spend time together in non-instructional ways.
4. Effective middle level schools have broad and varied rewards and award systems.
5. Effective middle level schools foster teacher fellowship, interdependence, and staff consensus.
6. Effective middle level teachers do not sit down while they teach.
7. Effective middle level teachers work to create lessons which bring students as close to the real thing as possible.
8. Effective middle level teachers have a sense of humor.
9. Effective middle level teachers think big but teach small.
10. Effective middle level school teachers work to weasel their way into the hearts of the young adolescents they teach. (p. 25)

The third truth articulated by Doda et al. (1987) is, I believe, particularly important.

Through special events, teachers and students are able to create an atmosphere in which relationships can be generated and cultivated. In other words, the positive relationship

between teacher and student carries into the classroom. The authors feel that this relationship results in improved student attitudes and fewer discipline problems.

The researchers' final truth is "effective middle school teachers work to weasel their way into the hearts of the young adolescents they teach" (Doda et al., 1987, p.27). The overriding attitude here is that it is impossible to teach an adolescent learner without reaching them first. By this statement it is meant that a student must feel that the teacher cares about him or her as a person before truly effective teaching can occur. One of the final points of the article is particularly poignant, "effective schools for early adolescents are organized so that the people within them are not lost in the complexity of the process" (Doda et al., 1987, p.27). When schooling is viewed as just a process one loses sight of those individuals involved in the process of learning. I believe the "organization of effective schools for young adolescents" (Doda et al., 1987, p.27), must address the needs of the students. Moreover, if schools are to be organized around these student needs, in hopes of maintaining student interest, then schools must find out what students need.

It is the notion that students are in danger of getting "lost" that drives my desire to complete this study. Clearly the research indicates this concern too. It is evident that the research shows the importance of relationships in an adolescent's life in helping him/her to maintain positive feelings towards school. I cannot, in good conscience, assume I know what my students need and want from school. I must allow them to voice their opinions and provide an arena in which those voices are heard. Dodd (1999) looks at the creation of a community of learners in her article, "How Parents and Students Can Enrich the Work of a Community of Learners." Although the students mentioned in the article are of high school age, I believe the attitudes are similar to those of junior high school

students. The most powerful statement Dodd (1999) makes is that when students are truly listened to their motivation to learn increases (p. 24). According to Dodd, students seem to feel as though the teacher cares about them as individuals when student feedback is instrumental in facilitating classroom changes. Interestingly, the process of choice for Dodd in extracting student feedback is through “informal writing” as opposed to class discussion. This process allows for every student to have and express an opinion, not merely those students who are outspoken.

#### Qualitative Research

The final body of literature examines the purpose of qualitative research in this study as well as the importance of caring for and listening to adolescents in their discussion of the positive and negative attributes of school as it relates to the choice of qualitative research methods. The reason for this choice was deliberate and firmly based on the literature surrounding qualitative research and the importance of caring for and listening to, in the case of this study, junior high school students. This portion of the literature review will explore these issues as they relate to this study.

Qualitative research encompasses many approaches to data collection. Researchers employ a variety of methods that would come under the umbrella of qualitative research however, it is important to understand how qualitative research is defined. Marshall and Rossman (1989) define qualitative research as a process “that entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for study, that values participants’ perspectives on their worlds and seeks to discover those perspectives, that views inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants, and that is primarily descriptive and relies on people’s words as the primary data” (p. 11). I felt strongly that the students in

this study needed and deserved a chance to be heard. Qualitative approaches to research, according to this definition, provided the opportunity for the students to share with me their perceptions of school in their own words.

Wilson (1998) describes qualitative research as “discovery research” (p. 3). The research is carried out in an attempt to “discover” the reality of a situation or environment as perceived by the participants themselves. Wilson (1998) cites Sherman & Webb (1988) who say that, “experience is taken as a whole, and those who are studied speak for themselves” (p. 3). The idea of “discovery research” appealed to me as this approach would allow the students’ perceptions of school to evolve. The students could choose the direction of the data rather than my leading them to a pre-conceived conclusion.

Bogdan and Taylor (1975) view qualitative research from a phenomenological perspective that allows the researcher to “examine how the world is experienced. For him or her the important reality is what people imagine it to be” (p. 2). Wilson (1998) cites Sherman and Webb who indicate, “Qualitative research implies a direct concern with experience as it is lived or felt or undergone” (p. 7). This belief relates directly to the research question. If I am interested in discovering what makes school a positive experience for 12 junior high school students then it is imperative I provide the opportunity for those students to share their experiences of school. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) continue their discussion of the phenomenological perspective when they point out the importance of “understanding human behavior from the actor’s own frame of reference” (p. 2). It is the desire to understand school as it is seen through the eyes of these twelve junior high school students that drives the choice of a qualitative approach



to this study. As Taylor and Bogdan (1984) point out, “our assumptions, interests, and purposes shape which methodology we choose” (p. 1).

The two approaches used to collect descriptive data for this study included personal documents and unstructured interviews. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) define personal documents as “materials in which people reveal in their own words their view of their entire life, or a part of it, or some other aspect about themselves” (p. 6).

I chose to provide an opportunity for the students to respond, in writing, to prompts designed to elicit their opinions regarding the negative and positive attributes of junior high school. They were later asked to participate in group interviews in order to verbally expand upon the issues they had brought forward in their writing as well as introduce any new issues they deemed important. The particulars of the methodology will be discussed in further chapters. It is, however, necessary to discuss why qualitative research methods were chosen for this study. Both of the methods of data collection, written student responses and interviews, were chosen as they allowed the students to narrate their school experiences and tell me what they valued in school. “Words are the way that most people come to understand their situations. We create our world with words. We explain ourselves with words. We defend and hide ourselves with words” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 18). It is through the students’ own words that I will learn about what makes school a positive experience for students.

Narrative is defined by Connelly and Clandinin (as cited by Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 558) as a “reconstruction of experience”. This reconstruction of experience, according to Connelly and Clandinin, can be accomplished through a number of methods including “journal records, interview transcripts, observations, story telling,

letter writing, autobiographical writing, class plans, newsletters, and other writing” (p. 558). Although the studies Connelly and Clandinin were conducting at the time of the above discussion involved “narrative accounts of teachers’ lived experience” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 557), I believe we can substitute the study of students’ lived experiences as they pertain to school quite easily. That having been said, the method of recording the views of the students becomes of paramount importance.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state, “The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). I am not only interested in the students’ experiences but also their views of these experiences. What the architect, administration, or teachers envision as the ideal school is not important here; I want to know what the students value. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) concur with Connelly and Clandinin when they state that “qualitative research ... generally examines people’s words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants” (p. 2).

The second qualitative method chosen for this study was the interview. Seidman (1991) states that “At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (p. 3). This statement underlies the primary reason for conducting this study, the belief that the students’ opinions have worth and that their participation is necessary in the organization of their educational experiences. Freidus (1998) cites Nussbaum (1997) who states, “listening to stories, educators are better able to move beyond their own experience, to recognize the ways in which common needs and aims may be differently addressed, and to develop, not only a factual knowledge base, but a ‘narrative imagination’ that better prepares them to decipher and understand the

words and action of their students”(p. 1). This is a particularly important statement as it underscores the importance of teachers viewing the process of education through the eyes of other participants. I think it is reasonable to suggest that one method of teaching is not the only method of teaching. We must keep in mind not only the teacher delivering the lesson but also the students who we hope benefit from that lesson. Through sharing with colleagues and students, we can, as teachers, only become more effective participants in the process of education. Also the desire to develop an ability to “decipher and understand the words and action of their students” (Nussbaum (1997) as cited by Freidus, 1998, p. 1) suggests a commitment, by that teacher, not only to the education of students but also to the students themselves. The choice of a qualitative research approach is firmly rooted in my interest in learning what is important to students at the junior high school level. My goal was to collect their perceptions of school through the use of their own words. If it is their world I wish to see then, surely, it must be seen through their words.

There is a significant thread of caring that seems to be woven through many of the theories behind the use of qualitative research methodologies. “The methods by which we study people of necessity affects how we view them. When we reduce people to statistical aggregates, we lose sight of the subjective nature of human behavior. Qualitative methods allow us to know people personally and to see them as they are developing their own definitions of the world. We experience what they experience in their daily struggle with their society” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 4).

That commitment to students requires a level of caring that is, I believe, an absolutely necessary characteristic of an effective teacher. If we do not view our students as

valuable members of a class, then why would we care about their opinions? “To care for another person in the most significant sense is to help him grow and actualize himself” (Mayeroff, 1971, as cited by Ferreira, Bosworth, and Smith, 1995, p. 3). This may sound like a significant expectation to place at the feet of teachers but when we look at the results of caring for others, I believe the necessity for this characteristic becomes clearer. Ferreira et al. (1995) cite Benner and Wrubel (1989) as they describe caring as “an enabling condition of connection and concern” (p. 3). There must be a connection before caring is evident and effective.

The sheer enormity of the importance of caring becomes clear when we understand the end result of that caring attitude. Whisler (1992) offers the following citation from the Carnegie Council: “Caring is crucial to the development of young adolescents into healthy adults. Young adolescents need to see themselves as valued members of a group that offers mutual support and trusting relationships. They need to be able to succeed at something, and to be praised and rewarded for that success” (p. 7). Recognition of success is a universal human need. It is no different for adolescents. Teachers of adolescents must recognize that need and be conscious of the effect of their attitudes toward their students. We know that “students develop and grow in an environment of trust and safety” (Whisler, and McCombs, 1992, p. 5) and we know that trust and safety come from caring enough to ensure an environment that will provide for that trust and safety.

Examination of the literature surrounding caring also reveals the importance of listening and showing respect as indications of the evidence of caring. Teachers in junior high school or middle school should have “the ability to listen, to talk with, not at,

students of this age” (Steer, 1984, p. 2). It is important “to listen with the purpose of understanding the student’s point of view; empathy, resulting from careful listening” (Glenn and Nelsen as cited by Whisler, 1992, p. 9). “When we listen to others and speak with respect, we can collaborate to create curriculums and methodology that will help our students, teacher, and parents honor the soul of education” (Kessler, 2000, p. 169). It is the deeply rooted belief that a person’s narratives are worth hearing that ultimately leads to that person feeling valued, respected, and worthy. It is not surprising that students wish to feel valued and respected because who of us has not wished as much for ourselves?

Respect grows from knowing that someone views you as an individual, not simply part of a group. It is only through listening to, and learning, about those students with whom we spend most of our day that we can begin to view students as individuals. We need to know what they think before we can honestly consider ourselves aware of their needs. Giving students the chance to voice opinions and feelings is one way to begin to learn about the students themselves. This is one of the driving forces behind this study. How do I provide an opportunity for their voices to come to the forefront?

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state that “Voice is meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community .... The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process.... Voice suggests relationships: the individual’s relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the individual’s relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process” (p. 4).

I have already discussed the importance of relationship earlier in the literature review, but Connelly and Clandinin (1990) bring to the forefront the importance of relationship to the act of understanding. The desire to recognize the importance of relationship resulted in my choice of group interviews as a data collection method. Group interviews also relate to the social aspect of understanding as the student will be interacting with not only me but also the other students in the group.

The students need to feel heard and need to feel a valuable part of the school community. Through the reading of, and listening to, the students' narratives, students will be given the opportunity to have their words and voices heard. They have the chance to be the narrators of their own experiences.

The purpose of this study is to describe the perceptions of school held by 12 junior high school students. I believe the result will be a clearer understanding of what makes school a positive experience for junior high school students. An understanding of what contributes to a more positive atmosphere in a school can provide opportunities for change and improvements of existing programs

## Methodology

I chose to use qualitative inquiry as the research approach for this study. As Wilson (1998) states, “qualitative research strives to understand the world as seen through the eyes of the participant” (p. 1). I felt that, in order to fully understand the perspectives of my students, I needed to view their world as they do. Another reason for using qualitative methods was that the information gathered was of a personal and sensitive nature and I needed to treat it as such. In my opinion, it would be inappropriate to collect and analyze data from a purely statistical approach when dealing with human stories.

Wilson (1998) also makes the point that “we undertake qualitative inquiry not so much from the recognition that we do not know all the answers to our problems but rather from an appreciation of the fact that we do not know all the questions” (p. 8). My goal was to ascertain the issues that are of importance to the adolescents I teach, through the reading of their written responses and the clarification of some of those issues through a group interview. Through this experience I hoped to gain an understanding of their reality as they see it. From that point, it was my wish to interpret their “truths” and further explore the impact of this information on my teaching and the consequent required changes of my classroom practice.

Johnson (1991) speaks of student voice as a form of empowerment.

If we expect students to achieve, they must be treated as members of the educational team; being a member of a team means having a chance to contribute. Denying students that chance sends them a clear message; what they have to offer isn’t needed or wanted or useful (p. 5).

### **Prompts and Group Interview Question**

Five prompts were presented to the students. They were intended as a guide. I deliberately left them general in order to leave students a wide berth in terms of the direction of their written responses. Mee (1997) used a similar approach in her survey of 2,000 grade five-through-eight students. She believed that open-ended prompts allows for the students' responses to "be freed from the test mentality" (p. 11). According to Mee, students felt more comfortable giving opinions when the survey took an open-ended format. The five prompts were:

1. Junior high school is...
2. What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?
3. What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?
4. The best thing about my school is...
5. The worst thing about my school is...

These prompts were modified from an earlier set, following the completion of a pilot study. I recruited the assistance of my grade eight advisory group of 22 students and, during a Health period, asked them to respond in writing to the original prompts. We then discussed how they felt about the questions. My students, discussing the questions, pointed out that two of the previous questions were too similar in nature and were confusing. These questions were changed. The final two questions were designed to extract the most important issues that students were experiencing in school. The students I involved in the pilot study felt that these questions would encourage them to prioritize and write specifically about their environment and suggested that these questions remain in the study.



The group interview statement was: “Imagine that you were asked to create the ‘ideal’ school. Describe what that school would look like”. I felt this statement would possibly encourage them to illustrate the most important positive attributes of school in a descriptive manner and provide an opportunity to consolidate the students’ ideas.

#### Collection of Data

The initial collection of data was completed over a period of approximately three and a half weeks. This proved to be an adequate amount of time in which to accommodate the schedules of the students who were participating. I chose a total of 12 students from all three grades in one junior high school. These students needed to feel comfortable communicating in writing. They also needed to be able to articulate their own opinions regardless of what they might have thought I wanted to hear. The students needed to show an interest in the study and those who did not had the option to decline. Students also needed to feel comfortable with word processing as they completed their writing in a computer lab. A general call for volunteers was not made as I did not wish to reject a student who did not fit the criteria.

#### Student Participants

In order to complete the selection of 12 students it was necessary to recruit the assistance of a number of teachers. I shared the criteria with them and they each suggested names of students they felt would be helpful in my study. These names were divided into grade level and gender categories. From each category, two students were randomly chosen. These students felt comfortable communicating in writing, were willing to share their opinions of junior high school and showed an interest in the study. They also agreed to complete their writing in the computer lab. The make-up of this

group of junior high participants was as follows: two girls in grade seven; two boys in grade seven; two girls in grade eight; two boys in grade eight; two girls in grade nine; two boys in grade nine. This allowed for the sharing of perspectives of students from the three levels of junior high school:

1. entry or introduction to junior high,
2. middle, and
3. preparation for exit from junior high and entry to high school.

Students came from both of the class configurations available in the school, departmental or homeroom. Those in departmental classes have four teachers teaching the four core subjects; Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, and Math. Students in a homeroom class have one teacher teaching the four core classes. These students move about the school less because they have no need to go to different classrooms for each subject.

The students were to submit their writing during a three and a half week period in the middle of October. At this time they had completed the first month of school and had settled into the routine of schooling. The experiences of the start to the year would be relatively fresh in their minds, thus allowing for a clearer “telling” of their stories.

I explained to the students that I was working on a degree at The University of Lethbridge and that this study was necessary for the completion of that degree. The students were told that the study was an attempt to discover what makes junior high school a positive experience for them, the students. It was then explained that their opinions were vital to the success of the study. They were informed of the two ways in which their participation would be required; response to questions using a word processor

and a grade level group interview. Students who agreed to participate were given two letters of consent, one requiring the signature of a parent/guardian and one requiring the student's signature. Each of the letters clearly stated the guarantee of anonymity and that the student's name would not be used at any time. Students and parents were also assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time with out any prejudice. They were asked to return the signed letters as soon as possible.

Over the next few days I collected signed letters, reminded students of the importance of the letters, and replaced lost letters. Within about 18 days all of the letters were returned and dates were scheduled for each student to begin the study. Only one student decided not to participate due to a very busy schedule. She made the decision to withdraw early enough that I was able to find another participant quite easily.

Once student and parental permissions were obtained the introduction for this study was given orally to each group of students prior to them being asked to write. The groups were arranged based on student availability. I let them know that I was looking for their opinions and experiences and that they should feel free to write about anything they felt was relevant to their school experiences. Students were encouraged to write in any format with which they felt comfortable. They were also reassured that I was not looking for polished pieces of writing and that spelling would not count. Indeed, marks were not to be issued at all for this activity. Further, students were assured that their comments in no way affected their grades or standing in their classes. Importantly, students were assured that their participation would be given due consideration regarding confidentiality and anonymity.

### Protocol

The students were then asked to respond, in writing, to five prompts. The students wrote in a computer lab where they formulated their responses through the use of a word processor. This format made my reading of their written responses easier. Each student saved his or her work on a computer diskette which was coded so as to recognize grade level and gender.

McLean (1994), in her comparison of narrative interviewing and ethnographic interviewing, points out the need to “allow the flow of the story to continue” (p. 6) when she collected written responses. She was also acutely aware of being “as small and unobtrusive as possible” (p. 7). I hoped that through the use of prompts and computers, I could remove myself from the students enough that they responded both honestly and frankly.

This portion of the data collection was completed easily. All of the students admitted to feeling comfortable composing their responses on the computer. As the activity was done individually, it was simple to find times for the students to participate. I made myself available before and after school as well as at noon and these time slots seemed to accommodate the students’ schedules with little difficulty. I had time to set them up in the computer lab and they were free to take the amount of time they needed to compose their written responses.

Approximately a week after the collection of student writing, the students were asked to return for a follow-up interview. The arrangement of the grade level group interviews did not go as smoothly. Students are very busy and finding common times for five people proved, at times, frustrating. I met with students individually as well as in small groups

and, eventually, times were booked. All of the interviews occurred at noon. I was concerned that younger students would feel intimidated by the older students so I organized the students in grade level (i.e. grade seven students, grade eight student, and grade nine students), groups of four students each and asked them to respond to one main statement: "Imagine that you were asked to create the 'ideal' school. Describe what that school would look like". In addition, they were asked to clarify some of their written responses to the five prompts. Bogden and Biklen (1992) point out that "the interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the research can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (p. 96). Morgan (as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 100) points out that bringing a group of people together for an interview may allow them to stimulate ideas in others as well as offer the researcher the opportunity to hear the language the group shares. The group interview situation brought to the surface issues that were specific to a particular grade level. It provided an opportunity to consolidate the opinions they offered in their earlier writing.

We met in my classroom as the school conference area is commonly booked for noon meetings. The students brought their lunches and desks were arranged to create an environment in which all participants could face each other. It was explained that I would be recording the interview so that I could transcribe and review it later. None of the students expressed any feelings of discomfort with the use of the tape recorder. The one interruption was the public address system. These announcements were picked up so well by the tape recorder that our voices were drowned out, forcing us to stop each time there was an announcement.

The grade seven students were a little hesitant at first but quietly began to share their opinions. They were conscious of the other group members and took turns speaking. There was little interrupting. These students did not really know each other, all having come from different elementary schools to the junior high school they were now attending. The two girls knew each other slightly. The grade eight students seemed quite happy to share their thoughts and were cooperative and enthusiastic. They all happened to be in the same class but knew each other only slightly. They had, however, been quick to agree to participate in the study and seemed to take it seriously. They had also been the first to return their signed letters of consent and were diligent in their search for common times within which to meet for the group interview. The grade nine students were very comfortable and free with their opinions. I had taught all of the grade nine students the year before and two of them in grade seven as well. They also knew each other, which contributed to the relaxed environment. During the interview there was a lot of interruptions as well as laughter and teasing. These students felt confident in sharing their thoughts and quickly spoke their minds. They had firm opinions and were not at all surprised that their opinions were being solicited.

The grade seven students, when asked to participate in the study, looked a little surprised. All of them adopted a quizzical look and simply said, "ok" when asked if they would be interested in being a part of the study. When it came to the first portion of the study, the writing, they were more concerned about others reading their answers, anonymity and whether the answers need to be in full sentences and paragraphs. When it was explained that there was no need to worry about sentences and that their answers would remain anonymous they relaxed. The final assurance that there were no right or

wrong answers appeared to satisfy them and they continued, now visibly comfortable. At no time did any of the students inquire as to the purpose of the study.

The grade eight students were enthusiastic from the beginning. As was mentioned earlier, they were the first group to return the signed letters and were at my door, ready to go at the agreed upon times. They did not seem too concerned as to the purpose of the study but were more than happy to share their thoughts about school. They seemed almost relieved to be asked. None of these students needed reassurance about my handling of their information, the details given in the letter seemed to be enough. They chose to write in a format most comfortable to them as individual writers, some in full paragraphs, some in point form. One student chose both forms and simply jumped from one to the other.

The grade nine students were quick to agree to participate but needed to know a little more about the study. The most commonly asked question was, "Who else is doing it?" One student finished his written component and then stayed in my classroom while we finished our lunches. He asked me what would happen next and when it was explained that eventually I would be writing a paper about the things I learned from the students, he seemed a little perplexed. His eyebrows raised and his head shook when he learned that I had been at this "school stuff" for almost three years, "You're going to school when you don't have to?" This opened the gates to a rather memorable and pleasant conversation about choices and futures. The other grade nine students asked about the study and seemed pleased that I could not complete my work without their help and input. They were not as surprised as the grade seven students at having been asked for their assistance.

### **Problems**

1. **Validity** – It has been argued that qualitative research lacks validity because data are often collected using words, not numbers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 40) and that the words are open to interpretation. Becker (as cited in Sherman & Webb, 1988) points out that, “quantitative researchers frequently describe qualitative research as ‘subjective’ and therefore inherently unreliable and invalid”. Seidman (1991), however, reminds us that information gathered from people is valid for that person at that point in his or her life. Stake (1988) visits this issue when discussing case study validity. He observes, “we should note that validity depends on the use to which the findings are put” (p. 263). If my findings result in my awareness of the needs of junior high students, and ultimately in the improvement of my teaching practices, then, for me, validity exists. Thomas (1992) cites Munro in further discussion of validity, “validity assumes some absolute, fixed and verifiable truths” (p. 7). Munro continues to explain that ‘truths’ in qualitative inquiry are “partial, contested, intersubjective and illusive” (as cited in Thomas, 1992, p. 7). Butt (1992) also speaks to the issue of validity in qualitative inquiry, “the question of validity, then, is how well do we represent the perceptions, feelings, thinking, experience of persons, the breadth, depth, and interrelationships of issues, concerns and themes” (p. 29). I must keep in mind that each individual’s response is of value and must be treated with respect. I remained open to the possibility that there would be many issues that could come up in the process of this research. For this reason I did not start with a hypothesis. I feel it would potentially limit the study.



2. **Analysis** – It takes a great deal of time to read and find emergent themes. However, I felt it was important that the needs of the students were heard through their voices. Their issues must come to me via their own language. Wilson (1998 ) believes “qualitative research strives to understand the world as seen through the eyes of the participant” (p. 1). Hearing (reading) their stories allowed me to ‘see’ through their eyes. Clandinin and Connelly (1989) cite Novak (1975), “story ... is an ancient and altogether human method. The human being alone among the creatures on the earth is a storytelling animal: sees the present rising out of a past, leading into a future; perceives reality in narrative form” (p. 1). It seems logical to then put the students’ thoughts on paper. If the goal of qualitative study is to view reality as perceived by the respondents, then it follows that we must value the ‘way’ it is written or said. Thomas (1992) reveals that “our understanding of the world is given by the language we have to describe it; we are spoken by our discourse” (p. 1). Essentially, it seems disadvantageous to study the issues of junior high students without hearing the words and phrases used by those students. In conclusion, although the analysis will be time consuming, the process of presenting the students’ issues through the use of their own words is deliberate and based on previous study and research.

#### Anticipated Outcomes

It was anticipated that this study would allow me insight into the perceptions of 12 junior high school students about their schooling experience, and specifically, about identifying what contributes to a positive junior high school experience. As Mee (1997) states, “to understand students, educators should go directly to them and learn how they view the world, school, and their own learning” (p. 2). It was hoped that through a clearer

understanding of issues important to students, I would be able to make changes within my classroom that will contribute to an environment conducive to learning. These findings will also be important to share with administrators in my school, who, in their journey to provide meaningful experiences for adolescent learners, will find the perceptions of their students helpful. As well, teachers who have a desire to teach at the middle level, will find the insights of these students encouraging. It is only through the personal revelations of students that we can truly discover what it is that is so important to those we teach. "One who believes that most students are responsible and motivated feels differently about student voice than someone who sees kids as protohumans seeking any excuse to avoid work and cut classes" (Johnson, 1991, p. 4). I expect that those teachers of adolescents would perceive students as people with valuable opinions and believe that those opinions will prove helpful in programming for adolescents to provide the best curriculum and school environment possible.

## **The Data**

### **Process**

Clandinin and Connelly (1989) speak of two important elements of narrative research; reflection and deliberation. Reflecting on where we once were allows us to think of where we would like to be. What issues need to be visited? Why are these issues important? Deliberation takes that reflection, and the study it ultimately suggests, one step further. Through the study, we have gathered information. What do we do with it? Where is it we go from here? and How do we get there? (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p.10).

As soon as the students finished their written responses, I printed each of their saved documents. Reading and analyzing the information, I was able to extract the themes that seemed most prevalent. Radnofsky (1995) emphasises the importance of interaction with the data because the intensity of the interaction allows the researcher to see the patterns. She uses colour as a means of organizing her data. Her theory behind using colour is that, “As the brain overloads with words---hundreds of thousands of them--- the eye remembers shapes, colors, signs, and symbols, etc. that stand for other meanings” (p. 5). I used a variation of her idea to indicate the main themes and, with coloured pencil crayons, I began circling the themes in the data. The themes centred around the topics I introduced during the grade level interview and the students clarified or simply re-addressed the issues.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) also offer some suggestions of what to do with gathered information. The authors feel it is important that, while reading through the information,

the researcher start “developing a preliminary list of coding categories” (p. 176). They also cite Miles and Huberman (1984) when they point out the relevance of jotting down ideas regarding relationships that may be noticed in the reading. Once codes have been determined, Bogdan and Biklen suggest re-reading the data and assigning codes to the writing, in the margins, as they apply. It is at this point that codes may need to be modified if they are not as workable as initially thought. Once this stage was complete, I transferred the information onto index cards, as suggested by Bodgan and Biklen. These cards were organized with code titles at the top of each card and the information fitting that code transcribed from the data sheets. This process allowed me to focus on the words and ideas communicated by the students. Wolcott (1994) supports the importance of displaying the information but cautions the researcher to pay close attention to the possibility of over-using “graphics and visualization” (p. 31). He believes that words are the tools that provide the information necessary for the transformation of data. I was conscious of the words of the students and wished to maintain the integrity of their responses. It was important that their words become part of the text so I transcribed exact wording onto the index cards.

Immediately following the grade level interviews, I sat down with the tape recorder and transcribed the information. The transcription resulted in 22 pages of data. Then, using the written responses and the transcripts, I revisited the original themes I had extracted earlier. Wilson (1998) cites Strauss (1987) in a discussion of the important steps involved in coding qualitative data. Strauss points out that following the initial coding, which occurs right after the interview, and involves reading the transcript, and making any notes about tone or behaviour, it is important to go through a second round of coding.

This second round of coding requires the researcher to go through a line-by-line analysis of the data. It is at this point that the researcher must identify major themes as well as sub-themes. I took the major themes and sub-themes, and made appropriate revisions, and placed them on index cards. I then went through all of the data and, again, transcribed student quotes that pertained to each of these themes.

My process for data analysis is described here so that readers have a clear perception of the process used to extract the data that makes up the bulk of this study.

The next chapter presents the results of my analysis by focussing on the major themes that emerged from the data.

## Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the responses of the 12 students who participated in the study. Each student responded, in writing, to five prompts and then participated in grade level group interviews. The purpose of gathering the student responses was to discover and document the factors that contribute to a positive school experience for these students.

The responses were organized through the use of student codes that will be used throughout this chapter. For example, (F 1-7) indicates a female grade seven student. The second female in grade seven will be designated (F 2-7). This same coding procedure was used with the remainder of the students with the male students recognized with an 'M', for example, (M 1-7). In addition, I indicated the information gathered from the students' writing by adding a 'W' at the end of the student code, (F 1-7 W). As well, I indicated information gathered from the group interviews by adding a 'T' for transcript at the end of each student code. Any misspellings found in the students' responses remain in the text because I felt it was important that their voices be heard in the manner in which they were delivered.

The initial prompt was an open-ended sentence starter, "Junior High School is...". The students' responses to this prompt provided a base from which to start this discussion of what makes school a positive experience for the 12 students who participated in the study. From this point, I presented those factors the students designated as negative and then the factors the students designated as positive.

**Junior High School is...**

The first prompt to which the students responded, in writing, was “Junior high school is...”. I felt this question would set the scene and allow me a chance to get an overall feeling as to the students’ attitude toward junior high school.

The grade seven students responded to the differences they perceived between elementary school and junior high school. They had only been in junior high school for approximately a month at the time of the study, which may well have affected their responses.

A great place to be. I love junior high because I'm with all of my friends. We have an awesome time! My homeroom teacher is great to. I like how you get to choose "opion" it give's me a variety of things to do. I think that we should have boys and girls together in gym because it makes both boys and girls work so much harder. Or at least it helps me to. I think the lockers are a great idea cause you can store your stuff in them. I hate it when someone picks the key part on the back of your lock though (F 1-7 W).

Pretty good. I like that we get lockers. Mostly to me Junior High is just school. It's a place I come to learn that's better than elementary but still just school. It's a place where there's teachers, good student's and bad students (F 2-7 W).

just another step in life that we have to take to get to being an adult (M 1-7 W).

Junior high is better than elementary because you have more freedom at lunch and the dances. It is more slow because all the classes take longer but I like the choices you get for options. I think that it is better safer to bring stuff because of the lockers (M 2-7 W).

Three of the four students were still excited about having lockers. The security of storing their own things in their own lockers is apparently a positive aspect of junior high school. Lockers and locks often seem to be a big deal to the incoming grade seven students and they look forward to receiving their locker number. Lockers represent a little place that belongs only to them and students often decorate their lockers with magnets, pictures, and cuttings from magazine pages.

Choice of option classes was also mentioned by most of the grade seven students. These are classes that students may choose and this, for most students, was the first time they were involved in choosing a subject they wished to study.

Two students also wrote of the enjoyment of being with friends and having more “freedom” at noon hours. This was a time for them to spend with friends and escape adults. All of the grade seven students mentioned, or agreed with, the importance of friends during the group interview. This is clear evidence of the importance friends and peers play in the lives of junior high students.

Apart from the choice of options, none of the students wrote about curriculum. Their interests seem to reside in the differences perceived between elementary school and junior high school. These differences may be physical, such as the lockers or perhaps viewed as part of their ‘growing up’ process, for example, the freedom they feel they have at noon. For two of the students school is viewed as a place to which they have to go.

The grade eight students seemed to view junior high school a little differently. Where the grade seven students were happy with lockers, freedom, and a chance to be with friends, the grade eight students seemed to view school as an important step in their lives.



All of them mentioned learning and most embellished on the importance of that learning. Their notion of what students learned in junior high school encompassed much more than the subject areas.

Junior high school is a place where teenagers can go to learn to become somebody when they're older. It teaches them the knowledge they need to learn to get around in the world and to understand the world. It teaches them the importance of getting a good education, and that going to college or university when their older is the best decision they will make in their life. I think school can be fun and interesting if you make it, but some people don't understand how to make it that way and therefore they just think it is boring and then they stop trying (F 1-8 W).

I think that junior high school is a part of every day life. It is a place to learn and grow in more ways than one. You learn basic math, science, L.A, and social studies information but, you also learn how to act in public, behave around others and how to make friends (M 1-8 W).

Junior high school is a place where students come to learn. Students learn about what life is, what life can become, and what to expect from life. We also learn how to cope with life (M2- W).

An institution for students to learn in. Ha Ha that's close to the dictionary definition I think! Well I think Junior high is a fun place to learn things in. There are some good things and bad things about Jr. high and it is scary at first (F 2-8 W).

These grade eight students, for the most part, view school as not only a place to learn about core subjects but also a place in which they learn about life. This knowledge prepares them for the futures they envision for themselves as well as teaching them how

to socialize in their world. These are pretty tall orders for schools, however, at the same time, important for educators to know. The suggestion here is that students want more than teachers who can provide facts, although they seem to accept the importance of the school subjects. Students want to go out into the world prepared for whatever might be presented to them and they see the value of an education in that preparation.

One of the grade nine boys echoed the attitude that junior high school is a place for learning and, at the same time, projected his feelings about a world without the opportunities found in junior high school.

A place where students can learn. It is a very important part of a person's life. I think that junior high is a good place to hang out and meet new people. I feel that school is a good way to keep kids out of trouble during the day and hopefully educate them about life. The Junior High years are the time in life when a person gains some real experience with people relations and hard work. Without junior high, I feel that a person would be indefinitely crippled in the real world (M 1-9W).

The importance of school being a safe environment was also mentioned by a grade nine girl, "school is the type of environment that is easy to relax in" (F 1-9 W). She also spoke of teachers playing a role in the negative side to school, mainly when they do not return the respect they demand from students. Environment and the role of teachers was mentioned by the second grade nine girl in the study, "I feel that teachers are what make school positive or negative. I think that school is a safety cushion for me. When things are bad with friends, or family, I know that I still have school, and I don't HAVE to interact with those people!" (F 2-9).

One of the grade nine boys took this opportunity to share an opinion about not only junior high but also his perception of the teachers, “A place to grow and learn (hahahahaha). Where you go to learn and be educated by dinosaurs who don't know what there talking about. Oh and a place to hang out with your friends” (M 2-9 W).

The statements made by the students in each of the three grades provided an initial sense of what junior high school is in the minds of the students who participated in this study. They wrote about junior high as a time of their lives, a place, teachers, education, and friends. These opinions were written individually with no chance for collaboration. It was not until the grade level interviews that the students had the opportunity to hear other opinions and share their own ideas.

With an idea of how junior high is perceived by these students, it is easier to begin to understand what it is teachers need to do in order to make the experience of junior high more positive. The grade seven students were making a transition and understanding the excitements and worries attached to that transition assists teachers in making program decisions. For example, option choice is important, therefore the school must do everything possible to provide opportunities for success in that choice. Saying that we offer choice may not be enough, we need to make sure the choices are available.

These grade eight students were excited by the chance to learn. They view school as a place where they will learn to become the people they will be in the future. They were looking forward and seeing what life potentially has to offer. These particular students were interested in the skills that will prove helpful in their futures. Schools are in the perfect position to offer opportunities within which these students can gain these life skills.

For the most part, the grade nine students recognized the importance of junior high but did not view it as a perfect place. They seem to want a safe environment in which to learn. Even the student who described teachers as “dinosaurs” also admitted to junior high being a place to learn. What he needs to make junior high a positive experience remains to be seen.

#### Negative Attributes of Junior High School

Before we can really understand what makes school a positive experience, I think it is important to look at what makes school a negative experience as it is possible to learn from the negative experiences as well as the positive. The students, in both their written and verbal responses, shared their opinions of what makes junior high a negative place to be. Interestingly, every student spoke mainly of things people do to make junior high negative. They all mentioned either the behaviour of other students or the behaviour of teachers as the main reasons for a negative junior high experience.

#### Negative Attributes of Students

Bullies. Bullying was a theme that showed up at each of the grade levels. The grade seven students seemed nervous about the possibility that they, or their friends, might become the target of bullies. They also associated bullies with drugs. Much of the conversation seemed to relate to the fear of the unknown. Would they become victims of bullying or would they be lucky enough to escape the experience? There was also the feeling of one grade seven girl that if you were picked on you “won’t feel good about yourself and you might try and do bad things” (F 1-7 T).

The grade eight students recognized that the bullies needed to feel that they had power over other people and ultimately made school a negative place to be. This grade level

“spoke” more freely of bullying in the schools in their written portion of the study.

During the grade eight group interview, a grade eight girl recounted a story from when she was in elementary school. She had transferred schools and in her new school met up with a girl she knew. This particular girl was teased a lot and nobody seemed to want to be her friend. The student participant admitted to rebuffing this girl’s friendly advances because of peer pressure. “Like no one liked her and I wanted to fit in because I was the new girl” (F 2-8 T). This is an incident that she not only remembers clearly but also regrets. One student even went as far as suggesting the reinstatement of the strap, feeling that if it were implemented, the bullying would be cut in half (M 2-8 T). This response may have been a reaction to having lived with bullying in his recently completed grade seven year. “Through-out my school years, I’ve been picked on for little things, such as the arch in my nose, or the cloths I wear, and whenever I told my teacher, the bully would stop, bugging me, for a while, but pick on someone else” (M 2-8 W).

The grade nine students had an alarmingly resigned attitude toward bullying. One grade nine boy described the whole situation as a “food chain” (M 2-9 T). The “chain” involved the students in the higher grade picking on those in the lower grade(s). According to these students, grade seven students tried to hook up with grade nine students as an attempt to secure safety. This tactic, according to the grade nine students, never worked really well because “if they’re bullied, they’re always gonna be bullied” (F 2-9 T). Equally, when they discussed the bullies they all agreed that “no matter what you do, how you punish them they’re still gonna do it. Like if they’re a bully then they’re a bully, they’re always gonna be a bully” (F 1-9 T). When asked if they played a role in rectifying the bullying situation, the general feeling was that if they tried to help they

would simply become bullied as well. Two students went as far as telling me that bullying was simply “hard to stop” and that it would take a “mature person to fix it and junior high isn’t mature” (M 1-9 T, M 2-9 T). In regards to the responsibility of the adults in the school, the students believed that administrators and teachers did not have the power to solve the situation. It was not that we, as adults, would not act but that we could not act. The power and control is on the side of the bullies; that is how the bullying situation was seen by these students. One strong concern shared by a grade nine student was the fear that bullying may lead to violence. He talked about the relatively recent school shooting incidents. He also mentioned that negative things going on in schools “looks bad on the school as well as the students” (M 1-9 T). I believe that these students were concerned about the bullying but were unsure about how to deal with it, or even if it could be dealt with successfully.

Hoover and Oliver (1996) found, in their investigations, that the middle-school years are a particularly intense time for bullying. They state that 75% to 90% of students admit to having experienced bullying during their school years. Although some of those experiences may have occurred during elementary school years, it was found that, “bullying interfered with growth most during the period spanning fifth through eighth grades”(Hoover & Oliver, 1996, p. 3). Arora and Thompson (1987), cited by Hoover and Oliver (1996), found that many of the students they interviewed believed that bullying was simply part of the natural order of things. McMahon (1995) agrees that students often accept bullying as behaviour expected at this stage in their lives. He also reports that students may view victims as deserving of the bullying behaviour. O'Connell, Sedighdeilami, Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Atlas, Smith, and Charach (1997) discovered

in their study of 4,743 students in grades one through eight that as students grew older, the likelihood of them helping a victim of bullying decreased. Approximately 39% of junior high students admitted that they would not assist someone who was being bullied. Peer pressure and the fear of being hurt themselves seem to have a role in the students' disinclination to help. This attitude reflects the feelings of helplessness that some of the 12 students participating in the study voiced. Often bullying behaviour is not reported to the school as the students are fearful of the repercussions.

Disruptive Students. Disruptive students were also categorized as a negative aspect of the junior high school experience. The resentment among the students seemed to reside in the fact that simply because some students chose not to learn, it should not affect the rest of the class. Students found it difficult to pay attention and listen if there were disruptive students present. The presence of bullies also meant, according to the students, that privileges for the majority were lost due to the actions of a few. The notion of fairness, so strong in adolescents, was evident here. One grade seven student (M 1-7 T) felt that one solution would be smaller classes. He believed that smaller classes might cut down on the number of disruptive students. In larger classes there are more people and "when some talk, it's hard to pay attention", agreed a grade seven girl (F 1-7 T). Fewer distracting people would make it easier for other students to learn. One student stated that the things that make school negative are "people that don't follow the rules, teachers or other people in the school that don't care about the best interest of the students, and people that don't want to learn" (M 1-7 W). Disruptions are occurring because some students do not want to learn and do not seem to care about the other students in the school. One grade eight boy mentioned the negative aspects of being a target of a bully and having disruptive

students in class in the same sentence (M 1-8 W). This feeling was so important to him, that he wrote about it twice and spoke about it during the grade group interview. Bullying and disrupting seemed to have a strong connection for this student. Perhaps he perceived the students who naturally disrupt class as being the same ones who exhibit bullying behaviour. A grade nine student agreed with the negative presence of disruptive students, “Junior high can be a negative place because some people do not like to learn, and instead disrupt class. This can be annoying and counter-productive for the other students in the class” (M 1-9 W). The main point here seemed to be that students do want to learn and feel frustrated when the behaviours of others prevent them from doing so.

Disturbances were also blamed on those students who refused to follow the rules of the school. One grade eight girl believed strongly that, “Allowing kids to get away with inappropriate behaviour, makes school a negative place to be because it disrupts the kids that are trying to listen and do their work, and it frustrates them to think that the teachers aren’t doing anything about it” (F 1-8 W).

#### Negative Attributes of Teachers

Teachers were also singled out as potentially making school a negative experience by ten of the 12 participating students. It was stated that it was vital for teachers to care about students. The teachers viewed as uncaring exhibited a number of behaviours. Yelling, for example, was interpreted by one grade seven student as an uncaring behaviour. She believed that yelling made the students feel “like we’re stupid or like we always do things wrong or like we’re bad kids, it’s very negative” (F 2-7 W). She agreed with the need for a teacher to be firm, but yelling simply meant, to her, that the teacher did not care and was not encouraging. There seemed to be a fine line between being strict



and being uncaring. Straus (1992) discovered that teachers who show negative attitudes toward their students are in danger of causing a shut down of that student's learning. In her study of grade eight students, it became evident that students at this stage need to know that a teacher cares more than they need to know the amount of knowledge that teacher possesses. The caring connection needed to be in evidence before effective learning could occur.

One grade nine girl strongly stated, "I think that teachers are what MAKE junior high negative or positive! If the teacher treats me with respect and makes school a positive experience, than school becomes a positive place to be" (F 2-9 W). She was adamant that teachers needed to show respect to the students and never use methods such as smacking desks with metre sticks. This behaviour would seem to fit in the category of "teacher with bad attitudes that don't encourage you" (M 2-9 W).

Teachers are meant to be firm and fair. They have the job of expecting clearly explained behaviours as well as handing out consequences when necessary. One grade eight student pointed out that if a student gets away with inappropriate behaviours "over and over again without a consequence ... this makes them think that they can get away with not doing something, such as homework" (F 1-8 W). A grade nine boy pointed out that it was up to the teachers to set the standards for work done by students. He felt that "the standards are set too low in all the core areas. Students aren't pushed hard enough to do better. They concentrate on passing and that's it. Once they get passed a certain percentage, they don't care anymore. ... I do feel that students should be expected to do better quality work" (M 1-9 W).

Ignoring students and not hearing them was another behaviour deemed important enough to mention by grade eight students. This treatment showed lack of encouragement on the teacher's part. This opinion connects closely with the grade nine students' feelings that students do not receive the respect they deserve from teachers. One grade nine girl puts it quite clearly, "They [teachers] think that if we ask a question we're dumb or don't care about the subject/topic. Some teachers have no respect for us and they don't take our comments into consideration, they think... 'I'm the teacher I know all!'" This is not right!!!" (F 2-9 W).

The students seem to look to the teacher to establish the atmosphere within the classroom. They admitted to testing the boundaries from time to time but would ultimately respect the teacher who maintained a positive yet firm environment.

#### Positive Attributes of Junior High School

Again, all of the students mentioned the people within the school as being responsible for making school positive. For the most part, it seemed that the teachers were the most responsible for the positive experience of junior high school. These twelve students did not seem to view themselves as the primary players in making school positive.

#### Positive Attributes of Students

A grade nine girl put it beautifully, "Junior high can be positive if we all work together" (F 1-9 W). Relationships that enable students to share ideas and feel safe are paramount to positive feelings toward junior high school. The grade seven students seemed to view friends as a buffer zone. They were arriving at a new school with a lot of new experiences and expectations, and they were, understandably, a little nervous. They needed their friends to help them through the experience of a new environment. Many of

the grade seven students did not know what to expect upon entering junior high school and have envisioned all sorts of frightening experiences. Friends provide a sense of belonging, there is someone with whom they could share the excitements, fears, and questions of junior high. Having friends meant you didn't feel like a "loser" (M 1-7 T). Friends also helped a student "get through school" (M 1-7 T). Situations such as a locker not opening, seemed a little less dire if a friend was there to help. Without friends, "you're just gonna be like, you'll feel left out and lonely" (F 1-7 T). Friends also were potential protection against bullies ( F1-7 T).

Two of the grade eight students mentioned the importance of friends in their writing. "I think having friends is another very important part of making junior a better place to be"(M 1-8 W). "If you had no friends in your school" (F 2-8 W), school would be a negative place to be.

The grade nine students seemed to view friends as a given. They just assumed they would have friends. This didn't seem to be an area they felt they needed to discuss at length. They admitted that friends were important and that they enjoyed working with peers on projects but they all seemed secure in their knowledge that they belonged. Interestingly, although they knew each other, they did not necessarily hang out together. Different friendship groups were in existence within this group of grade nine students. They did, however, discuss the importance of getting along and being happy.

#### Positive Attributes of Teachers

Students spoke often of the importance of positive teachers. The three most important attributes of a teacher are, according to the students, being nice, caring about students and possessing a respectful attitude.

What is a nice teacher? When speaking of the positive attributes of teachers, the term 'nice' was commonly used by the students. When I asked for clarification of nice, or what nice would look like in a teacher, I was given a number of different responses.

A teacher who tried to understand the students was categorized as nice. As a grade seven girl told me, "When they try to understand us rather than reprimand us it brings out our good side. When they do that it makes us want to please them, not hate them" (F 2-7 W). Understanding a student's point of view is accomplished through listening to that student. This behaviour appears to be possibly one of the most important attributes a teacher can possess as many of the other positive qualities hinge on a teacher's ability to listen. A grade eight girl, in her discussion of a positive or nice teacher simply put it, "They'll listen to what you have to say" (F 1-8 T). A grade nine boy continued, "The teachers are receptive and understanding" (M 1-9 W). One of the grade eight boys gave a specific example of an understanding teacher, "If you have way too much homework then they will respect that and cut down on what they assign" (M 2-8 T). The students did not feel understood and heard unless a teacher listened to their opinions and feelings.

Another behaviour that would lead students to believe a teacher to be nice involved the teacher's voice. Teachers who made a habit of yelling or raising their voices were viewed negatively by the students. According to these 12 participants, friendly or nice teachers did not yell. One student even believed that, "If a teacher allows you "stupid" questions and answers them without a temper, that makes school a positive experience" (F 2-9 W). Upon listening to their comments, it was possible to understand the importance of feeling safe enough to succeed. Learning is an ongoing process and the

teacher that allows for mistakes, differences of opinion, and provides an arena for discussion has a better chance of being viewed as nice by the students.

Interestingly, nice does not mean that a teacher cannot be firm. While a nice teacher should, as a grade seven girl informed me, “encourage students and make them feel good” (F 2-7 W), they should also have expectations. The same grade seven girl continued her discussion of nice teachers with this insight, “When a kid is bad then they [teachers] need to be firm and a bit strict but not make us feel bad” (F 2-7 W). A grade eight girl echoed these sentiments with her comment, “They don’t treat us like kindergarteners” (F 2-8 T). These students wish to be viewed as young adults, not children. Many are even willing to accept the consequences of this choice, “They [teachers] make sure that all lessons are learned by all and that the students do their best” (M 1-9 W). Students do want to learn and teachers are meant to facilitate that learning. A teacher without expectations is a teacher who cannot expect the students to take their learning seriously. One grade nine girl sums it up, “It’s plain and simple, if you hand something in late, your fault, if you need help, ask and she will be there and help you with whatever you need for however long it takes for you to get it, she’s a teacher” (F 2-9 W).

What is a caring teacher? Although ‘nice’ and ‘caring’ seemed to be similar categorizations, there were some specific attributes the students applied to ‘caring’ teachers. The grade seven students defined caring as someone who noticed when they [the students] needed help. A teacher showed this caring attitude by asking the student to stay after school for extra help. The students also indicated that a teacher should know if

an assignment has not been completed. What many teachers may view as simply book-keeping activities are viewed by these students as caring behaviours.

According to one grade seven student, a caring teacher also gives compliments (M 1-7 T). Again, this stresses the importance of noticing the students. As well as compliments, encouraging students is of vital importance if you are going to be a caring teacher. A teacher who is willing to explain concepts a number of different ways if a student does not understand is a teacher who the grade seven students would designate as caring. “And they like try to understand what you think and like try to make it as easy as you can when you don’t understand” (M 2-7 T). “They step out of their way to help you do something you don’t understand” (M 2-8 T). The underlying feeling here is one of self-confidence and self-esteem. When a teacher yells, the students feel as though they have not accomplished what they set out to do, thus feeling as though they have failed. Grade seven students repeatedly mentioned the importance of students being able to ask for help and teachers taking the time to explain a concept in a number of different ways. A caring teacher is expected to recognize that not all students understand concepts the same way or at the same speed.

One of the grade eight students took the definition of caring one step further. She felt that a caring teacher listened “to students even if they don’t agree with the student” (F1-8 T). The grade eight students were perhaps discovering their own opinions and were more apt to discuss issues with a teacher simply for the enjoyment of the process. Students also noticed if teachers listened to non-school topics. This, according to one grade eight boy, allowed the student to feel as though he was on more of an equal footing with the teacher.

Students needed to feel that they had a voice, a chance to explain the situation to the teacher. Students also wanted their teacher to know about their “out of school lives”.

Respect. Respect was the most prevalent theme found in the grade nine writings and interview. It was unequivocally believed that students did not always receive the respect they deserved from teachers. As with the grade seven students, the grade nines felt that teachers should encourage their students and lack of respect represented lack of encouragement. “Teachers expect things such as respect from students but don’t always give it back” (F 1-9 W), stated a grade nine girl. During the interview, it came out that respect is a two-way street. Both students and teachers must earn respect, “anything teachers expect from students they should return” (F 1-9 W). It was also recognized that everyone must earn the respect. One grade nine girl explained, “the teacher might not respect you because you’re a rotten kid in class. Like you have to earn the respect, and like they have to earn the respect” (F 1-9 T). “If we don’t respect the teacher it’s because we don’t think the teacher respects us” (F 2-9 T), clarified the other grade nine girl.

The intensity of the need for respect surprised me. The grade nine students believe that respect affects all of their work. Lack of respect meant that students would not bother listening to the teacher, and may consider not handing in assignments. One of the girls admitted, “If we don’t feel the teacher has respect for us then we don’t feel the work needs to be done” (F 2-9 T). There seems to be a strong connection between the way a student feels about a teacher and the amount of work that student will put into the class. Respect shows a caring attitude and if a student does not feel that a teacher cares, there is a chance that a student will not work for that teacher. The teacher needs to care about the student and the work coming from that student. Then it seems more likely the students

will want to seek approval from the teacher. If you are respected as a teacher, the students want to work well for you. A grade nine boy informed me that respect is also tied into feelings about the assignment itself. “If you don’t respect the teacher you’ll think it’s [work] pointless and not do it” (M 2-9 T).

What is respect? According to the students, respect involved a number of teacher behaviours; listening and treating students fairly being two of the most important. A respectful teacher, according to a grade nine girl, is one who recognizes the validity of an opinion, “She always respects us and our opinion, no matter what the subject” (F 1-9 W). According to one of the grade nine girls, school spirit was even linked to respect, “you really have to believe in your school... if you don’t like your school or don’t like the teachers in your school or something along those lines then you have no school spirit” (F 2-9 T).

During the grade nine group interview, the group agreed that, “We respect the teachers who know what they are doing”. This expectation was only mentioned as an issue at the grade nine level. It was important that their teacher have knowledge specific to the subject. A teacher who did not know the answer to a question but followed through in the search for that answer received more respect than the teacher that “thinks they know it all” (F 2-9 T) explained a grade nine student. It is a question of fair treatment. As one grade nine girl pointed out, “you make us admit when we don’t know something” (F 2-9 T). It is apparent that the teacher who is honest and tries, is going to be more successful in the eyes of the students. “You [the students] have to be understanding in that respect but like when they [teachers] totally have no clue and they’re not really trying to have a



clue, that's when it's like, 'just never mind'". These students seemed to need to feel that the teachers respect their intelligence enough to recognize the reality of a situation.

Role of the teacher. When the students spoke of the role of teacher within the classroom and how these roles made school positive, their opinions were refreshing as they did not illustrate the need for major changes, just the need for teachers to provide variety. They did not expect their teachers to be circus entertainers but they all believed that teachers should be fun. However, in order to make learning fun, it was not necessary to make major changes in the routine of the classroom. The students wanted to learn but they wanted to learn through the use of a variety of teaching strategies.

They seemed to appreciate a teacher who took the time to plan something fun to do in the classroom. "Learning is fun when a teacher plans games, something different" (F 1-7 T), reminded one of the grade seven girls. This sentiment was echoed by a grade eight boy, "Games are interesting, make learning fun" (M 1-8 T). Games allowed the students to learn in a different way and could take on a number of forms. They could be math games using cards, social studies review games following the Jeopardy format, or language arts games reviewing comprehension. The fact that a teacher took the time to use games as a method proved they cared enough to try something different and this was viewed as a positive attribute.

Other hands-on activities, such as science labs, math games, projects, or extra-curricular activities such as badminton club or noon volleyball, were positively anticipated by students. Although the students were now talking about activities, they still attributed the success of the activities to teachers. It was the responsibility of the teachers and adults in the school to make sure there are activities offered. Science becomes far

more interesting if there are labs. “Science labs make learning fun” (F 1-8 T), agreed a grade eight girl. Students appreciated the chance to “do” things. This is one of the reasons that options are so popular.

Collaborative or group work was also viewed positively by students. They believed that working together resulted in more creative and meaningful learning. They felt that if they were able to work with other students, then they would not become bored. Boredom could potentially lead to off-task activities such as note writing. As one grade nine girl told me, “If you’re in a group you still get to talk to other people when you work and the teacher thinks you don’t do work when you’re in a group. I usually get more work done when I’m in a group. We’re talking it over with other people, we’re discussing other opinions. Getting more opinions on things so you get more ideas of what to do it’s just better” (F 1-9 T). One grade nine boy viewed group work as a move, on the teachers’ part, “to be entertaining – not drone on for 45 minutes” (M 2-9 T). He then admitted that an entertaining teacher is one who impresses students. His clarification of entertaining and impressive turned out to be when a teacher took the time to think up fun activities and games to use in the classroom.

The grade seven students spoke of the volume of homework given by teachers and one of the boys felt that “it got in the way of spending time with friends” (M 1-7 T). They believed that they received more homework than they had in elementary school and found it to be “harder work” (M 1-7 T). Both grade seven and eight students appreciated a teacher who did not assign too much homework. One grade eight boy viewed the homework as a point of negotiation with a teacher. If teachers recognized that students had lives outside of school, they would “cut down on what they assign” (M 2-8 T). It

was not simply that teachers not assign homework, but, more importantly, that they saw their students as individuals with lives of value. “Some teachers give way too much homework and don’t really realize that we have other things to do in our lives beside do hours of homework each night” (F 1-8 W).

#### Ideal School

The final challenge for the students in the grade group interview was to imagine the ideal school. I then asked them to describe that school for me. I have left the responses in grade level groups as I feel it allows me insight as to the issues that still seem to rise to the top for each of the grade levels. I have also left their quotes intact and in the order in which they responded. A short discussion of background follows each statement.

#### The Ideal School for the Grade Seven Students

Many of the responses at the grade seven level spoke of the importance of the physical plant and technology. Some of the initial worries for many grade seven students involve the fear of getting lost and arriving to class late in the new school and I think some of those fears have come out during this portion of the study. They also worry about fitting in with older students and do not want to get in their way or appear foolish in front of them.

1. “You’d have lanes in the hallways” (M 1-7 T). This was probably in response to the fact that our hallways are very congested. We have a large number of students and narrow hallways. Not only is the congestion a problem, but also the behaviour of the students causes problems for some students. In a confined space there is a lot of pushing and shoving that has been reported as being intimidating for some students.

2. **“There’d be like a big cafeteria with all these different places to eat” (F 1-7 T). We have a student center and small gymnasium in which tables are set up for the students. Students either bring lunch or can purchase “junk food” and submarine sandwiches at the tuck shop. Students do not have a wide choice of food available for purchase. If they bring food from home, there are a handful of microwaves in which to heat their lunches. The lunch environment seems limiting for some students. This limitation seems to be one of the reasons that students frequent the fast food franchises located a few blocks away from the school.**
3. **“Have special notification on your lockers so like you just put your finger on it and it would open instead of doing the lock every time” (M 1-7 T). Grade seven students are often worried or anxious about the locks on their lockers. They complain that they find it intimidating to have other students watching them as they have trouble opening their lockers. The teachers of grade seven students will often give extra time in class for lock opening practice in hopes that the students will feel more confident when in the hallways. This need is unique to students at this grade level.**
4. **“Give us more time to change in gym. Our teacher lets us out at the bell and we don’t have time to change, then we’re late for our class” (F 1-7). For most students, junior high school is the first time they are expected to change into gym strip for physical education classes. This change in routine can be disconcerting for some students. Not only may they find themselves changing in front of their peers, but also they are expected to do so quickly. Little time is given for “freshening up.”**
5. **“A separate classroom where kids could talk so we don’t clog up the hallways” (M 2-7). Students tend to stop in the middle of the hallway to conduct conversations. They**

are constantly being encouraged to find a room in which to socialize. Unfortunately, staying in one room is not always an easy choice as some of their friends may be in another room. It seems to be preferable to roam from room to room as they do not want to miss anything.

6. "It'd be better if there was like one floor for 7, 8, and 9 so like all the classes were like on one floor and you didn't have to like go downstairs. It'd be easier to get to class" (M 1-7 T). It is common for the grade seven students to get lost when they first come to the school. They are also a little nervous about going along the "grade nine hallway" as these students are often much taller and project an air of confidence that most grade seven students have not yet adopted.
7. "We'd have lap top computers" (F 1-7 T). This technological tool would mean that notes could be typed and not written. One of the students even thought that a computer that responds to voice and types out the spoken word would be great. The amount of work is sometimes a little overwhelming to new grade seven students. They may have difficulties adapting to the expectations of junior high school. One such expectation is that of note taking. Many of the students have verbalized dismay at the amount of written work necessary and seem to be on the lookout for simpler ways of wading through the work load. Apparently, a computer responding to the spoken voice, one per student, would solve the whole work problem.
8. "Maybe you'd have different classes. Like if you're ahead in math or something and you've learned some of it already and you know what you're doing, they'd put you ahead of something, a higher level" (F 1-7 T). Classes would allow the students to challenge their knowledge. If students could demonstrate that they know a concept,

they would be put ahead. Students seem to accept that they all work at different levels and would like to be recognized for their own achievements. They say they understand the concepts teachers use to reach as many students as possible but still wish they could have what they perceive as more freedom in their learning.

9. "I think with the teams they should have like a team for grade seveners" (F 2-7 T).

Students may feel a bit intimidated when it comes to trying out for a team with students from other grades. This particular student also felt that grade seven students would have a better chance of making a team if there were more open positions.

10. "Maybe the subjects spread out more, like no double classes" (M 1-7 T). This would mean, for example, that they would not have two math classes in one day. Students voiced a concern that this was too much of one subject. They get bored doing the same thing for too long. Knowing that double classes occur because of our complex scheduling difficulties does not make them any happier about seeing any subject more than once a day. The only time they seemed to want a subject for an extended period of time in a day was if there was a project they deemed exciting going on in that class. Often this appeared to be a hands-on project.

#### The Ideal School for the Grade Eight Students

When I asked the grade eight students to describe the ideal school, one of the first responses was to ask if they could describe the people that went to that ideal school. This was a departure from the grade seven responses and indicated that the roles of people in a school are important to some students. The grade eight students also mentioned technology, and seemed to enjoy imagining the possibilities. Physical plant issues were very similar to those of the grade seven students, focussing mainly on creating an

environment without busy hallways. One student mentioned an idea that would allow students to demonstrate their responsible behaviour.

1. “The people who go to that school would actually like listen and they wouldn’t goof off in class and everything” (F 2-8 T). This student continued by recalling a recent incident when a substitute teacher was disrespected by a student. The student in question openly disobeyed a school rule and when confronted by the substitute teacher, was rude. The student telling the story felt embarrassed by the student and for the teacher. He felt strongly that students should not be permitted to bully teachers. He also recognized that behaviours such as those displayed by the other boy got in the way of the learning important to some students.
2. “Teachers...if you try your hardest like and then they listen to you, you’ve tried your hardest ...this is as good as you can get” (F 2-8 T). Students needed to feel that they are being encouraged but not asked to do more than they are capable of achieving. Similar to the thoughts of the grade seven students on this subject, the grade eight students wished to be viewed as individuals within a group.
3. “I have something that is really bogus that would never happen, but it would be really neat to have little computers build in the corner of the desk. You wouldn’t have to like write out everything” (M 1-8 T). Students would not have to write notes, similar to what the grade seven students wanted. These students viewed technology as part of their lives and they want to use it to make their lives more streamlined and less complicated.
4. “We would have one floor... because like traffic jams at the top of the stairs, it’s really bad. Nobody lets in, everybody pushes. Wider hallways too” (M 2-8 T). The

grade eight students viewed the hallways during class changes as a prime opportunity for bullies to act. The congestion meant that more undetected bullying could occur while under the cover of other bodies.

5. "Maybe it's [school] like a circle, the whole thing is a circle" (M 1-8 T). The school would be built in a circular pattern with hallways radiating out from a central spot. These hallways would connect at the other end, giving students a number of different ways of getting to their destination. This hallway adjustment would all be in hopes of cutting down on the congestion in the hallways. Another suggestion was to have connecting doors between classes that would allow students to move to their next class without ever entering the hallway.
6. "...options like cooking and shop" (F 2-8 T). They want "more hands on options. So it's not just writing, you're more doing things. "Cause school gives you and education but not necessarily tells you how to live" (M 2-8 T). Students seem to enjoy the subjects that deal with skills for living. They also seem to appreciate those activities that allow them hands on experience.
7. "More intramural or something like that" (F 2-8 T). Students want more chances to participate in a variety of activities with their peers. Most of the intramural activities occur at noon and students appear to want things to do during their lunch hour. This opportunity is also a time for those students who may not make it on a school team to participate in cooperative activities. Nobody is turned down, willingness to participate is all that is required of a student.
8. "You get to choose when you want your DT as long as it's served" (M 2-8 T). One grade eight student came up with a plan in which students would be given the



responsibility of serving detentions when it was more convenient for them. “ And if you don’t, there’s some sort of punishment for delaying too much.” This student seemed to accept detentions as a consequence but wanted to be respected enough to serve that detention when it is convenient

9. “More comfortable chairs on desks” (M 2-8 T). Students spend a lot of time in their desks and it does not seem surprising that they wish to be comfortable. This tends to be a decision that is made out of the classroom. When new desks are purchased, students are not consulted.
10. “More time on computers” (F 2-8 T). In grade seven, as it is the introductory junior high year, students have two computer core classes a week. It is expected that they will learn a number of computer skills that will then be used in the following years. In grades eight and nine, students only have access to computer through their regularly scheduled core classes and an occasional option. We have two computer labs but they, obviously, need to be shared with all of the classes. Many students do not get to the computers as much as they would like. These students also spoke of the school providing the same computer programs so that they could work on assignments at home as well as at school.

#### The Ideal School for the Grade Nine Students

The grade nine students came up with fewer ideas but most of those ideas revolved around relationships with peers and teachers. Respect and involvement were prevalent themes in their responses. They wanted to feel that they belonged to the school community and wanted a say in the organization of that community.

1. "It would be bright, lots of windows" (F 2-9 T). One student made the comment that it was dull when all the walls were the same colour. "I remember when we had lots of murals on the walls and then they painted over them. You're just making the school look like a prison. Get the students involved in what the school looks like and then they're proud of their school and then they have more school spirit with leads back to respect" (F 1-9 T). This sentiment is echoed in the fact that many former students have visited the school to view their artwork that happens to be framed and placed throughout the school hallways. These students feel pride in the fact that their artwork is not only viewed by visitors, but also that it is still on the walls, sometimes years after they have left. The small act of framing and hanging student art contributes to positive memories of school. This holds true of the teachers as well. Many discussions of past students have occurred due to the viewing of a piece of art.
2. "Everyone would get along with each other" (F 2-9 T). These students spend a considerable amount of time in school and their need for a safe and pleasant environment is paramount. Students believed that if people got along with others, then many of the social problems, such as bullying, would disappear. Although they did not believe we can do anything about bullying, they still dream of a place where there is no conflict.
3. "Sometime it's the subject but lots of time it's the teacher that you don't want to be with" (F 2-9 T). If teachers were to realize this fact then perhaps they would work on relationships with their students. One grade nine girl even admitted that when she got to a teacher she liked and respected, she learned to like and appreciate a subject that,

prior to this, she had not liked. “With some teachers you like doing the work for them, they show respect and you do the work” (F 2-9 T).

4. “Pretty much everybody being involved in the school, the school beautification, the bright colours and things like that” (F 1-9 T). This seems to be linked to both the respect issue and the school pride issue. If the school belongs to all those within the four walls, then they should all be involved in making it a good place to spend time. Students want to provide input. They want to be involved in some of the decision making. They want to have an opportunity to speak their minds and contribute to their school in a constructive manner. Given the opportunity, students can and do make reasonable suggestions. One such suggestion was voiced by a grade nine boy, “Teachers should coordinate what they teach, for example, teach position papers the same way in all three grades” (M 2-9 T).
5. “No doubles [classes]” (F 1-9 T). These students also liked the variety of classes and did not want too much of one subject in one day. They admitted to feeling bored with double classes.
6. “It’s good to learn stuff like Power Point” (M 2-9 T). These students also recognize the need for technology in their lives and want to experience as many different programs as possible. This is the time for introduction to new ideas. It is also fun to work with these programs and it does not feel like work to the students.
7. “Sometimes teachers expect too much and compare us to other classes” (F 2-9 T). The need to be seen as individuals is loud and clear in this statement. Students who want to learn are willing to work but still need to be encouraged in ways that

celebrate their own strengths. Being compared to another student with completely different strengths makes them feel insecure and as though they will never succeed.

8. “Teachers shouldn’t give up on us” (F 2-9 T). The fact that this statement finished the discussion of the ideal school is quite fitting. What is it students want out of school? Certainly some of their expectations revolved around the physical set-up of school, but much more important were the feelings they got from being in school. Students who have teachers who believe in them are more likely to believe in themselves. Students who have teachers who do not give up on them, are more likely not to give up on themselves.

Interestingly, the final statement, “Describe the ideal school ...”, brought out some different areas of importance. Some of the points were not brought up by the students earlier in their responses, either in their writing or in the group interviews.

#### Physical Set-up of the School

The physical set-up of the school was identified by students in all three grades. Some of the ideas, such as building a circular school, are a little more involved than others but the overriding notion is that of ease. Students wanted to be able to travel through their school without having to push and shove or without being pushed or shoved. They wanted to work in comfortable surroundings on comfortable chairs. They wanted to be surrounded by colour and light. It is their environment so it seems reasonable that they would be asked their thoughts on how the environment should look and feel. Perhaps, as we build new schools, we should be asking those who spend most of their time in the school what it should look like.

### Teacher Expectations

In the ideal school, teachers' expectations would be better suited to the abilities of their students. Students certainly need, and want, to be challenged but they also want to succeed. When teachers ask too much of their students, students feel as though they are failing. According to Scales (1996), the commonly asked questions by adolescents are, "Am I competent? Am I normal? Am I loveable and loving?" As a teacher, I can place reasonable expectations at the feet of my students and assist them in their journey. Students need a chance to realize what it is they are capable of and school is one of the places where students should be able to feel safe enough to try.

### Technology

Computers are swiftly becoming a common part of life. Many students are far more computer literate than some adults and will act as resources within classes. I certainly have learned a great deal about computers through my students. Some of the students simply wished to have more time working on and with computers while others were predicting new technology such as "notification on your lockers". Most of the students viewed computers as tools to make their lives simpler and have the attitude that advances in technology were just a matter of time. They also recognized that computer literacy was becoming more and more important in the work place and were keen to learn as much as they could about a variety of programs. Schools need to act upon this curiosity and enthusiasm and program accordingly.

### Curriculum and Scheduling

The one area of scheduling brought up by both the grade seven and grade nine students was the existence of double classes. At both levels, students felt that double

classes meant too much of one subject in a day. Students needed to know that what they were learning was meaningful. “When educators understand fully young adolescent realities, student learning will become more meaningful, and the lifelong decisions they [students] make will be more positive” (Mee, 1997, p. 5). Listening to the students’ perceptions of their learning allows us, as educators, the chance to understand their realities and adjust our outlook accordingly. They want classes that they perceive as allowing them to “do” not just work. Hands-on activities and extracurricular activities provide chances for the students to try new things and discover new abilities.

#### Student Behaviour

Although not a new topic for these students, student behaviour is obviously an important one. They emphasized the necessity of cooperation and collaboration in the success of a school. Students wanted to work in an environment of belonging. They wanted to work together and they wanted to get along. Although they do not know what to do about the negative aspects of student behaviour, such as bullying, they still wanted someone to do something. If they did not want this, there would not be statements such as, “everyone would get along with each other

## **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to discover what makes school a positive experience, based on the written and spoken perceptions of 12 junior high school students, representing each of the grades, 7, 8, and 9. The purpose of discovering students' feelings about school was to address the needs of students in the organization of school. As Goodlad (1984) states, "understanding schools is prerequisite to improving them" (p. 17). In this case, understanding student needs can result in effective programs and practices developed with those needs in mind.

The following list is in no particular order as I believe the order would vary based on the student and the situation.

### **Discoveries**

1. Students want to spend time with friends.
2. Students want teachers who care about them.
3. Students want to respect their teachers and wish to be respected in return.
4. Students want to learn.
5. Students want to be safe from bullies.
6. Students want a pleasing, safe, and comfortable physical environment.
7. Students want to be treated fairly.
8. Students want to be heard.
9. Students want to be involved in school activities.
10. Students want teachers to believe in them and not to give up on them.

None of the students brought up issues in exactly the same way or in exactly the same order. What is important is that these are the main themes that were written about and

verbalized by the students who participated in this study. In looking at each of the items on the above list in more detail, I will attempt to relate the realities of school as perceived by the students to the appropriate literature and research with the purpose of creating a set of recommendations to share with the broader educational community.

1. Students want to spend time with friends.

“Friendships are based on mutual trust and loyalty as well as upon the cooperation that dominates friendships in childhood” (Elkind, 1984, p. 70). Friends are meant to be there when needed and to simply share experiences of life. Students want to feel as though they belong and as one grade nine boy informed me, “if you don’t have people to talk to and hang out with, it’s the most horrible place to be.” Spending time with friends can also occur within the classroom. Students mentioned the enjoyment they experienced when permitted to work in groups. “Most young adolescents want to be part of a group, so cooperative learning seems to be a natural and promising strategy for helping them learn” (George, Stevenson, Thomason, Beane, 1992, p. 73). The authors also state that teachers notice “greater social support among the students” (George et al., 1992, p. 73) when they work cooperatively. Schools are not made up of isolated individuals (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, 1994) but rather of individuals that make up teams of collaborative achievers. Hanging out with friends seems to be not only a way for students to spend time, but also a way to learn about the world around them.

2. Students want teachers who care about them.

Part of this issue seems to be the fact that if someone else does not care about the students, why should the students care about themselves? Teachers can be



instrumental in assisting students see their own potential and ability. “Knowing that you can get help is important because if you don’t think u can do something then you don’t even try” (M 2-9 W). Dougherty (1997) suggests that in middle level schools, students believe “I am who I am because of the manner in which others treat me, or the way I perceive others treating me” (p. 16). If this is the case, caring teachers become even more important to the well-being of the students. He also makes the statement, “Teacher caring is the single most important prerequisite to student success in middle school” (Dougherty, 1997, p. 39). A reminder to educators, “We will do well to remember that in our relationships with youngsters, as in our relationships with each other, what goes around comes around. If we want a better society for future generations, we have to build it now through the trusting relationships we build with youngsters and the humanity we represent” (George et al, 1992, p. 32).

3. Students want to respect their teachers and wish to be respected in return.

Respect, as mentioned earlier, is of the utmost importance in junior high school. Students rely on the teachers to establish boundaries and to follow through on those boundaries. Without boundaries, school seems “like a big joke. The teachers should be strict enough to be able to handle kids that are disturbing the class” (F 1-8 W). When students perceive a teacher struggling for control of content or classroom management, it becomes difficult to respect him/her. The students in this study spoke of the importance of a teacher knowing what he/she is doing both in terms of content and behaviour. One grade nine girl gave the example of a teacher hitting the desk with a metre stick. She recognized that the purpose of the behaviour was to catch the attention of an unruly group, but she could not respect the behaviour and, ultimately,

could not respect the teacher. Students know that respect is something they earn but still believe a teacher should earn it first. Maturity is on the side of the adult.

4. Students want to learn.

Students would not ask for help or consider an approachable teacher a positive attribute if they did not wish to learn. They want “fun classes” because they are interested in learning, they just want to do it in a variety of ways. Erikson (1968) is cited by George et al. (1992) as saying, “uppermost in kids’ identity needs at this time is the desire to be competent, to be doers and producers, and to be known by others by what they do well” (p. 22). The authors continue in their discussion of “achievable challenges” (George et al., 1992, p. 22) by explaining that students wish to be successful and perceived as successful by other teachers as well as their peers. Students need to be challenged but must also know that success is attainable. Students also wish to learn using technology. The opportunity to discover the possibilities while using technological tools and the chance to demonstrate their discoveries is of importance to students.

5. Students want to be safe from bullies.

As was mentioned earlier, bullying is a major issue with these students. Students do not have to have been at the receiving end to recognize the prevalence and importance of bullying behaviour. Students admitted to running up against a brick wall when asked what they could do to rectify the bullying situation. What is so alarming is that there seems to be so much bullying behaviour that is never reported to teachers and administrators due to the fear the victim feels about making the situation worse. Also, students were beginning to connect bullying with other violent

acts carried out by adolescents. Schools are now participating in lock down procedure practises as precautionary reactions to societal acts of violence. This drill must have an impact on students.

6. Students want a visually pleasing, safe, and comfortable physical environment.

School is a place where students spend a great deal of time. It was not surprising that they wanted input regarding their physical environment. That environment must be organized to enhance the learning that occurs within the four walls of the school. We should not want a school to represent a “prison” as one of the grade nine girls told me. George et al. (1992) in their discussion of middle school and changes within a middle school speak of “personal ownership” (p. 124). They state that, “The more people are involved in responsible and meaningful ways, the more likely they are to support the results of that involvement over a long period of time” (George et al., 1992, p. 124). They are speaking of adults in this case, but why would the statement apply only to adults. If a school is developed as a community wherein adults and students reside, then surely we must all take on the personal responsibility of making the school a better place. Students are eager to tell adults what it is they want, but they need to be asked first. Comfortable chairs and bright colours are reasonable and attainable requests.

7. Students want to be treated fairly.

An adolescent’s sense of justice is strong at this age. They are much more likely to respect a decision if they view it as fair. They are also more likely to respect the teacher who has made the decision if it is deemed fair. As was mentioned earlier in the study, some students are likely to sabotage their own learning if they do not feel

respected by a teacher. These students not only realized that fair treatment of students was important, but also recognized that not all students treated teachers fairly. This seems to be quite a mature and insightful observation.

8. Students want to be heard.

Students have ideas and opinions and they want the chance to share these ideas and opinions. Sometimes, a student just wants a chance to talk. As one grade eight girl informed me, “They [teachers] listen to what you’re saying. Even if they don’t agree with it or something, they still listen” (F 1-8 T). Students also mention the appreciation of teachers who listen to topics that are not school related. “Middle grade students need teachers who are particularly responsive to them and who care about them as people” (Schurr et al., 1995, p. 35). It is up to teachers to create an environment that supports young adolescents and allows them the opportunity to be contributors.

9. Students want to be involved in school activities.

These activities can be in or out of class time. Students are eager to participate in hands-on classes such as Industrial Arts, Band, Choir, Foods, Drama, Science labs, computer labs as well as creative activities in other core classes. Junior high school students have high energy levels and need outlets (Wood, 1997). Students perceive activities to be fun and that means they are more willing to participate. One simple example is the challenge of bridge building in science. Students need to have a fair amount of information prior to designing and building the toothpick bridges but are happy to do the preliminary work because it leads to something they perceive as fun.

10. Students want teachers to believe in them and not give up on them.

These students needed to believe that they are worth a second chance. A recent conversation was to then become defensive and angry. That anger was generally directed at the adult closest in proximity. At one point I crouched down beside her desk and reminded her of a conversation we had earlier that day. The agreement we had made was that we were to meet each other in the middle, effort was to come from both of us in order to make our relationship work. She looked at me rather skeptically. I then told her that I was holding up my end of the bargain and was “starting fresh each day.” She raised her eyebrows and said, “Really, you start fresh every day?” My reply was, “Don’t I smile and say good morning to you every day?” At this point, a smile flashed across her face and she replied, “Well, you shoulda told me you started fresh every day. If I knew that, I’d be working for ya.” This rather amusing event reminded me not only of the importance of not giving up on students but also the necessity of open communication. Encouragement is important, but the students need to recognize it as encouragement before it becomes effective. I had with a student confirmed this belief. The student was having a rather tough day and her pattern

#### Insights for Change

If we as educators know what is important to students and understand their social realities, then maybe we can relate and connect these students’ attitudes, thought, and values to the schooling process. When this occurs, education will become the exciting, safe, equitable, and authentic experience it ought to be. School will be a place where students want to attend and where their positive energy and passion are engaged in meaningful ways (Mee, 1997, p. 5).

Keeping this in mind, I look back on the data collected during this study and wonder what I can do to make school a positive experience. I can start within the four walls of my classroom and make sure that I focus on practices that meet the needs and desires of students.

1. Use more cooperative and collaborative activities. Students enjoy working together and have admitted to learning more if they are permitted to work in groups. I feel it is important to properly prepare students for group work and will work the cooperative techniques into my existing program. If, as the students in this study suggest, learning should be fun, then perhaps more projects that can assist in the consolidation of learning need to be planned.
2. Learn more about the lives of my students. I can build more autobiographical assignments and activities into my program. I also need to use the time after and during school to “just talk” to my students. I think it is also important to encourage the students to learn more about each other. Perhaps this can be done through the creation of differing groups for projects. The importance of a sense of community and the need for positive relationships was clear in this study.
3. Earn the respect of my students by showing them the respect they deserve. This is simply done, treat my students in the way I would like to be treated.
4. Find fun and interesting ways of dealing with curriculum. Remember the value of play. A chance to laugh and enjoy an activity is vastly important. I get bored doing things the same old way, and I imagine my students feel the same way. Providing the opportunity to continually seek out new and interesting ways of

attacking curriculum results in a community of learners who are curious and eager.

5. Find ways in which all students can achieve. I must remember that achievement is not always measured academically. For some students, social achievement is important. Each of my students is different and if I take the time to get to know them I should be able to find ways in which they can feel successful in an area of importance to them. Variety of programming allows for students who have skills in areas other than writing to excel.
6. Incorporate programs designed to deal with bullying. Look at the development of leadership in students. Although this is primarily a school level issue I think that insisting on and modeling respectful and considerate behaviour in the classroom can help. I am always on the lookout for materials dealing with bullying and leadership to use in my classroom. Incorporating positive conflict resolution methods in a small group such as a classroom is a good start.
7. Have students collaborate in the decoration of the room. I am a firm believer in displaying student work and will continue to do so. I also have areas of the class that are for the students to decorate. As a group they decide on the design and then the whole class implements that design.
8. Provide regular times for students to discuss and share opinions regarding school. These discussions may not always be planned. Sometimes, the topic of study may trigger a conversation and it is important, if at all possible, to allow that conversation to flow. When students ask questions, it is important to answer

honestly. This is not a time to insult others, it is a chance to discuss the issues that affect the students.

9. Incorporate more hands-on activities into my units. As this study shows, students feel the need to “do” things. They are still of an age when sitting still for extended periods of time can be difficult. Students need the chance to move, change seating arrangements, clean their desks, work with others or just wander to the pencil sharpener. Hands-on activities involve more students at one time as students seem to spend more time on task because the activities can be organized with individual student abilities in mind. These are the activities that allow students to shine.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to ascertain what makes school a positive experience for 12 junior high school students at the grade levels, 7, 8, and 9. Through the use of written responses and grade level group interviews, information was gathered. I think it is reasonable to suggest that students view the relationships within school as the most important attributes of a positive junior high school experience. These relationships include peer relationships as well as student/teacher relationships. After examining the data in this study it is also reasonable to state that students need and want adults in their lives who will believe in them. The fact that a teacher will not give up on them seems to be of paramount importance to many of these students. This is important information for teachers of adolescents. They recognize the energy it takes to weather the emotional ups and downs of adolescence and, I'm sure, are no strangers to the feeling that giving up the fight may look very attractive at one time or another. Perhaps the knowledge that adolescents need us to believe in their value as individuals will be enough to keep us going when giving up seems to be an option.

If we are to admit that junior high school is for the students, then we must put effort into realizing their needs. Those of us who are given the privilege of teaching young adolescents must take the responsibility of sharing, with others, the true picture of young people of today. How we feel about students will dictate how we feel about their opinions. It is only through asking that we learn what these students really need. These are students who want to learn, want to believe in themselves and the adults in their lives, want their world to be peaceful, and want to be proud of their achievements. Important to the success of school is, "the willingness of teachers and other staff to invest their

efforts in the young adolescent students. Teachers must understand and want to teach young adolescents and find the middle grade school a rewarding place to work” (Schurr et al., 1995, p. 39).

What does all of this mean to those concerned with the needs of adolescents? A study by Richard and Patricia Schmuck (as cited by Johnson, 1991) discovered that adolescents “wanted teachers to be human beings who would show trust, respect, and understanding of youth” (p. 14). This was also reflected in the present study. Students want to respect their teachers and are just asking that we earn that respect and, in return, show it to them. Through respect and caring for students, we show them that they are worthy.

An environment of trust and respect is vital to the sense of well-being in a school. The issues related to respect brought up by the students involved in this study show the importance of consciously and actively developing an environment dedicated to trust and respect.

Respect seems to be linked to so many aspects of junior high school experiences. Students in this study admitted to deliberately sabotaging their education due to lack of respect for their teachers. They chose not to complete work and to simply decide not to put full effort into school activities because they do not respect a teacher. This may, at first glance, seem to be a student problem but based on the perceptions of the 12 students who participated in this study, it seems that respect must start with the teacher. We, as teachers, must understand that we need to model respectful behaviour and show students that they are vital to the community of school. We cannot demand respect if we are not prepared to completely dedicate ourselves to showing respect to our students. This translates into caring for our students. Students want teachers who care about them. This

is something we all desire, it should not be surprising that students voice the need to feel cared for as a significant issue.

Fairness and justice are important issues at this age. Simply, students wished to be treated with fairness and felt that justice was prevalent in the school. Students in the study spoke of the negative behaviours exhibited by other students that were not being dealt with by the adults of the school. They sensed the frustrations of the teachers but still wanted to believe something could be done. Safety was connected to the importance of justice. They recognized the negative aspects of bullying but felt powerless to stop the cycle.

The fact that students felt powerless to stop bullying means that school-based adults must pick up the responsibility. We all read newspapers and listen to news reports so should not be surprised to learn that bullying is becoming a very visible school issue. The fear teachers and administrators have is that bullying is merely a stepping stone to an environment of increased violence. The bottom line is that we are responsible for the students in our schools. We must find ways of dealing with violence in our schools in an expedient and efficient manner. Students need to feel safe and their parents have the right to demand the safety of their children in schools.

School is a community and students want to be involved in making it a positive place in which to spend time. The students spend as much time in the school as the teachers do, yet it is often the teachers who decide what the environment is going to look like. Students deserve the chance to show their school pride and are eager to be a part of the team that makes school beautification decisions. Schools should be organized and decorated with the students in mind.

Students want to be heard. Their voices are an important part of a successful school. “Levels of student voice reflect student engagement in a school community” (Johnson, 1991, p. 5). A student who is engaged, is a student who is interested. This is when they feel success and power. It is, I believe, fair to assume that most teachers would wish for students who are interested, intrigued, and enthusiastic about their learning.

The issue of involvement for students very simply means that they want to be considered as valuable members of a community. They are in school to learn and can be very enthusiastic about that learning, but they are also in school to learn to develop and maintain positive social relationships with one another. It is important to them that they be given the opportunity to be with friends. Many students feel that given the opportunity to work together, they will learn more. This issue also relates back to the issue of respect. Schools need to respect students enough to trust that they can act responsibly when it comes to their education. With some guidance, students can take ownership for their actions.

“Middle schools are constantly reacting to the needs of the students. They should become active” (Bergman, 1989, p. 18). We need to involve students early on in the process so that we are aware of needs and do not find ourselves simply reacting to situations that arise.

Parents recognize that, particularly in junior high school, their children are often spending more time with teachers than they are with their own parents. This can be a frightening realization for many parents. This information should also send a clear message to teachers. We need to be aware of the needs, developmental and educational, of our students so that we can program accordingly. Parents need to be aware of what is

going on in the school and have the right to be actively involved in the well-being of their children while they are at school. Schools that promote a team approach, that is school and home working together, will find that the open lines of communication will benefit both the school and the family. We know that students indicated that caring involves an adult knowing what is going on in the students' lives and working closely with home will help the school facilitate a caring environment.

Administrators and teacher educators need to look at more than what a teacher is qualified to teach. If we are to admit and recognize that healthy relationships are of paramount importance to the success of both students and teachers then we must look for teachers who want to be with adolescents. Teachers must like adolescents and enjoy the challenges that will undoubtedly face them as they become involved in not only the education, but also the lives, of adolescents.

During an interview with John Lounsbury, Johnston (1992) posed the question, "What would [you] do if [you] ran the world's schools for fifteen minutes?" Lounsbury answered, "I'd assure that all kids had successful, happy experiences from their very first day. I'd make school a place that matched the kid, not a place where the kid is the one always expected to conform to the institution" (cited in J. H. Johnston, 1992, p. 50). I hope that anyone who works with adolescents would agree because I certainly think the 12 students who participated in this study would.

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**Appendix A****Letter of Consent to Superintendent****Kae McFadzen****Gilbert Paterson Community School  
2109 12 Avenue South  
Lethbridge, Alberta T1K 0P1****June 1, 2000****Mr. Mal Clewes  
Superintendent  
Lethbridge School district #51  
433 15<sup>th</sup> Street South  
Lethbridge, Alberta T1J 2Z5****Dear Mr. Clewes:**

**I am writing to acquire permission to conduct research which would allow me to complete my Master of Education degree at the University of Lethbridge. It is my intention to answer the question, What makes school a positive experience for junior high school students? My study will be qualitative in nature and my data collection will involve twelve students from the three junior high grades. These students will be asked to share, in writing, their perceptions of school. I have attached a copy of my proposal should you require more specific information.**

**All of the data obtained will be presented in an anonymous fashion; students will compose their writings on word processors to ensure anonymity.**

**Should you require additional information, please call me at 329-0125. I would appreciate a response in writing at your convenience.**

**Thank-you for your time and consideration.**

**Sincerely,**

**Kae McFadzen**

**Appendix B**

**Letter of Consent to School Principal**

**Kae McFadzen**

**Gilbert Paterson Community School  
2109 12 Avenue South  
Lethbridge, Alberta T1K 0**

**June 1, 2000**

**Mrs. Patricia Hales  
Gilbert Paterson Community School  
2109 12 Avenue South  
Lethbridge, Alberta T1K 0P1**

**Dear Mrs. Hales:**

**I am writing to acquire permission to conduct research which would allow me to complete my Master of Education degree at the University of Lethbridge. It is my intention to answer the question, What makes school a positive experience for junior high school students? My study will be qualitative in nature and my data collection will involve twelve students from the three junior high grades in one school. These students will be asked to share their perceptions of school. A copy of my proposal will be made available should you require more specific information.**

**All of the data obtained will be presented in an anonymous fashion, students will compose their writings on word processors to ensure anonymity.**

**Should you require additional information, please call me at 329-0125. I would appreciate a response in writing at your convenience.**

**Thank-you for your time and consideration.**

**Sincerely,**

**Kae McFadzen**

Appendix C  
Letter of Consent to Parents

Dear Parent:

I am conducting a study of junior high school student perceptions. The purpose of this study is to explore the issues which factor into the identification of a positive school experience for junior high school students. I anticipate that your child and others will benefit from participation in this study by allowing educators insight into the issues as they are identified by students. I would like your permission for your child to participate in this study.

As part of this research your child will be asked to respond to questions designed to elicit responses regarding their perceptions of school. They will initially answer questions in writing. Once compilation of these responses is complete, students will meet in grade level groups for a final interview. Please note that all information will be handled in a confidential and professional manner. When responses are released, they will be reported in summary form only. Further, all names, locations and any other identifying information will not be included in any discussion of the results. You also have the right to withdraw your child from the study without prejudice at any time.

If you choose to do so, please indicate your willingness to allow your child to participate by signing this letter in the space provided below, and return the letter to the school with your child.

I very much appreciate your assistance in this study. If you have any questions please feel free to call me at the school (329-0125). Also feel free to contact the supervisor of my study, Dr. Robin Bright at the University of Lethbridge (329-2443) or [brightr@uleth.ca](mailto:brightr@uleth.ca) The chair of the Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge, Keith Roscoe, can be reached at 329-2446 should you have any concerns.

Sincerely,

Kae McFadzen  
Gilbert Paterson Community School  
329-0125

.....

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I \_\_\_\_\_ give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_

to participate in Kae McFadzen’s study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Parent/Guardian signature)



**Appendix D**  
**Letter of Consent to Students**

**Dear Student:**

**I am conducting a study of junior high school student perceptions. The purpose of this study is to explore the issues which factor into the identification of a positive school experience for junior high students. I anticipate that you and others will benefit from participation in this study by allowing educators insight into the issues as they are identified by you, the students. I would like you to participate in this study.**

**As part of this research you will be asked to share your opinions regarding school. You will also be asked to share any school-related experiences you think would help me in my understanding of what makes school a positive place. Responses will be both written and verbal, and will involve a grade level group interview. Please remember that all information will be handled in a confidential and professional manner. When responses are released, they will be reported in summary form only. Further, all names, locations and any other identifying information will not be included in any discussion of the results. You also have the right to withdraw from the study without prejudice at any time.**

**If you choose to do so, please indicate your willingness to participate by signing this letter in the space provided below, and return the letter to the school.**

**Sincerely,**

**Kae McFadzen  
Gilbert Paterson Community School  
329-0125**

.....

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in Kae McFadzen’s study.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**(Student Signature)**

## Appendix E

### Grade 7 Students' Written Responses

#### F 1-8

#### Junior high school is...

A great place to be. I love junior high because I'm with all of my friends. We have an awesome time! My homeroom teacher is great to. I like how you get to choose "option" it give's me a variety of things to do. I think that we should have boys and girls together in gym because it makes both boys and girls work so much harder. Or at least it helps me to. I think the lockers are a great idea cause you can store your stuff in them. I hate it when someone picks the key part on the back of your lock though.

#### What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?

- If you have friends in junior high it makes's a big difference.
- You get to chose options
- You can meet new people
- It helps you to learn
- you get more then one option

#### What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?

- Drugs make junior high a negative place.
- Bullies and ennimies don't help either
- Sometimes junior high seems to big
- We get to much home work

- Older students sometimes pick on the younger grades
- I have noticed that if we go in dairy queen or Mohawk they treat us differently then adults. Ex I went to DQ with a whole bunch of my friends and I had my lunch kit with me and they said that I wasn't allowed to come in because I had a lunch kit and they physicaly pushed me out of the resturant (just because I might not hve bought anything doesn't mean I can't at all)
- You get DT's
- You have to get up early

**The best thing about my school is**

- Being with all of your friends

**The worst thing about my school is...**

- Home work
- People do drugs!
- Tests
- Social get's kinda boring
- Roommers

All done..... that's all I have to say

**F 2-7 written responses****Junior high school is...**

Pretty good. I like that we get lockers. Mostly to me Junior High is just school. It's a place I come to learn that's better than elementary but still just school. It's a place where there's teachers, good student's and bad students.

**What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

Start your answer here – I think that when teachers are on the same terms as the kids it helps. When they try to understand us rather than reprimand us it brings out our good side. When they do that it makes us want to please them not hate them. I also like all the teams and activities made available to us kids.

**What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

Start your answer here – I think when teachers shout at the kids and make us feel like we're stupid or like we always do things wrong or like we're bad kids it's very negative. I think teachers are supposed to encourage the students and make us feel good. When a kid is bad then they need to be firm and a bit strict but not make us feel bad. I don't think they should ever yell. I also think bullying makes junior high negative.

**The best thing about my school** is all the activities made available to us and all the teams. I'm part of the volleyball team and it's a load of fun. Gilbert's staff is also very good. I like having locker's in elementary I always wanted lockers.

**The worst thing about my school is...** I don't really know a worst thing. I like (school) features and almost everything about it. I haven't really found that much wrong with it.

**M 1-7 written responses****Junior high school is...**

just another step in life that we have to take to get to being an adult.

**What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

friends, fun classes, and people who care about each and every one of us can make a junior high school a positive place to be.

**What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

things that can make a junior high school a negative place to be are: people that don't follow the rules, teachers or other people in the school that don't care about the best interest of the students, and people that don't want to learn.

**The best thing about my school is**

The best thing about my school is that the people here get along very well and the teachers are very good at making learning fun I think this school is great.

**The worst thing about my school is...**

The worst thing about my school is I find it hard sometimes to find the classes with the two floors and remembering everything for all of my classes but I'm sure that it will get easier as the year goes on.

**M 2-7 written responses****Junior high school is...**

Junior high is better than elementary because you have more freedom at lunch and the dances. It is more slow because all the classes take longer but I like the choices you get for options. I think that it is better safer to bring stuff because of the lockers.

**What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

I think it already is but it could probably use more teachers and staff. The classes are interesting but can be boring at times. There could probably be some more phones for students to use and maybe though I don't want them uniforms, but probably not.

**What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

It will become a negative place if there are not enough rules and discipline. If there is less staff it will also become negative and not be much fun to learn in. The classes need to stay interesting or else it will be a negative place to learn.

**The best thing about my school is**

I think that the best thing is the dances and that there should be more of them.

**The worst thing about my school is...**The worst thing is how much more work there is than elementary, but I guess this much work is needed to keep everyone learning.

## Appendix F

### Grade Eight Students' Written Responses

#### **F 1 - 8**

##### **Junior high school is...**

Junior high school is a place where teenagers can go to learn to become somebody when they're older. It teaches them the knowledge they need to learn to get around in the world and to understand the world. It teaches them the importance of getting a good education, and that going to college or university when their older is the best decision they will make in their life. I think school can be fun and interesting if you make it, but some people don't understand how to make it that way and therefore they just think it is boring and then they stop trying.

##### **What do you thing can make junior high a positive place to be?**

I think to make junior high a positive place to be, you need to have discipline, and rules that the kids in the school must follow. If you don't have rules, then the kids think they can do whatever they want, such as running in the halls, not doing homework, or not listening to what the teachers have to say, and making school seem like it is a big joke. The teachers should be strict enough to be able to handle the kids that are disturbing the class, but also be fun, and enjoyable to have as a teacher. I like teachers that like to do experiments, and play games in the classroom where we can learn as we play the game. I think this makes school amore positive and fun place to be in. Bullying should not be allowed, and the bully should be punished in some way. I have been in this situation before, where somebody was bullying me and a friend of mine. I think the school didn't



know how serious the situation was and that my friend and I were very worried. The school eventually did something about it.

**What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

Allowing kids to get away with inappropriate behavior, makes school a negative place to be because it disrupts the kids that are trying to listen and do their work, and it frustrates them to think that the teacher aren't doing anything about it. Students should not have to be told to do something over and over again without a consequence because this makes them think that they can get away with not doing something, such as homework, and not have to worry about having a detention or anything like that. Getting a zero, on an assignment is a consequence for not doing homework, but students should not be given lengthy amounts of time to complete late assignments.

**The best thing about my school is...**

The best thing about my school is the teachers that care so much about the students and the Phys-Ed classes because it is a chance to play sports and have fun, instead of just doing work.

**The worst thing about my school is...**

The kids that don't behave and aren't dealt with. Some of the teachers are too strict, I think for the grade level being taught. Some teachers give way too much homework and don't realize that we have other things to do in our lives besides do hours of homework

each night. I think some homework is necessary but there should be a limit to the amount of homework given each night.

**F 2-8 written responses**

**Junior high school is...** An institution for students to learn in. Ha Ha that's close to the dictionary definition I think! Well I think Junior high is a fun place to learn things in.

There are some good things and bad things about Jr. high and it is scary at first. I enjoy many things, but I shouldn't tell you all because it might overlap some things so bye for now!

**What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

The teachers, the library, the intermurals. The amount of school spirit shown in you school. School should be a safe place to be and to learn. Teaches should listen to what you have to say. The murals at my school make it lived in (my mom's and artist and there are paintings all over my house) and it makes my school friendly. In school its fun when you get hands on experiec in things, not just the termanology. Ex: doing science labs and not just copying down definitions.

**What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

People being mean to you and teasing you. If there is a lot of violence and drugs going around your school. If teachers never lisen to what you have to say and always ignor you. If you get picked on because of how you look or dress. If you always get in truble for things you didn't do. If people acuse you of cheating. If you had no friends in your school.

**The best thing about my school is**

- My teachers and my friends most of the people.
- The library.
- Options
- the murals
- the Intermurals
- the classes

**The worst thing about my school is...**

- I herd that this year some grade eighters were picking on a grade sevens in the beginning of the year.
- some of the people
- you don't get much time on the computers in grade eight, I have a friend in french and because she is in french she doesn't have library Or many computer, she's been in once this year.

**M 1-8 written responses****Junior high school is...**

I think that junior high school is a part of every day life. It is a place to learn and grow in more ways than one. You learn basic math, science, L.A, and social studies information but, you also learn how to act in public, behave around others and how to make friends. I think that going to a public school is better than being home-schooled because than you get to interact with other kids your age. But there are also advantages to being home-schooled. Both ways are different and people should do whatever is best for them.

**What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

I think that having a good teacher is a very important part of having a good time at school. I think that having friends is another very important part of making junior a better place to be. A third and final thought would be working in a clean non-distracting environment is also very important.

**What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

I think that having the opposite to all of the positive aspects of school (some listed above) can really be negative in your school experience. I think a very negative experience would be being the target of a bully, or even having a bully or disruptive student in your class could be a very negative experience.

**The best thing about my school is**

The fact that I have so many friends and that I make friends easily. I also have a very good teacher this year as well as in all of my previous years at this and my old school. I also have no trouble learning or catching on to things.

**The worst thing about my school is...**

That t in this and previous year there has been some disruptive student and bullies.

**M 2-8 written responses****Junior high school is...**

Junior high school is a place where students come to learn. Students learn about what life is, what life can become, and what to expect from life. We also learn how to cope with life (the core subjects and options).

**What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

I think that if junior high schools had better discipline for the students, school would be a better place to be. Through-out my school years, I've been picked on for little things, such as the arch in my nose, or the cloths that I wear, and whenever I told my teacher, the bully would stop, bugging me, for a while, but pick on someone else. Before long he would be back on my case, but that didn't bother me so much as the extent of the bullying that went on with other kids.

The strap and stronger penalties would instantly stop everything.

**What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

I think, as I said before, that bullying makes school a very, very negative place; no one likes to be picked-on. Very strict teachers also make school a negative place; it makes kids hesitant to say that they like school.

**The best thing about my school is**

The best thing about my school is my friendly teachers.

**The worst thing about my school is...**

The worst thing about my school is the amount of bullying that goes on behind the teachers, and is openly reported. It is not fun for the students.



## **Appendix G**

### **Grade Nine Students' Written Responses**

#### **F 1-9 written responses**

##### **Junior high school is...**

I think that junior high is a positive and a negative place to be.

There are different ways to think of school in positive ways, but there are also many negative things about it. Teachers expect things, such as respect from students but don't always give it back. On the other hand, school is the type of environment that is easy to relax in.

##### **What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

Junior high can be positive if we all work together.

Anything that teachers expect from students they should return. School is a good place to be when you are under stress because you can always take it out on your work.

##### **What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

Students don't get the respect that they deserve .

##### **The best thing about my school is**

(teacher) because I like the way she teaches. She always respects us and our opinion, no matter what the subject. The method that she uses works well for everyone because she gives and gets the same amount of respect that she and we deserve. Everybody is treated fairly and every one is equally.

**The worst thing about my school is...**

I guess that the worst thing would have to be the way that all of the other teachers teach.

They, on the most part, do not respect us but still they demand our respect. The teachers don't always listen to our opinions or treat us as they would like to be treated. This is not fair nor is it right.

### **F 2-9 written responses**

#### **Junior high school is...**

I think that junior high can be a negative and positive place to be. I feel that teachers are what make school positive or negative. I think that school is a safety cushion for me. When things are bad with friends, or family, I know that I still have school, and I don't HAVE to interact with those people!

#### **What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

I think that teachers are what MAKE junior high negative or positive! If the teacher treats me with respect and makes school a positive experience, than school becomes a positive place to be.

For example, teachers who take time for just you at one point or another make it a positive experience. If a teacher allows you "stupid" questions and answers them without a temper, that makes school a positive experience.

#### **What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

Once again, teachers!!!

For example, I had a teacher that chose to smack people desks with metre sticks to get their attention, but when a teacher reacts to a student with this matter, it just makes the student dislike the teacher even more than they did before. This also gets a rise out of the students because they think that the teacher is "bad"!!

**The best thing about my school is**

I would have to say that the best thing about my school would have to be (teacher) because I like the way she teaches!! Now, I'm not sucking up or brown nosing, but I really like her method!! It's plain and simple, if you hand something in late, your fault, if you need help, ask and she will be there and help you with whatever you need for how ever long it takes for you to get, she's a teacher, it's her job, and the only one who really thinks it!! (teacher) also respects us and our opinions, which gets us to respect her!! All and all I LOVE (teacher)!!!

**The worst thing about my school is...**

I would have to say that the worse thing about my school would be the way that some/most of the other teachers treat/teach us students!! They think that if we ask a question we're dumb or don't care about the subject/topic. Some teachers have no respect for us and they don't take our comments into consideration, they think.... "I'm the teacher, I know all!" This is not right!!!

**M 1-9 written responses****Junior high school is...**

A place where students can learn. It is a very important part of a person's life. I think that junior high is a good place to hang out and meet new people. I feel that school is a good way to keep kids out of trouble during the day and hopefully educate them about life. The Junior High years are the time in life when a person gains some real experience with people relations and hard work. Without junior high, I feel that a person would be indefinitely crippled in the real world.

**What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

I think the students and teachers make junior high a positive place to be. The students are friendly and communicating (talking) is very enjoyable. The teachers are receptive and understanding. They make sure that all lessons are learned by all and that the students do their best. I like school because it beats hanging around at home doing nothing. Instead, I'm learning new things that will help me in the future.

**What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

Junior high can be a negative place because some people do not like to learn, and instead disrupt class. This can be annoying and counter-productive for the other students in the class. Another problem that sometimes comes up in schools, is the neglect that some students receive from fellow classmates. This sometimes leads to violence. Over the past year, there have been many school-related incidents that happened just like this, one in

Taber and one in the States. The peer pressure in school can also be a problem. If a group of people make one decision, it may also affect a whole bunch of other people's decisions. If the original decision is a bad one, this can lead to conflicts and trouble. The pressure to be "cool" also comes into play in many schools. For instance, some teens would rather fit in with the group no matter what the cost. Smoking, drinking and stealing can be some of these conforming activities. This looks bad on the school as well as the students.

**The best thing about my school is**

The great school spirit that we have together. One example of this, is our track and field record. Every student tries their hardest to make it to the school competition and then onto the city championships. Everyone knows that our school needs to win to keep our streak alive. This tremendous team spirit is evident in all the school sports teams that we have. This effort and hard work spills into academic classes too. Most students try their hardest on assignments and be the best that they can be. It would be great if all schools had this spirit. I'm sure that it would make Canadian education look ten times better.

**The worst thing about my school is...**

The low quality of work expected from all the subjects. I feel that the standards are set too low in all the core areas. Students aren't pushed hard enough to do better. They concentrate on passing and that's it. Once they get passed a certain percentage, they don't care any more. I'm not quite sure how anybody can change the marking system or

if anything can be done at all, but I do feel that students should be expected to do better quality work.

**M 2-9 written responses****Junior high school is...**

A place to grow and learn (hahahahaha). Where you go to learn and be educated by dinosaurs who don't know what there talking about. Oh and a place to hang out with your friends

**What do you think can make junior high a positive place to be?**

ENTERTAINING teachers that don't just drone on for 45 minutes and make up fun activities. Knowing that you can get help is important because if you don't think u can then you don't even try. The main reason though is your friends because you can have the best teachers in the world but if you don't have people to talk to and hang out with it's the most horrible place to be.

**What do you think can make junior high a negative place to be?**

Definitely having no friends and teachers with bad attitudes that don't encourage you. You also have to have something to look forward to or else it seems pointless.



**The best thing about my school is**

All the people get along and it's a real comfortable place to be.

**The worst thing about my school is...**

My (subject) classes because my teacher doesn't know how to set up the class. First she goes over the page for homework the night before and then she lectures and gives notes until the end of the class. That's when she decides to give us our two-page assignment due for the next day when then bell goes in one minute. It's just really frustrating to get a whole bunch of homework and sometimes not knowing how do it until the next day.

## Appendix H

### Grade Seven Group Interview Transcript

**Me:** One of the things that came up a lot was that friends are really important in Junior High. Can you tell me why friends are so important to you?

**F 1-7:** Like if you don't have friends, you're just gonna be like, you'll feel left out and lonely.

**M 1-7:** Like a loser.

**F 1-7:** Yeah, and you'll get picked on and you won't like feel good about yourself and you might try and do bad things or something.

**M 1-7:** And you have somebody to talk to in school and stuff. To get through school.

**Me:** It's that bad is it?

**M 2-7:** Well you'll just be like bored all day and after you eat your lunch at like lunch hour you'll have nothing to do and you'll sit around feeling sorry for yourself.

**F 1-7:** Yeah, and if you get lost or can't open your locker, there'll be someone there sort of, around.

**Me:** So it gives you somebody to socialize with on your down time and people to help you out as you're going through the day.

**Group:** Yeah

**Me:** One of the other things that was brought up was the fact that teachers are supposed to encourage and understand kids. How do you know when that is happening, what does that look like?

**M 2-7:** They're not yelling. I don't know, they just try and help us. Not getting upset with us when we don't understand something that they've explained. When we don't the way they explained, sometimes they get mad over that. But they should probably just try and understand.

**Me:** Any other ways that they encourage?

**F 1-7:** Like if you get something done or something then they might give you something fun to do or whatever like if the whole class gets all their notes or whatever done.

**M 1-7:** Like a compliment maybe.

**M 2-7:** And they like try to understand what you think and like try to make it as easy as you can when you don't understand.

**Me:** So different ways of explaining if the first way doesn't work?

**M 2-7:** Yeah.

**Me:** How does Junior High help you learn?

**F 1-7:** Everything helps you learn. Educational wise.

**Me:** Is it different from elementary?

**Group:** Yeah

**Me:** How is it different?

**M 1-7:** Elementary, they like watch you and see what you're doing in class like if you're talking or something, they take points off, they'll like take marks off for that but they don't do that in Junior High. They just see what you're accomplishing so a little different at like report cards.

**Me:** Anything else different in the classroom?

**F 1-7:** Some people talk and you can't hear. It's just kind of hard to pay attention. There's like so many more kids. You're meeting all these new people.

**Me:** The social thing is important and sometimes it gets disruptive.

**F 1-7:** Yeah

**Me:** How does homework differ in Junior High?

**Group:** We get a lot.

**M 1-7:** and it's harder too.

**F 1-7:** specially if you don't have the time.

**F 2-7:** There's not that much more than (teacher) gave us last year.

**F 1-7:** Our teacher was really nice last year. We didn't get like any homework last year. Like just a little bit.

**Me:** So that's a change for most of you. You're getting more homework.

**M 2-7:** We got some homework last year but we get more now.

**M 1-7:** Like in elementary we had more time to do stuff with like friends and stuff but now like, right after school you have to like do your homework and stuff. It's sorta better cause school is shorter and stuff though.

**F 1-7:** You don't have like that many breaks in between or anything.

**Me:** No recess.

**F 1-7:** We should get little breaks between each subject.

**Me:** The other thing that came up quite a bit was freedom. You get more freedom in Junior High. What does that mean?

**M 2-7:** Well like at lunch hour and stuff you can go where ever you want, you don't have to stay on the school grounds.

**M 1-7:** Yeah, you can go to Dairy Queen and stuff.

**F 1-7:** Except they treat us differently there. I had my lunch kit with me and I was gonna share a sundae with my friends and they kicked me out. So my friends didn't notice I was gone and I was just standing outside. And some places we have to line up, they say only six people are allowed in at a time, they allow the adults who are getting gas go inside before us.

**Me:** How do you think we could change these attitudes?

**F 2-7:** When we go, like my friends are really polite cause like we're scared of him. One day I got some fries, I had a little bit of another lunch but I didn't have a sandwich so I got some fries. I was sharing with a few of my friends and he got mad, he's like, ok from

now on only 4 people will be able to share a basket of fries and only 2 people can share like the size I had.

Me: Do you see negative things happening, even though your friends are polite?

F 1-7: Some people mouth them off. But not that much.

Me: Another comment made was, 'we need more teachers'. What difference would having more teachers make?

F 1-7: You'd have a smaller class and you'd be able to learn better.

M 1-7: Yeah, easier to learn, less like distractions. You wouldn't talk as much to your friends.

F 1-7: You'd get like more out of it sort of. Say like a whole class, two people don't finish the test and you're just sitting there. It would be an advantage cause you won't have to wait as long for other people to get everything done.

M 1-7: And one time I had my hand up for like ten minutes and the teacher couldn't get to me, she was like going to other people too. So it took a while.

Me: People who care about us, that was indicated as a positive in Junior High. How do you know when people care about you?

F 1-7: Like, you kinda know when your friends are your real friends, like if they gossip behind your back or like they're there for you. I don't know, if something happened or something. You kinda know if they're there for you and care about you but like if you see them talking to someone else behind your back or like not helping you – you have a question in math and they're like, oh you're so stupid then you know they're not a good friend of yours.

**Me:** Not providing you with support.

**F 1-7:** Yeah.

**Me:** Is caring only important when it comes from your friends?

**F 1-7:** If your teacher doesn't care about you, they don't really care about your marks or whatever. So like if you didn't get an assignment done, they wouldn't even notice. They just take the marks off or whatever

**M 1-7:** They wouldn't ask you for help or nothing. Like sometimes if some person isn't doing very good, they ask them if they'll stay a while after school and get some help.

**Me:** That's how we, as teachers, can show you that we're caring about what is going on?

**Group:** (nods)

**Me:** We talked a little bit earlier about disruptions and we also had the comment that it's negative when you have people in the class who don't want to learn. Why is that negative?

**F 1-7:** Basically, you get distracted.

**F 2-7:** And they don't allow you to learn cause they're chatting it up back there. You can't hear what the teacher is saying if they mention something that could be on the test.

**M 2-7:** Like if there is one kid in your class that doesn't want to learn then since nobody can hear what the teacher says, then nobody learns.

**M 1-7:** The teacher has to stop like every other sentence because people are like talking.

**Me:** It takes longer to get through the material.

**M 1-7:** Yeah.

**Me:** How can teachers make learning fun for you?

**F 1-7:** Do like fun activities. Just something different for a change.

**F 2-7:** and like if we all do something good, they can reward us like have a free period.

**Me:** I want you to imagine you have the power to create the ideal school. Describe that school for me.

**M 1-7:** You'd have lanes in the hallways.

**F 1-7:** There'd be like a big cafeteria with all these different places to eat.

**Me:** A food court.

**F 1-7:** Yeah.

**M 1-7:** Have special notification on your lockers so like you just put your finger on it and it would open instead of doing the lock every time.

**Me:** Technology on those lockers.

**F 1-7:** Give us more time to change in gym. Our teacher lets us out at the bell and we don't have time to change, then we're late for our class.

**M 2-7:** A separate classroom where kids could talk so we don't clog up the hallways.



**M 1-7:** It'd be better if there was like one floor for 7, 8, and 9 so like all the classes were like on one floor and you didn't have to like go downstairs. It'd be easier to get to class.

**F 1-7:** We'd have lap top computers.

**F 2-7:** We could type our notes.

**F 1-7:** Or just like say it and it would type it for you.

**Me:** Would anything change that we have already? What about curriculum, things we learn, would that change?

**F 1-7:** Maybe you'd have different classes. Like if you're ahead in math or something and you've learned some of it already and you know what you're doing, they'd put you ahead or something, a higher level.

**F 2-7:** I think with the teams they should have like a team for grade sevens.

**Me:** Anything else?

**M 2-7:** Maybe the subjects spread out more, like no double classes

**Me:** Anything else?

**F 1-7:** I don't know, like I was talking to my friends from other schools and people are really mean to others. I have a friend that comes to our school now because people were being really mean to her at her other school. Things are better here.

## Appendix I

### Grade Eight Group Interview Transcript

**Me:** one of the things that was mentioned, something that makes school positive is a good teacher. I'm wondering if you can tell me what a good teacher is, how do we know when someone is a good teacher?

**F 2-8:** Um, they're not like mean all the time and they're nice, you know. They do assign homework but they don't like assign MAJOR, you know like six hours a night kind of thing and they just are nice.

**Me:** How do you know when someone's nice? (pause) If I was going into a classroom and this room had a good teacher in it, what would I be seeing?

**M 2-8:** I think it's when a teacher respects you. As an example, if you have way too much homework then they will respect that and cut down on what they assign.

**Me:** So they are hearing your issues?

**M 2-8:** Yeah.

**F 1-8:** Um, they'll listen to what you have to say.

**F 2-8:** Yeah

**M 1-8:** They're usually pretty friendly as well.

**F 1-8:** They don't yell.

**M 1-8:** The way they talk...

F 1-8: They don't raise their voice.

F 2-8: And they don't treat us like kindergarteners. (Andrea goes on to tell us about an experience of her sister's ( high school student).

Me: Bullies was mentioned quite a bit. What kind of role do bullies play in this school?

F 2-8: Not necessarily bullies in this school, but just all around.

M 2-8: They don't make it fun to be around.

Me: Do you think that they have power?

M 1-8: Over some people.

F 1-8: Over some teachers, but some teachers not.

F 2-8: Bullies need power. I remember, if you really want to hear this, in grade two, I believe, I transferred from this, grade one, grade one. And this was when I was kinda mean. I transferred from this one school, I was in this grade two class and there was this friend I had in that school and she had moved to (the school) before I did and here she was really, really teased. And she really just wanted a friend and no one would friends with her, right. And cause she knew me already and so she probably thought, like hey, I know Andrea and she's pretty nice, you know. I was so mean, I remember that though, I remember running away and like trying to make her stop, it's like, I don't wanna be friends with you.

Me: Why didn't you want to be friends?

F 2-8: Peer pressure. Like no one liked her and I wanted to fit in because I was the new girl.

**Me:** Do you still feel that now, now that you're older?

**F 2-8:** Sometimes. Not as much. (group nods in agreement)

**Me:** Is the bullying happening in class or outside of class?

**M 1-8/ M 2-8:** both, all over

**Me:** What do you think we need to do?

**M 2-8:** Bring the strap back in school.

**Me:** Fear?

**M 2-8:** Yeah, nobody's gonna, it's gonna cut it right in half.

**F 2-8:** Something we should not bring in school is school uniforms.

**Me:** You wouldn't like school uniforms?

**F 2-8:** NO. I remember like last year, (school) is thinking of getting school uniforms. You know my mom said, that's a good idea. I'm like, no mom..

**Me:** Why wouldn't you like school uniforms?

**M 1-8:** Lack of freedom of your own personality.

**M 2-8:** Expressing yourself.

**F 2-8:** Yeah, it also is um, a way for, ok, uh, conformity. It encourages conformity.

Me: You all look the same?

F 2-8: Yeah, you know like, and, I remember hearing this one person, right, she had school uniforms in this like one place. You have to wear black shoes right, and so if your shoes had any white at all on them. Like they bought this new pair of Nikes, you know they're really, really expensive and they said either like put black marker and colour the white or you can't, you can't wear them.

Me: So the phys. Ed. Shoes had to be black too?

F 2-8: I think so.

Me: How can we, as teachers and staff, make school interesting? That seemed to be important, that school be interesting.

M 1-8: I think that little games that we did earlier in math, where it's this chalkboard game that (teacher's name) made for us. She wrote different groups on the board and we went into separate groups and she said questions and we wrote them down and we had to figure out the answer.

Me: And you got points for getting it correct?

F 1-8: And science labs.

F 2-8: Yeah, science labs and also when we're doing math and she says, we're not going to do math, we're going to do a game thing. And it was a math game but it was with dice. She has a whole ton of different dice and you had to roll them and like you had to guess which one are which. That was pretty fun too.

Me: So it doesn't have to be major things by the sounds of it.

**Group:** No.

**Me:** Just something a little different.

**M 2-8:** And desks, I don't think it's really fun to sit the desk all day. You should be able to get up and move around.

**Me:** What do you think holds back that freedom?

**M 2-8:** People who would abuse that priviledge.

**Me:** It's unfortunate, isn't it.

**F 1-8:** One or two people ruin it for the whole class. It's hard for a teacher to watch.

**Me:** How do you know when a teacher cares about you?

**F 1-8:** They listen to what you're saying. Even if they don't agree with it or something, they still listen.

**M 2-8:** They step out of their way to help you do something you don't understand.

**F 2-8:** If you need help with something even if it doesn't like have anything to do with school they listen still.

**Me:** So it doesn't always have to be school related?

**F 1-8:** If you're having problems at home or something you can talk to them.

**Me:** Anything you would like to add? (pause) I want you to imagine you have the power to create what you consider to be the ideal school. Describe that school for me.

**F 2-8:** Can I also describe the people who go to that school?

**Me:** Absolutely.

**F 2-8:** The people who go to that school would actually like listen and they wouldn't goof off in class and everything. Like the kids wouldn't be like mean and everything. One day in class we had this substitute teacher and this kid right cause the substitute teacher didn't know how things were working and the kid was like, it was this year too. He was like listening to a walkman, right and like he's sitting at the back of the class and he was also going up to the teacher's computer and stuff.

**M 2-8:** His Diskman was like blaring loud I could hear it and I was sitting across the room.

**Me:** So we would have, in this ideal school, students that respected everyone.

**Group:** Yeah.

**Me:** What else would we notice?

**F 2-8:** Teachers

**Me:** Teachers. Ok, what about teachers?

**F 2-8:** What we said before.. respecting. Like if you try your hardest like and then they listen to you've tried your hardest you know like this is as good as you can get.

**Me:** Not expecting more than you can do.

F 2-8: Yeah.

M 1-8: I have something that is really bogus that would never happen but it would be really neat to have little computers built in the corner of your desk. You wouldn't have to like write out everything.

M 2-8: Everyone has a user name to log in from class to class.

Me: What else would we see? We're using technology and having our computers built into the desk, we have kids who respect, teachers who care.

M 2-8: We'd have one floor.

Me: Why would we have one floor?

M 2-8: Because like traffic jams at the top of the stairs, it's really bad. Nobody lets in, everybody pushes. Wider hallways too.

M 1-8: Bigger lockers. More hallways too. We could take a detour, it could take away from some of the congestion.

Me: Different routes to the same spot.

M 1-8: Maybe it's like a circle, the whole thing is a circle.

M 2-8: Or another thing, doors in between classes. You could just go into different classrooms instead of going into the hallway.

Me: Anything else we'd see in this school?



**F 2-8:** Yeah, options. Like cooking and shop, they're good.

**Me:** Now would you change anything that we've got existing now?

**M 1-8:** More.

**Me:** More choice?

**M 2-8:** I think I'd want more hands on options. So it's not just writing, you're more doing things. Cause school gives you an education but not necessarily tells you how to live.

**Me:** Skills?

**M 2-8:** Yeah, skills for living.

**Me:** Anything else you can think of to add, or take away.

**F 2-8:** Something to add. More intramurals or things like that.

**M 2-8:** I think that DT's, not late DT's, but homework DT's. Like the teacher wouldn't tell you when to serve it because sometime you have things that you have to do at home. That you get to choose when you want your DT as long as it's served. And if you don't there's some sort of punishment for delaying too much. There would be a specific amount of time. So they're still keeping track if you're keeping your DT's.

**Me:** But they're counting on you to..

**M 2-8:** to take responsibility.

**F 2-8:** That's the main reason, the problem of school. Why it can't be perfect is because some people abuse the privileges.

**Me:** So we can never hit that perfect state.

**Group:** No

**M 2-8:** I think a one on one relationship with teachers.

**Me:** How would we do that?

**M 2-8:** I think that parents should be able to come in at any time what so ever. Even during class and be able to talk to the teacher. Students could go and talk to anybody at any time. They shouldn't be limited to talk to other human beings. Just because of school work.

**Me:** So you could share ideas.

**M 2-8:** Exactly

**Me:** Anything else?

**M 2-8:** More comfortable chairs on desks.

**Me:** I think you'd have a few teachers agreeing with you on that one.

**F 2-8:** More time on computers. In grade seven we got computer class, two each week. I though we'd still get computer this year you know and I come and we like don't have computer. I think this future is going to be very important on computers.

**M 1-8:** Even having info-processing takes away from your option time so you're either getting your computer time or you're losing your option.

**Adrian:** I think the school should provide the same programs so you can use them at home and have the same capabilities. You can be familiar with them. Like I've never used Power Point before.

**F 2-8:** There's a fault with that because not everyone can afford computers.

**M 1-7:** I wish we had links from the school to our house. You could just type in your user name and password and do most of your work at home.

Appendix J  
Grade Nine Group Interview Transcript

Me: One of the issues that came up a lot in your writing was respect. The fact that you needed or deserved respect from your teachers. Tell me what respect looks like.

F 1-9: If the teacher and the students were respecting each other it would be a happier place. Everybody would probably be listening to the teacher and the teacher would be listening to everybody else.

Me: What else would we see?

F 2-9: Students doing work.

Me: How does that relate to respect?

F 2-9: If both are being respected then it's gonna be different. If teachers respect students but students don't respect teachers then it's gonna look like the teachers are gonna be really fed up. The students will be happy but they won't be learning anything.

Me: Does respect affect the amount of work you do.

Group: Yeah.

F 1-9: Respect affects all of our work.

M 2-9: If you don't respect the teacher you'll think it's pointless and not do it.

F 1-9: And if the teacher doesn't respect you then you think to but them I'm not gonna do the work.

**F 2-9:** Well if we don't respect the teacher it's because we don't think the teacher respects us.

**F 1-9:** Right

**Me:** So the teacher has to show you respect before you show the teacher respect.

**F 1-9:** No it's

**M 2-9:** She has to impress us.

**Me:** She has to impress you. What do we need to do to impress you?

**M 2-9:** Not be boring. Be nice to you.

**Me:** (student's name), is respect important?

**M 1-9:** Yes, kids just like talking more than respecting the teacher.

**M 2-9:** If you don't respect the teacher, you just talk the whole class and not even listen to her.

**Me:** So you're not even learning.

**F 2-9:** Exactly.

**Me:** And you would respect a teacher if that teacher is fun.

**F 1-9:** Well you have to earn respect. Like the teacher might not respect you because you're a rotten kid in class. Like you have to earn the respect, and like they have to earn the respect.

F 2-9: But teachers that don't earn respect they just, like they're really strict, I don't know. They have weird ways of keeping us in line, like rulers on desks, which doesn't work.

Me: Why doesn't that work?

F 1-9: Because it just makes the kids laugh at them.

F 2-9: We just think that our teacher is psychotic.

M 2-9: Yeah, that he doesn't know what he's doing.

F 2-9: That's how they lose our respect, from us.

F 1-9: It totally works both ways though.

Me: We all have to recognize our role in earning respect.

M 2-9: Entertaining stuff, like group work and making it so it's not all on your own boring stuff.

Me: Different.

Group: Yeah.

M 2-9: Creative

Me: We don't have to have huge, major changes in the classroom.

**F 1-9:** No. It's like when we're doing things by ourselves, I'm gonna start writing a note cause I'm bored. If you're in a group you still get to talk to other people when you work and teacher think you don't do work when you're in a group. I usually get more work done when I'm in a group. We're talking it over with other people, we're discussing other opinions. Getting more opinions on things so you get more ideas of what to do. It's just better.

**Me:** Bullying and violence. What do you notice in the school?

**F 2-9:** Lots of it.

**Me:** When does it happen.

**F 2-9:** All the time.

**Me:** In class, outside of class.

**F 2-9:** All the time.

**Me:** What kind of bullying would we see?

**Group:** Name calling.

**F 2-9:** The name calling for no reason.

**Me:** So not teasing that the other person recognizes as teasing.

**F 2-9:** Right. Lots of the time it's mean.

**Me:** Is it within the same grades?

F 2-9: Both

F 1-9: I think it's more different grades.

F 2-9: It's more like nines with sevens. It's lots eights with sevens.

F 1-9: Yeah, that's where you see it the most, eights with sevens.

Me: Why is that?

F1-9: Because now they're higher than somebody, we know, we were there.

Me: so what do we do about it?

M 2-9: Not much, you can't really watch everybody all the

F 1-9: There's really nothing you can do about it. You can try.

F 2-9: But that just makes things worse. You tell people not to do it and they do it more.

Me: So there's nothing the school could do.

F 1-9: No matter what you do, how you punish them, they're still gonna do it. Like if they're a bully then they're a bully, they're always gonna be a bully.

F 2-9: And if they're bullied, they're always gonna be bullied.

Me: So who has to take the responsibility to change that situation?

M 1-9: Probably the students but that's just how they think and it's probably gonna be really hard to stop.



**Me:** So even if students who felt bullying was a negative, if they got together

**F 2-9:** No cause they become bullied.

**M 2-9:** It's only the really mature people who can do that and junior high isn't really mature

**F 2-9:** Exactly.

**Me:** We have different levels of maturity though, right. So we're looking at bullying and we're thinking it's just going to happen so there's nothing we can do.

**F 2-9:** We like to think there's something we could do but we haven't figured it out.

**F 1-9:** We'd like to say, oh yeah we can help.

**F 2-9:** But we can't. Cause we try to help and we become bullied. It just makes it worse.

**F 1-9:** It's just how school is. Like if you're in the grade higher, you but the grade lower. It's dumb but that's just how it is.

**F 2-9:** It's stupid.

**M 2-9:** It's a food chain.

**Me:** Food chain? That's quite the analogy.

**F 1-9:** No matter how mature you are or what grade you're in. Like the grade sevens are gonna try to be friends with us so they don't get bullied and like

F 2-9: And we think it's funny when they try and be our friends cause

F 1-9: It's not gonna work.

Me: Are you nice to them?

F 2-9: Oh yeah, I have lots of little grade seven friends.

Me: You remember what it was like?

F 2-9: No. She's just my little sister so I might as well be nice to her.

M 2-9: Grade nines are the kings

F 1-9: Queens

M 2-9: ... cause they're the older ones. Grade eights are lower and sevens are lowest. Grade seven you get picked on the most and grade nine you don't get picked on at all, well you will.

F 2-9: grade eights get picked on a lot.

Me: What is the responsibility that you folks, as grade nines, have?

M 1-9: To set a good example for the rest of the school.

F 2-9: But that doesn't work. We try and set examples but there's still the bad people.

F 1-9: You can try and set an example and some people will look up to you but others will say oh well.

F 2-9: They laugh.

Me: If you weren't setting a good example, would it be worse?

F 1-9: Probably, if we were doing it, everybody would think it was cool to do it because we're the grade nines.

F 2-9: Lots of grade nines do do it.

F 1-9: Right but if we were all doing it then it would be a lot worse.

M 2-9: Grade nines skateboard, grade seven see them do it and then they start.

Me: How important is school spirit?

F 1-9: Pretty important.

F 2-9: Really important. Like every volleyball game we can go to, we're there. And we normally get dirty looks.

Me: Why do you get dirty looks?

F 2-9: We cheer and if they're losing they think we shouldn't be cheering.

F 1-9: But we still cheer to get em going. If we had no school spirit then school would suck..

F 2-9: With no school spirit it would be coming to school, sitting in class, and going home.

Me: Where does the school spirit come from?

F 1-9: It comes from everybody.

F 2-9: You really have to believe in your school before you, if you don't like your school or don't like the teachers in your school or something along those lines they you have no school spirit.

Me: So does this relate back to the respect.

Group: Yeah.

Me: I didn't make that connection.

F 1-9: Miss McFadzen, what is wrong with you?

Me: Yeah, what was I thinkin'?

F 2-9: I was wondering what you were thinking having both of us here (indicates F 1-9) cause we fight all the time.

F 2-9: but we're always arguing for the same thing.

Me: Teachers knowing their subjects. How important is that?

F 1-9: Very important. Cause if they don't know what they're teaching then we know they don't know what they're teaching and we sit there and go you don't know what you're doing so I'm just gonna sit here and pretend you're not talking.

F 2-9: That's exactly how it is with substitutes, if substitutes come in and they think they know what they're doing but they really have no idea then we sit there and we figure at least our normal teacher knows what he's talking about.

**Me:** So what if a substitute teacher were to walk in, and we recognize the fact that sometimes you're being given a job that is not your area of expertise. What should you do?

**F 1-9:** You have to be understanding, if they're nervous and they don't know what they're doing and they know they don't know but are still trying to help you. You have to be understanding in that respect but like when they totally have no clue and they're not really trying to have a clue, that's when it's like, 'just never mind'.

**F 2-9:** I think especially with substitutes, when they come in and they think they know everything but really they don't. You try to correct them, 'we were taught this' and then the substitute is telling you something different and they fight with you on it. Just things like that, it frustrates you.

**Me:** Should we admit when we don't know something?

**Group:** Yeah.

**F 2-9:** You make us admit when we don't know something.

**Me:** Good point.

**F 1-9:** So I think if a teacher comes in and says I'm not good in this subject, work with me.

**F 2-9:** We would.

**F 1-9:** We would have more respect for that person. But if they came in and said I know exactly what I'm doing and they're doing it wrong we're gonna be like, what are you doing?

**Me:** You'll clue in.

**F 2-9:** Exactly.

**F 1-9:** Sometime we know more than them. We're trying to help but they're not listening because they think they know it all.

**Me:** Imagine you had the power to create the ideal school. Describe the school.

**F 2-9:** It would be bright. Lots of windows.

**F 1-9:** The rooms are dull. They need some color, like pink. I remember when we had lots of murals on the walls and then they painted over them. You're just making the school look like a prison. Get the students involved in what the school looks like and then they're proud of their school and then they have more school spirit which leads

**Group:** back to respect!

**F 2-9:** Everyone would get along with each other.

**F 1-9:** Everyone would be happy.

**Me:** Do we know how to do that?

**F 2-9:** You wouldn't walk into a class going, 'can we leave yet?'

**F 1-9:** Or 'what time is it' or 'can I go to the bathroom?'

**F 2-9:** Sometime it's the subject but lots of time it's the teacher that you don't want to be with.

F 1-9: Before, I didn't like (subject) at all, like it was my worst subject. But then when I had a certain teacher for that subject, it made it interesting, just the way that teacher taught it. I felt the respect and I looked forward to going to that class.

F 2-9: But then when you go and you get a teacher you don't like and then they don't show you the respect, you don't like the subject. With some teacher you like doing the work for them, they show respect and you do the work. You actually hand thing in on time. I think that's another thing about respect you know if a student has respect for you cause their stuff in on time, all the time.

F 1-9: It has nothing to do with when they do it or how much they're doing in class. If they don't respect you, they're not gonna do it. Just because then they know you're gonna be mad.

F 2-9: They say, 'I left it at home' but no.

F 1-9: It's in their binder and they just haven't finished it.

F 2-9: They don't like the teacher. If we don't feel the teacher has respect for us then we don't feel the work needs to be done.

Me: Anything else.

F 1-9: The bathrooms would have locks.

Me: Anything else?

F 1-9: Yeah, so just the pretty much everybody being involved in the school, the school beautification, the bright colors and things like that.

**F 1-9:** And no doubles. We never used to have double classes.

**M 2-9:** It's good to learn stuff like Power Point.

**F 2-9:** Sometimes teachers expect too much. And compare us to other classes. Sometimes we just don't get stuff. And teachers give up on us. They shouldn't give up on us. Some kids don't get stuff as fast.

**M 2-9:** Teachers should also teach us some stuff the same way. Sometimes every year there's a different way to do something. They should do stuff like position papers the same way.

**Me:** Anything else?