

Running head: THE DANCE OF RESILIENCE

The Dance of Resilience: A Narrative Exploration of Community Connection

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### **Abstract**

Poverty is affecting student learning and social development every day. Creating social emotional learning environments for learners can foster the development of resilient behaviours in vulnerable youth. This study explores students who have developed resilient behaviours as a result of their connection to a dance community within their school. The purpose of this narrative study was to determine powerful contributors that led to the transformation of student behavior within this community. Twelve students within this community, as well as their principal, were interviewed and three students' stories were chosen to be presented in narrative form. Employing co-ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methodologies three students' stories were woven together with the personal story of the researcher. The results of this study illustrated the importance of fostering social emotional learning environments so that vulnerable students can find success. In particular, the development of a healthy relationship with an adult was a key factor in allowing students' resilience to develop. Teachers need to be educated in the area of social emotional learning so they can better their practice and enhance student achievement for vulnerable learners.

### **Dedication**

This work is in dedication to my Gram, Marilyn Story, who without a doubt was the most influential person in my life. You showed me the power of community connection, the significance of relationships and the importance of generosity. Your influence created a tenacity within me that never has let me accept anything less than what you showed me I deserve. What I would do for you to be here to share in this process with me.

I miss you every single day.

## Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge all the teachers who believed in me when it seemed like no one else did. Some of you are mentioned in my stories, and some of you are not; nonetheless, you have all played a significant role in helping me to move forward toward a life of resilience.

I would like to acknowledge my parents, Pat and Cindy Bartlett for modeling a type of resilience that I have yet to dance.

Most importantly, I would like to acknowledge my dancing beans for their tenacity and determination for resilience. Without your resilience there would be no research. Each and every one of you has inspired me to take the same risks that I expect of you each day. The risks you took in sharing your stories will change the lives of others, so you should be very proud of yourselves.

I love you all more than you know.

A special acknowledgement to “Stella, Addie & Peyton” for their brave spirits and genuine concern for helping teachers to better understand the lives of vulnerable children.

Rachel Moll, for recognizing that my data is meaningful and should be shared through story. Even though at the time it seemed like a dark abyss, pushing through it with your encouragement was a life changing experience, so I thank you for challenging me and making this a truly meaningful experience.

Karle Frumento and Grandma Faye, without your eagerness for more and your genuine feedback I may have never had the courage to keep writing and to share these stories.

Robyn Gray, for igniting my innovative spirit, and helping me find my voice. You reinforced the value of my beliefs and taught me that they are worth a good fight.

Katherine Pepper for whom I wrote my first story. You created conditions for me to explore the root of my vulnerability and my core values...and this is where my journey began.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert for not only empowering me to share this story with the world, but for making me realize that not doing so... would be akin to educational mal-practice.

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## Chapter One: Problem to be Investigated

*“Oh my friend, it's not what they take away from you that counts. It's what you do with what you have left.”*

- Hubert Humphrey

### Introduction

The word poverty ignites a visual image, an image that is unique to every individual. Most people in modern society, living within middle or upper class demographics, would visualize the AIDS epidemic in Africa or the current war torn country of Afghanistan; others may visualize the pan-handlers on the downtown streets of major cities. In all of these cases, the holders of these visions usually conclude that poverty is far away from their own reality. According to Cooperrider's (1999) mentalist paradigm “reality is conditioned, reconstructed, and often profoundly created through our anticipatory images, values, plans, intentions, beliefs, and the like” (p. 2). If most middle and upper class people within our community experience these visual images, which allow us to continue to ignore poverty and its effects on our *own* community, we cannot expect it to change anytime soon.

In schools, poverty is affecting student learning and social development. We can define poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (Payne, 1996, p. 7). Students living in poverty attend school with many life stresses; due to their lack of resources their focus and motivation to learn is compromised. As teachers, we are expected to teach curriculum content in various subject areas but teachers are becoming increasingly challenged in leading their students to success. Educators are expecting

students to be good learners and demonstrate resilient behaviours, even though their basic needs are not being met. With this understanding it becomes imperative to face the issue of poverty in schools, and instill systems that foster resiliency for vulnerable youth. “To improve achievement . . . we will need to rethink our instruction and instructional arrangements” (Payne, 1996, p. 87) so students can be supported in dealing with personal adversities, and become better able to learn.

We live in a time affected by educational cut backs, and this ever-declining budget affects all involved in education. The first on the chopping block, where cut backs are concerned, tend to be programs that support student needs, since they are often seen as unwarranted for successful attainment of the required expectations. It is not mandatory for students to be a part of programs such as band, football, dance, or student council. Programs such as the gay straight alliance, social justice, and student leadership programs are not viewed as an essential part of education, as English, Math, Social Studies, and Science are. But these programs, for some students, are the one ‘hook’ that keeps them motivated and involved. As educators we need to ask ourselves, to what extent are vulnerable students developing emotionally and finding success in these areas when their motivation to focus has been compromised?

### **Background and Context**

As an educator, I dream of the day when all vulnerable children can rise above adversity. I teach at an inner-city school and come from a similar background. I understand the situations that our vulnerable students face on a daily basis and now, as an educator, I understand the challenges of leading these students to success. The school I teach at is considered inner-city, at-risk, and of low socioeconomic standing. The students within the school vary in ability, but a large percentage of these learners are



considered vulnerable for various reasons. I grew up in the same community as these students and I also attended, and graduated from, the very same school. Although need has increased in this community in the last decade I am able to connect similar patterns of need from my own school experiences with those of my vulnerable learners.

I graduated from high school in the year of 1998. I left that building reluctantly not wanting to let go of the security, the safety, and the relationships that I had with the people within it. My aspirations were clear. I would attend, what was then, Malaspina University-College and do an undergraduate degree in English and Physical Education, and then apply to, and graduate from, the Malaspina Bachelor of Education program. After graduation I would go back to my high school and join that community once again, but this time as a teacher. Sounded simple enough. My teachers in high school listened to my plans and intentions with much hope, I'm sure, of saving one of their vulnerable students. I'd love to know what they were actually thinking at that time. Did they think that I would accomplish what I was setting out to do?

When I graduated from the teaching program in December of 2006 it wasn't long before I accomplished my long-term goal and became a teacher at my old stomping ground in September of 2008. Upon getting the job, I was so excited at the thought of being back in the building that brought me so much joy in my adolescent years. But when I entered the doors of my beloved high school I realized that things were a little different than I remembered. The boys' football program that was in its beginning stages when I left was now in full swing. Provincial championship games were a common occurrence each year and there was even a championship banner from 2002. The same coach was there and he had created and sustained a dynamic program, which provided the

boys with enormous amounts of self worth, confidence, and a sense of belonging within the building. It was amazing to watch them all work so hard toward common goals, and with such passion.

But quite quickly I began to notice that the girls seemed to lack identity within the school; there was nothing keeping them engaged. It seemed your best chance at identity was if you were dating one of the all star football players. Teenage pregnancy was at an all time high for girls within this school, and the government even funded a daycare to be on the high-school campus, in an attempt to support young mothers. The lack of opportunity for girls in this school broke my heart. I had to reframe my strategies as a teacher if I wanted to make a difference; if I wanted these girls (girls who were much like me in my adolescent years) to rise above adversity and really make something of themselves. My teaching assignment, at that time, consisted of a physical education and dance performance class. I felt my best shot at helping these kids was to create an inclusive dance program within the school. I knew that if I wanted kids to buy into the program, they would need a dynamic space, a studio perhaps. They were not going to buy into the concept of community and togetherness by dancing where all the other students ate their sandwiches at lunchtime.

So I approached the principal with my thoughts and ideas and gained full support for the establishment of a dance studio space! The kids did buy in and I went from one period of dance, to four the following year; the past two years we have had enrollment numbers for seven periods of dance, and each semester there is a waitlist. These are high numbers for a school with less than 700 students. Our program naturally attracts vulnerable girls, mostly, but there are a few exceptions. Now that the physical

infrastructure for the program was in place and the learners were present, in Studio 411, I began to see the transformations that I was hoping would develop.

Studio 411 became a meeting place, where students felt they belonged. Inclusive peer groups became the norm where students of all grade levels and abilities accepted each other for their strengths and supported each other for their weaknesses. Students began to gain purpose in creating and showcasing their dances, and, in working collectively to bring each dancer to the same level of ability. Girls began to walk the halls with their heads held high. Their confidence led them to take advantage of leadership opportunities around the school and in their community.

The dancers became the regular half-time-show entertainment for all the home football games and they even travelled with the team for important games, which have included dancing at Empire Stadium and BC Place for the Provincial Championships. We also participate in annual dance competitions. Last year we travelled to the River Rock Theater to compete among high school dance teams from across Canada. We didn't win but the students were excited with their adjudication scores that were in the high eighties. Their school leadership activities have included creating inclusive dances to perform at other school events such as assemblies, talent show nights, and pep-rallies.

The dancers have even become a tradition at the District Aboriginal Graduation as well as at the District Professional Development Days in Nanaimo. Last year close to a hundred students travelled by bus to the event to kick off a professional development day for teachers with a flash-mob. This year the senior students offered a dance workshop to teachers within the district in hopes of promoting the benefits of dance across grade levels. Since then, teachers from various schools have contacted us in hopes that we will

come to their schools and work with their students. Further, these students have even performed for charity fundraisers sponsored by Rotary Clubs of Nanaimo.

What is obvious to me is that this dance community is fostering the development of resilient behaviours. Self-confidence, purpose, a sense of belonging, student leadership, aspirations for the future, and positive self-worth are showcased most days in Studio 411. But questions still remain...what *was* the cause for *this* effect? *How* is this dance community fostering the development of these resilient behaviours? And what can we do as educators, to implement these factors contributing to resilience in the traditional classroom setting so all students can become emotionally connected to their learning?

### **Purpose of the Study**

Therefore, the specific purpose of this study was to explore what exactly was responsible for these transformations. It seemed silly at first, to explore the *reasons* behind the transformation of these kids rising above their adversities, and showing success in a variety of areas in their lives. But as people began to ask questions about the program and my thoughts on the most powerful contributors that led to this change...I wasn't quite sure how to explain it in words. All I could convey was that this all-encompassing approach of developing this dance community seemed to be working. But I knew that if I wanted to advocate for the creation and sustainment of similar type programs, and promote initiatives to bring into the traditional classroom setting, ones that fostered resiliency for vulnerable youth, then I needed to be able to explain the relationship between fostering resilience and successful behaviours. Thus the research question I explored in this study was: *How* do communities within a school setting foster resiliency for vulnerable youth?

As I began to explore the patterns of my students I began to reflect on myself as a vulnerable learner. I became clear to me that my story of rising above my own adversities coincided with the stories of my learners. This self-reflection became a deep self-actualizing experience for me, and one that I had not *consciously* connected with in the past. Through this process my assumption became that a positive connection with a healthy role model is a powerful contributor that vulnerable youth need in order to develop resilient behaviours.

Research Question: *How* do communities within a school setting foster resiliency for vulnerable youth?

My hypothesis then, was that when vulnerable learners are connected to a community within their school that fosters healthy connection with an adult, they are more likely to demonstrate qualities and behaviours that will help them to rise above adversity, become better learners and lead fulfilled lives.

### **Justification of the Study**

I feel as though there is ample research for educators to find, if they looked, the knowledge to support them in providing an environment that fosters resiliency. But knowing that all people within an educational setting may not partake in self-initiated professional development, someone must take the initiative for ensuring fundamental systems are in place to support vulnerable learners. Schools need to make structural changes in order to adapt to the cultural changes that are taking place within society. Expecting under resourced learners to achieve in education means creating systems where school becomes a haven for youth. “As professionals, we need to reframe teaching and learning to offer ways to expand opportunities for children and adolescents to participate in school and community” (Shepard, 2004, p. 210). But who is responsible for facilitating these opportunities for students?

Nor and Roslan's (2009) conducted a study that focused on exploring the actions of two Principals in Selangor, Malaysia, who both turned at-risk schools into high performing ones. The results of the study showed that the biggest improvements to the turn around were the implementation of school programs. The principals' priorities were to "reach out to help everyone discover and realize their potentials" (p. 24). The results showed that programs or communities within a school have directly led to successfully turning around an at-risk school. Each and every program was designed to offer students a space within the school to identify with, ample time with an adult to develop healthy personal bonds, and an opportunity to develop a true sense of belonging within the school building.

Educated professionals need to know the influence they have on youth, and understand their role in providing opportunities for them to be nurtured before they can expect academic success to take place in their classrooms. "It is our responsibility to create environments that foster resiliency and do not promote failure or hopelessness for students" (Hippe, 2004, p. 240). Resiliency can be taught and can lead to improved academic performance. We as educators have a responsibility to create environments that foster resiliency.

Research shows that resiliency can be taught and that educators are the best models for youth. "To a considerable extent, resilience can be taught or cultivated. In that respect, adults bear direct responsibility for creating environments where positive growth and resilient outcomes can occur" (Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2003, p. 23). Research by Feinstein, Baartman, Buboltz, Sonnichsen, and Solomon (2008) helped identify what a community needs to offer vulnerable students in order to foster resiliency. Characteristics such as, adequate bonding time with an adult in the program, as well as the need for empathy practices to be promoted within the community were some of the

major findings.

In creating resilient youth, educators will see the benefits through their students attaining their academic expectations, as well as, their behavioural expectations. “Resilient persons possess self-awareness. They are aware of their strengths and limitations and have empathy for others” (Hippe, 2004, p. 240). In order to support at-risk learners, educational settings need to symbolize a supportive, family-type dynamic where relationships are valued and where students feel like they belong. “Resilient youth typically form positive attachments to teachers, mentors, or healthy peers. These can compensate for problem relationships in their families” (Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2003, p. 23).

One problem that seems to arise for educators is that they do not fully understand the nature of student adversity and *how* exactly they can create environments to support these vulnerable learners. Schonert-Reichl and Hymel (2007) highlight Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as the “missing piece, because it represents a part of education that is inextricably linked to school success, but has not been explicitly stated or given much attention” (p. 21). Their research illustrated that SEL “is the process of acquiring the competencies to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations effectively” (p. 21). These characteristics paralleled the qualities of resilient behaviours from literature in the field and within this research study. Further, Schonert-Reichl and Hymel (2007) explained how environments that nurtured SEL resulted in vulnerable students attaining higher academic achievement and resilient characteristics for life after leaving the education system (p. 21). In creating a systematic

approach, and informing all educators with the knowledge they need to support vulnerable learners in the classroom “resilient youth [will] have the opportunities for achievement, develop skills to cope with stress, resolve problems, and succeed in school and life” (Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2003, p. 23). Given the research on resilient youth, my current study collected students’ stories and examine themes to determine what factors of the dance community contributed to their sense of resiliency, with the purpose of better understanding exactly what students need in order to rise above their adversities.

### **Definitions of Terms**

My study identifies **vulnerable** students as students who are living in a low socioeconomic community and attending an inner-city school. These students show lack of emotional support, support systems, and/or healthy role models. It is because of these challenges that these students’ focus and motivation to learn is compromised.

A **community** within a school setting, is defined in my study as, a group of people within a school that share a common space, common values, and work together towards a common goal, while supporting each other in a family-type environment. The community must offer ways to expand opportunities for children and adolescents to participate in school and the wider community. The community must foster connection, and the opportunity of bonding with a healthy role model.

The community being studied in this research is our dance program within our inner-city school that takes place within the newly built Studio 411. It is an inclusive program and all students are welcome to sign up for the course. All students work toward performance opportunities that take place at the school or in the wider community. Students collectively work together and solve problems that arise within the group,



among their peers or at home. Our dance program acts as a support network for youth, where they help each other in the fight against adversity. The program provides ample opportunity for dancers to build confidence through hard work and performance success. The purpose of this community is for students to be supported and build resilience.

I define **resiliency** by identifying a student who feels a sense of belonging, shows self-confidence, has a bond with a healthy role model, has aspirations for the future, has a desire to come to school, and shows signs of having empathy. This definition was informed by Johnson's (2009) study on resilience which demonstrated that belongingness, personal connection, and cooperation attested to the success students showed in school. Thus, these three attributes were incorporated to construct the definition of resilience in the current study.

### **Brief Overview of Study**

This study explored how communities within a school foster resiliency for vulnerable youth. This narrative study consisted of qualitative data that was collected through personal interviews with vulnerable students. These students were a part of a dance community within an inner-city school, which is considered the lowest performing high school in School District #68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith. Through conversations (interviews) I looked for evidence of resilient behaviours that have emerged through their participation in this community, and for factors that were the community's most powerful contributors to the development of these resilient behaviours.

After the interviews I worked alongside the participants to construct co-ethnographic narratives; through this process the stories of each student represented data of their own adversities and how they began to develop signs of resiliency within this dance community.

The study explored the root of vulnerability of each participant and showcased the patterns and links throughout the personal journey of each participant.

Data were supplemented with auto-ethnographic data. I presented the data in the form of a story, where I explored my own personal educational journey and how I rose above adversity and found success. This study aimed to lead to a deep understanding of *how* this dance community fosters the development of resilient behaviours. The results of this research were used to advocate for the creation and sustainment of similar types of programs and/or teaching initiatives in order to help vulnerable learners find success.

## Chapter Two: A Review of Related Literature

Empirical research in the area of *how* communities within school settings foster the development of resilient behaviours was limited. However literature around the phenomenon of resiliency in children, and how we can better support student achievement levels informed the current study.

### Student Resilience

Feinstein, Baartman, Buboltz, Sonnichsen and Solomon's (2008) study focused around the fact that there can be two vulnerable children, with evidence of similar adversities, yet one may show resilient behaviors while the other does not. This study attempted to understand the factors that may support or hinder adolescent boys in their ability to show resilient behaviours. The study took place within a low-security correctional facility. The participants were 18 juvenile males who were between the ages of 12 and 18; all residents of the facility were there as a result of repeated offence. All boys residing in this correctional community were enrolled in grades 7 through 12, as an essential requirement within the program. All participants within the study were performing below grade level in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics.

The purpose of the study was to identify the positive factors that currently existed for each of the juvenile boys, in an attempt to establish approaches that fostered resiliency. Cesarone (1999) as quoted in Feinstein et al. (2008) defined resiliency as the "the human capacity and ability to face, overcome, be strengthened by, and even be transformed by experiences of adversity" (p. 28). In this study resiliency was examined through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which is "an approach to understanding

human development within the context of the systems of relationships that form in the individual's environment" (2008, p. 94).

Feinstein et al. (2008) qualitatively collected data through individual interviews with all of the 18 participants in the study. The team of researchers established interview questions. Bronfenbrenner's Theory, as well as, the Search Institutes Risk and Resiliency Theory, helped to shape the nature of the interview questions. Some examples of interview questions in Feinstein et al.'s (2008) study were, *Who are your role models? Why? Do you have plans for the future? Do people feel safe in your community (outside the facility)?* (p. 98-99). Once interview data were collected, the team of researchers in this study analyzed it in an attempt to identify relationships and trends.

Findings within Feinstein et al.'s (2008) study helped me in recognizing the characteristics needed within a community in order to foster resiliency for vulnerable youth. They identified characteristics such as adequate bonding time with an adult in the program, as well as, the need for empathy practices to be promoted within the community. The methods of this study provided me with models of appropriate and meaningful interview questions that can be used when exploring whether children who are connected to a community within their school are demonstrating resilient behaviours.

One limitation to Feinstein et al.'s (2008) study was that there was no follow up evidence to see if the boys continued to demonstrate resilient behaviors outside of the correctional community. The nurturing environment of the facility offered structure, accountability, and unconditional support to the juvenile boys. It would be valuable to know if this supportive community, that fostered resiliency, resulted in withstanding adversity after the boys re-entered society.

Around the world, there are many high performing schools, but there are also schools that are not offering at-risk students the education that they rightly deserve and need in order to find success. The problem that motivated Nor and Roslan's (2009) study highlights was the fact that, even given ample, available research that shows how high performing schools are maintaining success, and how low performing schools have turned around their success rates, a considerable amount of at-risk schools still remain. In their study "at-risk schools were defined by the Department of Education in the state of Selangor, Malaysia as schools with serious disciplinary problems and low academic achievement" (Nor & Roslan, p. 21).

The purpose of Nor and Roslan's (2009) study was to dissect the doings of principal leadership within each of the schools during the time of transition from at-risk to high performing. The study was focused specifically on two schools that had made a turn around from at-risk to high performing; both schools were in the area of Selangor, Malaysia. The participants in Nor and Roslan's research were former principals, present teachers and students from both schools. All subjects in this qualitative study were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol, and asked to discuss what factors they believed resulted in the turn around. Additionally, researchers observed programs and communities within the schools, and collected past and present documents for content analysis.

Results from Nor and Roslan's (2009) research found that the principals who worked to change the climate of the schools, were responsible for the transformation of them. Both principals of the two schools focused on improving the physical environment, the social environment, the affective environment and the academic environment of each

school. Some initiatives included celebrating student success and achievements with a formal appreciative assembly; another was making the building more aesthetically pleasing in hopes that the students would develop a sense of pride within their school. The majority of initiatives implemented to establish positive school climate were a variety of in-school programs. The programs ranged from developing a workshop for students to do repairs on their cars, bikes or other small machines, to gardening and landscaping programs. The principals developed many programs, “willing to reach out to help everyone discover and realize their potentials” (Nor & Roslan, 2008, p. 24).

This article helped me to identify that, programs or communities within a school can have a direct impact on successfully turning around an at-risk school. Each and every program was developed to offer students space within the school to identify with, ample time with an adult to develop healthy personal bonds, and opportunities to develop a true sense of belonging within the school building. In an attempt to develop an understanding as to whether communities in a school foster resiliency, this study helped me to develop a hypothesis for my research.

A limitation, however, to this research study was that it focused on what the individual principals did, so naturally it was going to conclude that the principals’ actions were the reason the school turned around. Although they speak to programs within the school, as being the reason the turn-around was so successful, some readers may be discouraged to connect to this study given the specific personal attributes of the two principals. It would have been helpful for this study to showcase the roles teachers, or communities within the school and what they offered in support of the ‘turn around.’

Johnson (2009) strongly believed that learning relies on interpersonal factors. Her study focused on “examining the link between social context variables and the educational process by providing an analysis of the relationship between belongingness, teacher support, and school context” (p. 99). The question that drove her research was: do levels of belongingness differ in relation to school context? In an attempt to find answers to this question Johnson (2009) found a school that met her criteria of being considered a ‘non-traditional’ context.

Starlight Academy reported organizing their structure around the developmental needs of their students and policies were made collaboratively among all stakeholders in the educational community. To compare the aspect of belongingness within different contexts, Johnson (2009) cross-studied Lincoln School, which represented a traditional approach to teaching and learning. This mixed methods study administered teacher/student questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, as well as classroom observations by the researcher. This research attempted to prove, through qualitative and quantitative data, that schools that fostered belongingness and other interpersonal factors resulted in effective and successful learning experiences for students.

Results from the data showed that students who attended the ‘non-traditional’ school were more likely to report teacher support and care, belongingness, and a desire for learning than the students who attended the ‘traditional’ school. Limitations to this research included the fact that the student-participants who participated in the study were not chosen but volunteered to partake in the interview process. Because of this, the sample size was smaller than anticipated, and therefore created narrow results in support of the outcome of this study.

The data that was generated proved meaningful to the participants that it involved, and therefore genuine data was still represented in the findings. Johnson's (2009) focus on the benefits of interpersonal factors on student learning had similarities to the link between community connection and resilient behaviours, which I am interested in in the current study. Johnson's results showed how belongingness, personal connection and cooperation attested to the success students showed in school. Thus, these three attributes were incorporated to construct the definition of resilience in the current study.

Revell and Arthur (2007) explored the attitudes and teacher training of student teachers around character education. This study highlighted the fact that character education was a large part of the school curriculum in England; yet, it was not included as part of the training courses within the teacher education programs. Within the study, character education was characterized by, but not limited to, the development of student social responsibility, community involvement, respect for others, the development of trust and honesty with others, the promotion of self-esteem and emotional well being, and the development of effective relationships.

Revell and Arthur (2007) presented a case study of the students within two University education programs, and were interested in determining the attitudes of these students toward teaching moral education in schools, and their experience in learning *how* to teach morals to their students. The sample of participants included all students enrolled within in both primary and secondary education programs, which gave the study a sample size of 1013 students. Each student received a questionnaire at the beginning of the teacher education courses and then again after the courses and directly before their first teaching placement. Additionally, students were asked to record their "experiences



in school in relation to their understanding of how school influenced the development of pupil character and values...[and] the frequency with which they observed values education and whether they thought their course had prepared them to teach in this area” (p. 82-83).

The first set of data that was taken prior to the start of the teacher training courses showed that 68% of student teachers believed character education was critical and expected it to be part of the teacher training criteria; only 5% said that it was only important for primary teachers to teach moral behaviours in school. When the questions used the word behaviour, as opposed to values or morals, 97% reported it being crucial to teacher training. The second questionnaire distributed offered data that showed that only 34% of student-teachers reported that they felt the teacher education training prepared them to develop and influence students’ values and characters; 12% reported not at all, while 52% reported ‘to a limited extent.’

Results of the study “reveal that issues of educational ethics and moral discourse were absent in the two courses at the center of this research” (p. 85). Knowing that learners within the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to be supported in their emotional development, it becomes imperative to transform teacher education training programs so that they include the tools and skills teachers need to teach students in a moral way. Additionally, practicing teachers need to be supported around their knowledge of character education, which is becoming newly known as social emotional learning, which is “the process of acquiring the competencies to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations effectively” (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007, p. 21) in

order to demonstrate resilient behaviours. Educators who are better equipped to deal with the realities of student adversity in their classrooms will foster structures which can better help students find success in school, and in life beyond the education system.

### **Narrative Studies**

Studies by Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lepine, Begin, and Bernard (2007) and Fisher (2010) demonstrated how narrative methodologies in research are appropriate for the study of student resilient behaviours.

As educators, it is difficult to determine which students are vulnerable and in need of a social emotional learning approach, and ones that are not. Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lepine, Begin and Bernard (2007) explored questions regarding the phenomenon of resilient and non-resilient tendencies among children with similar backgrounds and living conditions, and attempted to determine their characteristics. The participants who were chosen in this study had all previously been in the foster care system and were all deemed to have qualities of resilient behaviours. Researchers chose participants from foster care backgrounds as they all share disconnection from a parental bond. Participants were deemed resilient if they demonstrated resilient behaviours in three of the five domains: “(1) scholastic participation or employability; (2) relationships with peers; (3) relationships with adults; (4) personal characteristics; (5) behavior” (p. 981).

Drapeau et al. (2007) chose these participants by purposeful sampling in an attempt to determine the rooting causes for the development of such resilient behaviours. The purpose of the study, then, was to deepen knowledge and understanding of the processes that contributed to the development of resilient behaviours among at-risk adolescents. To determine these causes participants participated in two separate

interviews. The first was a general exploration of the participant through an autobiographical approach. The second interview had a more in depth focus around specific events that contributed to the development of resilient behaviours. Researchers identified these events as “turning points” or “breaking points” where the resilience began to develop. Qualitative data were presented in the form of narratives or stories in an attempt for the reader to gain meaning within the process of developed resilience.

The main results of the study helped to better understand the development of resilience among vulnerable adolescents. Drapeau et al. (2007) identified three themes from the data presented within the stories: action, relation, and reflection. According to the researchers, these were common themes that helped to determine the process of developed resilience. Action reflected a moment in time when the participant experienced an achievement or sense of accomplishment. Relation was determined when the participant reported trust with a healthy adult. Finally, Reflection or going through the process of self-discovery seemed to have a large impact in the development of personal resilience.

Drapeau et al. (2007) presented qualitative data in the form of narratives or stories, which demonstrated a meaningful and effective approach to research findings. The use of this methodology allowed me to benefit from the genuineness of the data; as well, it fostered the process of listening to those who know best based on lived experience. When we can draw on the voice of those who are at the heart of our research it is possible to rely less on drawing conclusions based on the assumptions of the researcher.

Fisher (2010) shared common thoughts on the power of narrative forms of research. Her study focused on the negative, long-standing impacts that summative

assessment and evaluation practices could have on learners. The purpose of her study was to develop an understanding of “the meaning of measuring and being measured in school contexts” (p. 15). She thoroughly explored the implications for both the evaluator and the evaluated in a variety of contexts.

Fisher (2010) used a multi-dimensional, narrative research approach that included auto-ethnography and co-ethnography methods; her words described it best,

At the core is a belief in story as an epistemology – a way to make meaning of our experiences. This core is overlaid with a belief in the potential of autoethnography – a perspective that leads me to assert that a telling and examination of my own stories is an effective means of understanding the experiences of others, and of exploring these experiences within a cultural context. An understanding of the social aspects of the construction of experience compels me to examine the ‘we’ that is implicit in ‘me’ and to be curious about the meaning others make from their experiences as well. This examination is facilitated through co-autoethnography (working with others to create a storying of their experiences) and narrative analysis (examining the impact of the stories we are told by others about who we are), (p. 52).

The participants in Fisher’s (2010) study were four students from the Adult Basic Education program at Vancouver Island University, who voluntarily agreed to share their stories of their previous school experiences with the researcher. The sharing of stories took place in a casual environment where the participants’ stories were audiotaped and later transformed by the researcher into narrative experiences. Additionally, the autobiographical stories of the researcher made up the core of the data that was collected for the study. Fisher (2010) believed that this qualitative form of data collection was the best strategy to truly understand how evaluative processes affected learners, and thus the best approach to use to understand assessment strategies for optimal student learning. “If my intention is to seek to understand the meaning that people make of their evaluative assessment experiences, I assert that stories are the best evidence I can obtain” (p. 53).

Fisher's (2010) methodology offered an in depth understanding of the true emotions of learners within a school environment. The genuine evidence that can be attained through this approach would prove effective when researching resiliency in vulnerable youth. Giving the opportunity to tell stories will allow for the collection of meaningful evidence, which could enhance the understanding of individual needs for vulnerable learners. Auto-ethnography, specifically, would enrich the meaning of research findings by inviting the reader to better understand how connected the researcher is to this area of study.

There are always limitations to presenting qualitative research; one such limitation when presenting qualitative data is that "there is seldom methodological justification for generalizing the findings of a particular study" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 432). But it is important to realize that it is the educational leader, or reader of the findings within the study, who will determine whether they can generalize the data and correlate it with their own situations or populations of interest (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The current study endeavoured to gather and present rich data, through co-ethnographic and auto-ethnographic stories that would provide enough data for the reader to decide whether the results would be valid and generalizable to their context.

Overall, this literature review illustrates that qualitative research is a meaningful way to present data when exploring powerful contributors that lead to the development of resilient behaviours in youth. Further, representing personalized data in the form of stories or narratives in both co-ethnography and auto-ethnography gives the reader the ability to empathize with the participants and generalize the validity to their own context.

### Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Methods

*“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” – Tom King*

#### Methodological Framework

Throughout my educational years I have learned about the Holocaust. I know the dates and facts of the tragedies that took place, mostly from Social Studies textbooks and classroom lectures. But it wasn't until I met Peter Parker, and heard his story, in the Fall of 2006 that I truly understood the pain that was caused to millions of people during that time. Peter Parker is a survivor of one of the most horrific events in history. At a Holocaust Symposium, he told stories of his days within the concentration camps in Auschwitz at the young age of eleven. Within his stories he explained his thoughts and feelings; how scared he was, and how lonely he felt, every single day.

Against the odds, Peter Parker survived the war and began the struggle of putting his life back together at the age of sixteen. It was difficult to overcome what he had faced. The years that were robbed from his youth, the constant occurring memories throughout adulthood and the torturing dreams that will haunt him forever. I am grateful Peter Parker found personal resilience; if it were not for his personal story, I would not have truly *felt* his pain, and the pain of the people like him, who also went through this tragedy, and whom may not have come out safely to tell the powerful story that he could.

Stories, or narratives, act as powerful tools in the attempt of truly understanding how a person thinks and more importantly, how a person feels. My strong belief in story telling has led me to pursue a narrative form of qualitative research. “Through narrative inquiry, you gain access to the personal experiences of the storyteller who frames,

articulates, and reveals life as experienced in a narrative structure we call story” (deMarris & Lapan, 2004, p.105). Through the examination of my stories within this research, I have learned that my experiences in education reflect those of my current students, and I believe that- the telling of my own experiences may offer an understanding of the similar patterns of my students and help me to help them to then lead more successful lives. Polkinghorne (2007) said, “Narrative researchers undertake their inquiries to have something to say to their readers about human condition. Their efforts are not simply for their own private consumption” (p. 476).

As Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) highlighted, “an important aspect of some narrative research is that the participant recalls one or more special events (an “epiphany”) in his or her life. The researcher in narrative research describes, in some detail, the setting or content within which the epiphany occurred” (p. 427). Throughout my personal journey in education I had adversities to overcome in order to find success. Upon becoming an educator I came to realize the root of these struggles and how I subconsciously, at the times of these struggles, overcame them and found success. I believe that these patterns of failure not only hinder us academically but also follow us into other important developmental aspects of our lives.

Therefore, auto-ethnography was used as a form of data collection in this thesis. It was used in similar ways to Fisher (2010) who said that it is “a perspective that leads me to assert that a telling and examination of my own stories is an effective means of understanding the experiences of others, and of exploring these experiences within a cultural context” (p. 52). It was my intent, through this research, to share my stories and hope that they create ‘epiphany’ type moments for teachers, so they can begin to

understand how to foster an environment of resilience for their students.

Additionally, I intended “for this research to have an impact on the participants,” (Fisher, 2010, p. 60) which is known as catalytic validity. To facilitate catalytic validity my personal stories were shared with the participants and included in this research study in hopes to create a transformation in their behaviours and thought processes by the “reality altering impact of the research process itself” (Lather, 1986, p. 67).

Further, Fisher (2010) explained the importance of co-ethnography, which involves working with others to create a storying of their experiences (p. 52). She added that the “sharing of stories is a common yet deeply meaningful way to share past experiences and to make meaning of them” (p. 60). Collaborative methods of sharing stories enable us to, together, construct better understandings of the world (Taylor & Coia, 2006).

Thus, in this study narrative data was collected and represented through a process of auto-ethnography and co-ethnography. My goals in participating in, both, auto- and co- ethnography was to first, gain a better understanding of vulnerable learners who are connected to a community within their school, and second, for these students to develop understanding of, and a sense of determination in their current life situations. There is potential for this research to change the stories the participants live by (Fisher, 2010, p. 60). And as Fisher (2010) points out in her justification for narrative research, “you really can’t understand the world without telling a story” (p.52).

### **Research Design**

The objective of this research was to gather evidence of resilient behaviours that have emerged through participation in this dance community, and determine the factors that powerfully contribute to the development of resilient behaviours. The results of this research will then be used to advocate for the creation and sustainment of similar types of programs



and/or strategic methods of teaching, through which educators can create conditions for vulnerable students to find success in their classrooms and help coach students in understanding *how* to create these conditions for themselves once they leave the school building.

The study procedures included semi-structured interviews with the school principal and vulnerable students who were connected to the dance community within an inner-city school in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith school district. The questions addressed to the students explored the resilient behaviours that students were demonstrating, as well as, questions about the factors that students could identify as the most powerful contributors to their behavioural transformations. Resilient characteristics were determined by participants demonstrating; a sense of belonging, self-confidence, having aspirations for the future, having a desire to come to school, and the ability to identify two people who believe in them within the school building. Students also had the opportunity to reflect on what they thought were the most influential factors within the community that contributed to their behavioural transformations. The interview questions addressed to the school principal asked for her observations of the effects of the community on the vulnerable students, and her perception of the success of this community in her school. All participation was voluntary and data found within the interviews were kept confidential. Following the interviews the researcher critically analyzed the qualitative data and chose three students to participate in the process of co-ethnography, where stories were created in an attempt to make the data more meaningful and real for the reader of the thesis. In addition, the study also explored my educational journey through the process of auto-ethnography. I shared and reflected on my personal stories and

included them as data in this study because an understanding of my experience lead to a richer understanding of students' experiences.

### **Participants**

This study identified vulnerable students as students who were living in a low socioeconomic community and attending an inner-city school. These students showed lack of emotional support, support systems, and/or healthy role models. It was because of these challenges that students' focus and motivation to learn was compromised. The 12 student-participants in the study ranged from 14-18 years of age, and were chosen as purposive sample, which is uniquely suited to the intent of the study – to understand the nature of the dance community. In order to explore the resilient behaviours of vulnerable students who were connected to the community, chosen participants needed to be demonstrating resilient behaviours and needed to belong to that specific dance community.

A community within a school setting, in this study, was considered a group of people within a school that share a common space, common values, and work together towards a common goal, while supporting each other in a family-type environment. The community must offer ways to expand opportunities for children and adolescents to participate in school and the wider community. The dance community within this school, described in detail in Chapter 1, met the criteria of community within the study, and therefore all participants were chosen from that particular community in the school. Additionally, the school principal was also a participant in the study. She has been at the school, as principal, for three years and has been an advocate for this dance community from its inception.

The experiences of the three students chosen for the co-ethnography process paralleled the overall trends and themes of the other nine student interviews. These three students were specifically chosen based on their desire to go further in this self-learning process. During the initial interview these students showed a self-initiated willingness to share stories of their life. All three of these students reported having something to offer after the sharing of my own personal stories. All three students also showed interest in promoting awareness to teachers around at-risk students.

### **Instruments**

Semi-structured and informal interviews were used in an attempt to identify characteristics and behaviours of resilience and the contributing factors to this resilience in the vulnerable youth who were connected to a community within their school. The terms resilience, vulnerable, and community were defined for the participants in this study which improved the validity of the interview protocol. Findings within Feinstein et al.'s (2008) study helped in recognizing the characteristics needed within a community in order to foster resiliency for vulnerable youth. They identified characteristics such as adequate bonding time with an adult in the program, as well as, the need for empathy practices to be promoted within the community. Feinstein et al.'s study provided me with models of appropriate and meaningful interview questions that can be used when exploring whether children who are connected to a community within their school are demonstrating resilient behaviours. The questions created for the current study reflected ways of determining how this dance community was fostering an environment where students could develop resilient behaviours. Some examples of questions asked during the interview were, *What does it mean to you to be part of this dance program? What is*

*your role in class? Do you have bonds with students in class? Can you identify two people in this building that believe you will be a success in life? Do you feel like you belong in Studio 411? If so, what makes you feel this way? What are your aspirations for the future? How are you doing in your other school subjects?* (Refer to Appendix A for the full interview protocol of the study). The characteristics of resilience were determined by subjects showing that they had; a sense of belonging, self-confidence, had aspirations for the future, had purpose in life; had a desire to come to school and showed signs of having empathy for others.

Additionally, the school principal was asked questions in a formal interview setting. She had been at the inner-city school for three years and was a strong advocate for vulnerable learners that attended her school. This principal had also been a strong advocate for the creation and sustainment of the dance program. Some of the questions that she was asked in the interview were, *What do you believe this dance community has brought to your school? What do you believe must be present in order for a community or program within a school to foster the development of resiliency for vulnerable youth? You have been an advocate for the creation and sustainment of the dance program at your school. Please expand on that.* (Refer to Appendix A for the full interview protocol of the study).

### **Procedures**

Over a five week period in the Winter of 2012, twelve students and their principal in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith School District participated in one-hour individual interviews. Refer to Appendix A, the interview protocol, for a complete list of interview questions. Participants were chosen by purposive sampling but it was explained that their participation in the research study was voluntary and the data would be kept completely

confidential. Each participant had a consent form signed by their parent or guardian, please refer to Appendix B. The interviews took place in the school that the participants attended, and in a neutral and private environment. Participants were explained the purpose and justification of the study, as well as the definitions of key terms such as resilience.

Following the interviews the researcher transcribed and then critically analyzed the qualitative data. The audio-recorded interviews were deleted after the transcription process was complete. The data were critically analyzed to determine whether the participants held the characteristics of resilience, which were defined in the study. The data were then analyzed to investigate the most significant contributing factors that led to the development of these behavioural transformations. After careful analysis, inferences regarding how and whether the participants demonstrated resilient characteristics were made and three students were chosen to participate in the process of co-ethnography. Parent consent forms included the co-ethnography process. Interviews with these three students were scheduled.

The three students chosen showed evidence in the initial interview that paralleled the overall trends and themes of the other nine student interviews and thus were representative of the larger group of dance community students who showed resilient behaviours. These three students were specifically chosen based on their desire to go further in this self-learning process. During the initial interview these students showed a self-initiated willingness to share stories of their life. All three of these students reported having something to offer I shared my own personal stories. All three students also showed interest in promoting awareness to teachers around at-risk students. During the

second interview with each participant we talked about memories, or moments in time, which reflected feelings of hope and despair related to the feelings associated with the definition of resilience in this study. During this process we worked together in creating stories based on these particular moments in time when the students believed that the memory or event either helped mold their core vulnerabilities or attributed to the development of resilient behavior. All of the interviews were again audio-recorded, transcribed and later deleted. During the analysis of these interviews is when I began to write stories with the data received from these conversations. The stories presented as in Chapter 4 were drawn directly from data collected during the co-ethnography process. Participants were asked to describe their memories in as much detail as possible in an attempt to recreate the event with authenticity. Direct quotes from the participant interviews were used frequently and wherever possible. As I completed the writing of each section students read it in order to correct or change the details within their story. When each individual story was complete I then wove the stories together with my own stories, which too, explored my educational journey to resilience through auto-ethnography. These stories then became one and was then presented as data in Chapter 4.

### **Validity**

This study was designed to involve and include interviews from 12 students from a dance community within an inner-city school, in an attempt to discover how exactly the participants' connection to the community supported them to develop characteristics and behaviours of resilience. To determine the validity of the data received from the interviews there were many threats to consider. "Validity refers to the relationship between the measuring instrument and the concept it is attempting to measure"

(Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 175). The threats to internal validity that were considered in this study: participant characteristics, mortality, location, instrument decay, data collector characteristics, and attitude of the participants. Of these threats participant characteristics, mortality, location, instrument decay and data collector characteristics were reduced through control measures. However, attitude of participants were potential limitations to the study.

Choosing participants for the study by purposive sampling reduced the threat of participant characteristics. All students were female and chosen from the age range of 14-18 years. All students were deemed vulnerable based on the definition within the study and all belonged to the dance community within their school.

Having a flexible interview schedule controlled for mortality. If a participant was not present on the day of the scheduled interview the participant and the researcher chose an alternate date. The interviews were held in the same place for all participants, to ensure consistency, and which helped to control the location threat. Controlling location ensured that the participants' responses did not rely on a difference in comfort of a particular location.

Instrument decay could have been a potential threat. Long interviews resulted in a long transcribing process and the chance of fatigue setting in for the researcher. "Fatigue often happens when a researcher scores a number of tests one after the other; he or she becomes tired and scores the tests differently" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 170). I assured this didn't become a threat to the validity to the study by scheduling the interviews far enough apart to take my time with each individual interview and transcription process. Each time I interviewed I spent time immediately afterwards

critically analyzing the data. Another interview was not scheduled until, at least, three days after. Data collector bias and maturation also posed no threat, as I was the sole data collector in this study and there was no pre/post data collection.

Attitude of participants was deemed the largest threat to the validity of the study.

It was characterized by “how the [participants] view a study and participate in it” (p. 174). Factors such as being the researcher, as well as the participants’ classroom teacher, and informing the participants of the nature and goal of the study, my concern was that they would tell me what I want to hear as opposed to being honest in their responses. Another factor to consider was that students would hide relevant information about their adversities due to being uncomfortable or fearing judgment. In an attempt to reduce this threat I spoke honestly with the participants prior to the commencement of the interview. I ensured confidentiality, was consistent, and treated all participants the same. I shared with them some of my personal stories and emphasized the need for honest responses so that I, and other readers of this thesis who were looking to improve the lives of vulnerable students, can learn from their experiences and help other students be successful. I believe that the relational trust I had with my participants, being their teacher, allowed me to attain rich, genuine data from them.

Lastly, a limitation when presenting qualitative data is that “there is seldom methodological justification for generalizing the findings of a particular study” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 432). It is important to realize that it is the educational leader, or reader of the findings within the study, who will determine whether they can generalize the data and correlate it with their own situations or populations of interest. Thus, the stories of these vulnerable learners were offered in rich detail in this study. The way in



which these stories are presented have the potential to offer significant insight for educators, as to what vulnerable learners need in order to find success in school.

### **Justification of Methods of Analysis**

Analysis of data was carried out in three steps. Interview data from 12 students was analyzed for interpretations of whether students demonstrated resilient behaviours and the factors which contributed to the development of the resilient behaviours. In an attempt to determine the factors that were powerful contributors in fostering resilience for vulnerable students, we must first review the resilient characteristics defined within the study. Within this study resiliency was defined by identifying a student who feels a sense of belonging, shows self-confidence, has a bond with a healthy role model, has aspirations for the future, has a desire to come to school and shows signs of having empathy. In order to evaluate whether the participants in this study possessed these characteristics, interview questions were created to elicit this information. Some responses reflected in the data offered discourse that directly reflected the defined characteristics of resiliency. For other responses, interpretations were made of resilient behaviours through the process of critical discourse analysis. Fisher (2010) pointed out that discourse analysis is “a method of qualitative research and a field of study devoted to understanding all forms of spoken interaction and written texts. It views language critically as an activity that constructs reality rather than merely describing or referring to it” (Oxford University Press, 2009). Considering the young mean age of the participants it becomes important to make inferences from their responses, and analyze whether, in their individual discourse, they demonstrated these characteristics without necessarily self-identifying that they indeed do. Inferences were also made about key factors that

helped students to develop resilient behaviours. These factors formed the basis of the co-ethnography process.

As a second step I made inferences from my own personal narratives. Making meaning of my stories helped shape understandings of personal growth in hopes to impact the participants through the research process (catalytic validity), as well as the readers of this thesis.

Finally, I then proceeded with a co-ethnography process, where I critically analyzed the content and discourse of the interviews and produced narratives of three of the participants' experiences. Memories and events that contributed to students' vulnerabilities and key factors that led to the development of resilient behaviours were identified and used to craft stories to represent students' experiences.

Collectively, my methods of analysis have brought meaningful insight to the initial purpose of this study. Although qualitative research is criticized in its ability to make generalizations on a given population, this research advocates for vulnerable children through authentic stories of three student representatives, who reported needing something more than what the traditional education system was currently offering them. Their stories undeniably tell a story; they showcase the root of their vulnerabilities and how this dance community has contributed to their journey of resilience. Hearing the voices of these students may not be considered controlled, experimental data but in all my research, I have yet to come across data that has proved to be more meaningful.

## Chapter Four: Results

The initial purpose of this study was to explore *how* this specific dance community was fostering the development of resilient behaviours in vulnerable youth. Data were generated from twelve interviews with vulnerable students who were connected to the dance community in the study. Questions were focused on finding what the students identified as powerful contributors within the community that attributed to the transformation of their behaviours. Additionally, students were given the opportunity to share any life experiences that they felt fostered or deterred the development of these behaviours throughout their lives. After the initial interviews three students were asked to participate in the process of co-ethnography, where we revisited their initial responses and discussed them in more depth, in an attempt to co-create narratives that would share their individual journey to resilience. These three students chose an alias to go by within the stories, and so here are the stories of Stella, Addie and Peyton, as well as my own. Our personal stories are woven together here and presented as qualitative, narrative data. These stories were intended to give the reader a window into the lives of a vulnerable child. It is not common to know students in this much depth. Unless a student is designated with a learning disability and there is a file where teachers can understand them better, we are left without the knowledge we need to support students' emotional development.

### Stories

I invite you to take this opportunity to learn from these brave students, who thought their stories could make a difference for teachers. These students believe that teachers need to understand that the adversities they face are sometimes hidden from their

appearance and kept secret; and so, they are challenging us teachers to teach every child with our hearts, as if they were vulnerable...you know, just in case.

RICKI –

My saddest memory takes place in the backseat of an old, brown, Pontiac grand prix. I was four years old. During the winter of 1984, my parents decided they were moving from Nanaimo to Edmonton, they also decided that they would give parenthood a shot. Up until then I was mostly living with my grandparents. My grandma led a traditional life of homemaking and my grandpa was a carpenter at the local mill. My life with them was nurturing and complete, I had everything I needed and I felt a tremendous amount of love. I belonged in that house; it was my safe place and a place where I thrived being myself. But after days of hearing desperate cries from my gram, on the phone to my mother, I knew it was time to say goodbye. My gram had prepared me that day by saying that I was so lucky to be going on such an exciting adventure. She said there could be no tears on that day because it would do nothing but make my mother feel badly, and it's not nice to make people feel badly. So as I walked out to the car that day, I called gram on her deal breaking tears...she said that she was not crying, but that she had gotten bleach in her eye earlier in the day, and it was causing her eyes to water. When I got into the backseat of that Pontiac, I would not take my eyes off gram...I can't even explain the feeling in my body in that minute of sadness. And when the tears began to fall down my cheeks, my mom turned from the passenger seat and asked, "Why are you crying?" As a four-year-old girl, feeling desperate with sadness and loss, I managed to answer, "because I pinched my finger in the seatbelt."

I think that was the first lie I ever told. Gram and I both told one that day.

STELLA –

My earliest memory takes place in a small city apartment in downtown Timmins Ontario. It was the summer of 1998 and I was three years old. If I close my eyes in silence I can still hear the banging on the door...and I can see the blinding sun when the door opens wide. I wish I could say that my first memory was peaceful and safe but let's be real, I don't have too many of those in my memory bank. I was with Darlene, my babysitter, who later became Dad's mistress and brother Drew's mother. Men in uniforms filled the apartment, pointing guns and yelling. They were looking for Dad...searched every room. They didn't find him, but they took a lot of things out of the house that day. When I close my eyes, I still sometimes see those guns...and when I do, my temples still tense up. At the time I didn't know why they wanted Dad, or what they took from the house.

But as I look back now, I have a few ideas.

ADDIE –

Mom left when I was six. She was only twenty-two years old. Dad worked a lot as he was trying to provide for Mom and me and my new little brother. Before my brother was born my grandparents were helping us with money, but when Mom got pregnant again Dad said he could no longer mooch off his parents to raise his own family. With Dad working away driving truck all the time Mom got angry. On the days when Mom would expect Dad home from work she would pack us up and go to her friend Ivy's house. Most of the time at Ivy's we had to keep quiet while Mom was on the phone with Dad. She would be yelling and screaming and telling him that next time he came home we would really be gone and he wouldn't be able to find us.

Mom called it teaching him a lesson. Dad called it bullshit.

When he was gone back to work we would leave Ivy's and head back home again. For a long time I forgot what my Dad even looked like because I hadn't seen him in so long. One day Dad lied to Mom about when he was coming home and he showed up in his work truck.

Mom locked the door and didn't let him in.

PEYTON –

I never really remember a life when Mom and Dad were together. They split up not long after I was born. At the time of their separation Dad pursued custody, but Mom proved in court that Dad was a drug user and Mom received full parental rights of me.

I don't remember this of course, but I've heard the story a thousand times.

And so, my first memories are of just me and Mom living together in a tiny apartment, which most times held a number of Mom's friends. Mom loved to be around a lot of people and she was always hosting parties at our place.

Weirdly enough, my first memory of my Dad was at one of Mom's parties...but she wasn't there.



RICKI –

We were only in Edmonton a few months when we packed up the Pontiac and headed back to BC. My Dad had found a job in Surrey and my Mom wasn't happy in the cold weather. My Mom didn't seem happy at all. I still felt homesick for my gram, and even though we were still a ferryboat ride apart, I knew I'd get to see her more often. My parents weren't anything like papa and gram. They didn't like to sing, dance or cuddle up, and they certainly didn't like putting my hair in rollers at night like gram used to. Instead, they had two more kids, boys this time. They weren't twins but they were born a year apart. I remember my parents telling me I was going to have a brother, and then as soon as he came they told me to expect another. I remember being so confused as to why they kept bringing these kids home when they didn't like to do anything that kids liked to do. In Edmonton, Mom used to put me on the step outside the apartment whenever she took a shower, because she didn't trust that I wouldn't get into anything. Now there were three of us! Sadly, I looked forward to the day that the two boys would have to sit out there on the step and feel the way I did. But that day never came...for some reason my parents liked to cuddle with boys. The days at school seemed too short and the nights seemed too long. With two baby brothers, a father who loved to drink and a mother who was angry all the time I grew up pretty fast. I was seven years old and I knew how to cook, clean and change diapers. I even got to take care of the boys all by myself on the nights when Dad would come home drunk, and Mom would leave for the night angry and upset.

Oh! And also! I learned how to put rollers in my own hair!

STELLA –

Not too long after that first memory comes my second. I had moved in with Mom after she had, apparently, got her act together. She was motivated by her determination that the dirty-babysitter-mistress Darlene was not going to raise me while Dad was in jail. My memory consists of me drawing all over myself with markers. Mom then carried me to the bathroom upstairs and started to run a bath. I was sitting on the floor with Tutu my bear, when she said she'd be right back. Over the sound of the water falling into the tub I could hear loud voices. As I walked to the top of the stairs, I saw men dressed very much the same as the men who had come into Dad's house and taken stuff. Mom was yelling at the men and crying. She called up to me and said, "It's ok honey." These men had come looking for Dad and now they were here for Mom? Who were they?

A big lump rose from my tummy and got stuck in my throat.

I went back to the tub and climbed in with Tutu.

ADDIE –

One day Mom announced that we didn't need Dad and so sold everything in our house, and in the yard, and we moved into a new place. The next time Dad came home he wouldn't have a TV or even a bed to sleep in, but Mom didn't care. The new place was small; me and my brother shared a bed in the living room and Mom had her own room. She convinced Grandma to buy her a computer so she could look for work from home. Her computer became her most pride possession and her favorite hobby. She spent hours and hours on that thing. Even in the middle of the night when I'd wake up to go pee, I'd peek in her room, and she'd still be glued to the screen. It never seemed to help her get a job like she thought it would, but it did help her find new friends. Ivy always came over to look at Mom's new friends on the computer. And then when Mom went to meet her new friends in person Ivy would come over and babysit. Most times Ivy was still there in the morning, calling around to see where Mom got to.

One night Ivy asked me if I missed my Dad. I don't think I answered her.

I think you have to know someone, like really know someone, to miss them.

PEYTON –

One night, when I was five, I woke up to one of Mom's parties. I wandered from room to room trying to find my Mom and I couldn't find her anywhere. Some people I recognized and some I didn't. I remember being so scared. I went to a corner and started to cry. People came over to me saying that my Mom would be back soon, and not to worry...but it didn't stop me from worrying.

Then all of a sudden a man with a hat, who I had never seen, came through the door and walked over to me and picked me up. I started to scream and hit him. As he carried me outside he stopped and talked to a guy with a super big belly. The man holding me thanked the guy with the big belly and carried me to a truck.

Then the man with the hat said, "Shhh, it's ok Peyton... I'm your Dad."

RICKI –

School became my haven. I easily made friends and I was a good reader. I used to fall in love with the characters in a story and change my name to theirs in hopes to somehow transition into the life they were living within the story. The only thing I apparently wasn't good at was speaking aloud. Mrs. Johnson, my grade one teacher, always told me to "slow down!" She would say, "we can't understand what you are saying, with you talking that fast!" For the rest of grade one I barely spoke. I wondered if Mrs. Johnson knew that school was the only place where people listened to me.

In grade two, Mrs. Brinkert never told me to slow down when I spoke. But she did send me to this lady named Linda to practice sounds and speaking clearly. Mrs. Brinkert used to say that people who speak fast have thousands of ideas bouncing in their heads, and that it was a good thing because ideas are powerful. I remember being so excited when I got Mrs. Brinkert for a teacher again in grade three. One day she asked me what I wanted to be when I grow up. I thought and thought and I couldn't come up with an answer. Then one day after story circle where Mrs. Brinkert masterfully finished reading a story that made me get chicken skin from the lesson learned, I ran up to her and told her that I knew what I wanted to be. "Oh good, what is Miss. Ricki Bartlett going to be in this world?" She asked.

"A storyteller!" I answered.

Mrs. Brinkert was the first person, since my gram, that I knew, believed in me. I was so sad leaving grade three that I begged her to teach grade four. The fear of losing my connection with Mrs. Brinkert brought with it the same feelings I experienced that day in the back of the Pontiac. I think Mrs. Brinkert knew...yeah, she knew something, because in grade four she took me out of my class once a week to read stories to her class. She created opportunities for me to shine, to stay connected to her, and...to be a storyteller.

STELLA –

The man who brought me to the strangers' house was different than the man who had pulled me from the tub that night. I met another man, a lady and three young girls. All three of girls were bigger than me but not much bigger. My only memories of that house are sleeping on a bunk bed for my first time, doing the 'head and shoulders knees and toes' song every night before bed, and being more scared than ever in my life. I know, now, that I was more safe in that house than with either of my parents, but at the time it didn't feel like it. The man, the lady and the three young girls were nice, kind even, but they were not my Mom and Dad, they were strangers.

And I didn't belong there.

ADDIE –

One night after Mom left to go meet one of her computer friends Ivy asked me if I wanted to see my Dad. I shrugged my shoulders. Not long after that there was a knock at the door. Dad walked in and grabbed me and my brother and hugged us for, what seemed like, forever. My tummy felt icky, and my heart started to race. But this was just the beginning...Ivy started letting Dad come see us every time Mom went out. Over time that icky feeling in my tummy started going away when Dad came over...I actually started looking forward to it. Dad was fun. He always played with us and brought us candy. But the part I loved the most was that he hugged and kissed us all the time. He lifted me over his head and flew me like an airplane around the room.

When Dad was there...I felt like I was his favorite thing in the room.

And that's why I kept his visits secret.

That icky tummy feeling didn't go away all together it still came, but now it came when Mom was home.



PEYTON –

Mom and I were back together in no time. I was only with the man who told me he was my Dad for a day or two before the police picked him up for kidnapping. There was an emergency court hearing so Dad could attempt to convince the judge that he stole me because I was in danger, and my Mom was unfit to take care of me, but the judge didn't buy it. Dad tried to get custody again and again. He got clean and sober, mom didn't. He got a good job, Mom couldn't keep a job to save her life. He had a nice place, Mom didn't. Dad had money to buy food, Mom didn't. Dad gave money to Mom to buy us food, but she spent it on other things. But the judge kept taking Mom's side.

The only thing Dad was allowed to do was visit me with a supervisor in the room.

RICKI -

Grade four was my last year in the same building as Mrs. Brinkert. My family packed up and headed home to the Island. We had a new car by then, a 1989 dark blue Jeep Cherokee. Dad bought it brand new from the lot and I remember thinking that we were rich when he brought it home. For a year my Dad commuted from Surrey to Nanaimo while the rest of us moved from house to house wearing out our welcome. We were not rich, even if we did have a shiny, new Jeep, not even close. My grade five year consisted of four different schools, so once again I was at a loss for attachments or connections to someone who believed in me. My great grandma ended up passing away, and she left the house to Mom and Uncle Rick. So the five of us moved into a tiny two bedroom and grew some roots in the Harewood community. I was happy to be in the community where I started out with my gram, she lived really close so I got to see her whenever I wanted. But something in me had changed, and it seemed the only things I longed for were the things that got me into trouble.

STELLA –

One day, Meme, who was my grandma, came and rescued me from the strangers. She brought me home to BC with her...and she brought Mom and Dad too.

Recently I asked Meme about why she came back to get me.

She said that someone had called her and said that if she didn't get my Dad out of Timmins right away... somebody was going to kill him.

It gave me goose bumps when I heard that.

ADDIE –

Visits with Ivy and Dad became few and far between. Mom had no need to go out and meet new friends because she found one who she really liked and they both spent all their time at our place. I wasn't sure why Mom liked Pete, he was grouchy all the time and he never smiled. He brought his video games to our place and he never moved from the TV unless he had to use the bathroom. Mom even brought him food when he was hungry. He never asked me to play with him.

One time I asked him if I could try his game.

Mom yelled, and told me to find something to do.

Him and Mom weren't fun like Dad was...my tummy felt icky all of the time.

PEYTON –

I started to get to know my Dad during the supervised visits...I even started to like him. Sometimes his girl friend was there and she was really nice to me. During the visits we always did fun things like play games, colour and do crafts. I only met with Dad once every two weeks, but I started to feel like I knew him more than Mom. Even though I was with Mom most of the time...we never did fun stuff together.

One day Mom was going out to look for a job and so she dropped me off at my Aunt's house for the day.

The day turned into the night, and the night turned into days.

Mom didn't come back for a whole week.

I was only six or seven, but I remember wondering, *what the heck was she was up to?*

RICKI –

When I was in my mid-teens some big things happened that changed my life. My uncle died from a drug overdose, Dad got sober and I found a teacher at school who believed in me. I can't say which one contributed the most or if it was a combination of all three, but I'm going to tell you about the latter. Ms. Emerson was my Physical Education teacher in Grade 9 and 10, and I knew she believed in me because she used to tell me that she did. One day Mrs. Emerson told me that I have all the qualities of a great teacher and that I should think about pursuing it.

That same day I quit doing things that didn't make me proud of who I was.

I started getting good grades; I joined clubs at school and even spearheaded meaningful school-wide events. I became a leader around that building and I became focused on my future because...I, was becoming a teacher.

That following year Ms. Emerson was denied the PE department head position at our school, but was successful in getting one at a school on the other side of town. I was devastated. I honestly felt that there was no possible way to keep doing the things I was doing without her to cheer me on.

So it was simple, I quit doing them.

STELLA –

Just in case you were wondering Grand-Mere is grandma in French. When I first started talking I could only pronounce it Mere-Mere, then it went to Meme...and it stuck. Most of the time it was just me and Meme, but now and again my Mom would come by to eat and sleep. Some days I would wake up for school and find her asleep next to me in bed; these were the days that I couldn't focus at school. The day couldn't end fast enough. I remember running home as fast as I could to see my Mom, many times with a piece of art I had made for her...but she was always gone by the time I got there.

These days made me feel like crying or punching something... but I never did.

One day in grade two I got my wish, and Mom came to get me! She had convinced Meme that she was capable of taking care of me and we moved into an apartment together. For a little while it was just me and Mom! I remember feeling so proud having her walk me to school. I loved all the others kids seeing me with her, seeing her kiss me goodbye.

But it wasn't long before I began walking myself to school.

ADDIE –

One morning Pete wasn't in front of the TV and Mom was in her room crying. It wasn't long before Ivy was at the door and hugging Mom. Mom cried and cried all day long and in the end decided she needed to go out and find Pete. As Mom showered and did her make-up and hair, I was walking around the living room with a bounce in my step.

I knew this meant Dad was coming over!

This time Dad brought pizza and we wrestled on the living room floor. He even let me put barrettes in his hair. All was good until Mom and Pete came home and caught us in the act.

That was the day Mom found out about our secret.

That was the day Mom and Ivy weren't friends anymore.

And, that was the day that Mom left and never came back.



PEYTON –

School became my favorite place to be. I loved it for two reasons. There was always food to eat, and I always got to see Mrs. Rogers. Mrs. Rogers was my favorite teacher and maybe the most favorite person in my life. I was really shy and I found it hard to make friends. I always remember thinking that no one in my class really liked me.

Even though I left Mrs. Rogers' class after grade two I would visit her every day after school. Some days we would sit in her classroom and eat the treats she always brought...fruit or veggies, and sometimes cookies and cakes that she baked at home. I always told her that she was the best cookie maker in the entire world. Some afternoons her and I baked cookies in the school kitchen.

And whatever we did together we always talked about the future.

Lots of days we would talk about what I was going to be when I grew up, Mrs. Rogers was really interested in that.

One day I asked Mrs. Rogers what she would be if she couldn't be a teacher.

She said she would love to move to Europe to open her own bakery.

My tummy felt heavy.

I stopped telling Mrs. Rogers that she was the best cookie maker in the entire world.

RICKI –

One day I drove into the school parking lot after taking a leisurely lunch break and my Vice-Principal was standing in the lot shaking his head. As I stepped out of my very own 1987 white Honda he told me to meet him in his office. I sat in the chair across from him without any fear of getting in trouble. For some reason trouble didn't scare me in the least.

But Mr. Rhodes didn't give me trouble at all.

He told me I should be proud myself for working so hard at the Bingo Hall. He said that being able to buy a car and pay for the insurance by myself, at such a young age, was quite remarkable. He also said that he believes I have the ability to do well in school, to be a leader and to really make something of my life. Then he said that the only thing standing in my way of doing all that...was the joy rides that I was taking in that damn car when I should be in school getting smart!

I handed Mr. Rhodes the keys to my Honda that day.

And every day after that...at 8:25am.

STELLA –

Mom got a boyfriend, his name was Wheels, and he almost always slept over. He had a lot of friends and they liked to sleep over too. Most mornings Mom was too tired from entertaining Wheels and his friends all night, to get up with me. So I got up and ready, and walked myself to school. There was never much food at our place so every morning I went to the school breakfast club. Mom used to say that things in life aren't free, so if someone is giving away something for free you should take it. But, when I started walking myself to school I always arrived after the damn breakfast club was shut down.

Those days made me mad.

It wasn't long before I was back living with Meme.

The day I left Mom, we both cried. She told me that Meme's house was only up the street and that we were practically neighbours. She said we would see each other all the time.

After that day, I didn't see my Mom for years.

ADDIE –

Life with Dad and Ivy wasn't as fun as it was during our secret visits. Dad worked a lot and Ivy stayed home to take care of us. Soon Ivy was pregnant and I had another little brother. Ivy always picked fights with Dad about money, taking care of all of us alone, and about getting married. Dad only ever fought back when it came to getting married. He said he didn't believe in it. Soon after the day Mom left, Ivy told me that Mom and Pete moved to Alberta and got married.

I didn't know what I thought about that.

About a year later Mom called and told Dad she wanted a relationship with us. She wanted us to travel by bus with our grandparents to Alberta for the summer. I would hear Dad and Ivy talk about how if they sent me and my brother for a visit to Alberta that we would probably never come back. They decided to send us anyways.

I didn't know what I thought about that.

Dad and Ivy packed us up and sent us on our way. I was only seven but Dad taught me how to use calling cards so I could call him whenever I wanted to.

The calling card lessons were useless, because as soon as Mom saw them in my packsack...she threw them all away.

I knew what I thought about that.

PEYTON –

During one of my visits with Dad when I was seven or eight he told me he had to move to Vancouver for a job. He also told me that he was going to talk to the judge and see if we could start doing our visits overnight on the weekends in Vancouver. It seemed like Dad really liked to spend time with me... and I really liked that.

I prayed that night that the judge would let us. And he did.

Mom was more angry at Dad than ever. Even though, every second weekend Mom was supposed to take me one way on the ferry to Vancouver, while Dad traveled the other way, she almost never did. She always gave Dad an excuse as to how busy she was.

Most times Dad travelled both ways.

RICKI –

I didn't hand my keys over for nothing, Mr. Rhodes and I had a plan. He listened to my story of Mrs. Emerson and how when she left I lost focus and determination in my plans to become a teacher. He asked me if that is what I truly wanted to be and I told him that it was. And then, I was given an opportunity that I had never known existed and one that I have not witnessed since.

Twice a week when the block rotation aligned with lunch hour I got to drive to the school across town and team-teach with Mrs. Emerson. I don't remember being more excited in my whole life! Ms. Emerson and I planned lessons together and I helped her run class and do testing. Some days she let me teach the class all by myself...it was like I had my very own grade 8 girls PE class! But, the deal with Mr. Rhodes was that I had to have my keys into the school office by 8:25am every morning of the week, I had to attend every class, and I had to help him coach the grade 8 girls volleyball team.

No problem.

The connections I had with these teachers kept me grounded for the rest of my high school years.

STELLA –

One day after not seeing my parents for a few years, my Dad showed up at Meme's doorstep. I was no more than ten or eleven. He looked worse than I had ever seen him. He was dirty. His clothes were dirty. His hair looked ridiculous it was so long. I'll never forget the feeling I got when I opened the door and he said, "Hi kiddo, do you have a safety pin I could borrow for a minute?" He said it like we had seen each other yesterday. Didn't he know that I prayed every night that he was safe...alive! Some nights I got myself so worked up that my parents were dead that I didn't sleep the whole entire night! Most nights I felt like screaming as loud as I could, some nights I did, and then I cried because it didn't change anything. I felt hopeless and scared everyday of my life and my Dad just strolls up to my door one afternoon after not seeing me in years and asks me for a damn safety pin!

Turned out dad was homeless and needed the pin to pop his blisters from having to walk around the streets so much. I went up to Meme's drawers and brought him 2 pins and told him that he could keep them. He popped his blisters out there on the stoop while we talked.

I had to turn my head, as the sight of his feet was too much to bear.

I felt sorry for him...I did.

But it was the first time I remember hoping to never see him again.

ADDIE –

I was happy when we returned home from Alberta. My tummy had that icky feeling the entire time I was there. Pete was mean and he drank too much beer. He made me call him daddy the whole time, and if I didn't he would slap me in the face and make me say it over and over again... and then he'd laugh.

I hated Pete's guts.

And I think Pete and Mom hated mine too, because after that trip... still to this day, Mom has never spoken to me again.



PEYTON –

As I got older I started to make excuses as to why I couldn't go to Dad's for the weekend. Mom got mad at me when I'd come back and tell her all the fun things we would do. Sometimes she cried, sometimes she got mad, but most times she would leave me alone for a long time...she couldn't stand the sight of me because I looked so much like Dad. I know now that my Mom was jealous because my Dad got his life together, and she didn't.

But I worried about her.

Everyday, she was either throwing up sick, so upset she was in tears, or angry at everyone in her life.

She needed me to take care of her.

So I stopped going to Dad's.

RICKI -

I graduated from high school in the year of 1998 labeled as ‘most self confident’ from my peers in the yearbook. I left that building reluctantly not wanting to let go of the security, the safety, and the relationships that I had developed with healthy adults. But my aspirations were clear and I was indeed confident. I would attend, what was then, Malaspina University-College and do an undergrad in English and Physical Education, and then apply to, and graduate from, the Malaspina Bachelor of Education program. After graduation I would go back to my high school and join that community once again, but this time as a teacher. Sounded simple enough. My teachers in high school listened to my plans and intentions with much hope, I’m sure, of saving one of their vulnerable students. I’d love to know what they were actually thinking at that time. Did they think that I would accomplish what I was setting out to do?

I started University keeping my eye on the prize and my cheerleaders as close as I could, but something was off...and that damn feeling from the Pontiac came back again.

STELLA –

By the time I reached my teen years wishing and praying for my parents to get better seemed far from, even my own, reality. They both continue to stroll in and out of my life whenever they feel like it, and when they leave again it doesn't seem to affect them the same way it affects me. Dad said this town was no town for someone like him, so he headed to the mainland where he lives on the East Side of the city with more people like him. I knew he really left because he was in too much trouble here...he was running. He gets into trouble there too and ends up in jail now and again. Sometimes I don't hear from him for months...and most days I still close my eyes at night wondering if he is safe, or if he is dead. But mostly I wonder if he wishes things were different, if he misses me, and if I mean enough to him to change his ways. But just when I have myself believing that he must, and one day he will... I'll receive a message like this.

From my Dad:

Hi hon, whats new?? alls good with us I've got the wickedest connection over here, GHB, special K, E whatever we need... the fuckin Ketamine (special K) is fucking CRAAAAZY!!!! Me and Jane did some last week and I saw my buddys face melting into little cubes then dripping off and hitting the floor then grouping back together around his nose... it was wicked! We have a place now and I got my disability back. I will b going to jail soon for a bit but it will b fine. BTW dont talk to that cunt Isabel, the little goof had me charged with threatening death, her and Joeys girlfriends mom!!!! If u say anything to her though I can be charged so just get her smashed if u feel like it LOL. You can call me any time if u want, we have unlimited talk and text, for \$25 a month!!! Wicked huh! Anyways my digits are 555 555 5555 just keep it to urself ok. Let me know if ur comin to Van any time soon cause I wanna see ya. K I'll ttys I hope kiddo, love you and miss u. Dad

ADDIE –

As time went by the fights at home seemed to get bigger. And as I got older the fights seemed to include me yelling and getting yelled at instead of me sitting quietly in my room waiting for them to end.

I swear sometimes that Ivy and Pete must talk on the phone and conspire. Ivy has become angry most of the time and since Dad isn't around much she chooses to yell at me instead. One time I told Ivy that she was not my Mom and she slapped me so hard I felt it for a week. Sometimes when she is in a really bad mood, she makes me play a game with her. Here are the rules: I have to stand up, straight as a board; look into her eyes...if I flinch, I get slapped. End of game.

When Dad comes home she screams to him about how bad I am, then he gets mad at me too and sends me to my room.

When Dad comes to my room to talk to me alone, he only hugs me and tells me he is sorry...for everything.

Sometimes Dad cries when he's in my room with me.

PEYTON –

Mom and I got along best when I started to party. I was in grade eight and doing everything that a thirteen-year-old kid should not be doing. For the first time in my life, though, I had a peer group. My friends were the kids who slept in during first period, and smoked a joint on the way to school...and I became just like them. Most days the closest we ever got to the school was the smoke pit. Getting in trouble by the principal and my teachers became a regular event. I was lucky, though; my Mom was about as interested in what they had to say as I was, and so I never got in trouble for it at home. Most times when my teachers were giving me hell about absences, homework, or test scores I was able to block them out. But every now and again while they were ranting at me, I would think of Mrs. Rogers and our conversations about my future.

I wondered about if things would be different for me if she were here at high school.

I wondered what she would say to me if she knew what I was doing.

I wondered if she moved to Europe to start that bakery.

RICKI –

Up on the University campus, no one would have guessed that only months earlier I was deemed ‘most self-confident’ in my grad class. I was lost, disconnected to my learning and actually failing terribly. A couple years went by as I struggled for passing grades when I developed an idea. I wanted to create a Physical Education student club. One day when I got over my fear I approached the dean of the program. I was so embarrassed to ask him for help in developing an extra-curricular club when I had failed his class the year before. Nonetheless, when I finally did he welcomed the idea and appeared as excited as I was...my first connection. He guided me through the process of initiating a club at the university level and writing a constitution. It wasn’t long before our department had a dynamic student club that focused on connecting our faculty and student peers within the program. We hiked, and biked and spent much time in the student union pub. The connections that I made became lifelong and life altering where my academic success and motivation was concerned. That dean, he stayed connected through out the entire process and even became a regular at our events. The following year I retook his class and got an A. I will be forever thankful for how willing this educator at a University level supported my need for something bigger within the program. Even then I had, consciously, made no sense of the connection between relationships and learning.

I suppose I thought I just simply got smart over time.

STELLA –

You know how some people say that sometimes you have to hit rock bottom before you decide to turn your life around? Well I remembered hearing that saying on the day that I found out that Mom was in the intensive care unit. Mom was apparently pregnant and had gone in for a ‘routine’ abortion, but there were complications and her uterus was punctured. Her body was weak from all the drugs she had ingested and she was going through major withdrawal. Her organs started to shut down and, as the doctor put it, things did not look promising. Meme took me to visit her and as I sat at her bedside I cried and cried. I never imagined it ending like this. I sat there and prayed. And then I had a thought...this was Mom’s rock bottom! *God please! If you could just help her recover from this, then I know she would choose a better life!*

One that I hoped would include me. After all the withdrawal would be over and the drug would be out of her system.

Against all odds, Mom did recover.

And she was back to her old tricks in no time.

ADDIE –

So naturally my favorite days have become school days. My favorite part of school days is walking to school by myself. I love the peace and quiet. Some days when it's ugly outside Ivy offers me a ride, but I never accept. I don't even care if it's pouring rain or a snow blizzard...it has become my own time, and I love it.

Since the start of school I have had trouble making friends. The unwritten rule seems to be that girls play with girls and boys play with boys.

I never wanted to play with girls.

Maybe it's because I don't like to do the kind of stuff they liked to do.

Maybe it's because I am intimidated by their confidence.

Maybe it's because I never felt like I belonged among a group of girls.

Whatever the reason...I can't say for sure.



PEYTON—

Well as I sat in a chair in the nurses' station while the lady in white manhandled my cup of urine, I wondered what she was thinking of me. That, I was fifteen-years-old and too young and too stupid to be a mother, were some of the things pondering her mind I'm sure. If the test were to come out positive there was no way in hell that I was having this baby, for a few reasons. One, I had no idea who the father of the baby was; two, I had consumed enough alcohol in the last few months to pickle a herd of elephants; and three, I didn't want to get fat.

It was simple enough to have an abortion these days. I could probably even get away with not telling Mom at all.

But for some reason, when the lady in white turned around and said those words...

"It's positive..." the water works began and, all I wanted to do... was tell Mom.

RICKI –

I graduated University in the winter of 2006 and began teaching a month later. At first I was a Teacher on Call, but it wasn't long before I had a teaching contract. One day during the summer of 2008 the staffing officer at Nanaimo-Ladysmith School District called, and asked me to come meet with her. When I entered her office she sat me down and said that the new Principal at the inner-city school wanted to meet with me regarding a dance position. I had seen the job posting; I knew it was only a quarter-time position. I explained to her what she already knew; that I had taken a fulltime job for the 2008/2009 school year as an Aboriginal Support Teacher. She assured me that going to talk with this new Principal would not change that, and that she just wants the chance to talk with me, that is all. As I walked out of her office she called me back,

“Ricki?” she said. “She’s the ‘full-meal-deal’ you know...just like you. So listen to what she has to say.”

So as I drove over to the school I reflected on how badly I wanted to work in my old high school, but I reassured myself that the time would come eventually, and I simply could not afford to drop a fulltime job for a job that would barely keep my gas tank full.

Ms. Presley was the newest Principal in the District. She knew what she wanted and knew how to get it. She played on the fact that I was an ex-graduate from the school and how meaningful it would be to work back in the same building I started my vision from. She repeatedly stated how these girls needed someone like me to influence them, to believe in them. That it wasn't just about dance but something bigger for these kids.

She promised her support in me building this course into a program, which would eventually turn into a full time position, blah, blah, blah. I promised her I would think about it for the night. But before I walked out her office door, she stopped me.

“I was in attendance at your Aboriginal graduation, I was the District Principal then” she went on, “your Vice-Principal at the time, Mr. Rhodes...” I nodded, “...he pointed you out and told me to keep an eye on you, and to remember your name. He said you’ll be big one day in the education world.” Then she said something that made me realize that this ‘connection to people who believe in you thing’ ...it doesn’t necessarily disappear as you get older.

“I believe you will be too.” She said.

Needless to say, I walked out of my old high school that day...with pocket change for a pay cheque.

STELLA –

One day at school a detective showed up to talk to me. My heart sank into my tummy thinking that Mom or Dad were dead. He wasn't a regular police officer; he called himself a crime-ring investigator, and he was there to ask me questions about Mom. He said she was involved with some pretty bad people. I knew that, and I was no crime-ring investigator. He said that there was a warrant out for her arrest, for various crimes, one of which included Mom using MY name in some fraudulent act of identity theft. The investigator asked me questions about old addresses, old cell phone numbers and people she hangs around with. Most of my answers were "I don't know" even for the ones I did know. The man asked me to tell my Mom to please turn herself in, and that it would be in her best interest if she did because she would get less jail time. I asked him if she turned herself in today would there be a chance that she could be out of jail within a year. And then he asked me why.

I told him I didn't want her to miss my graduation. I mean I know my Mom is doing bad things but I love her you know? But more than anything I want her to love me.

He promised me he'd do his best. He gave me two of his cards, one for me and one to give to Mom. I got a hold of Mom that night and told her everything. I begged her to call him, I told her what he'd promised, I told her that it wasn't her he wanted but that it was information about other stuff that he was looking for and if she gave it to him she would be out of jail within a year and make my graduation!

Not long after our phone call, Mom left town with the carnival.

ADDIE –

Being home on the weekends and school holidays is tough. I have a lot more responsibilities at home since starting high school, and too much homework. It seems I am always babysitting my brothers, cooking and cleaning the house. I've learned to keep quiet and get it all done, in an attempt to avoid a fight; even though, sometimes it takes nothing to start a fight with Ivy. Her yelling has gotten so bad that the neighbours sometimes show up to make sure everything is ok. One neighbour even called Child Protective Services and they come for regular visits.

Ivy hates that neighbour; she swears she knows which one called.

I think of my Mom sometimes and wonder how she is doing...if she is still with Pete...if she has had any more kids. If she wishes she would have stayed.

One day not too long ago I was walking down the mall with Ivy and my brothers when Ivy gasped. "That is your Mother..."

I knew who she was right away. She knew us right away too.

I smiled and waved at her, expecting I don't know what. I suppose I have fantasized about seeing her again...what it would be like, what she would say after not seeing me for so long. She left when I was a little girl and now I was a teenager.

Dad said I looked just like her, and Mom...she was beautiful.

She starred at us for a moment, and then she laughed.

And then she turned around and walked away.

PEYTON—

Mom surprised me that day. She said that I should keep the baby regardless of my reasons not to. She said she would help me raise the baby and that *she* needed this. It was a second chance for her, as she felt she didn't do the best job with me. Having her on my side and happy for once led me to make the decision to not have the abortion. I was kind of excited at the fact that this baby might be the thing that brings me and Mom close together.

I stopped doing drugs and drinking. And I started planning for motherhood.

Dealing with who the baby's father was got pretty messy, and I won't get into that. But, overall I was excited at the thought of me and Mom being a team in all this. Before you know it we had a beautiful baby boy, who I named Chance, living in our place. I had him in the summer of grade ten and so I started back to school in September for my grade eleven year. Our high school has a daycare on campus to support young moms who want to finish school, so Chance and I went to school together every morning. I wanted to work hard and get a good job you know, so I will be able to provide for Chance by myself one day, and so he could be proud of who his mom was. I'm not going to lie, the novelty of the situation wore off quite quickly for Mom and she began to lose sight of our big plans to raise Chance together.

Without my knowledge Mom apparently contacted my Dad, who I had lost touch with for a couple years. Mom had informed him of our new situation, and that he needed to send money to help support the baby.

Dad did what Mom asked of him and Mom received the money for months.

But I had no idea of it. And Chance and I...we never saw a penny of that money.

One day Dad called when Mom was out and I was home from school because Chance had a cold. He asked me if I was getting the money he was sending.

I was in shock.

Remembering all the times we were scrounging for change to eat and to get diapers and the whole time Mom was receiving money on my behalf?

She was keeping it all to herself?

That day I confronted Mom about it. She got mad and left.

Chance and I haven't seen her since.

RICKI –

Upon getting the job, I was so excited at the thought of being back in the building that brought me so much joy in my adolescent years. But when I entered the doors of my beloved high school I realized that things were a little different than I remembered. The boy's football program that was in its beginning stages when I left was now in full swing. Provincial championship games were a common occurrence each year and there was even a championship banner from 2002. The same coach was there and he had created and sustained a dynamic program, which left the boys with enormous amounts of self worth, confidence and a sense of belonging within the building. It was amazing to watch them all work so hard toward common goals, and with such passion.

What I began to notice in the first year of teaching there was that the girls seemed to lack identity within the school; there was nothing keeping them engaged. It seemed your best chance at identity was if you were dating one of the all star football players. Teenage pregnancy was at an all time high for girls within this school, and the government even funded a daycare to be on the high-school campus, in an attempt to support young mothers. The lack of opportunity for girls in this school broke my heart. And then it hit me...these girls had no sense of belonging. I recognized that these girls were much like me in my adolescent years, when I was unmotivated. They needed connection, and someone to create opportunities to be successful. They needed a cheerleader and someone to believe in them...oh my goodness, I thought, they need what I need. They needed a Mrs. Emerson and a Mr. Rhodes!

My teaching assignment, at that time, consisted of a physical education class and



a dance performance class. But I needed more if I was going to support these girls in rising above adversity. They needed a space to identify with, a space to belong to, and people to connect with and believe in them. I felt my best shot at helping these kids was to create an inclusive dance program within the school. But I knew if I wanted kids to buy into the program, they would need a dynamic space, a studio perhaps. They were not going to buy into the concept of community and togetherness by dancing where all the other students ate their sandwiches at lunchtime.

So I called Ms. Presley, the Principal, on her promise to support the development of this program, and gained full support! The kids did buy in and we went from one period of dance, to four the following year; this year we have seven periods of dance, and the enrollment numbers for next year are even higher. Our program naturally attracts vulnerable girls, mostly, but there are a few exceptions. Now that the physical infrastructure for the program was in place and the learners were present, in Studio 411, my purpose became to create ample opportunities for these students to be successful and to share and celebrate their success with the rest of the school and their community. These kids needed to feel like they had purpose and options to rise above their adversities...and I was going to help them do it!

STELLA –

Coming into high school I had a pretty strong peer group, but I soon ditched them and started hanging with the kids like me who didn't have a curfew. I was up to no good and going nowhere fast. You'd think watching my parents ruin their lives with drugs and recklessness I would have learned my lesson, but for some reason it seemed impossible to believe that I deserved anything more.

Then one day in dance class my teacher came to me and asked me if I knew how good of a dancer I was. I shrugged. She said that she was so happy I was only in grade nine and that she was excited to have me for the next four years. And then she said that I was ready for performance group if I was interested in joining.

Provincial Competitions! Football game half time shows! I was so excited!

She told me the only rules to be on performance group were that you had to commit to making all practices, love the girls in the group like family no matter what, and absolutely no drugs....what the hell I thought, I'm in!

Since that day I have been drug free! And you wouldn't believe what we've been up to over the past two years! We traveled to River Rock Hotel Theater to compete in a high school dance competition. We didn't win but we scored in the high 80's in our adjudication. We danced at Empire Stadium last year for the Football Provincial Championships and this year at BC Place, it was wild! And for all those performances I did a lot of the choreography. I'm a student leader in Studio 411 now and I teach units to the class all the time, most days I lead warm-up too.

Last year 100 of us went to a Pro-D Day to do a flash-mob for the all the teachers and principals in the district, it was an amazing feeling! This year for the Pro-D day I got to choreograph and teach a dance workshop for a group of teachers. We did it so we could promote dance across the grade levels. Now those teachers and their friends are calling us to see if we can come to their schools and teach dance to their students. That was like the coolest thing I have ever done.

I love coming to school, there is always something new on the go in the dance room and I'm always excited to be involved in whatever it is. I love my teacher and I have never had someone believe in me like she does. I'm also getting really good grades and last year I even got the passport to education to help me pay for University.

I have so many friends in the dance program, and it's cool because I don't think I'd be friends with these girls otherwise. We all support each other like family and we all really care about each other.

To be honest, sometimes I get scared when I think I only have one year left. I know that I want to go to University and become a dance teacher; I just can't imagine leaving everything here... you know?

ADDIE –

When I started high school I was really shy. And like I said before I didn't really have many girl friends so I was kind of lonely and I didn't really fit in. I took dance in grade eight and I really liked it. Dance is something I always wanted to do but Dad and Ivy really couldn't afford it with the three of us kids at home. This year in grade nine Ricki came up to me and said that my technique was excellent and asked me if I wanted to start performing. I was so nervous at the thought of being on the dance team as most of the dancers were girls, and girls who honestly kind of scared me. But she kept pushing me and well, I decided to give it a try. And everyday since then I am thankful that I did.

For some reason I am doing way better in my other classes too. Ricki kind of stays on you and asks how you're doing in your course work. She like remembers all the subjects you're taking and everything, it's weird. I used to feel bad when she asked me how I was doing and I had to report that I wasn't passing. So I started to do good so I had something good to tell her you know. Now I get so excited when I do well that I tell her before she asks. I also can trust her to talk about anything that is going on at home too.

And the dance room like, I love it...I love that it's all girls now and we all know each other so well, and we are all really close, and I love dancing, it's really fun. I like performing cause everyone watches and you work so hard for it and then you get to perform it, I just I love it.

I'm only in grade nine right now but next year I want to be able to like... like the seniors make dances... I want be able to do that. I want be able to see it like they do. Our seniors

can just like make dances at the top of their heads and I just can't wait to be able to do that.

Being part of this dance room I don't know I just like it, it makes me feel so good...special. Makes me feel like I belong to something good, I get to be with a bunch of people I love all the time, I don't know I think I like it more than I've liked anything...ever.

PEYTON –

The first year when I went back to school after having Chance I was so angry everyday. I hated being at school feeling so tired and hungry, it was kind of embarrassing you know? I was in the alternate program, which is pretty much self-paced and I just did the bare minimum to get by. I guess you could say I felt sorry for myself a little bit being a teen mom, living on my own with a baby, and having to do school too, but I so badly wanted to finish.

The following year when I picked up my timetable I noticed that I was put into dance class. I had never danced before and I was not the kind of girl to hangout with a bunch of young girls, and I was never going to perform on a stage or anything. I immediately went to the counselor to change my timetable. But apparently they weren't doing any changes until the following week. I was told to attend dance class for 5 days and then my appointment was first thing Monday morning.

But when I started attending class I actually kind of liked it. The exercise felt good and it was kind of relaxing, and maybe even fun. And the girls...they weren't so bad.

Now dance is like my whole life. I've only been in there since September but I have already made the performance team. And the dance team has become like my family. Ricki is always there for me and she always tells me how proud she is of me, she is so positive and so it's hard not to be positive when you are around her.

One day after school I went back to the Studio because I forgot my purse. I was so frustrated because Chance and I missed the bus because I left my purse in the Studio, and

now I had an hour to kill, with a baby, in the rain. I grabbed my purse, and as we walked out the door, Ricki yelled out as she was dancing, “Love you Peyton, good job today.”

How did she know just what I needed in the moment in time?

It was weird but, in that moment, I was actually happy I missed the bus.

I’ve made friends with all the other girls too. We work really well together when it comes to performance time and we also support each other with life stuff. My academic classes are turning around too. My alternate teacher told me the other day how proud he is of my transformation from last year, he also said I was a good role model for other kids in class.

With all these positive things happening in my life I would get sad sometimes that I had no one to call and tell about it, and I was getting scared knowing I was graduating soon and then I wouldn’t have anybody. So one day after a long conversation with Ricki about what I needed in my life to feel fulfilled after graduation, I got on the phone and called my Dad. I apologized for pushing him away and he apologized for letting me push him away. We have been super connected since and we have the best relationship. He came and watched our dance performance at BC Place this year with my step Mom. When I walked off the field and saw them they were crying and telling me how amazing I was...I cried too.

Chance now has a grandpa, which is pretty cool. We go to Vancouver and stay with them almost every weekend now, and next year after I graduate I think me and Chance will move there so we can be close to our family.

This dance program totally changes you, but in a good way you know? I'm happy to have my Dad and step Mom back in my life and to be part of a family again, but I'll be really sad to leave the family I have here too.



RICKI –

I was given the opportunity during the Ethics course of this Masters program to reflect on my past. We were challenged to explore the root of our vulnerabilities and the connection they have to our core values. I discovered that what saved me from continuing a life of adversity was the connections and relationships that I had developed with healthy adults in my life. I was able to parallel times when I was least successful (and in trouble) with the fact that I had no positive adult influences and no feelings of anyone believing in me, or advocating for me to succeed.

Subconsciously, I suppose, I have fostered the nourishment of my core values over the years and it has helped me to move forward successfully in life.

But until this discovery I wasn't able to identify or explain the conditions I needed in order to be successful. I could have easily gone in the other direction had those people in my life not advocated for me the way they did.

I was lucky that I somehow found my way.

But now that my journey continues in consciousness, I feel a deeper responsibility for my vulnerable learners. Throughout the four years of creating and sustaining our dance community I have witnessed similar transformations of my students that I have recognized in myself. This study has given me the opportunity to explore and compare my students' vulnerabilities and transformations with my own. Here I have come to a deeper understanding of the social and emotional learning that all vulnerable learners need in order to be successful.

Further, I feel our responsibility reaches beyond just creating conditions for students to be successful, but to also create conditions for students to understand *how* to be successful. As we have learned from my own educational journey, it becomes imperative to not only create these conditions but to also have conversations with vulnerable students, about who they really are and what they really need in order to find success. Until I gained clarity of who I was and why, and until I realized what I needed in order to be successful, I was unable to feel in control of my own future. I believe creating opportunities for conversations with students about the nature of how they learn best will help foster vulnerable learners with the clarity they need to move forward in their lives with purpose, dignity and options beyond the walls of our school building.

## Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions

*“Every child deserves at least one adult who is absolutely crazy about them.” – Bronfenbrenner*

### Summary

Being a witness to the transformations of vulnerable students within Studio 411, who found success through finding purpose, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging, inspired me to pursue this research and gain a better understanding of what these students identify as the key contributing factors to their personal transformation toward resilience. In an attempt to better understand the root or cause for the development of these behaviours twelve vulnerable students who were connected to the dance community of this inner-city school in School District 68 participated in a one-hour interview. Students were asked questions that led to an understanding of which type of resilient behaviours they possessed and were asked what they believed were the contributing factors that aided in the development of these resilient transformations.

During the interview many students offered background stories, where they made connections to other times in their lives when they had felt this way before. Willing students participated in a second interview process where these ‘moments in time’ or stories were explored in more depth. Three students, who showed interest in further self-understanding and sharing their stories, then took part in the process of co-ethnography. During this process we worked together in creating stories based on particular moments in time when the students believed that the memory or event either helped mold their core vulnerability or attributed to the development of resilient behavior. My stories too were created based on significant moments in time, which I attribute to being integral to helping me rise above my own adversities. Interpretations of the key factors that

contributed to the development of student resilience were informed by reflecting on the educational journeys that the students and myself, the researcher, shared.

The stories illustrated that students demonstrated resilient behaviours such as student leadership, motivation to attend school, and showing purpose in their daily work. Another important result was that resilient behaviours emerged during moments of time when they had a connection to someone who believed in them, and who created opportunities for them to be successful. These significant people had their trust and advocated for their best interest. Thus, the most significant contributing factor that allowed the dance community to foster resilience in at-risk students was the social emotional learning environment created by having a healthy relationship with an adult in the community.

### **Discussion, Conclusions, and Future Recommendations**

The findings of this study highlight critical factors that need to be addressed in order to move educators forward in creating learning environments that foster resiliency for vulnerable youth.

1. Vulnerable students need the facilitation of social emotional learning strategies to take place in order for them to find success.

Stella, Addie, and Peyton and I, in our stories, make it clear that communities or programs within a school building that foster resiliency for vulnerable youth have the potential to lead students within these programs to success. But what about the vulnerable students who are not part of this dance community, or the football program within this inner-city school? How are their social emotional needs being met? Through the understandings gained from this study it proves critical to provide opportunities for

students not to only find these supportive environments within a specialized program, but in each and every classroom within their school building. This can be achieved by emphasizing social emotional learning in addition to the achievement of curricular outcomes. Schonert-Reichl and Hymel (2007) stress the need for teachers to provide social emotional learning environments so that students can belong to “responsive, caring, and inclusive classrooms [that] provide the foundation for building and sustaining learning relationships that lead to academic success” (p. 21). They define social emotional learning as “the process of acquiring the competencies to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations effectively” (p. 21).

2. *All* classrooms need to foster these environments so all students can benefit from social emotional learning initiatives.

The results of the current study illustrated some of the ways in which communities, such as the dance program in this study, can foster healthy social emotional learning contexts, however it is important to extend these results to regular classrooms. As teachers teaching students, who may or may not be considered vulnerable, at what point do we overcome the frustration of the unknown and start teaching every student as if they were in need of emotional support. In society today we have more reasons, than not, to assume that all students need something more than what the traditional system offers. Supportive, nuclear homes have become the minority household of society and we can only assume that most of our students are living with the effects of separation or detachment of a parental figure, either physically or emotionally. Since this has become the norm, we have become desensitized to the effects of parental detachment - but our

students have not. Educators need to understand that just this hardship alone leads to the need for social emotional learning to take place in each and every classroom if we expect our vulnerable students to “manage [their] emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations effectively” (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007, p. 21).

In Stella’s story you see the detachment process begin when she was just a toddler. But throughout her life she was forced to detach each time her parents decided re-enter and re-leave her life. This process has happened at least six times in the few years that I have known her. As an attachment figure for Stella, she finds me when these occasions arise. I pull her off the ground, with unconditional love and support, until she is ready to move forward and take on life once again. Stella is a beautiful young girl with a smile that lights up a room. She is genuine and kind and she wears her heart on her sleeve. Stella is also very bright. I watched her master the Periodic Table of Elements a few weeks ago and she was even helping one of her peers study for the test. I have watched Stella develop confidence, purpose, and become a dynamic student leader. But one thing that I am privy to that no other teacher is, is that Stella regularly experiences periods of severe emotional distress. Worrying about the safety of her parents has become a full time job that Stella cannot seem to let go of at this time in her life.

For whatever reason, many teachers in the school building probably assume Stella is healthy, smart, and spoiled. She has even said herself, that her looks have helped her hide the fact that she is poor and suffering. Knowing we cannot expect our struggling students to stand up in class and tell us they are vulnerable, we as educators need to take

the responsibility to foster social emotional learning strategies in our classrooms and teach every student as if they were in need of emotional support.

During the interviews Stella said that when she was in elementary school she did look poor, and she was sad all of the time, but still, there were no teachers who took interest in connecting with her emotionally. Establishing school district or provincial goals around the needs of vulnerable students must align with the education that our BC teachers are receiving. Questions must be asked: Are we providing training to student-teachers on how to promote social emotional learning strategies in the classroom? Are we supporting our current teachers with developing new strategies with this every increasing vulnerable student body? Our educational system needs to align these initiatives with their actions, in facilitating opportunities for educators to have the tools, knowledge and understanding to implement these critical strategies.

Since starting high school Stella reports that the one thing that motivates her to succeed on a daily basis is that I believe in her. Before this program she said she hated school and that it was embarrassing going there every day. Currently, Stella takes on every possible leadership opportunity I put in front of her. She leads dance groups, teaches classes, facilitates workshops for teachers, and helps plan school-wide events. She not only does these things, but she is amazingly talented at it.

When Addie entered high school she felt she had no sense of belonging among her peers. She struggled connecting with girls, she had no self-confidence, and she was finding no success in her academic courses. The dance program has been a turning point in Addie's life where she is finding success in all areas of school. Finding somewhere where she belongs, and where she has a connection with a teacher, who believes in her,

has been enough to influence her academic success. Within her stories you can see that she is even able to set personal goals and find success in doing so.

Before doing this research I believed the best way to foster resiliency in vulnerable youth was to create opportunities for them to be successful through a community or program approach. If a community or program within a school setting promotes a sense of belonging, opportunities to connect with a healthy role model, and opportunities for students to be successful, I believe it will create conditions for students to find purpose, self-confidence, and a willingness to be leaders. I still believe this to be true. But through the construction of these student stories and through the self-exploration of writing my own stories, I now feel the responsibility reaches beyond just creating these conditions through programs or communities to developing these principles within every classroom environment. If what we have learned through these stories, is that vulnerable students learn best from a social emotional teaching approach and that they need to feel like their teacher believes in their abilities for them to find purpose, self-confidence and determination in their learning, then we as educators need to create a system-wide shift in how we approach student needs in every classroom, not just in particular program settings.

In a perfect world all teachers would understand the need for a system-wide shift toward social emotional learning. My personal life experiences together with my experience in doing this research has made me aware of these issues and allowed me to find ease in developing programs that foster resiliency for my vulnerable students. What about teachers who do not fully understand the effects of adversity on student leaning? How do we move their learning forward, and support them in creating social emotional



learning environments? Many districts create initiatives around these ideals, yet these initiatives are not always supported with teacher training in the knowledge and understanding needed to create these conditions for students.

As a system, wanting to make this shift for vulnerable learners we must also ask whether student-teachers are receiving the appropriate training to support social emotional learning environments. Assuring required training for student teachers, as well as, supporting current teachers with knowledge and understanding so they feel competent in improving their practice around social emotional learning, will help to begin the process of educational change in this area. Here we can, together, begin to make a system-wide shift toward equity among all students.

3. Meaningful conversations around learning need to take place with students.

Educators must create opportunities for these conversations to take place so that students can move forward in their lives knowing *how* they learn best. Students need to feel confident in creating these conditions for themselves, so they can be self-advocates and find fulfillment and success beyond the walls of the school building.

It is my observation through my own personal stories that, although I had teacher advocates providing me with opportunities to be successful, it wasn't until I was facilitated through self-exploration around learning that I truly understood *how* I learn best. And it wasn't until this point of self-discovery that I could not only explain and identify the factors that enabled my success, and but I felt that I was finally in control of the success of my own future.

Peyton's story about re-connecting with her dad illustrates how powerful conversations about her learning allowed her to create her own conditions for success in

the future. If we have hopes of students finding success in schools, as well as in life, beyond the school building we need to have these meaningful conversations about their learning. More empirical research in this area is needed to support this claim. A longitudinal study showing data of vulnerable students who were connected to an environment that fostered social emotional learning, and who also reported understanding *how* they learn best would provide evidence of just how powerful conversations can be.

As graduation nears, both Stella and Peyton, as well as many of the students during the initial interviews, reported being fearful of leaving school and all the positive things that have been created for them within the dance program. One grade twelve student even reported staying in high school for the Spring semester, when she could have graduated early. This student reported being focused on her future and had been accepted to the University for the Fall. Her initial plan was to graduate early and work to save money to pay for her first semester, but she said that her feelings of the unknown were too much to bear at a time when she had the choice to stay. And so she stayed, and is enrolled in three dance classes this semester.

Stella and I have discussions about her future all the time and what she wants to do after grade twelve. She wants to be a teacher. I make sure she knows how smart she is, and how much she has to offer this world. But, mostly, what Stella is concerned with when we talk about her future is how I am going to continue to be part of her life when she graduates. With these findings the importance of not only creating the conditions that foster resiliency for students to find success, but to also creating conditions for students to learn and understand *how* to be resiliently successful on their own, becomes clear.

During the interviews, Peyton shared with me some of her fears and concerns about her future. I then shared with Peyton, some of the stories about myself, and how I discovered what I needed in order to be fulfilled and successful in life. I then challenged her to discover what the turning point was for her, when she began to find success and purpose in her learning. Peyton opened up and shared with me that until she was part of a family-type environment where she had people who cared about her and who she felt accountable to she felt she had no reason to be successful. Then Peyton shared the fact that she was fearful of leaving this program and not being successful in life because she would no longer have that family-type environment to motivate her, and she would have no one in her life to believe in her.

Through the moments in time that Peyton shared in her stories, we can see that the dance program has allowed her to gain a sense of purpose and self-confidence. Peyton has found a family within Studio 411, but she recognizes that once she leaves this environment she may have difficulty in moving forward in a positive way. With all the positive feelings attached to this family-type environment Peyton has found the importance for her in reconnecting with her own family. Through conversations, Peyton has begun to learn *how* she learns best. This clarity has empowered Peyton to create her own conditions that she feels she needs in order to be successful.

As we have also learned from my own educational journey that it becomes imperative to not only create these conditions in our classrooms but to also create opportunities to have conversations with vulnerable students about who they really are and what they really need in order to find fulfillment and success. Until I gained clarity through self-exploration of who I really am, and until I realized what I needed, and the

root of why I needed it in order to be fulfilled and successful in my own life, I was unable to feel in control of my own future. Creating opportunities for students to find this clarity through meaningful conversations in a social emotional learning environment will not only help vulnerable learners in “developing the skills necessary for success in schools [but will] assist them to become more caring, responsible and concerned citizens” in the future (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007, p. 21). By having these meaningful conversations we are helping our students in moving forward with purpose, dignity and options beyond the walls of our school building.

### **Limitations**

When I think about what critics may say to devalue this research I suppose I could agree that the number of participants being studied only equals four. I could tell them that all twelve students who were interviewed initially reported being transformed by the impact of this dance community, and that the stories of the three participants represent overall trends found within all the interviews. All students interviewed in this study identified the most contributing factors in the development of resilient behaviours as a connection to a teacher who believed in them, opportunities for them to develop as leaders, opportunities to showcase their success, and having a sense of belonging. But even if this study told the story of one vulnerable learner and what that learner needed from us educators, shouldn't that be enough to change our ways?

The authenticity of the stories presented within this research help to allow educators to understand the types of vulnerability that many students face, and what they need from us in order to find success in school. Further, creating narrative of my own journey has allowed me to better understand the needs of the learners in my classroom.

I have come to see this as a layered and multi-faceted narrative approach. At the core is a belief in story as an epistemology – a way to make meaning of our experiences. This core is overlaid with a belief in the potential of autoethnography – a perspective that leads me to assert that a telling and examination of my own stories is an effective means of understanding the experiences of others, and of exploring these experiences within a cultural context. (Fisher, 2010, p. 52)

Tom King (2003) says, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2). You’ve now read the stories of myself as a vulnerable learner, and the stories of my vulnerable students, Stella, Addie and Peyton. I hope that from our stories you’ve been able to gain an understanding of the challenges some vulnerable learners face and the ways that we as teachers can support them. Paige Fisher (2010) offered the following sentiment to the readers of her narrative work, and now I will offer it to you: “Of course, you don’t have to pay attention to any of these stories...But help yourself to one if you like. ...It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (p. 216).

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### **Interview Questions for**

### **Exploring the resilient behaviours of students that are connected to a community within school**

**Principal Investigator:** Ms. Ricki Bartlett, Teacher, SD 68 – Nanaimo/Ladysmith

**Contact Information:** Ricki Bartlett [contact information removed for publication]

Supervisor: Dr. Rachel Moll, Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University (250) 753-3245 x 2161

#### **Purpose of the study:**

The purpose of this study is to, first, explore the types of resilient behaviours that vulnerable, inner-city youth demonstrate when connected to a community within their school, and second, to use the evidence of this study to advocate for the creation and sustainment of similar type programs.

My hypothesis is that when vulnerable learners are connected to a community within their school they are more likely to demonstrate qualities and behaviours that will help them to rise above adversity, become better learners and lead fulfilled lives. Data will be collected from secondary students who are connected to a dance community within their school.

#### **Introduction:**

At the beginning of interview participants will be reminded that they can withdraw at any time and for any reason and that their participation is voluntary, thus they can refuse to answer any question, at any time, for any reason. Participants will be assured that their data will remain as confidential as possible and that they should not say anything that identifies themselves (their name, the names of their instructors, classmates or school).

Before commencing the interviews I will tell the participants ‘my story’ of adversities when I was a student at the very same high school that they currently attend. Since I have found myself within this research, and I have learned that my experiences in education

reflect those of my current students, I believe that the telling of my own experiences may offer understanding to the similar patterns of my students and help them to then lead more successful lives.

Throughout my personal journey in education I had adversities to overcome in order to find success. Upon becoming an educator I came to realize the root of these struggles and how I subconsciously, at the times of these struggles, overcame them and found success. I believe patterns of failure not only hinder us academically in school, but also follow us into other important aspects of our lives. My intent is for this research to have a positive impact on my participants, where students can recognize these unhealthy patterns early and work through them in order to find success.

This process of research having positive effect on the participants is called catalytic validity and it reflects the sharing my personal stories with the participants and including them in this research study in hopes to create a transformation in their behaviours and thought processes by the “reality altering impact of the research process itself” (Lather, 1986, p. 67). My hopes as a role model for these kids, are that by sharing my personal stories, they will understand that success is related to hard work and determination rather than born-luck or privilege. If emotional topics arise, during or after the interview, students will have support of immediate on-site counseling, or information leading to available services after school hours, as outlined on the consent forms.

I will also explain the purpose of the research to all participants at this time, as well as, define the operational terms within the study, (vulnerable, community and resilience).

### **Interview Questions:**

#### 1. For dancers:

- What grade are you in?
- How old are you?
- Tell me about your family situation.
- When things get tough at home or school whom do you talk to?
- Do you have an adult role model? What makes them your idol?
- Do you enjoy coming to school? Why? Why not?
- Can you name two people in this building who believe in you?
- Tell me about the high school Dance program.
- What dance courses are you taking or have taken?
- Do you find dance easy or difficult?
- What are your goals for dance?
- What is your role in class?
- What does it mean to you to be part of the high school Dance program?
- How well do the dancers work together?
- Do you have bonds with other dancers?

- Do you feel like you belong to Studio 411? What makes you feel this way?
  - How are you doing in your other school subjects?
  - What is your long-term goal in life?
  - What has been your biggest highlight as a Dancer?
  - If you could change anything about the high school dance program what would it be?
2. For the principal of the high school
- How long have you been principal at this school?
  - What have your challenges been as a leader of a school with so many vulnerable students?
  - You have been an advocate for the creation and sustainment of the dance program at this school, please expand on that.
  - What do you believe this dance community has brought to your school?
  - What do you believe must be present in order for a community or program within a school to help build resiliency for vulnerable youth?

\*Post interviews, I will transcribe the audio-tapped data. I will then invite all participants to a second interview to participate in the process of co-ethnography. These participants will be asked for a second interview (story telling session) where we will share more specific details of their experiences that connect with the development of resilient behaviours. Then I will use this data to create stories in an attempt to present meaningful data in this research. Questions for this story-telling session will be made after the initial interview so that they can be based on their initial responses to the interview questions. Questions will be made in correlation to the participant's response. For example, asking the participant to expand on an initial response, or to share a specific event that took place, which led to the participant developing self-confidence or a sense of belonging perhaps. Participants for this portion of the study will be chosen based on observed willingness to share during the interview process, as well as, quality data for a storying process.



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## Appendix B: Parent Consent Form

### Parent/Guardian Consent Form for

#### **“Exploring the behaviours of students who are connected to a community within their school”**

**Principal Investigator:** Ms. Ricki Bartlett, Teacher, School District 68- Nanaimo-Ladysmith

**Supervisor:** Dr. Rachel Moll, Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University (250) 753-3245 x 2161

#### **Purpose:**

Your child is being invited to participate in this research because of his/her community connection to the high school dance program. As the researcher, I am interested in the types of resilient behaviours that students possess when connected to a community within their school. Therefore, the specific purpose of this study is to explore the types of resilient behaviours that youth demonstrate when connected to a community within their school, and to use the results to advocate for the creation and sustainment of similar type programs. The results will be used in my graduate thesis, as partial requirement for the Masters in Educational Leadership, at Vancouver Island University.

#### **Study Procedures:**

In this study, twelve students from the high school Dance program are being invited to participate in an interview. The procedures for each student participating in the interviews will be as follows:

1. Your child is being asked to participate in a one-on-one interview for one hour.
2. During the interview he/she will be asked a number of questions that may identify characteristics of resilient behaviours that have risen from the community connection of the high school dance program. Your son/daughter will be asked to

- reflect on the dance program, and discuss what difference, if any, it has made for them.
3. Interviews will take place in a location convenient for the participants (i.e. at the high school).
  4. With your permission, interviews will be audio taped to ensure accurate transcription.
  5. Your child will be asked not to state any identifying information about themselves or others during data collection.
  6. I will be transcribing and analyzing all the data.
  7. After the initial interview I will invite all students to participate in the process of co-ethnography (\*please see below). These participants will be asked for a second interview (story telling session) where we will share more specific details that arised during the initial interview. I will then use this data to create stories in an attempt to present meaningful data in this research. Questions for this story-telling session will be made after the interviews so that they can be based on their initial responses to the interview questions.

\*Co-ethnography is defined by working with others to create a storying of their experiences. The “sharing of stories is a common yet deeply meaningful way to share past experiences and to make meaning of them” (Fisher, 2010, p. 60). Collaborative methods of sharing stories enable us to, together, construct better understandings of the world (Taylor & Coia, 2006).

**Potential Risks:** Some of the interview questions for the student-participant interview may bring up personal feelings that result in emotional distress, and therefore counselling services will be made available to the students should this occur. Counselling appointments can be made by phone [number removed for publication], or in person, at the high school counselling office.

**Potential Benefits:** Your child may learn from the explanation of the nature and purpose of the research and may also learn more about themselves through the interview dialogue. Stronger bonds may also be created between participants and myself just from the nature and structure of the study. In addition, the participants may learn about personal growth and gain a deeper understanding of how to become resilient through their future experiences.

**Confidentiality:**

Your child’s name will not be recorded during data collection in this study. Study documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for 2 years at the Principal Investigator’s office. Your child or the school he/she attends will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Electronic data and results of this study will be stored on a password-protected computer with access restricted to me, and my research supervisor.

**Contact for information about the study:**

If you have any questions, or desire further information with respect to this study, please contact me, Ms. Ricki Bartlett, Teacher. [number removed for publication]

**Concerns about your treatment in the research:** If you have any concerns about your child's treatment as a participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer at [reb@viu.ca](mailto:reb@viu.ca) or by telephone at (250) 753-3245 (ext. 2665).

**Consent:**

Your child's participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline permission for your child to participate or withdraw your child from the study at any time, for any reason, and without penalty. Even though you provide your consent, your child may also refuse to participate or may withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, and without penalty if he/she so chooses. Your signature below indicates that you consent to your child's participation in this study and for the interview with your child to be audio-recorded..

- I consent to my child participating in this interview
- I do not consent to my child participating in this interview

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Student Name (please print)

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Parent/Guardian signature

Date