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STEPPING OUT OF THE DIRT:
A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF REFLECTIVE EXPRESSIVE WRITING ON MALE
TEENS RECENTLY RELEASED FROM A CLOSED CUSTODY FACILITY

by

April Dawn King

MASTER'S THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Masters in Education

Wilfrid Laurier University

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Abstract

When researching the topic of at-risk youth and reflective expressive writing there is little literature to be found. The limited literature that exists with regards to reflective expressive writing is not geared toward a population of at-risk teens (Burton & King, 2004). Although there is literature on alternative programming for at-risk youth (McKee & MacDonald, 2006), very little discusses reflective writing. The research question being addressed is: What is the impact of reflective expressive writing on male teens that have recently been released from a closed custody facility? The aim of this study is to present rich descriptive narratives that allow for future researchers, community members and educators to come to an understanding of the resources that youth may benefit from in both traditional and alternative learning environments. The following case studies examine the stories and experiences of two young men, ages 19 and 16, who took part in a reflective expressive writing initiative. Both young men who participated in the study are from Southern Ontario and were released from the same closed custody facility. A description of their experiences is provided and key themes that emerged from the analysis of journals, interviews, conversations, and field notes are also examined. The provided themes are areas of focus that proved meaningful when discussing the writing and reflecting that occurred. Four primary themes are discussed: relationships, depth of reflection, sense of belonging to a community, and self-esteem. Specific to the youths' relationships there are five sub-themes that are presented: determining characteristics, family, friendship, mentorship, and the researcher. Therefore this study responds to Long and King's (2011) call for greater attention to alternative learning programs to support at risk youth. Concluding remarks present the ways in which educators and community programs can engage at-risk male youth in respectful and trusting relationships.

Key Words: self-esteem, sense of belonging, Reflective expressive writing, mentorship, relationships, trust, respect, at-risk youth, closed custody facility, community

Acknowledgements

There are many people that I would like to thank for supporting me throughout this journey. I thank my family and friends for their support during the most difficult times of this entire process. I also thank my advisor Dr. Steven Sider, of Wilfrid Laurier University, for providing me with the guidance that I needed when things were looking grim. Thank you for all of the feedback provided from Dr. Kristiina Montero, Dr. Shoshanna Pollack and Jessica Weber. I am extremely grateful for all of the time and support that you put into helping me present this final piece.

Primarily this thesis is dedicated to all of the wonderful young men who have trusted me with their stories and allowed me to share their voices and their strength with others. They have my utmost respect for working hard to overcome their own personal adversities and allowing others to learn from all that they have to share. I thank them for trusting me to try something new and for teaching me so much along the way. Not only have I been informed enough to write my thesis, above all I have learned about the different ways in which many youth have triumphed through tough times, and worked to prove that they are more than their past. They are inspiring young men whom I am proud to have not only worked with, but also befriended.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

I am interested in the impact that reflective expressive writing may have on at-risk male teens'. Understanding that it is not possible to be completely objective when approaching research, it is essential for researchers to:

make sincere efforts to put aside their values in order to accurately describe respondents' life experiences. The means [that] researchers [should] endeavor not to allow their assumptions to shape the data collection process and the persistent effort not to impose their own understanding and constructions on the data [should be identified] (Ahern, 1999, p. 407).

In order to bracket the research appropriately and make my subjectivity known, it is important to inform the reader of the personal story that brought me to this study.

My interest in reflective writing with vulnerable male youth came about through my experience with writing in the English classroom. Not only did these students affirm that they felt an increase in self-esteem, but their journals also demonstrated a developing sense of community from the process of journaling. Students began to write about one another and the concerns that they had for their peers. Although their journals were not shared with each other, it appeared that, because they were all taking part in the same process, their sense of community began to build. Students became more supportive and caring of one another. This interest in looking at the impact of reflective expressive writing on the sense of belonging of the recently released male teens is due to my experience as a teacher and my subsequent finding that there is limited literature on the topic. In order to obtain a complete understanding of what spurred my interest in reflective expressive writing, it is essential to understand the lived experience that brought me to this case study.

My Story

Growing up in a middle-class, Canadian neighbourhood, there were many things for which to be grateful. Both of my parents had jobs and worked hard to not only put food on the table for my sisters and me, but also to pay for the many extra-curricular activities in which the three of us took part.

Growing up, my primary concerns were the expected arguments with siblings and the extended moments of my parents' fighting. I can recall several times when arguments got heated and we left the house with our mother while my parents were able to 'cool down' during their time apart. My parents separated for the first time when I was one year old. In Grade Two, the fighting continued and began to affect me, and my teacher called my parents in to speak about her concern with my journal entries in class. I wrote about my parents' fighting and my fear of divorce. These arguments continued throughout my entire childhood and adolescence. I no longer worried about a divorce, as this became my normal.

The year that I was in Grade Seven was a difficult one for me; it was at that time that my father was first diagnosed with cancer. Being young and not understanding the degrees of cancer and the many procedures available to help remove his cancer, I naturally began to worry. With a heightened childhood fear of death, I began to worry more than an average child should. Throughout elementary school, teachers and administrators expressed concern for me.

When I entered secondary school, I subconsciously developed a new strategy to avoid having staff and other students recognize the troubles at home. Although my dad continued to struggle on and off with cancer and my parents' fighting worsened, I learned how to cover this up from my friends and staff at my school. By getting involved with Student Council, sports teams, and various clubs, I was able to have moments of fun and appear to be a happy, super

involved and well-rounded teen. My extreme involvement was also beneficial as it kept me from going straight home after school and I could stay at school with my friends a bit longer. As a popular leader in the school there weren't any red flags raised about issues I faced at home.

It was in Grade 12 that school staff and my peers became concerned about me. My best friend died suddenly of meningitis and it not only hit the school hard, but it was also a very dark time for me. It was at this time that I began to write in a more reflective way than I had in the past. As a young girl, I kept a diary, but it took the passing of my best friend to encourage me to truly reflect. I began to reflect about her, my family, and myself. Writing became a cathartic and productive outlet for me. As an adolescent, many of my peers chose to deal with our shared loss by finding negative outlets such as through substance abuse. Writing became a way for me to reflect on my loss and the things that were generally important to me. This cathartic process helped to inform my practice as both a future educator and graduate student. Reflective expression allowed me to determine the values, experiences, and people that I held close to me. A reminder of what I valued allowed me to stay grounded, while avoiding the negative outlets in which my peers were taking part. My previously lived experiences, with the use of cathartic writing, have influenced the idea behind this study.

It is important to approach this research with a clear understanding of my subjectivity as a researcher (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17) in order to be aware of how my lived experience may have shaped this study. For the sake of transparency, it is crucial to recognize that I hope to find that reflective expressive writing can be a catalyst to improve the positive sense of self of male teens recently released from a closed custody facility. Although the study that I present herewith varies from my own experience, it is hoped that the concept of reflective expressive writing will offer further insight and assistance to the vulnerable youth in this study, just as it helped me deal with

difficult times in my own life. After presenting the potential impact on the well-being of the participants, there will be suggestions made to educators about how they can incorporate reflective expressive writing in their own practice. It is not always necessary for a major life event to occur in order for one to write reflectively; thus, it is evident that all students have the capacity to write reflectively when given the time and thought-provoking prompts.

Experience as my guide. As a Master's in Education student, and a high school English teacher for the past nine years, I have witnessed the influence of multiple forms of writing within the classroom. After working with a group of students over the course of two years (both Grade 9 and Grade 10 English), I found that many of the males lacked experience in journaling and, although initially hesitant, reaped the benefits when it came to increased self-esteem and sense of belonging to the classroom community. When confronted with a school-wide tragedy, it became clear that these males relied on their journals as a safe place to express deep thoughts and feelings, without fear of judgement or mockery. After much time and practice with journaling, students began to write about their concerns and care for one another, along with their many personal successes and failures. Through phone calls and emails that I received from parents, there was an evident consensus that the youth were not speaking to their parents about this experience. It also became clear that these male teens used their journals as a space for therapeutic healing.

Through my personal experience with these young men, I was able to discover a possible need and gap amongst at-risk young males within the traditional education setting.

Teens that are deemed at-risk within the education system are those, who would previously have studie[d] at the modified or basic level [or those] who are performing significantly below the provincial standard, earning marks in the 50s and low

60s and who do not have the foundations to be successful [...] In addition, the category of disengaged with very poor attendance was added (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

The term, at-risk, is used as it suggests that there is a chance that these students may not successfully graduate, as they may fall through the cracks of the education system. It is essential to remember that “at-risk” implies that this is a possibility and is not a guaranteed certainty. Not only are at-risk youth deemed to be in jeopardy of not graduating high school, but they may also be at-risk for not succeeding outside of the school environment. It is for both personal experience with cathartic writing as a teen, and the professional practice where I was able to see the benefits of journaling, that this thesis is an opportunity to consider how reflective expressive writing can influence at-risk youth.

Research Context

Many male teens have been incarcerated due to the poor choices they have made. Several pieces of literature speak to the reasons that these youth make such choices and the various people or facilities that may have failed them. Researchers have noted that, in the United States of America,

many youth offenders have not had successful experiences within traditional avenues of schooling (Jacobi, 2008, p. 72). ‘While most facilities offer juveniles access to literacy programs, the ‘percentage of State inmates without a high school diploma remained about the same between the 1991 and 1997 prisoner surveys. About 40% in 1997 and 41% in 1991 did not have a high school diploma or GED’ (Harlow, 2003).

With several studies confirming these poor experiences for teens in education programs, there is a gap in the literature discussing how to help improve teens’ self-esteem and their sense of community belonging. This study intends to address the gap in literature that addresses the

influence of reflective expressive writing on recently released incarcerated male teens' self-esteem and sense of belonging. Chapter 2 will provide definitions to assist in understanding what reflective expressive writing looks like.

Definitions. For the purpose of clarity, juveniles can be defined as youth that are under the legal age of traditional criminal prosecution. In Ontario, Canada, this definition refers to juveniles as youth between the ages of 12-17 years old (Youth Justice, 2013). When looking at incarcerated male teens, it is also imperative to note that, although incarceration refers to those who have been imprisoned, it does not always refer to the traditional prison system to which adults are often sentenced. References to incarcerated youth will naturally refer to teens living in a closed/secure custody juvenile centre. The difference between a closed/secure custody and open custody facility is primarily the fact that teens sentenced to a closed custody facility tend to have been convicted for crimes that are more serious and, thus, are deemed to pose more of a danger to society than those placed in an open custody facility. Because of the seriousness of the crime committed and the potential danger that these teens may pose to society, the closed custody facility has much stricter rules, but is also not nearly as lenient when it comes to the idea of providing the convicted with any form of freedom (personal communication, March 21, 2013).

To understand the workings of a closed custody facility, one needs to understand that youth ages 12-17 remain in the correctional facility as a way to atone for their crimes and to be provided with various resources to help prepare them for the eventual return to their community. "Creative or expository writing workshops have become an increasingly recognized component of correctional education programs. [...] Many promote a blend of creative expression and active and critical self-reflection to improved written literacy and communication" (Jacobi, 2008, p.

75). While in a closed custody facility, such as the one to which these particular youth were sentenced, there was “on-site school, sports, trades, and chaplaincy programs [to] help youth develop life skills and alternative strategies to cope with conflict” (Youth and Justice, n.d.). Such facilities,

offer each resident an individualized Plan of Care. The staff evaluate each youth’s unique situation and develop a plan to assist youth in overcoming personal social and spiritual challenges. Working directly with the parents or guardians of each resident, [their] case workers help youth and their families work together to change their lives (Youth and Justice, n.d.).

Although the needs may vary between adolescents, it is clear that attendance in the on-site education programs is mandatory for all residents.

Context relating to teaching experience. During the 2010-2011 school year, I had the privilege of teaching two different Grade 9 Applied English classes. These classes were comprised primarily of male students. Administering reading comprehension tests within the first two weeks of the semester, and being aware of their poor reading and literacy scores, I decided to begin each class with the use of journals. Initially, I was thinking about the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) that the students would write the following year, and I was hoping that, if students practiced writing without being tested, judged on content, or graded on spelling and grammar, they might improve their writing on their own. Rather than judging or grading the journals, I just responded to what they wrote. By writing more frequently in a journal, students would hopefully be more open and willing to write for class assignments and, thus, more receptive to feedback for improvement as well. After bringing in journals for the students, I explained that we would write at the beginning of every class for 15-20 minutes.

Writing prompts were provided to help me get to know my students and to help them battle the blank page staring at them. Initially, students were not overly thrilled about this new task and the 20 minutes felt extremely long and boring. However, after approximately two weeks, I stopped providing students with writing prompts because I realized that the students were not writing about what was on the blackboard; instead, we were each having our own unique conversations using their journals. Students wrote freely about both the positive and negative emotions that they were experiencing, and without their peers' knowledge that they were speaking to an adult about potentially serious issues. After time passed, the 20 minutes of writing no longer felt like a chore, now students were writing a response that ranged from half a page to a full page each day. At the end of their Grade 9 semester, I asked students to write their final goodbye to the course in their journals. Several responses stated that they were sad because the classroom community that we formed was the safest room in the school building for them. I thought about what I did differently in this class compared to others in order to create such a safe space, and it came down to the use of journaling. The combination of students being able to experience an emotional release and knowing that there was someone that cared about them was what they needed to feel a sense of belonging in my classroom.

In the following year, I was assigned a Grade 10 Applied English class, consisting primarily of males, in which 14 of the 18 students were from my previous year. Knowing that students would be preparing for the OSSLT, I started to announce that we would begin each class with an activity that would help them get ready for the test. I was unable to finish the announcement as one of the boys interrupted me by asking if they were going to write in their journals again. I asked if they wanted to and they all did. The next day I brought in journals and they began to write. In fact, a couple of the boys actually brought their journals back from the

previous year. That same school year our school had a death of a student – a good friend to several of the boys in my classroom. Rather than going to someone to talk about what was happening, they began to seek out their journals and write about their pain. The boys felt safe enough to write about their emotions without having to talk about their feelings with one another (something they admittedly were not comfortable doing). I began to read journal responses not just about their grief, but also about their genuine concern for others in the room. When provided with the opportunity to write reflectively in class, students embraced it yet again and felt much more connected to one another, as well as with me.

In the 2012-2013 school year, previous students came to see me and told their friends that I was a safe person to talk to even though I was no longer teaching them in the classroom. It appeared that these students felt this way just because they were able to write, get their thoughts and emotions on paper without feeling judged. Recently, in June 2013, in order to gain a better understanding of the benefits that reflective writing may have had on my students; I randomly selected four of the boys to study in order for me to gain greater clarity about their experiences with reflective writing in the classroom. I asked the boys if they had ever participated in reflective writing prior to my courses, if they preferred to write about positive or negative experiences, and if they felt that the writing helped them in any way. All of the boys said that they had to write in journals in the elementary grades, but not in the same way they did in my English classes. Being short for words, the boys did not elaborate on how the journal writing experience was different. Two of the boys preferred writing about positive experiences and the other two preferred writing about negative experiences. Three of the four boys said that they found the writing to be beneficial. They said that they did see their self-esteem increase because it was okay to feel the way they were feeling and they were able to “get all of their emotions

out”. One of the students also stated that he became “more open to talking about [him]self”. Knowing some of the big issues that these boys dealt with outside of the classroom and their willingness to be open to personal growth through writing in a journal, I became determined to use these sources of personal practical knowledge to see what impact reflective expressive writing could have on others.

I began to consider other at-risk communities that might benefit from an opportunity to write reflectively in order to privilege a marginalized voice, even if just on a piece of paper being read by someone else. Taking into consideration the various marginalized youth and scenarios in which teens are considered at-risk, I was inspired to consider the needs of those in a secure custody facility and, ultimately, look at the impact that reflective expressive writing may have on recently released incarcerated male teens’.

Statement of the Problem and Specific Research Questions

There is limited research that focuses on the impact of reflective expressive writing on criminalized adolescent males. The majority of the research found explores the use of diary writing within the field of nursing (Burton & King 2004; Gjengedal, 2010). Through my own implementation of reflective writing within the classroom, I observed that students were more willing to share their thoughts and feelings, and able to form more of a community with each other in which they demonstrated moments of concern for one another. By exploring the use of reflective writing with male teens recently released from a closed custody facility, I anticipate the youth will experience a positive increase in their perceived sense of self.

The specific research question being addressed is, “What is the impact of reflective expressive writing on male teens that have recently been released from a closed custody facility?”

In order to address the research question, it was also important to consider the topics that the youth would be asked to write about. Burton and King (2004) discussed another concept that this study addresses. It was suggested that writing about Intensely Positive Experiences (IPEs) is highly beneficial for the mood and health of writing participants. Burton and King's (2004) research explains IPEs to be experiences that utilize an increased number of positive emotive words when being described. Examples provided were that of "graduation, dates, time with friends and family, travel, etc." (Burton & King, 2004, p. 156). Thus, an additional research question to approach asks: "Does reflective writing about Intensely Positive Experiences (IPEs) have a positive effect on one's perceived sense of self?"

By analyzing the data and responses to the above questions, I have developed a greater understanding of the impact that reflective expressive writing has on male youth that have recently been released from a closed custody facility. The process I used in order to analyze the collected data is outlined in Chapter 3.

Beyond exploring the impact that reflective expressive writing has on youth released from a closed custody facility, a potential implication of this study may be transferred to the field of education. As a result, an additional question addressed is how this program might provide further insight to the possible use of reflective expressive writing on at-risk teens within a traditional school setting. Developing an understanding of how we can intervene and assist at-risk youth within a traditional school setting may assist educators in providing a way for at-risk youth to increase their self-esteem and sense of belonging. It is my hope that this knowledge will allow educators the opportunity to recognize their role in assisting at-risk youth in their classrooms. Using interviews and the journals themselves, I will describe the young men's

perceptions of their self-esteem and sense of belonging. In Chapter 3, there will be further information provided concerning the methodology used.

In addition to assisting the traditional classroom and the organizations that work with youth released from closed custody facilities, this case study will be able to add to the lacking body of literature that surrounds the topics of both incarcerated male programming, writing initiatives for youth within a secure facility, and programs to implement within restorative justice organizations.

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to discover the impact that reflective expressive writing may have on male teens that have recently been released from a closed custody facility. In particular, this study hopes to provide further insight into the background of the male youth that chose to participate in reflective expressive writing. Although there are various programs already implemented in closed custody facilities for male teens, such as a program instructing the males on expressing their lived experiences through rap music and the journaling occurring in their English classroom, a program based on reflective expressive writing has not received enough attention. What “remains unclear, however, whether alternative literacy programs are effective at bringing about positive emotional and/or behavioural changes in youth as few systematic studies have been conducted to examine the impact of writing and creative arts programming on youth in need” (Long & Davis, 2011, p. 8). This study hopes to provide a deeper understanding of the impact that reflective expressive writing may have on the recently released participants.

Limitations of the Study

Although it is clear that this study hopes to help participants increase their self-esteem and sense of belonging to a community, there is also hope that the study itself will assist future

researchers within the fields of incarceration, restorative justice, and education. When conducting this study there are several limitations to take note of:

A limitation associated with this study was the way in which I evaluated the depth of reflection that participants expressed. I tried to ensure that the assessment of the depth of reflection is not subjective, as each person's level of reflection could look different. Based on my experience of nine years of teaching secondary school English courses, I have been trained to evaluate work, particularly in identifying the difference between surface level thought and in-depth reflection. Determining the depth of reflection that one puts into their writing is a difficult task. In order to assist myself in understanding the difference between surface level writing and deep reflections, each journal needs to be read separately in order to understand if the youth understood the prompt provided and if they went beyond merely telling a story. In addition to utilizing my professional judgement, I created a rubric, as seen in Figure 1, to be used as a basic guide for assessing the depth of reflection that took place in the writing. Although the journal entries were not being graded for a final mark, it was imperative that I looked at the depth of reflection in order to gauge if any of the changes within the teens could be attributed to the writing and reflection itself, or other outside influences.

Another limitation to this study is the lack of literature already produced on this topic. Due to the lack of literature dealing with reflective expressive writing and its impact on male teens that have recently been released from a closed custody facility, this study sought to understand the way reflective expressive writing has been utilized in other fields of study. Understanding the environment and circumstances surrounding a closed custody facility and a restorative justice organization, I implemented the information found in the literature review in a way that would suit the specific research question outlined. Through the analysis of journals,

field notes, interviews and conversations, I intended to conduct a study to inform others about the impact of reflective expressive writing on male teens recently released from a closed custody facility.

Chapter 2 – Review of Literature

Research shows that there is an interest in understanding how journaling and diary writing may assist different fields of study. Although there are many bodies of literature discussed in this review, one will find that the literature is very limited when focusing on reflective expressive writing itself. There is no research to be found about reflective expressive writing and the impact on incarcerated male teens recently released from a closed custody facility. Due to the limits in research, I present a broadened search to include the use of journal keeping in nursing, as well as one example found in an open custody facility.

This review of literature will begin with distinguishing the difference between expressive writing and diary keeping. It is essential to understand the differences in writing forms in order to understand the type of writing that will take place in this particular study. A review of the literature found on the use of writing as therapeutic practice and its effects on the nursing field is also presented. Following an understanding of the writing forms and the ways in which writing has benefited other fields, there is literature presented to help understand the potential use of reflective expressive writing with male youth recently released from a closed custody facility. This section will also serve to provide context on the terminology and practices used in the closed custody facility in which the youth stayed, along with the necessary terminology used within the Pathways to Community programs with which the boys are involved. Next, there is information presented to help other researchers understand the importance of helping teens foster a strong sense of self and sense of belonging, along with current practices being used with at-risk youth. Finally, this literature review presents various implications of the study conducted.

Expressive and Reflective Writing

Distinction between expressive writing and diary keeping. When thinking about the act of expressive and reflective writing, one may differentiate the two in thinking that expressive writing is meant merely to write about a personal account of a memorable experience, while reflective writing requires the writer to place more of an emphasis on considering how that event may have affected him or her. For the purpose of this study, I will use the term *reflective expressive writing* to denote the type of writing in which the youth took part. Long and Davis (2011) explained “[e]xpressive writing typically involves writing, about an emotional event or topic which is relevant and meaningful to the writer and about which the writer shares his or her thoughts and feelings” (p. 9). Making this definition clear also allows the reader to decipher the difference between expressive writing and daily diary keeping. Diary keeping is often used to account for what a person has done in the past and, at times, even predict or hope for what may happen in the future. Diary keeping is not necessarily done in a reflective manner, rather it is used as a great resource to keep track of one’s past experiences. Understanding the purpose of this study it is clear that the term, reflective expressive writing, much more accurately describes what will be addressed, as opposed to the term, diary keeping. I have chosen to use the term, reflective expressive writing, as I am asking the youth to reflect upon various events and prompts and express their emotion using writing.

Reflective writing as therapeutic practice. By defining journaling as a way in which a person keeps an individual recording of their personal experiences and developments throughout time (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.), it is clear that journaling can overlap with the concept behind recording in a diary. A diary can be defined as, “a book in which one keeps a daily record of events and experiences” (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). Gjengedal (2010) presented how the nursing

field also benefits from the use of diaries from both a patient's and a nurse's perspective. When investigating the "background, extent and implementation of diaries in Norwegian ICUs" (Gjengedal, 2010, p. 176), the overall response was that nurses found diaries to be therapeutic and patients saw a positive effect of diaries on their emotional well-being. It is clear that the nursing field evidently recognizes similar benefits for their participants using reflective journaling or diaries. "In most units patient diaries were described as serving both a caring and therapeutic purpose, even though the two purposes overlapped. Some nurses stressed the importance of the diary as a basis for follow-up dialogues" (Gjengedal, 2010, p. 178). Providing an individual with an outlet to take part in a task that brings upon a 'caring and therapeutic purpose' is a promising concept, at best. In addition to these positive intentions, nurses were able to recognize that the use of diaries was effective in being a source that one could refer back to in order to remind them of issues with which they, personally, needed to follow up. This could also be beneficial to all people that participate in reflective expressive writing. Being able to look back on past thoughts to find trends in beliefs and behaviours will allow an individual to recognize where changes in thought or behaviour may be necessary and is an effective way to allow one to look back and celebrate the growth that they may have achieved. Writing about life experiences has proven to be beneficial:

A large body of research support the idea that writing about important and particularly traumatic life experiences causes improvements in a wide variety of indicators of positive well-being. Research has shown that writing about traumatic life events is associated with enhanced immune functioning (Esterling, Antoni, Fletcher, & Margulies, 1994; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Petrie, Booth, Pennebaker, & Davidson, 1995 in Burton & King, 2004, p. 150).

Although one may find positive personal benefits from writing about such experiences, it is also imperative to take note about the potential results of writing about positive moments. When Burton and King (2004) randomly sampled undergraduate students who wrote about an Intensely Positive Experience (IPE) for 20 minutes a day, over the course of three consecutive days, they discovered that writing about IPEs also had many health benefits.

Burton and King (2004) measured participants' moods pre and post journaling. In order to measure the mood of the writing, written pieces "were coded by two independent raters for how positive, negative and emotional they were. [...] A second set of ratings was completed only on the IPE essays, by two additional raters. These focused on how much the participant demonstrated insight, creativity, a broadened perspective, and finding meaning, and how much the event 'triggered thinking'" (Burton & King, 2004, p. 155). Three months after taking part in the study, participants who wrote about IPEs demonstrated higher levels in mood and had less health center visits compared to those in a control group. Although there are many studies that focus on the benefits of writing about negative emotional experiences, it is

suggest[ed] that negative emotional focus is not an essential characteristic of essays that are likely to be associated with health improvements. Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) suggested that the pattern that was most characteristic of beneficial writing included relatively high levels of positive emotion words, a moderate level of negative emotion words, and increasing [number of] insight words used over the course of writing (Burton & King, 2004; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 151).

Long and Davis (2011) also suggested that studies should "strongly consider utilizing writing interventions that focus on positive emotional topics rather than traumatic life events and thereby

avoid the potential risks associated with instructing individuals to write about traumatic, emotionally negative writing topics” (p. 10).

Writing within the field of nursing. Journaling has been proven beneficial in many different settings. Due to a gap in literature concerning reflective expressive writing practices with recently released incarcerated teens, it was imperative to look at the use of journaling throughout other professions.

Within the field of nursing, journals are used for various reasons and from various perspectives. In Langley and Brown’s (2010) study, graduate nursing students, along with a small sample of faculty, were asked to keep a reflective learning journal (RLJ) to help determine their perceptions in online education (p. 12). The results of this study confirmed the view of educational philosopher, John Dewey, that people learn from experience and, therefore, reflection is necessary in order to experience lifelong learning (Langley & Brown, 2010). Participants in the study demonstrated the need to teach reflective patterns of thought. Langley and Brown’s (2010) study found that reflective learning journals were able to assist in the organization, the consolidation of thinking through reflection, the encouraging of both maturity and self-awareness, the connecting of internal values with external realities, and the increase in self-confidence (p. 13). The use of reflective learning journals is purported to enhance the development of the professional self in practice (Langley & Brown, 2010; Boud, 2001; Wong, Kember, Chung, & Yang 1995). When graduate students responded to the survey provided after implementing the use of reflective learning journals, it was found that students “agreed that reflective journaling enabled them to examine their own attitudes and see problems from the perspectives of others. This finding is consistent with the literature, in that reflective journaling allows for the exploration of attitudes such as self-doubt and fear of exposure (Langley &

Brown, 2010; Kerka, 2002). The use of reflection may be helpful in labelling an individual's fears and doubts, in order to work on overcoming them. Reflective writing allows an individual to identify these potential weaknesses, in order to let them confront and overcome said challenges.

A form of journal writing was also implemented for second year baccalaureate nursing students during their clinical practicum (Ibarreta & McLeod, 2004). Researchers made it clear that putting their thoughts "on paper through journal writing is one of many teaching strategies that can help promote learning in a process-oriented curriculum. [...] There was evidence that the students' writing in journals could demonstrate critical thinking and analyze significant events that occurred during their practicum" (Ibarreta & McLeod, 2004, p. 134). The nursing students participated in a much more structured form of journaling in which each entry provided "a record of events, observations, feelings, and context the students used as bases for analysis, reflection, planning, and evaluation" (Ibarreta & McLeod, 2004, p. 135). This structured journaling still allowed students to learn from their actions and to plan for future goals/adjustments that they may aim to make.

Reflective Writing and Incarcerated Male Youth

Importance/Impact of Having a Strong Sense of Self

Self-esteem is defined as "the extent to which one prizes, values, approves, or likes oneself" (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991, p. 115). Another term that can be used interchangeably with self-esteem is that of self-worth. Goodenow and Grady (1992) defined the concept of one's sense of belonging as "the extent to which they feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others" (p. 60-61). It has been proven that the associations that students make "with cultural and ethnic groups, their families, and their friends (especially

in adolescence) are fundamental aspects of this social fabric. Another potentially important element of the social context is the students' sense of belonging in the school or classroom" (Goodenow & Grady, 1992, p. 60). Goodenow and Grady (1992) asserted that an "approach to understanding social influences on school motivation, especially among disadvantaged students, has focused on students' subjective sense of school belonging" (p. 61). An *identification-participation* model was created in order "to account for school withdrawal among at-risk students" (p. 61). Finn's model presented the idea that "unless students identify with the school to at least a minimal extent [...] they may begin the gradual disengagement process of which officially dropping out is only the final step" (p. 61). Having a sense of belonging within the school influences the way in which students commit to their education and accept the values of education that are being placed on them (p. 61).

The decision to focus on males in this study was also because of studies demonstrating that "[g]irls were more likely than boys to express a high sense of school belonging and general school motivation" (Goodenow & Grady, 1992, p. 65). There were three important results that came from Goodenow and Grady's (1992) study: "The first is that many urban adolescents may have a poor sense of school belonging and low school motivation. Second, students who do have a high sense of belonging in school are also more likely to be motivated and academically engaged than those whose sense of belonging is low" (p. 67). Sadly, it was also found that even when there were positive results on academic motivation, many still had a poor sense of belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 1992). Overall, the main finding of their study

concerns the association between students' psychological sense of membership and motivational outcomes. School belonging accounted for substantial proportions of the variance in attitudinal scales that measured general school motivation, expectancy for

academic success, and especially the value that students attributed to academic work (Goodenow & Grady, 1992, p. 65).

Current Practices with At-Risk Youth and Writing

Although there is evidence of studies in classrooms that assess teenage diaries, it is evident that such studies aimed to demonstrate “that the use of diaries [is] an effective instructional intervention and that reading ability in part plays a role in students’ academic achievement” (McKee & MacDonald, 2006, p. 1). Hoping to discover ways to produce

positive behavioural and emotional changes in adolescents, a wide range of innovative programs, many of which include some kind of writing and/or artistic component have recently been implemented by program directors, staff, and educators working in after school programs and correctional facilities across the U.S. (Long & Davis, 2011, p. 7-8). Jocson (2006) shows that poetry also has the ability to increase one’s self-awareness. Jocson (2006) stated “[p]oetry seen in this light reveals the power of words as one means for youths to make sense of their lives” (p. 701). When Jocson spoke of a participant in the program, she relied on studies done by Mahirir and Sablo (1996) and Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) highlighting a young man who stated that “poetry became a vehicle for exposing his lived realities that are often hidden from public view. Poetry was built upon his cultural knowledge and the everyday complexities of what it meant to be an urban youth of color (as cited in Jocson, 2006, p. 706). Branching out beyond poetry and looking at various writing prompts allowed recently released incarcerated male teens to reflect upon their lives up to this point, along with hopes for their future. Montero (2012) found that “[c]areful consideration of the urban students’ messages in [her] project as a complete narrative and their collective ‘call to action’ reveals that these young people are acutely aware of society’s low expectations for them and, despite this

awareness, believe that they hold a power to change their futures” (p. 36). Knowing that many teens who have been incarcerated are either urban youth or have similar views of the perception that many people have of them, reflective writing may help youth to increase their own esteem and work away from the perception of peers, family, and community members.

Other Forms of Therapeutic Healing

Another creative form of therapeutic release that some teens have taken part in is music therapy. Music therapy is “an established healthcare profession that uses music to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of individuals” (AMTA, 2004). Music therapy is said to improve the quality of life for those involved. Studies show that music and poetry therapy are beneficial for adolescents with mental health disorders, addiction problems, and those looking to explore their feelings while developing coping skills (Gooding, 2008, p. 21). Along with taking part in music therapy, Mazza’s (2003) case study highlights:

a 17-year-old girl being treated for alcohol abuse and depression, who benefited from the introduction of poetry and song, as well as journaling between sessions. Studying poetry therapy, the mode of creative/expressive writing was looked at. Mazza stated that the writings could be done in any form “of poems, lyrics, stories and diaries (Gooding 2003, p. 222).

Through writing, Kellner (2004) asserted that participants demonstrated “an increased tolerance, an increase in future orientation and an increase in hope” (as cited in Gooding, 2008, p. 223).

Teens in Los Angeles were involved in a different form of writing, for the Los Angeles newspaper. The piece of writing that the youth preferred to write were about teens themselves, tackling many of the issues that were not being discussed in schools (Hartigan, 1999).

Recognizing their preference to write about such issues demonstrates a potential want and need

for teens to talk about the various topics that are not typically being addressed in school. From this information, one may see the need to find an outlet in which these teens feel comfortable talking about the issues that they feel they need to withhold while in the traditional schooling system.

There are, of course, many reasons attributed to youths' failure in schooling; however, "research demonstrates that the psychological maturity of youth offenders is arrested by their removal from home communities and conventional educational access" (Jacobi, 2008, p. 73). It is important to consider ways to offer a sense of community when youth feel disconnected. Martha Zacharias (2001) found that journaling was effective in developing the thinking processes of the participants, especially that of decision-making. Zacharias (2001) defined decision making as "making informed choices and accepting responsibility for those choices" (p. 268). She also found that the use of journal writing can assist students in developing their decision-making skills. The aforementioned alternative literacy programs "can lead to strengthened language and literacy skills as well as development in maturity levels since many exercises require cooperative and collaborative learning and audience awareness" (Jacobi, 2008, p. 73). Long and Davis (2011) asserted that:

while there certainly is a lack of systematic research examining the effectiveness of alternative literacy programs, the few studies that have evaluated these types of programs suggest that the programs have the potential to help youth improve their writing skills, gain a better sense of self, and, possibly, improve young offenders' understanding of the emotional toll their crimes place on others (p. 9).

Ultimately, the goal of this study was to understand the impact reflective expressive writing had on the young men that took part in the study.

Implications

Writing forms and prompts to be considered. Various studies have been conducted over the past decade concerning:

the benefits of expressive writing on a wide array of individuals' emotional, psychological, and even physical well-being. The results of past studies suggest that engagement in some form of expressive or disclosive writing has been found to produce increased levels of happiness and lower levels of depression in adults (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005 in Long & Davis, 2011, p. 9).

Considering the aforementioned, there are many ways that researchers may be able to help close the gaps found when discussing the needs of juveniles and the desire to work on improving their self-esteem and sense of belonging within the community. With the nursing field benefiting from increased organizational skills, maturity, understanding of values and realities, along with an increased self-esteem, and a therapeutic release of experiences and feelings, it is evident that these are all laudable characteristics that can help male teens that have found themselves in some form of trouble. Knowing that many male adolescents that have been held in secure custody facilities may struggle with past experiences, choices, and perceptions of self, it is clear that the aforementioned benefits are something that will assist them in increasing their own self-esteem and, potentially, their sense of belonging to their communities at large. In order to work on making growth in these areas, it is clear that one no longer needs to associate expressive writing as a tool to get out the participants' negative emotions (Burton & King, 2004). Reflective expressive writing does not have to be trudging up the past; rather, it can be writing about positive experiences and maintaining a happier mood than many would expect. When conducting the study, writing prompts were provided that were related to primarily positive moments and/or

feelings. Participants were able to write about topics such as their happiest moments, their life goals, and the ideal life they aspire to have (see Appendix A).

Hartigan (1999) recognized that teens need some guidance before they begin writing. In addition to providing participants with primarily positive emotional topics to reflect upon, writers were also provided an opportunity to be introduced to multiple journaling types (mind maps, traditional writing, lists, etc.). It is believed that “[e]ducators who recognize the value of offering students multiple ways to access information improve students potential to develop critical reading and writing skills as they prepare for productive personal and public adult lives” (Jacobi, 2008, p. 75). Although it is clear that this study intended to use various forms of writing and writing prompts that foster positive reflection, it was essential to select prompts that truly support the teens. I placed a heavy focus on selecting writing prompts that would best support these young men and their ability to connect and reflect on the provided topics.

The influence of a strong sense of belonging and self-esteem. Along with the aforementioned, it was found that “[a]lmost all people find school (or other work settings) more enjoyable, worthwhile, and interesting when they believe that others in the environment like and value them” (Goodenow & Grady, 1992, p. 68). If a sense of belonging can have an influence on the value in which these males attribute to themselves and their communities, then it is worth spending time with them in order to teach them how to write reflectively in order to reap the benefits. In order to teach reflective expressive writing, it is imperative to expose participants to the different forms of writing mentioned earlier. Participants were also introduced to the difference between reflecting about one’s thoughts and the way one writes in a reflective manner, versus the previously defined diary keeping. In the same way, it was also important to

question how I, the facilitator, would ensure that reflective writing was actually the way in which participants journaled.

Writing as maturity. If alternative literacy exercises assist the development of participants' maturity levels, then it is quite possible that those who take part in the process of reflection and expressive writing will experience a growth in maturity. As participants' maturity levels increase, it is hypothesized that their sense of self may also develop, as they grow to understand their past actions, their potential futures and, in turn, maintain a developed sense of self-worth. Implementing a program with youth from a secure custody facility proved to be beneficial as "incarcerated juveniles may respond well to creative and unconventional approaches to learning more likely to motivate change when offered in tandem with conventional educational programs than the latter can in isolation" (Jacobi, 2008, p. 74). In addition to the primary goal of increasing the young men's self-esteem and sense of belonging, it is believed that "offering juveniles opportunities to engage in both conventional schooling and alternative [...] textual practices can enhance critical thinking and decision-making skills, resulting in a critical correctional education" (Jacobi, 2008, p. 74). Jacobi (2008) presented the idea that alternative literacy's do in fact "promote an increased sense of identity, confidence, and motivation" (p. 80). This study has an ultimate focus on the impact of reflective expressive writing on the self-esteem and sense of belonging of male teens recently released from a closed custody facility.

Bridging the gaps. By examining the results of introducing reflective expressive writing in different forums, it is clear that there is merit in sharing the benefits with others. Although a sample of nurses took part in more structured writing than what will be introduced to the incarcerated youth, the benefits can still be the same, as participants were reflecting on past

positive experiences. By considering the context and process that they took part in when they were happy, youth will hopefully aim to act in a way that will allow them to feel this happiness and strength in character once again. There is literature that demonstrates the effectiveness of writing within the field of nursing, as well as the field of education. Aside, from one referenced study about writing with juveniles, there is not enough research conducted with male teens that have been incarcerated. However, Naser and Visser (2006) remind us “different types of family support provided to recently released prisoners appear to improve post-release outcomes. In particular perceived emotional support ...” (p.22). Although this writing opportunity was designed for the released youth and not for their families, it is also noted that, when asked how one can help support families dealing with their incarcerated family member’s re-entry into society, “respondents typically mentioned services designed to help the released prisoners, not themselves” (Naser, 2006, p. 27). It was not uncommon to hear a family member state that programs designed to help the recently released, in turn, help the family members as one less thing with which they need to concern themselves.

As previously mentioned, there are also studies that outline the connection between one’s positive sense of self-worth and sense of belonging within their school communities and the performance and engagement that they exhibit within the classroom and school community (Goodenow & Grady, 1992). Recognizing that many incarcerated male teens have had poor experiences within the education system, one can hypothesize that their sense of belonging to their previous school community and their self-esteem may not be as high as those deemed high achievers. Knowing that studies show the use of alternative literacies to be beneficial with at-risk and struggling youth, it is hoped that the introduction of expressive writing will help the participating youth improve their perceived sense of self. It is clear that there are many benefits

to expressive writing; however, this technique has yet to be examined with the target group of recently released incarcerated male teens.

Summary of Literature

The distinction between expressive and reflective writing has become increasingly important to understand for this study. Understanding the difference between maintaining a diary and reflectively journaling is essential in assessing the intended responses. It is clear that diary keeping and journaling are used within the field of nursing. The findings from the use of writing in nursing have informed this study by outlining potential outcomes, along with potentially effective expectations for reflective expressive writing.

Throughout this chapter, I have focused on samples of writing forms and prompts to be used. It is hoped that these writing prompts foster a depth of reflection that will assist in nurturing a strong sense of belonging and self-esteem. As mentioned earlier, it is clear that having a strong sense of self assists in developing a strong positive set of values amongst the participants. Through consideration of alternative literacies studied with other at-risk teens, it has become evident that writing can be a cathartic tool that offers opportunities for participants to develop a sense of maturity. Having recognized the gaps in literature, this study aims to address the impact that reflective expressive writing has on male teens recently released from a closed custody facility. Chapter 3, a chapter focused on methodology, examines how the aforementioned issues will be studied.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Methodology

I explored the impact of reflective expressive writing on two male teens recently released from a closed custody facility through a case study. McMillan (2012) reinforces the idea that the intent of qualitative research is to “provide rich narrative descriptions [...] that enhance understanding” (p. 18). In particular, “... the distinctive need for using a case study arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. In brief, this case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events” (Yin, 1984, p. 14). A case study approach was selected for this study, in order to provide a well-rounded narrative about the young men that participated in the reflective expressive writing process.

Overview of method

This study used a qualitative approach by making use of observation field notes, interviews, and journals. The described approach to the research allows for a broadened exploration of this particular topic. Merriam (1998) reminds us “[t]he key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s” (p. 6). Two young men took part in the case study research allowing me to better understand the impact that reflective expressive writing had on their perceived sense of self. While participants partook in the study, as well as the interviews, I took field notes on the ways in which each participant appeared to respond. Looking at one’s body language, posture, and facial expressions assisted my understanding of how each participant reacted to particular questions, topics, and/or exercises. Conducting field research is a way of authentically observing behaviour as it naturally occurs (McMillan, 2012, p. 273). Observing participants behaving naturally allowed me to come to a greater understanding of their attitudes and emotions

associated with the questions or circumstances that each participant was asked to endure. In this study, I chose to implement a case study approach in order to understand the lived experiences of the youth participating. As stated by Merriam (1998), “A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (p. 19). I used the case study approach in order to provide a detailed description and analysis of this reflective expressive writing program.

During this study, the interviews allowed me to look for any changes in the participants’ perceived sense of self-esteem. Interviews were also able to inform me of the participants’ thoughts about their esteem as well as support the findings identified in their writing. Along with supporting the evidence found concerning esteem, interviews also addressed the participants’ sense of belonging to a community. Ultimately, interviews informed my understanding of what the reflective expressive writing experience was like for each individual participant. Not only were interviews conducted with the writing participants, but dialogue also took place with key stakeholders that worked directly with the youth on a regular basis.

Finally, it was essential to look at the written documents themselves – the journals. Overall, these journals were read and used to look at the depth of reflection that took place, along with the methods that participants deemed to be the most effective in communicating these thoughts and emotions. The content of the journals allowed me to understand the important experiences that each participant held close to them and the emotions that were attached to each experience. Their responses allowed me to analyze the content in order to understand the ways in which the participants perceived themselves.

Methods and Issues Regarding Qualitative Research

Gaining access to research site. Creswell (2013) reminded researchers that, when dealing with field research, “[c]onvincing individuals to participate in the study, building trust and credibility at the field site, and getting people from a site to respond are all important access challenges” (p. 171). In order to combat this challenge, I volunteered for over a year in the closed custody facility that these youth were sentenced, with the hope of building a rapport and a sense of trust with the potential participants in custody. In order to obtain this volunteer opportunity, there were a few interviews that took place with the facility’s volunteer coordinator, director, and social worker. All of the work completed prior to the study was strictly volunteer work. This work was conducted without any formal agreement by the facility to allow this study to occur.

After realizing that I would not be able to conduct this study in the secure custody facility due to Ministry restrictions, I began to discuss the potential to address this research with a local organization in which the young men were participants. This organization will be referred to using the pseudonym, Pathways to Community. Once Pathways to Community agreed to implement the study, I took part in their interview and training process to ensure that I was a certified volunteer with their organization. It was important to have a good understanding of what their organization stands for and what their overall goals and approach to youth entail. The training at Pathways to Community took place over two separate evenings. At this training, I was educated about the goals of the various programs that are offered at Pathways to Community, along with the intentions behind each program. The role of a volunteer was outlined, as well as the expectations of both the volunteers and the youth were discussed in depth. Understanding their belief in restorative justice and the successes they have had thus far assisted my understanding of the reasoning behind their approach to their programming and to the youth.

Pathways to Community is based around the concept of restorative justice practices.

Advocates of restorative justice argue that traditional ways of responding to wrongdoing tend to leave the needs of victims, perpetrators and communities unmet and leave the harm caused by wrongdoing unrepaired. They advocate alternative approaches designed to make wrongdoers aware of the nature and magnitude of the harm they cause to other people and of their obligation to atone for that harm through constructive and reparative gestures and deeds. Such reparative action, they suggest, can pave the way to forgiveness and reconciliation, the reintegration of wrongdoers into the community and the healing of victims' trauma (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007, xxi).

Pathways to Community tries to follow a restorative model that both respects and protects the rights of the offenders, victims, and others that may have been affected (personal communication, June, 2014). Pathways to Community works under a set of assumptions that need to be followed in order to be as successful as possible. These assumptions are that: victims are not only involved in the process of reparation, but they also receive recognition for the harm that was done to them; offenders are held responsible for their criminal behaviour and are supported in their ability to recognize and attempt to repair the harm caused; and, finally, the community is involved in helping to rebuild the relationship while providing an emphasis on integration (personal communication, June, 2014)

Along with the training and orientations that took place, it is imperative to consider the challenges of building trust and rapport with the participants in the interview process. When interviewing the participants, it was also necessary to take into account the relationship that the interviewer has with the interviewee (Creswell, 2012, p. 173). A participant that may have

developed a closer relationship to me may be more willing and more comfortable discussing his experiences, while one with less of a connection may hesitate to be as honest and forthcoming.

When addressing the needs of each participant in order to reflectively write in their journals, there are a few things that I needed to keep in mind. Creswell (2012) reminds researchers to ask ourselves the following questions: “What instructions should be given to individuals prior to writing in their journals? [And, a]re all participants equally comfortable with journaling?” (p. 174) Such questions help a researcher prepare participants for the study to begin. However, there are additional issues to consider throughout the process itself. I considered some of the handwriting of these males might be difficult to decipher. If this were to occur, I would need to find a method of decoding the writing, without approaching the participants themselves. If participants wrote about any experiences that are unknown to authorities, they would be asked to make up scenarios and names in order to prevent them from being penalized. Participants were also informed that confidentiality rules would be broken if they disclosed that they are planning to hurt themselves or others, or if they already have done so, and if they disclosed that there is someone else hurting them. The ability and reassurance to allow writers to be honest, allowed me to receive genuine reflections that did not need to be censored. In order to combat this concern, I prepared myself to make note of any difficult handwriting when analysing the depth of reflection in these journals. If there were any journals that have been too difficult to decipher, journals would be returned to participants and they would be afforded the opportunity to look for any marked pages where clarification may be needed. At this point, they would be able to correct the handwriting of any of the difficult areas in order to assist my understanding.

Along with possible difficulties reading the participants’ handwriting, one of the distinct disadvantages to using a qualitative design is that, because “the researchers are directly involved

in collecting data, either as observers, interviewers, or reviewers of documents and artifacts, they should be trained in the procedures they use” (McMillan, 2012, p. 306). Having taken graduate level courses in research praxis, research methods, and qualitative studies, I was prepared and well aware of the methods and techniques that are introduced in this chapter and that were implemented throughout the study. Overall, the qualitative approach allowed me to provide a “collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44).

Case Study Methodology

I decided to use a case study approach as this study hopes to provide an in-depth understanding of what the reflective expressive writing experience was like for each of the participants. Knowing that each youth had different lived experiences that brought them to this point in the program, it is clear that their reflections will be different. The case study approach allowed me to understand the perspective of each of the individual participants.

Merriam (1998) reminds us that qualitative researchers understand that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds. Qualitative researchers are *interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (emphasis in original, p. 3). This approach was chosen as an effective way to focus on the process of the writing as well as an understanding of the end product (Merriam, 1998, p. 8). A case study approach allows us to focus on the importance of “insight, discovery and interpretation, rather than hypothesis testing” (Merriam, 1998, p. 28-29). The case study of the reflective expressive writing process, allows the

readers to come to an understanding of what this experience meant to the participants and how each of their realities are able to inform our educational practices.

In order to provide the two participants with the opportunity to share some of their personal thoughts with me, it was clear it was necessary to build trust with them first. The case study approach allows a researcher to collaborate with the participants and to build an initial rapport with them, prior to asking them to share their personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Finding an opportunity to earn their trust, allows one to discover true thoughts and feelings from an individual that is willing to be honest and genuine about their experiences. My ability to establish a trusting relationship with both of these young men was accomplished in different ways. The forming of both of these relationships will be discussed further when the reader is later introduced to each of the youth.

An additional advantage to using the case study approach is the constant dialogue that occurred between me the participants. Having regular communication with the participants allowed me the opportunity to clarify statements that they may have previously made in their interviews or their writing. Because I audio-recorded each interview, I was able to quickly transcribe our interviews and receive immediate feedback from the youth on the validity of what I recorded. Prior to each writing session, I was already able to respond to their previous entry and ask additional questions for clarification when necessary. This consistent dialogue allowed me to elaborate on various themes that arose and to clarify or question other possible themes that I saw emerge.

In order to triangulate my data, I was able to rely on the use of multiple interviews, observation and the physical journals themselves. I was able to interview participants with specific questions about their experiences, read their writing about their personal thoughts and

emotions associated to the prompts and overall writing experience, and observe them not only while they took part in writing, but also in the community. Knowing that the writing prompts are linked primarily to events that have already occurred, the interviews were helpful in understanding what the writing experience felt like, as well as how the participants interpreted both the events and the writing experience. Meeting in various locations enabled me to observe the level of comfort that each male may have had in each environment. Having met the mother of one of the young men, I was also able to see the correlation between his mother comments and the perception that he thought his mother had of him. All of these interactions allowed me to find greater insight into the experiences of this type of reflective expressive writing program with male teens that have been recently released from a secure facility.

Along with the benefits mentioned, there are also some perceived disadvantages to using the case study method. Yin (1984) points out a “common concern about case study is that they provide very little basis for scientific generalization” (p. 21). Knowing that the sample size is much smaller than the sizes that come along with other approaches, it is a concern that case study researchers are not able to offer generalizable results. In the next section of this chapter, one will come to an understanding of why this approach is still necessary.

Another concern mentioned by Yin (1984) is concerning the external validity of case studies.

The external validity problem has a major barrier in doing case studies. Critics typically state that single cases offer a poor basis of generalizing. However, such critics are implicitly contrasting the situation to survey research, where a ‘sample’ (if selected correctly) readily generalizes to a larger universe. This analogy to samples and universes is incorrect when dealing with case studies. This is because survey research relies on

statistical generalization, whereas case studies (as with experiments) rely on analytical generalization (p. 39).

It is important, when considering the aforementioned concerns, to remember that, in qualitative research, a smaller sample size for case studies is “selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many: (Merriam, 1998, p. 208). In this case, the results of the study are intended to assist in adding further information to existing literature, not to create a general finding for all male teens released from closed custody facilities.

Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability

McMillan (2012) suggested “[m]aking a determination about the validity or credibility of the conclusions drawn from [...] research is dependent on the research design and data collection methods that were employed to conduct the investigation” (p. 355). In order to ensure that the multiple methods of data collection have a high degree of validity, I provided participants the opportunity to review the key quotations, themes and comments being used in order to approve and agree upon the findings that I gathered. Explanations to all findings are provided in order to be transparent with the developed procedures and conclusions. More details on member checking are provided later in this chapter.

Reliability can be viewed as the consistency of results (McMillan, 2012, p. 137). To further this explanation, one can say that a study is deemed reliable when researchers are able to conduct the study several times and still report similar scores/findings. Considering the various methods being used to collect data, this study demonstrates a high degree of reliability. If looking to replicate this study, one is able to use the questions being addressed; the writing prompts used, and recently released male teens that were held in a closed custody facility.

The conditions in which this study was implemented may be different from the environment of other restorative justice organizations that work with recently released male teens from closed custody facilities. This study hoped to inform the limited literature on reflective writing on recently released incarcerated males. Knowing that this study is one of the first of its kind, the purpose is more of an opportunity to discover key themes that are common among the individuals, as well as taking an opportunity to allow the voices of these male youths to be heard. The personal narratives of each of these individuals will offer insight into what led them to be involved in this writing program. This study will offer insight into the potential benefits that reflective expressive writing may have on future released incarcerated male teens.

Ethical Review

This study takes into consideration all of the guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (McMillan, 2012, p. 17). Having completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2) training and studied the guidelines of ethical considerations, it is clear that there are a few concerns of which participants need to be made aware.

There is absolutely no need for deception in this type of study. Knowing that I am unable to control the thoughts of the participants, there was the possibility that participants may feel mental discomfort in the thoughts and moments that they chose to reflect upon. Although I did everything in my power to create positive writing prompts, I also ensured that writers understood that, if they were uncomfortable, they were more than willing to withdraw.

Consent was provided from both the Pathways to Community youth and staff involved. All of the writers were aware that the data gathered would remain anonymous. Along with the necessary information provided to the participants, I also obtained permission from Wilfrid Laurier University's Ethical Review Board.

Research Challenges

After experiencing a few setbacks with the Ministry of Child and Youth Services, it was determined that this study would not take place within the facility itself. It was at this point that I decided to work with a restorative justice organization, which will be referred to as Pathways to Community, in order to implement this writing program with youth that have been released from the secure custody facility. Therefore, this study will place a focus on male teens recently released from a closed/secure custody facility in Southern Ontario, while also informing literature about the impact that reflective expressive writing has on teens. The study will also provide a narrative about the story of what the experience of writing was like for these boys.

Influencing aspects of a closed custody facility. Prior to describing the influencing aspects of a closed custody facility, it is important to understand what exactly a secure custody facility looks like. Service Ontario outlines the purpose of a closed custody facility as a place where youth are held in secure detention on a temporary basis. Each young person held at a secure custody facility has been charged with an offence for which an adult would have been sentenced to a minimum of five years. Youth may also be held in a secure facility if they have ever attempted to escape from lawful custody or if there is a concern that the youth may commit a crime while staying in an open custody facility (Service Ontario, 2013).

Initially, there were components to a closed custody facility that would affect the way this study could be conducted. It is essential not only to identify such aspects, but also to question how I, as the researcher, would be able to adapt the study to work within the secure environment. For the purpose of this study, I intended to focus on reflective expressive writing with incarcerated males that have already been sentenced. When the hopes of writing within the closed custody facility did not work out, I began to work on implementing reflective writing with

an organization called Pathways to Community. After transitioning to Pathways to Community and working with youth that have been released from the secure facility, it was important to make it clear to youth that, if they confess the need or want to hurt others, hurt themselves, or that there are others hurting them, I still hold the duty to report such instances.

Description of Pathways to Community

While staying at House of Opportunity, the pseudonym being used for the closed custody facility in which both participants were previously sentenced to, the youth are provided the opportunity to get to know the resources and volunteers that youth have access to both while in custody and upon release. Pathways to Community is an organization that strongly believes in restorative justice practices and assisting those that have been incarcerated in any way that will help them create a more positive lifestyle. The purpose of Pathways to Community is to both reconnect youth to the community and to “provide support with what youth face with their emotional, psychological, and physical well-being” (personal communication, June 17, 2014). The youth are able to get involved with Pathways to Community in various stages.

Two evenings a week, Pathways to Community implements recreational nights for the youth in a secure custody facility. Pathways to Community describes these recreational nights as a:

social recreation and reintegration skills program providing a social and informal environment through which to facilitate Youth Circles, and of bringing the community to the youth. Community volunteers participate in recreational activities alongside the young person. Through this shared experience, relationships are formed. It is these relationships that will help develop strong, trusting and lasting Circles (Organizational manual, 2014, p. 3).

It is the hope of Pathways to Community that this programming will bring about “supportive, responsive community partnerships, working with incarcerated youth to facilitate their return to the community and empowering them to improve their quality of life, resulting in healthier families, neighbourhoods and communities. [This program] serves incarcerated youth, their families and the communities in which they live” (Organizational manual, 2014, p. 2). After meeting and bonding with the various volunteers at recreation nights, the youth are offered the opportunity to continue to work with any of the volunteers that they may have connected with, upon release.

Continuing to work with the volunteers upon release includes being involved in what is referred to as a Youth Circle. Each of these circles is made up of one of the young people released and two to three other trained community volunteers. The purpose of the Circle is to support the youth as he/she reintegrates into the community from custody. Pathways to Community outlines their key goals in Youth Circle supports as being:

- To support and facilitate positive problem solving and decision making;
- To provide practical support as is reasonable; e.g. finding employment or registering for school, transportation, attending appointments, finding community resources etc;
- To encourage the exploration of community, and professional supports and opportunities’;
- To expand information and awareness of options;
- To augment or provide a social network; and
- To promote healthy and meaningful relationships (Organizational manual, 2014, p. 4).

Some of the typical activities included in a Circle involve playing sports, going to the local YMCA together, meeting for a coffee or a movie, or even assisting youth in creating resumes

and applying for jobs. Knowing that the reflective expressive writing program is looking to gauge if there is any impact on the youth's self esteem or sense of belonging to a community, is what interested Pathways to Community in allowing the research of their youth involved in circles.

Participants

As previously mentioned, the participants are both youth that have previously been sentenced for varying youth crimes that are of a serious nature. Later, I present several themes that will offer insight to fellow researchers and educators alike.

All members of a Youth Circle were offered the opportunity to take part in the reflective expressive writing program. The program was initially suggested to take place twice a week for approximately 12 sessions. As the programming took place, it became evident that the youth had their own schedules they would rather the program work around, with a minimum of meeting once per week. One of the participants, as will be discussed within the findings, requested to meet more regularly than the other participant. All reflective expressive writing took place in a public environment of the young men's choice.

Formulation of Writing Prompts

The writing prompts that I created were most definitely intentional. Initially I listed topics that could be discussed that would force participants to reflect; this usually consisted of asking about the participants' feelings during specific times in their lives. After creating this list of potential prompts I thought it was extremely important to ask myself if there were any prompts that were too personal. The purpose of this study was to ask participants to reflectively write, not to expose all of their personal secrets. It is important to allow participants the opportunity to

disclose information on their own terms and not directly ask them to write about topics that may be best to remain close to the participants only.

While deciding the order of the prompts I tried my best to scaffold the topics to allow the participants to ease into the possibility of reflecting about more personal or more difficult topics. I did not think that it would be realistic to meet a participant for the first time and expect him to share some difficult stories with me. It is with that in mind, that I tried to scaffold the depth of reflection and level of vulnerability required. Finally, when considering the order of the writing prompts I also ensure that if the participants had a prompt that was about a difficult topic, the next writing session would involve a prompt about an IPE. This was important in order to ensure that participants were not constantly walking away from our writing sessions thinking about a difficult or negative topic and potentially feeling down about themselves or their past choices.

General Process Followed

While guided through the process taken and the subsequent findings, it is important to note that the two young men that participated in the study have requested to be referred to by the pseudonyms of Johnny and Dominique.

To begin most writing sessions, I would purchase a beverage or food item for Johnny or Dominique. While they began to eat or drink, I would give them their journals with the writing prompt already prepared and written in the journal for them. When they were ready to reflect and write, Johnny and Dominique would open their journal, read my response from their last entry and then respond back to me or read the prompt of the day. Johnny and Dominique both took a few moments to think (typically looking up at the ceiling) before they began their responses. After the young men completed their journal entry, we usually discussed whether they liked the provided prompt and the various things in their lives on which they wanted to update me. I

intentionally attempted to guide these conversations to occur after the journal writing as it allowed me to gauge what the prompt was like for them. A second reason for not having the lengthier conversations prior to the writing sessions was to avoid allowing our discussions to influence the writing to come. It was important for me to ensure that my personal comments did not transfer into the boys' writing. I wanted Johnny and Dominique to share their voices and not write about something that they may have thought that I wanted to read.

Initially, I was prepared to work with Johnny and Dominique on understanding the various ways in which one could journal. After both of the boys' first interviews, it was made clear that they did not find the instruction to be necessary, as they already had experience with journaling. Through the reflective expressive writing process, it became clear that the journal writing itself served as a catalyst to the conversations that occurred afterwards. Johnny and Dominique consistently commented on their thoughts on the prompt provided and it was based off these opinions that our conversations developed further.

The use of field notes allowed me to understand that the writing itself was the key component to building the rapport, trust, and increased sense of self later discussed. When considering this study, one may question if the writing is truly what brought about the results to be presented later, or if the same findings would have been brought about merely through conversations with the participants. In Chapter 4, it will become clear that both of the young men believed that reflection was much deeper for them because they had to think about what they were writing. Both young men mentioned that oral expression comes easier for them as they do not have to reflect as much. Along these lines, the field notes taken throughout the writing sessions show it to be a common occurrence that Johnny or Dominique cover their writing with their hands as they worked (in order for me not to see what was being written). Once they were

finished writing, Johnny and Dominique would talk about whether or not they enjoyed the prompt; however, they very rarely talked to me about what they wrote. It became clear that, although they knew that I would eventually read their entries, they still felt like writing in the journal was somewhat private. Johnny and Dominique would close their journals and hand them to me without mention of what was written. In fact, at the end of the study Johnny mentioned that, although he may have trust issues, a good place to start was to “trust a book” (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014).

Informed consent. Each participant received a letter of informed consent. They were asked to read and sign this letter to ensure that they were well aware of the study taking place as well as the rights that they have as participants. The letter provided them with a method of contact for the researcher; however, more importantly, it outlined their ability to remove themselves from the program at any point that they may choose. A copy of the informed consent is found in Appendix B.

Data Collection

This study collected data using interviews, field notes, and journal analysis. All of the data collected remains confidential and resides in the hands of the researcher only.

As suggested by Creswell (2013), the following measures will be put in place:

1. The researcher will create backup copies of all data on computer files.
2. The researcher will ensure that all audio recordings of interviews will use high-quality tapes.
3. The researcher will obtain a master list of gathered information.
4. All of the participants will be protected by masking their names in the data (p. 175).

Taking the above list into consideration, all collected data was both safely stored and safely handled in order to ensure that participants were given the respect and anonymity that they deserve. This was done by storing data on a memory stick that was locked in a secure location. Field notes were also locked in a secure location. With provided consent, the interviews with the writers and the staff members were also audio-recorded for the purpose of transcription.

Interviews with young offenders. “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behaviour, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (Merriam, 1998, p. 72). The use of interviews, prior to the study, informed me of any previous writing experiences, along with any feelings or attitudes that they already held true to themselves. Interviews also added insight to the ways in which the participants evaluate their self-esteem levels along with their sense of belonging to a community. Interviews allowed me to understand what self-esteem and community looked like to each participant and if there are any communities in which they feel part of, excluded from, or even hope to be included in.

Interviews following the study described what the reflective expressive writing experience was like for each individual writer. Through the verbal responses, I came to an understanding of the participants’ thoughts about their experience and their perceived sense of self. Sample interview questions are provided in Appendix C.

All of the interviews took place in an environment chosen by the young men, in order to ensure that they felt comfortable speaking about their personal experiences, thoughts and feelings. Interviews ranged between 5-15 minutes in length and were recorded with a digital audio recorder.

Interactions with other stakeholders. At times, there were interactions with other stakeholders involved in the youth's lives. Primarily, there was constant interaction between the youth's circle volunteers and myself. Moments where the interaction added insight to the experience the youth was having with the reflective expressive writing program was recorded and analyzed. I spoke to these important stakeholders in order to understand their perspective and the observations that they may have noticed while working with the youth on a more regular basis.

Research memos. I was successful in taking field notes throughout the process of the writing and interviews. Along with observing outward behaviour, I also looked at the journal writing itself, in order to discover various themes found across all participants.

Field notes allowed me to record the writers' body language and outward emotion and attitude to the writing prompt and/or process of writing. Analyzing the journals also allowed me to assess the depth of reflection in which the writers took part. Understanding the depth of reflection allowed me to understand whether the inmates were capable, or even willing, to reflect on such a deep level. A sample rubric used when assessing the depth of reflection is attached in Appendix D.

Data Analysis

Once the data was collected, I saved all audio files and analysis conducted onto both my computer and a backup drive. Files were sorted into folders associated with the individual participants. Throughout the analytical process, I used a key word approach. I typed all transcriptions using a Microsoft Word document and hand wrote all of my field notes. When analyzing the data, I looked for keywords found with the interviews, field notes, and physical journals (Appendix E) to find common themes and insights. As described by Seale and

Charteris-Black (2010), “keyword analysis proceeds with an initial ‘quick’ overview before digging deeper in particular locations where mining is likely to be successful” (p. 539). After looking for keywords discussed in interviews, casual conversations, and journal entries, various commonalities and differences were identified. Once I identified key words that were repeated and clearly important to the young men, I looked further into the message or story to be told surrounding the particular word. Although I initially looked to address the questions about the impact on sense of belonging and self-esteem, I was also open to other themes that emerged.

Files were not only organized via individual code names, but there were also in folders created thematically. I examined for themes on an individual level and identified elements that were common across both participants. Through the labelling and locating of these repetitive themes, insights and conclusions were drawn. It is important to note that, although I hoped to see the impact that reflective expressive writing may have on the self-esteem and sense of belonging of male teens recently released from a closed custody facility, I was also open to other themes that emerged from the collected data. It was expected that this study would inform me of more than just the two aforementioned questions. The themes that emerged were analysed and discussed when bringing my findings together.

In order to make the various forms of communication identifiable, each piece of evidence presented will be cited in a way that is very clear for the reader. All quotations will make it very clear if the form of communication came from the physical journals, the interviews conducted, a casual conversation that occurred or correspondence through electronic sources.

Member checking. In most studies, member checking is done through meeting with participants or mailing transcripts out to participants in order to confirm my translation of the data. It was a goal of mine to complete the collection and analysis of data as quickly as possible

to ensure that participants were provided the opportunity to meet with me in order to review significant quotations and themes found within their work. Prior to providing participants the chance to look at significant passages and themes, I also double checked all recordings by listening to the recordings, alongside transcripts. If the young men disagreed with findings, they were told that they had the opportunity to correct my notes in order to ensure that their perceptions were relayed properly.

Summary

Overall, the qualitative approach was appropriate for this particular study as it allowed for a collection of data to take place in its natural setting. The various forms of data and perspectives from participants proved to assist in finding common themes among the writers. The use of interviews informed me of the way in which participants evaluate their self-esteem and opened my eyes to understanding the true background of each of the youth's lives. Although the two young men have different stories to be told, several themes have been identified and will be presented in Chapter 4.

Overview of Participants

Prior to learning about the various experiences of the youth that took part in the study, it is important to understand who these youth are and what life experiences brought them to where they are today. Using interviews, casual discussions and journal entries, the males in the cases presented have proven to have unique stories and voices that deserve to be heard. The following chart is a snapshot of the background and overall information that will be revealed through the various descriptions throughout this chapter:

| Name | Age | School Experience | Living Arrangement | Number of Writing Sessions | Number of Interviews Conducted | Amount of time released prior to writing |
|-------------|------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Johnny | 19 | Graduated high school | Lives with an older sibling and grew up in the Foster Care system | 6 | 2 | 19 months |
| Dominique | 16 | Grade 11 | Lives with a single mother and his younger siblings | 14 | 3 | 2 months |

Johnny's story. When Johnny and I met, he was 19 years old and spending time with his Circle volunteer Steve. Steve had heard about my study through Pathways to Community and extended the invitation to Johnny without me present. When Johnny said he was willing to take part, Steve introduced the two of us at one of Johnny's coffee shops. Although it was clear that Steve was sceptical of the study having any impact, I was immediately impressed that Johnny still demonstrated a willingness to open up to someone that he had not met before and his willingness to want to help with this study. Initially, it was clear that Johnny was considering this study because he wanted to help someone out and because his mentor is the one that suggested the study to him. After meeting, having breakfast together and agreeing to take part in the study, I was able to learn quite a bit about Johnny's story. Following our initial meeting, Johnny agreed to meet with me again in order to share more of his story and begin writing. When given the opportunity to choose where we would meet for his initial interview, he selected a different coffee shop with a more upscale status in order to prevent himself from being interrupted by people he might know in the city, and to feel "more academic" (Johnny, conversation, July 15, 2014).

Johnny was born in a city that is a couple of hours away from where he currently resides. He has lived in his current city for 8 years and moved there on his own, although his mother has been living there for the past 12 years. This past year, he was happy to say that the rest of his family, including his three brothers, moved to the same city as him. Now he has moved into an apartment with one of his older brothers. Johnny is the second youngest of four boys and tells me that he has actually lived in more than the two cities that we discussed. When asked where else he has lived, he responded with, "probably 30 other towns that I can't remember the names of. I was in foster care so..." (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). Johnny is currently receiving

disability cheques from the government, but also works part-time for a construction company, where he helps complete various labour-focused jobs.

Johnny's school experiences immediately started negatively. It was as early as Grade 1 that Johnny was getting in trouble at school. When asked about his elementary school experiences the first story that came to mind was when he "trashed [the] principal's office with rocks" (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). The following year, when he had to repeat Grade 1, was the year that he was first kicked out of school. It was at this point that Johnny first entered the Section 23 school system. Johnny does not have many other memories of his time in elementary school.

Johnny's time in secondary school was "rough" (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). He initially struggled in Grade 9 because he did not know anybody and did not enter the secondary school system with established friendships, as he moved into the city after Grade 8. He was able to get through Grade 9, but by November of his Grade 10 year, he was expelled from school and sent to another Section 23 school. That December, only one month later, Johnny ended up at House of Opportunity. School at House of Opportunity was similar to that of a Section 23 school. Youth work independently to earn the various high school credits that they need. In order to earn these credits, the males worked through the Independent Learning Course (ILC) booklets. They were able to earn credits as quickly as they could complete them. This is how Johnny was able to earn quite a few of his credits (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). Johnny said that he did not have many positive memories of schooling and that there was not one specific negative experience that stood out for him. His response when asked about school in general was simply, "school is whack" (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014).

Although he may not have been able to pinpoint defining positive and negative memories of schooling, when asked about his experiences with educators, he was able to identify both

positive and negative teachers and staff that affected his time at school. Although he was not able to identify a positive experience with any of his teachers, he was able to discuss the youth care worker at his school that had an impact. It was her kindness and ability to care about everyone that stood out to Johnny. She had a large enough influence on his life that he still stays in touch with her to this day, by meeting up for coffee every so often and taking the time to catch up with one another's lives. Johnny's negative experiences with staff resulted in his removal from high school in Grade 10. It was in this year that he "backed a few [teachers] into walls. They pissed [him] off" (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). After treating the school's principal in the same manner, Johnny was expelled from school.

While staying in House of Opportunity, Johnny informed me that their English teacher had them journaling on a daily basis. Knowing that he had prior journaling experience, he was able to inform me of his opinions of journaling and his experiences with writing.

Section 23 is always trying to get you to journal. And it doesn't always work for me, but that was because when I was 16 and 17 I was still super ADHD, so I couldn't really sit down and do it or collect my thoughts ever. Now it is easier, I guess, like I write all the time so. You gotta learn how to use words properly so it is easier now. [The English] class definitely helped me get there (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014).

Johnny's previous experience did not seem to be overly focused on the use of reflection, but rather on the need to work on his written expression. He said that the prompts he was used to were a bit shallower in thought; some examples included how he was feeling that day or what his weekend was like. Although he admits that journaling did help with his writing abilities, he did not have any positive or negative experiences that stood out in the process. It is clear that his preference is to express himself orally. He said:

I talk a lot, so I know how to use my words better. Sitting here writing is very forcing me and giving me more time to think about what I am writing, I guess. Like, sometimes I can't think about what I want to think so it is hard to for me. I don't know if you know what I mean by that. Like, more or less, if I'm talking to you I have seconds to think about what I have to say and I don't over process it. With writing I'm over thinking everything (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014).

He confirmed that it was through writing that he felt he had to reflect a bit more than if he could quickly respond orally to a question. It is the reflective piece that he found more difficult to do.

Aside from discussing Johnny's experiences in school, I was also informed that he believed himself to have fairly high self-esteem and that the main community that he felt connected to, aside from his girlfriend and friends in general, was the community he formed at Pathways to Community. Some of his favourite experiences with Steve and other members of Pathways to Community involve taking part in community runs and working out together. He was very proud of the fact that he was part of one of the longest standing circles that have occurred within Pathways to Community. It is clear that he looks up to his Circle mentor. When Steve demonstrated skepticism to the study, I could see this translated in Johnny's demeanor and approach to our discussion about the study itself. Despite the skepticism of his mentor and Johnny's slight hesitations as a result, he was still willing to take part in the reflective expressive writing sessions.

Dominique's story. Dominique and I met for the first time when he was 15 years old and already in House of Opportunity. I was volunteering there at the time and was only able to get to know Dominique for a short time prior to his release. A few weeks later, Dominique returned to House of Opportunity for a longer time – six months. He and I saw one another approximately

once a week over the course of the six months. Dominique was also one of the youth that began this study while staying at House of Opportunity. He was genuinely upset when the program was halted and, on the day before he was released, he asked me to contact him if he was able to take part in the study once he was released.

In order to get a good understanding of Dominique's experience within this program, it is imperative to understand who Dominique is and how his lived experiences brought him to where he is today. Dominique was born in Africa and is now 16 years old living in a city located in Southern Ontario, with his mother and siblings – two sisters and a brother. Although Dominique has lived in a couple of different co-op housing communities within adjoining cities, his biggest move was when he moved to his current city from Africa at the age of 5.

Since arriving in Canada, Dominique has attended seven different schools. Dominique enjoyed elementary school and had a lot of fun there until he entered Grade 7. It was in Grade 7 that his experience with schooling became much more negative and that he began to be turned off by school. It was at this time that Dominique says he was first made aware of the racist attitudes of some educators. Being called a "Negro" in front of a class of his peers upset both himself and his other friends enough that he and his "other black friends started like getting all pissed off and stuff and swearing [at the teacher] and stuff" (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014). At this point, he began to dislike the education system, as he did not see any consequences fall onto the teacher that both insulted and embarrassed him in front of the class.

In high school, Dominique began the first weeks strong and enjoying the new environment and peers to which he was exposed. It was through hanging out with peers that did not think too highly of school, that he began to skip class in order to hang out and/or smoke marijuana with his friends. Dominique believes that it was because of his lack of attendance that he was not able to

truly take advantage of the entire high school experience. Schooling at House of Opportunity allowed Dominique to work on earning the credits that he was not successful in obtaining when in high school. He worked hard at attending class and concentrating on one subject at a time to earn as many credits as he could. He found this environment to be much more structured than that of a traditional classroom, as if the youth did not take part in working on course work, they were sent back to their rooms for quiet time.

Dominique had the same English teacher that Johnny previously had and was exposed to the practice of journaling on a daily basis. Journaling, to Dominique, was a positive experience; although the prompts did not force him to reflect, they did allow him to develop a closer bond with his teacher. While journaling in class each day for his six month sentence, Dominique was able to feel closer to his teacher because they were both able to demonstrate a sense of respect and trust for one another.

Prior to the study, Dominique believed that he possessed high self-esteem, as he did not allow other people to get into his head and to tell him what to do. Dominique felt a connection and sense of belonging to his co-op housing community. In this community, he felt that they looked out for one another and worked together to try to keep the area clean and keep the violence out.

Dominique was eager to take part in the program as he remembered the one writing session that he started while at House of Opportunity and expressed a genuine desire to help me with my study.

Introduction to Themes That Emerged

In this chapter, I examine four of the primary themes, along with several sub-themes, that emerged from the interviews, observations, and journal responses. The four themes to be

introduced are relationships, depth of reflection, sense of belonging to community, and self-esteem/self-worth. Further related sub-themes to the discussion of relationships are family, friends, and mentorship. Finally, school experience is a sub-theme examined surrounding the theme of sense of belonging to a community.

Johnny and Dominique were able to inform both the themes and sub-themes presented. Each of the participants' insights on the experiences surrounding the reflective expressive writing program are provided. Although Johnny participated in fewer sessions than Dominique, it is still evident that the comments that each of the youth make about the program are able to add rich descriptive insight on how they perceived their experiences before, during, and after the reflective expressive writing process.

Relationships

Determining characteristics. Through their writing and interviews, both Johnny and Dominique addressed issues surrounding trust and respect. It became evident that two of the most important qualities that they found to determine whether their relationships were positive or negative were the presence, or lack of, of trust and respect.

Initially, Johnny and Steve were skeptical of taking part in the study, as there were concerns surrounding their ability to trust the process and the program itself, or me as a researcher. Prior to meeting Johnny, Steve expressed his concern with me about asking a young male to write reflectively. When it was explained that my hope was to look at the possible impact on the youth's self-esteem and sense of belonging to a community, he quite bluntly stated that I was going about this in the wrong way because the best approach to helping these boys was to participate in sporting activities with them. Unaware of the purpose of case study research, and not understanding that my ultimate goal is to add insight to existing literature and help discover

the next steps in helping at-risk male youth to reflect, it became difficult for him to trust the study. After attending the first few meetings that I had with Johnny, Steve's trust with the research began to develop and he eventually decided that he was comfortable with Johnny and me meeting alone from that point on (Steve, conversation, August 25, 2014). Steve explicitly said that, now that he knew me and had seen the writing sessions take place, he had decided that he could trust me and the prompts I would be providing for Johnny.

Once I established Steve's trust, my relationship with Johnny began to grow and we began to build a more positive bond. Johnny saw that Steve trusted me, and thus was able to follow the lead of his mentor and instill his trust in me as well. Although Johnny never wrote about trust in his journal entries, it was clear that trust issues were still present. Following his initial interview (Johnny, conversation, July 29, 2014) Johnny told me that, although he chose the location for our meeting and he felt comfortable speaking to me, there was still a concern that people 10 feet away may have heard him and, thus, told me less than he would have if being interviewed in my car, for example. It was through this comment that it became very clear that Johnny's past experiences have lead him to hesitate when trusting people that he is not familiar with. With that being said, once Johnny is familiar with someone, he gives trust away easily and is more concerned with how difficult it is to earn trust once it has been lost.

It doesn't take a lot to trust somebody. It is easy to trust someone it is harder to gain trust back after you lost it. Let's say I trusted you and told you a bunch of stuff and like two seconds later someone's like, 'Oh Johnny da da da he does this and this is him'. I'm like, there were only 3 people I told this, I'm going to go to those people to find out who it is and now I don't trust that person because I told them not to tell people that. So, it is easier

to trust somebody than it is to gain trust back from someone (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014).

Johnny speaks based off the many experiences that he has had when he has lost the ability to trust others. Through growing up in foster care and getting in trouble with the law, he has had many opportunities where he has lost the ability to trust people around him. Johnny writes about feeling alone while in foster care and lacking the trust of others: “I felt like I couldn’t talk to anybody, because I didn’t trust anybody and the second that I would begin to they’d move me so it’s been hard to trust people and because of that I have felt alone” (Johnny, journal, September 28, 2014). Pathways to Community introduced him to Steve and, through this circle, he developed a strong sense of trust for his mentor. Johnny relied heavily on his close friends and one of his brothers – all of whom he clearly trusted. Having built such a bond with Steve, it is understandable that it took witnessing Steve’s trust in me for Johnny to follow suit.

Dominique demonstrated a similar belief in the need for trust in order to maintain a positive relationship. Rather than trusting people immediately, Dominique said that he had been hurt too many times by people that he trusted and, thus, no longer extended immediate trust to people.

Honestly, I don’t trust a lot of people. I trust my family. I trust my mom, I trust my brother and my sisters; but, like, I trust some of my friends, but I’ve given my trust to a lot of people and, like, they used it against me, you know? So, I have trust issues; but, like, I see a lot of people that I think I can trust and there’s a lot of people I know I can trust, but I still don’t give them that trust just in case. There are people that I would never trust (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014).

To support his comments on having trust issues and not being able to hand his trust out to people, there were two opportunities where I personally witnessed Dominique's lack of trust for others. During our second interview, Dominique originally told me that he wanted to go to one of our regular coffee locations. As we drove there, he realized that this location tended to be quiet and that other people might hear us when we spoke. Because of this realization, Dominique changed his mind about the location and suggested a much busier place to be interviewed. He said he wanted to ensure that I could hear him and that the audio recording would pick up our voices, but he did not want other people around us to hear what he had to say (Dominique, conversation, August 21, 2014).

Another time that I saw Dominique's lack of trust for others was when we went to our regular coffee shop for him to take part in one of the reflective expressive writing sessions. After setting our things down at a table, I asked him to come with me so we could place our order. Dominique asked about our belongings and if they would be okay. I reassured him that we could leave our things there, but he was constantly looking over his shoulder. After placing our order and returning to our seats, he commented saying "this is why we rob white people" (Dominique, conversation, September 11, 2014). Although he said this to me in a joking manner, it was clear that he was concerned that he could not trust the people around us, as he has grown up in a culture of crime and was, thus, very worried that one of the strangers around us may have taken our belongings. He was relieved to see that none of our things appeared to be touched, but made sure to remind me that it was a risky decision to trust people that I did not know.

Although Dominique had issues trusting people, it was not impossible to gain his trust. He trusted his circle volunteers through Pathways to Community and he was able to learn to trust me, and many of the other staff that worked at House of Opportunity while he was there. Rather

than giving his trust immediately to people, Dominique had a strong need to evaluate other's actions in order to determine whether he can trust someone. When asked why he felt he was able to trust his Pathways to Community circle volunteers he said:

Because, like, based on what I've seen throughout the years, all they want to see, right, is me do good. Like, they do everything they can to just, like, help me. You know? So, there's no reason for me not to trust them right? It's not like they're gonna go plant a bunch of drugs in my bag or something like that, right? (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014)

Through the examples provided and the observations made, Dominique made it clear that, in order to gain his trust, it is as simple as "just by you know, being able to keep it real with me" (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014). It is through actions that Dominique believes he is able to assess one's character and determine whether he is able to trust someone.

Although Johnny and Dominique spoke of the earning of trust in different ways, it became clear that they both found that trust was an important factor in their lives, which became so because of the many times that they felt they could not trust others. Dominique made his point clear when he told me about the shame that he still feels for one of the crimes that he committed against his own friend (Dominique, conversation, August 20, 2014). He told me that he used information that his friend entrusted him with in order to hurt this friend. In the same sitting, he also shared a story with me about when the friends he thought he could trust broke into his home and stole all of his mother's belongings while Dominique was in custody. Through these aforementioned examples, we are able to come to a greater understanding of how the youth learn the importance of trust. It is not only through the actions of others losing their trust, but also through reflecting on times that they personally manipulated their supposed peers' trust.

Respect is another characteristic that Johnny and Dominique identified as being an important quality when developing positive relationships with others. Although many may link trust and respect as qualities that go hand-in-hand with one another, the ways in which these characteristics are given to others are not always similar. Johnny initially said that he is able to hand out his trust easily, but once lost it is very difficult to be retrieved. When it comes to gaining his respect, Johnny observes one's actions in order to determine if they are worthy of his respect, "you gotta show respect, that's literally it. Just don't think you're above me just because you think you are. You are equal with me because that is what you are" (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014). Like Johnny, Dominique also looks to the actions of others in order to decide whether he respects them. Dominique made it clear in his final interview that he does not judge people based on what they look like or the way they live their lives, he respects anybody that shows him respect:

Honestly, yo, I like a lot of people. There is no way that I can see a person and automatically not like them, you know what I mean? It just depends on what kind of a relationship I develop with them. Like, all of my friends now that are enemies to me, they were all my friends once before you know what I'm saying? Let's say I meet somebody new and they come up to me and say 'what's up man?' I'm not just gonna like flip them off and tell them to get lost or something like that you know what I mean? It doesn't matter who they are! It doesn't matter if you're gay, you're retarded or you're white; I don't care. As long as you are respectful to me I will be respectful to you. I go by the Golden Rule; it's as simple as that. That's my top thing, just respect (Dominique, interview, September 24, 2014).

Both of the young men have learned that they cannot trust a stranger to follow through on their word, which is why they look to people's actions to determine their opinions, rather than just assuming that both trust and respect are to be automatically handed out. Throughout all of the reflective expressive writing sessions and interviews, both of the youth demonstrated a sense of respect towards both their mentors and me. It was also clear that this came naturally to them, as the respect was reciprocated. Both of the youth recognized that we are willing to help them in order to become successful and accomplish their goals. Because we have proven through our actions that we can be trusted, we follow through with our actions, and we treat them with the respect that they deserve, respect and trust are granted in return. Dominique summed it up in his first journal entry when he wrote, "I respect the people who want to see me do good" (Dominique, journal, August 8, 2014).

Overall, Johnny and Dominique demonstrated a respect for themselves when following through on what they want and respecting the reputation that they want to leave on others. As an educator in the secondary school system for nine years, it is extremely common to see teens do things that the rest of the group are doing – not because they are particularly interested in partaking in such acts. Johnny and Dominique are no longer in the state of mind where they feel as influenced by their peers. Dominique admitted that one of his greatest weaknesses was that of succumbing to peer pressure (Dominique, journal, September 16, 2014); however, post-release, in his journal, he acknowledged that following the crowd may not have been the best choice for him. He now exhibits a respect for his wants.

All I know is that I ain't perfect. I know that the entire time I was there [House of Opportunity], I could've been a whole different person. But I chose to have respect for

my reputation, respect for my future, respect for who don't Fuck wit[sic] me (Dominique, journal, August 14, 2014).

Yet again, Dominique proved, through his actions, that he was worthy of respecting himself in order to reach his future goals.

When discussing the determining characteristics of trust and respect, it is important to acknowledge some of the experiences that Dominique speaks of when telling his story. It is clear that race plays a role in the way that Dominique perceives his world. During Dominique's initial interview he discusses the defining moment in which he began to lose interest in school. He was not feeling respected and did not believe that he could place his trust in the educator that called him a 'negro' in front of his classmates. This is the first mention of Dominique's experiences with racism. After sharing this story the topic of racism became a reoccurring one. While reading through the various themes that emerged, it is evident that Dominique's experiences with racism have influenced the way that he perceives his world. An example of his race being a prominent factor in Dominique's views of the world was evident one day when we met in a food court at the local mall to him. Dominique had finished one of our interviews and we decided to have dinner when he mentioned that he thought people were looking at him because of the colour of his skin. Dominique believed that being black was something that stood out to others and forced people to place automatic judgement. After further discussion he became aware of other less palpable reasons that drew attention to us, including our age difference.

Family. The topic of family is something that also came up quite often in both the reflective expressive writing journals and the interviews. Although none of the prompts asked the youth to speak directly about their family, both youth mention family members frequently. Johnny spoke of his mother and one of his older brothers the most. He often spoke of the

different things that he has done to help his mother. His brother was mentioned often in conversation, as they live together. Although Johnny alluded to many poor experiences with his family, it was clear that loyalty to family was important to him. He often did things to help his mother and although some initially cautioned him about living with his brother, he did so anyway. Steve told me that, although his older brother has also been in trouble at times, the two of them are actually good for one another as they are both willing to “keep each other in check” (Steve, conversation, July 15, 2014). The two of them relied on one another when in need and made sure to call one another out so that they stayed away from potential trouble.

When asked about a moment that he felt proud of himself, Johnny immediately wrote about being happy that he made a difference in his family when he was the first person to graduate from high school on time. “I felt proud because I was the first in my family to get my grade 12 on time. [...] What made me want to graduate so badly is the fact that I’d be the first in my family to graduate on time” (Johnny, journal, August 26, 2014). Johnny showed that he could be motivated to accomplish great things when wanting to impress his family, as family was clearly important to him.

Dominique also demonstrated a sense of loyalty to his family. Living with his mother, brothers and sister, Dominique made it very clear that he held a strong sense of love and responsibility for his entire family. Dominique, like Johnny, was another young male that does what he can to help his mother. In his case, the responsibility often felt heightened as he lived with his entire family and, without his father in his life, he is the eldest male in the home. Dominique said that, “family’s first for me; it always has been. I’ve been the man in the house since I was 5” (Dominique, conversation, August 20, 2014). Dominique continued to tell me that he had only spoken to his father once and did not even know if he was still alive; he believed that

he raised himself as a man as there was never a male role model in his life (Dominique, conversation, August 20, 2014). It was important to him that his brothers do not have the same experience and did not get into the same trouble that he did (Dominique, conversation, September 2, 2014). Dominique made a connection between not having his father around as a role model in his life, and the ability to feel alone:

Until this day, I've never once seen my dad. I've been the man of the house for as long as I remember. I taught myself everything. Nobody showed me how to ride my bike, nobody asked me to come play ball with them; nobody was there with me growing up except for me. It's been me, my bro, my sisters and my mom. That's it. I feel alone every day. But god gives me the power to be a man; I want better for my brother (Dominique, journal, August, 21, 2014).

Dominique worried about his family as he stated that his "worst years" with getting into trouble with the law were when he was 11 and 12 years old. By this point, he had been exposed to guns and other weapons. His ultimate concern was that his brother was, at the time of the interview, the same age that Dominique was when he first got into trouble and he knew that his mom often worried that he would be just like Dominique was (Dominique, conversation, September 2, 2014). It was clear, through his writing, conversations and even through a brief interaction that I observed when picking Dominique up, that his brother truly looked up to him as his male role model. It was because of this admiration that Dominique worried and had a desire to make more positive choices in order to be a good example for his brother.

Dominique often considered his family and related them to the writing prompts provided, particularly his worry for his mother. Dominique demonstrated concern for his mother, "Some

things in my life that really stress me out are things like seeing my mom down or upset...”

(Dominique, journal, August 28, 2014) and an appreciation for his cousin.

In the last two years, he was a better influence than any of my friends were in the last 4-6 years. Now that I am older, it is easier for me to understand certain things. The only male role models I had were my older friends, up until I turned 13. Every day my cuz would come call on me. He knocks a certain way, so I know the dill when he comes. [...] He tries to keep me out of shit and he knows I'm not stupid otherwise he wouldn't be helping me (Dominique, journal, September 2, 2014).

Frequently, in conversation, Dominique spoke of his responsibilities to take care of his younger siblings while his mom worked, and his want to help her in any way. He appreciated how hard she worked and, because of this, made sacrifices of which she is unaware. For example, Dominique was a very skilled basketball player that has been scouted to play for a rep team that was approximately two hours away from home. Although, he was very excited at the possibility of playing for the team, Dominique informed me that he would not be going, as he did not want the undue stress put on his mother when it came to transportation and additional fees. He thought of his family often and of how much they have accomplished together; it was not uncommon for him to state, “I love them all” (Dominique, conversation, August 11, 2014). Although Johnny and Dominique have experienced many hardships throughout their childhood, they both still exhibited a sense of loyalty and love for their families. Both Johnny and Dominique were able to look past some of the pain that family members caused them and continue to show love, loyalty, trust and respect for them.

Friendship. As I have witnessed with many teenagers, friendships play a very important role in the teenage years. Johnny and Dominique spoke often about the friends in their lives, both

past and present. For both of the youth, their offences occurred with their peers. At this stage in their lives, they both claimed to have formed more friendships that are positive and have been able to cut out some of the negative friendships that they had in the past.

Aside from one entry written specifically about his family, Johnny mentioned his friends in every one of his journal entries. He spoke of the various activities that he and his friends took part in, the adventures that they have gone through, and the way that they made him feel a part of something. He wrote of his cliff jumping, his time with his girlfriend and, ultimately, their ability to make him feel like he belonged. “Playing basketball with my friends and actually doing something besides sitting around made me feel like I belonged” (Johnny, journal, September 28, 2014). On a whole, Johnny’s reflective expressive writing demonstrated that his most favoured moments are those with his friends. Through conversation, it was also clear that one of Johnny’s closest friends was another youth that he stayed with at House of Opportunity. He often made comments to his mentor and I about other youth that were there with him who he no longer spoke to or who he was convinced would get back into trouble – he wanted nothing to do with these youth. It was clear that Johnny believed he had begun to surround himself with peers that would not encourage him to take part in past negative behaviours. He felt confident with his current friendships and believed that he made amends with everybody that he needed to in his past (Johnny, conversation, September 10, 2014).

Dominique also took time to reflect on his friendships in his writing. Dominique, like Johnny, was able to recognise that he has had some friends that were negative influences in the past. Dominique believed that one of the most negative influences in his life has been his past friends:

There is about 5 or 6 of my friends from childhood that have not sold or smoke weed, drink, rob, steal, harm, or cause someone to be harmed, until this day. I have friends who are doing long stretches right now. Some are doing 2-3 years, some 5-7. One of my friends [...] is doing 11 years with no parole right now. He retaliated after a gang of white boys jumped his cousin. He ended up stabbing the guy 4 times, 1 jab piercing his left lung. He was sentenced 8 months into his incarceration. My friends could be the worst influences or the best; I stay me (Dominique, journal, September 3, 2014).

It was because of the influence of these friends and the peer pressure that they often put on Dominique that he preferred not to spend time with them anymore.

I prefer not hanging with these friends. I would rather be out here broke, than in there with 'FRIENDS'. I actually hate them all. I hope I accomplish my 3 goals in life. If you ain't by my side helping/supporting me, get the F*** out of my face (Dominique, journal, September 16, 2014).

Dominique has come to learn that it was better for him to cut the negative people out of his life and focus on having a small circle of peers that he could trust. He believed that, if he was not talking and spending time with so many people, he would have more time to work on his goals and take care of himself (Dominique, journal, August 5, 2014).

Although Dominique wrote and spoke quite a bit about the negative friendships and influences in his life, he also told me about the ways in which the positive friends took care of one another. After picking him up for a writing session, Dominique showed me a new watch. He explained that although it was not brand new it was new to him and it was free. When I asked how he was able to obtain a free watch, he explained that he and his friends in the co-op complex constantly looked out for one another. When his friend purchased a new watch, he chose to give

the older watch to Dominique as he knew that Dominique did not have one. This was similar to a time that Dominique grew out of a pair of basketball shoes and decided that rather than selling them, he would rather give them to a friend in the complex that he knew needed a pair (Dominique, conversation, August 25, 2014). In this discussion, it became clear that Dominique had learned that friends were there to support and help one another and that he appreciated and respected the friends that showed him the same respect that he exhibited.

Overall, Johnny and Dominique agreed that, in order to be happy and to accomplish their goals of staying out of trouble, they needed to remove the negative friendships in their lives and stick with those that were supportive of their present goals. They demonstrated the strong influence that peers have on teens and that it is important to surround youth with positive role models and influences of a similar age, in order to assist them in making positive choices that may not lead them into exhibiting poor behaviours that may lead them to get in trouble with the law.

Mentorship. Throughout the course of this study, it became increasingly evident that the influence of a mentor can be paramount in the choices and attitudes that the youth exhibit. From the beginning, it was clear that the opinions that Johnny and Dominique's mentors had about the reflective expressive writing initiative influenced the attitudes that the youth held. Through observing the participants with their mentors, as well as having conversations with the youth about their mentors, it became very clear that they not only respected and trusted their circle volunteers, but they also valued their opinions.

Johnny demonstrated loyalty to Steve throughout all stages of the writing process. Before meeting Johnny, Steve made it abundantly clear that he did not think that reflective expressive writing would have any impact on male youth. He explained to me that if I wanted to have a

positive impact on male teens' self-esteem and sense of belonging to a community then I should be taking part in physical activity with them (Steve, conversation, June 2014). This stated hesitation lead Steve to delay inviting Johnny to take part in the study, as he was not overly certain that it would benefit him. Eventually, Steve gave Johnny the option to take part and Johnny clearly agreed. During my first interview with Johnny, there were moments where Steve jumped in to respond to questions, elaborate or even refute the goals that were set out for the study (Steve, interview, July 29, 2014). This skepticism translated with Johnny as, initially, he showed me that he was not overly eager to participate. He was willing to help with the study, but was hoping for a reward in the end (Steve suggested a gift if/when Johnny completed the study) and treated our visits as appointments that he needed to get through. Hence, in his final interview telling me that in the beginning the writing was "annoying" (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014). Interestingly enough, once Steve agreed that there was no need for him to attend each session, Johnny began to open up much more and eventually would describe the writing as enjoyable (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014).

More evidence to suggest the influence that a mentor may have on the youth they work with is demonstrated within the young men's opinions of Pathways to Community. Johnny's initial journal entry discussed the positive things that Pathways to Community did for him. He reflected on the fun activities that he took part in and the experience with Steve and Pathways to Community. He mentioned playing sports with Steve, but also taking part in a 5km run with multiple members from Pathways to Community. He said that, "overall my time with Pathways to Community and Steve has been good" (Johnny, journal, July 29, 2014). Several weeks later, Johnny's mentor had a personal conflict with the organization and chose to leave, but continued to work with Johnny. Although this change did not affect Johnny, and Pathways to Community

reached out to remind Johnny that they were still there to provide him support if needed, Johnny's opinion of the organization immediately changed. After completing Johnny's final interview, he spoke to me to tell me that he believed that Pathways to Community had gone "downhill now that they lost Steve from the program" (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014). Although the conflict that took place did not involve Johnny, the conversations Johnny had with Steve and the loyalty that he possessed for his mentor appeared to have assisted him in forming a new opinion about the organization as a whole. As a thank you gift for Johnny, I took him to purchase a new hat (something that he enjoyed collecting). Steve attended and appeared to be more positive about the process that Johnny went through and was pleased to hear Johnny mention wanting to continue visiting with me and developing our new found relationship post-study. This final positive reaction leads one to believe that not only did Johnny begin to enjoy the reflective expressive writing sessions, but also Steve was able to see some of the benefits concerning Johnny having found another positive connection in the community.

Dominique's mentors demonstrated a positive attitude and willingness to get Dominique involved in the reflective expressive writing program right from the start. Apart from having more awareness of what the writing process would look like, from his initial participation when in House of Opportunity, Dominique's mentors were also intrigued by the study and hopeful that it would have a positive impact on Dominique. This eagerness was demonstrated through the positive comments and intrigue that his mentors possessed. One of mentors attended Dominique's initial interview strictly because she was interested in learning more and thought that it had great potential. This excitement from his mentor, translated in a sense of pride in Dominique's posture and demeanor. It was clear that he was happy with his decision and happy

to see that others supported this choice. The fact that his mentors trusted me and the process from the beginning was very helpful.

Along with his mentors being pleased with his participation in the reflective expressive writing, Dominique's parole officer also encouraged his participation in the initiative. After one of the writing sessions, Dominique borrowed my phone to check in with his parole officer. In their conversation, his parole officer showed his support in what we were doing by approving my willingness to take Dominique to pick up the gym membership pass that his parole officer set up for him. Since the study has ended, his parole officer has also approved and encouraged Dominique's wishes to include me in his circle of mentors from here forward.

All of the encouragement and positive feedback provided by Dominique's mentors, allowed him to continue to take part in the study without any hesitation. Rather than feeling annoyed, Dominique increased the number of sessions to take part in and contacted me on a regular basis wanting to write more frequently. Upon completion of the study, Dominique's mentor sent me the following statement:

Dominique has always spoken highly of both yourself and the writing program that you started with him and the others. I personally thought it a bit different that a teenage boy would not only willingly, but excitedly take time to just write. When asked, Dominique has expressed a positive attitude about the writing project and has kept on top of contacting you because he is eager to write. As a sort of mentor or friend, I love the idea of him writing... Not only because it keeps him busy and out of potential trouble, but it allows him a creative outlet. Especially with things he may not be comfortable sharing with me (electronic, September 11, 2014).

Dominique also found the experience to be positive from start to finish. Through witnessing the similarities of both mentors with participants, it is evident that the role of a mentor can be very powerful when influencing the youth's opinions, actions, and attitudes.

Researcher. Asking young people who have issues with trust, to open up and write about their personal thoughts and feelings can be difficult. This study, in particular, proved that having a positive trusting relationship with the researcher was essential in getting youth to participate willingly in a focused and truly reflective manner. Through the frequent visits, the honest conversations and the mutual give and take of both trust and respect, I was able to successfully develop positive relationships with Johnny and Dominique.

Upon starting the study, I did not have an existing relationship with Johnny. As previously stated, we began the study with his mentor attending regularly in order to ensure that there was a sense of trust and understanding built between the three of us. After spending time writing with me, Johnny and I were successful in developing a closer relationship with one another. In his final interview, Johnny chose words such as *friendship*, *funny*, *energetic*, and *positive* as ways in which he would describe the relationship that we have formed.

Although Johnny and I were able to develop a positive relationship throughout the course of the study, it was evident that Dominique and I created a stronger bond. This growth in our relationship could be attributed to various factors. It is possible that this growth in our bond could be because of the prior relationship that we developed while I was volunteering at House of Opportunity, the encouragement of his mentors, the fact that he took part in more sessions and that there was less time that past between sessions; or it could be attributed to the fact that we were able to meet to write on our own right from the start. Dominique believed that our relationship was able to grow, "since we're meeting and writing occasionally we were able to get

to know each other better, you know like we were able to connect better and relate some stuff” (Dominique, interview, September 16, 2014). Dominique thought of the writing sessions as more than just taking part in a study. He saw the relationship that we began to create together and said he thought it was, “fun to just hang out with you and just, you know, kinda chill [...] And get away from some of the other stuff going on, so...” (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014). He believed that the best part of the entire process was “being able to, you know, like talk with you and, you know, and just being able to have someone to just go talk to about things I wanna do. And you know, like, almost like someone who is helping me get to my stuff” (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014). It was through our conversations in the car and his willingness to share his personal thoughts and feelings with me that we were able to achieve a mutual trust and respect for one another. This was proven when, to my surprise, Dominique wrote an entire reflective expressive journal entry about the admiration that he held for me (Dominique, journal, September 10, 2014). Upon reading this entry, he was pleasantly surprised to see that my written response back to him indicated the many qualities that I believe he possessed for others to admire. Our willingness to be open and honest with one another resulted in a positive relationship that we hope to continue past this thesis – through my becoming a mentor in his circle through Pathways to Community. No matter what the reason is for the strength in our bond, this growth in relationship and developed sense of trust and respect translated into a deeper sense of reflection in Dominique’s writing and discussions with me, as will be presented later in this chapter.

Ultimately, although my initial relationships with each of the youth may have started at different stages, it is clear that, through our regular meetings and conversations, it became possible for both youth to develop a trusting relationship with me as a researcher.

Depth of Reflection

Johnny and Dominique demonstrated an ability to focus and write more naturally as writing sessions increased. Johnny and Dominique mentioned experience journaling in their English class at House of Opportunity, but both admitted that the prompts provided did not require much reflection, rather a need for them to simply write. Knowing that the prompts this study provided required a bit more effort in reflecting on their past, it made sense that it would not come overly naturally at the outset.

In Johnny's initial interview, he indicated what the experience of journaling in his English class at House of Opportunity was like:

Section 23 is always trying to get you to journal. And it doesn't always really work for me, but that was because back when I was 16 and 17, I was still super ADHD, so I couldn't really sit down and do it or collect my thoughts ever. Now it is a little easier, I guess, like, I write all the time, so. You gotta learn how to use words properly so it is easier now. Her class definitely helped me get there. Her class was where it was forced every day and that definitely helped me, so I don't know (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014).

Along with discussing his previous experiences with journaling, Johnny also mentioned that instead of expressing himself in writing, he much preferred to do so orally. When asked why he preferred verbal reflection he said:

I talk a lot, so I know how to use my words better. Sitting here writing is very forcing me and giving me more time to think about what I am writing I guess. Like, sometimes I can't think about what I want to think so it is hard to for me. I don't know if you know what I mean by that. Like, more or less, if I'm talking to you I have seconds to think

about what I have to say and I don't over process it. With writing I'm over thinking everything (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014).

In Johnny's first reflective expressive writing session, he said that he found it difficult to get started writing because it had been so long since he had to write. Because of this hesitation, Johnny felt it easier to type his response to the prompt on his phone. Once he finished typing what he wanted to say, he copied the words out into the book provided (Johnny, journal, August 7, 2014). During his second session, thoughts were a bit easier to flow onto the paper, thus not needing to use his phone for assistance (Johnny, journal, August 25, 2014). When writing, Johnny felt like he had a lot of "racing thoughts" going through his mind (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014). With that being said, he did say that, as time passed, it became easier to sit down and write.

I found, over time, it just kinda, like, you write over time it just gets easier because you already know that it's a thing. It got easier because I had been writing in the weeks prior and it just kinda made it easier (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014).

The initial entries were:

harder because of the fact that I don't have as much experience. I've been out of school for 3 years so I don't really write. You lose the practice also right? So, I guess, over time, I just kinda got back into practice and it became easier. At the beginning it was hard and out of practice (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014).

Along with Johnny's admitted lack of practice when it came to writing, it also appeared that his confidence in truly reflecting on what he wrote also took time to develop. Part of this may be attributed to his need to build a greater rapport with me as a researcher. Our lack of a previous relationship reflected in the depth of which Johnny was willing to share his stories and

thoughts with me. Although he was open to chatting with me about his accomplishments, his writing and conversations were much shallower than they were at the end of the study. In the beginning, Johnny talked about all of his positive achievements. It was not until Steve stopped attending, and Johnny and I had more time to build our relationship with one another, that he began to trust me with more information and was willing to discuss some of his hardships. This was when he began to open up about family issues and current concerns of his friends. Johnny began to ask me advice about how to encourage his girlfriend to go back to school, or talk about how he could relate and empathize with his friend that was kicked out and needed a place to live (Johnny, conversation, August 2014). It was through the development of our relationship that Johnny was more willing to share stories that forced him to reflect on a deeper level.

When asked to define what it meant to reflect and if he thought that he was able to truly reflect in each of his entries, he said that reflecting meant “to review something that has been done” (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014) and admitted that some of his entries were more shallow in thoughts than others. Johnny said that, rather than reflecting in all entries, there were some reflective expressive writing sessions in which he merely just put simple “thoughts on paper” (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014). Although he had more entries that did appear to be slightly shallow in reflection, the practice of writing allowed him to eventually be more comfortable over time. Through the developing of our relationship and the practice of writing over time, Johnny’s description of the writing program changed from initial *annoyance* to that of saying he found *acceptance* and learned to *enjoy* the process (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014).

Dominique’s previous experience with journaling was similar to that of Johnny’s. He, too, had written on a daily basis in his English class while at House of Opportunity:

It was alright. She would, like, ask me questions about my experience going through the stuff I'm going through at, like, House of Opportunity and stuff. Being there for 6 months and stuff like that. She was just asking me a bunch of questions, you know? Like, we were close so she would always ask me how I'm doing and wish me good luck and stuff like that. Like, that's pretty much all (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014).

Although the similar previous experiences join the two youth, the depth and willingness to reflect was much deeper with Dominique. Dominique, like Johnny, also started off slightly hesitant about writing. Rather than being out of practice, as Dominique is still in school, his hesitation was the initial worry that what he wrote about may have been deemed "wrong". Once he was reminded that he could truly write about anything that he wanted and that there was no wrong answer, reflective expressive writing appeared to come much more naturally to Dominique (Dominique, journal, August 8, 2014). When asked about his experiences journaling, Dominique initially said, "It's nice. It gives me something to think about" (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014). When it came to a specific writing prompt that made Dominique reflect and feel remorse for past choices, he actually refused to write his thoughts down and asked if he could orally reflect with me instead. It was at this point that he shared a personal story regarding one of the crimes that he committed and the remorse and shame he felt as a result (Dominique, conversation, August 20, 2014). When later asked why that particular entry was easier to speak about than it was to write about Dominique said,

It is hard for me to concentrate on writing about things that I really don't like to think about or, you know, like, want anything to do with. I feel better talking about some certain stuff than, you know, writing or anything like that (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014).

Being curious as to what, in particular, about writing made it more difficult, Dominique told me it was “just putting the time in and thinking about the words that I am going to write and all that stuff and just thinking about the situation” (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014). It was through continued discussion that Dominique agreed that actually writing his thoughts down, forced him to think a little more than he would versus that of oral expression. Overall, whether they were prompts that Dominique felt to be positive or negative, he still said that he enjoyed writing because it allowed him to, “think a lot about my life and about what I do as a person and I like to write about it, so...” (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014). These sentiments remained similar when asked, at the very end of the study, how it felt to write. Dominique said, “I feel great you know? Just, letting some stuff off my mind, you know? It feels good”.(Dominique, interview, September 17, 2014)

Aside from feeling good when he wrote, Dominique was also asked how he defined reflection and if he felt that he was truly able to reflectively express himself in his written submissions. Dominique’s immediate reaction when asked to define reflection was, “mirror. Looking into the mirror [...] Writing about something that I can relate to. Like something that happened to me, or something like that” (Dominique, interview, September 17, 2014). Dominique believed that he was able to reflect throughout all of the writing prompts and he attributed this to being able to relate to the various prompts provided, “they were really good topics. Like, REALLY good topics because like it got my mind going and I actually had to, like, think back and to things I did and stuff like that”(Dominique, interview, September 17, 2014). Along with the prompts provided, when given the opportunity, Dominique began to reflect on other things happening in the world, in particular his growing interest for Chicago gang politics became evident. When asked about this newfound interest, he said that he thought a lot about the

politics because he recognized that these things could be happening to him. The only reason he was not in as bad of a situation as they are is due to where he lives in Canada. He is amazed and saddened by the fact that, “Those kids don’t have parents. They don’t even know what they’re doing” (Dominique, conversation, August 28, 2014). Whether it was about the provided reflective expressive writing prompts or the additional reflection that he did about the world, when asked if he found the writing helpful, he said, “Ya, because, just being able to write about something and then, you know, being able to reflect on or relate to whatever happened can make you stronger later on” (Dominique, interview, September 17, 2014).

Sense of Belonging to Community

In order to establish an understanding of the impact that reflective expressive writing may have had on the youths’ sense of belonging to a community, it was important to understand what community meant to each of the youth and understand what communities Johnny and Dominique belonged to, or wanted to belong to, prior to taking part in the reflective expressive writing sessions.

Johnny began this study by defining community as being as simple as “belonging”. When asked about any communities that he felt a part of, he found it to be a difficult question, but eventually stated, “Pathways to Community says the word community right in it so... I guess that’s a thing” (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). After taking part in the reflective expressive writing sessions and being asked about the first thing that came to mind when I said community, Johnny said “the friends and family around you” (Johnny, personal communication, September 28, 2014). After only six writing sessions, I asked Johnny if he felt that the study had any impact on his sense of belonging to any community.

To be honest, I can connect more with adults now. I don't know why; it's just feel like it is more intimidating. Just the fact that you are more of an adult figure and you're, like, I don't know. Even this is more of a thing [points to journal]; it's like, now I know how to kinda associate more with an older group and it is not always going to be hostile. [...] like I know that you're a teacher: I would NEVER go up to a teacher on the street and just be like 'Hey, wanna go hang out?' but with you I'd do it, so it's a thing right?

(Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014)

Being aware that Johnny initially felt like he belonged to Pathways to Community as well as amongst his friends and family, it was interesting to learn that he felt this process not only made our bond stronger, but also made him feel like he could connect with adults in general now.

Dominique initially defined community by saying, "Community means a group of people all working together to build a structure" (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014). He began the study already feeling like he belonged within the co-op community in which he lived. He felt part of the co-op community:

Because, like, the community centre is there. I know all the people in the community.

They all... I say hi to everybody. It is a good community because everybody knows each other and we work together to keep it clean and, you know, keep the violence and stuff out of the neighborhood, like for the kids and stuff you know? (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014)

It was later, through Dominique's writing, that he also began to realize that he not only felt like he belonged within his co-op community, but also felt like he belonged when he was playing basketball with peers that he met at a local gym (Dominique, journal, August 21, 2014).

Something that I found interesting about the discussions related to belonging is that neither of the youth said that they felt like they belonged within their school communities.

School. Experiences within school were discussed in casual conversations, interviews, and some journal entries. Although writing prompts did not ask either of the youth to speak about their experience in education, both youth chose to write about schooling at some point or another.

When asked about his experience with schooling, Johnny immediately spoke about the trouble that he got into. In “Grade 1 I trashed my principal’s office with rocks” (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). The following year, Johnny had to repeat Grade 1 and ended up being expelled from school and placed into the Section 23 system at a very early age. Although he did not have many memories of his elementary school years, he did state that,

High school was rough [because in] Grade 9 I didn’t know anybody. I just moved here in Grade 8. Grade 10 I went back and by November I had been expelled [...] I went back the second year, and the third year in Grade 11 in November I got kicked out [...] And then by December of that year I was in House of Opportunity (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014).

When asked about his experience going to school while at House of Opportunity, Johnny said, “I just banged out credits. I got a lot of credits, it was easy” (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014).

Recognizing that many of the stories that Johnny shared about school were negative, I asked him if there were any positive memories that he could think of. His simple response was, “No, school is whack” (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). Johnny continued to speak of his negative experiences with teachers and highlighted that, “I backed a few into walls. Ya, they pissed me off so [...] So backed up the principal and two teachers into a wall. That’s why I got

kicked out” (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). When asked specifically if there were any positive experiences with teachers, he could not think of one. He was able to tell me about the youth care worker that he came to know when he attended the traditional high school. He liked the fact that she was able to remain positive with everybody and, thus, did not show judgement. In fact, Johnny told me that he continued to stay in touch with the youth care worker to this day (Johnny, interview, July 29, 2014). It was refreshing to see the difference in facial expressions that Johnny made when speaking about a positive experience with an adult in the education system. It was clear that she made a difference in his life.

Although Dominique’s experiences in school were different from Johnny’s, the one thing that they had in common was the fact that his memories were also filled with negativity. At the young age of 16, Dominique has already attended seven different schools and, although he said early elementary school was fun, he cannot pinpoint an example of when he enjoyed his time in school. When asked about memorable teachers or moments he said, “I have a lot of negative [...] In Grade 7 a teacher called me a Negro [in front of the entire class]” (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014). He believed that there were several teachers in elementary school that attempted to “take over his mind” and, because of that, he said, “a lot of that stuff [referring to racist remarks] happened back then” (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014).

When asked about his secondary education he said, “The first few months was good and then I started skipping and stuff so I didn’t really get to experience a lot of high school” (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014). Dominique admitted that the primary reason for skipping class at the time was to spend time with his friends and, at times, to take part in the use of marijuana. Continuing to earn high school credits while at the House of Opportunity was something that Dominique said was simple to do, “All you do is sit there and work or you go to

your room. So I guess it was more structured because all you are doing is just working away and nobody is bothering you so..." (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014).

Although Johnny and Dominique were able to earn several credits while at House of Opportunity, this form of education was clearly not ideal. Both of the youth attribute their negative attitudes about school to the many negative experiences that they had with the educators that surrounded them.

Self- Esteem / Self-Worth. A common topic that arose throughout the interviews and journal entries was one's self-esteem. When asked what word they associated with the term self-esteem, both Johnny and Dominique chose the word *feelings*. Another commonality between Johnny and Dominique was that they both felt like they had a high sense of self going into the reflective expressive writing initiative. When asked for a definition of self-esteem Dominique said,

My self-esteem is like how much I could take of something. You know what I mean? Like, like, I don't know how to explain it, but, you know? Let's say uh, let's say I'm playing ball right? And someone is talking a whole bunch of shit, saying that I can't dribble or, you know, just making fun of me or something or whatever. My self-esteem is like, am I gonna listen to what he says and, like, break down because he's telling me this or am I gonna just fight through it and ignore what he says and do what I can, you know? (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014)

He believed that he had a high self-esteem, "Because I don't let people tell me what's, you know, I don't let people tell me what to do. I don't let people, you know, like, take over my mind" (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014). After asking Dominique how one could recognize that someone was trying to take over his mind he said,

If someone's, like, trying to put me second, you know what I'm saying? Someone's trying to manipulate me or something, you know? I can't, I don't let that happen, you know? Like someone, just today someone was talking a lot of crap to me. Trying to, you know, get under my skin, you know? What did I do? I just ignored it at first and then it kinda got to my head, but I didn't let myself, you know, explode just because, you know, some kid is talking shit (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014).

An example of a time that Dominique thought somebody was trying to take over his mind while in class is described below:

When I was at House of Opportunity, I would always play ball with this other guy and he would always try to talk shit to me. He would always try to, like, put me down. Tell me that I'm tall for nothing, like, that, I can't dunk, I'm a waste of height or, you know, like I'm never going to amount to nothing or just trying to put me down. Uh, and what I'd do is, I'd just listen to what he says, just let it sink in and then just do the, like, best revenge, the best pay back is, like, when... Okay what I am trying to say is, when people try to put me down, I overcome that and I come and I show them that I can do what they're saying that I can't. Right? Like, I know I CAN do it (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014).

Although Dominique did not believe that the reflective expressive writing program had any impact on his self-esteem, he did say that he is proud of what he accomplished,

Because, like, some of the stuff I really felt uncomfortable talking about and just being able to, like, talk about those stuff, think about them hard, you know, and, like, let you kinda understand being in my shoes you know what I mean? I think that's a big one (Dominique, interview, September 17, 2014).

On the other hand, Johnny believed that the reflective expressive writing program helped his self-esteem levels. Although Johnny began the study with a self-admitted high self-esteem, he ended the study acknowledging that he “noticed that it is easier to get jumbled thoughts out because of writing”. He then continued to say that these writing sessions were successful in making him more confident expressing himself, overall (Dominique, interview, September 17, 2014).

Summary

After taking part in the reflective expressive writing it is evident that the experiences lead to many insights about the themes of relationships, depth of reflection, sense of belonging and self-esteem. Although Johnny and Dominique came into the study with their own unique lived experiences, and their writing sessions were also unique to each individual, in the end, they both had positive comments to make about the success of the program.

When asked for any final thoughts about the reflective expressive writing Johnny said, “Ya, this is honestly a great time. To be honest. It definitely helped me” (Johnny, personal communication, September 28, 2014). Dominique’s final thoughts were as follows:

Ya, I’d like to continue, I think it’s a really good stress reliever. I think that writing gets a whole lot off my mind and just kinda relaxes me, you know what I mean? [silence] Ya, and I do think that I will pursue writing. I think that I will try to write in any other kind of writing program or at school or something like that. [...] This is a good program. Thank you a lot, like, you know, this was a program that gave me a chance to just get away from everything for about an hour to just put some words on some paper and just kinda take my mind somewhere else, from all the crazy stuff that’s going on in life right now, you know? Thank you so much for taking the time to, like, you know? Like, I know I am

helping you with this, but you're also helping me with this if you know that or not. Thank you a lot. This program was great, I think you ran it perfectly, and I think this is going to benefit me later in life. I learned a lot in this program too, just about writing and simple stuff like that. Thank you again (Dominique, interview, September 17, 2014).

In Chapter 5, the youth's recommendations for future implementation of a reflective expressive writing program are presented. There are also words of advice presented for future educators that may have the opportunity to work with youth that find themselves in similar situations as Johnny and Dominique. Along with their recommendations, I respond to many of the questions previously addressed in the literature review, along with making considerations about where further research on this topic may lead.

Chapter 4 spoke to the experiences and stories of the young men that participated in the reflective expressive writing initiative. This chapter will review what I attempted to accomplish, along with what I learned along the way. This Chapter also describes new questions that have been raised and implications for further research opportunities.

Review

As Chapter 1 illustrated, the initial research questions were developed through looking at my own personal story. Knowing that journaling was helpful for me and it had the potential benefits of improving the literacy levels of my students; I began to explore the use of journaling in the classroom, as an educator. The success that the journaling had on the young males that I worked with allowed me to contemplate the potential that reflective expressive writing may have on other at-risk populations. Initially, my goal was to discover the impact that reflective expressive writing may have on incarcerated male teens. After determining that working with the Ministry would not be feasible, the study shifted to looking at the impact that reflective expressing writing could have on male teens that have been recently released from a closed custody facility.

Through the analysis of the boys' journals, the following question is what I looked to address: What is the impact of reflective expressive writing on male teens that have recently been released from a closed custody facility? In my examination of the literature surrounding the topic of reflective expressive writing, Burton and King (2004) inspired me to address whether reflective writing about intensely positive experiences (IPEs) has a positive effect on one's perceived sense of self.

In order to respond to the aforementioned research questions, I implemented a case study approach. This type of methodology was selected in order to provide a rich description of the

experiences and voices of the youth that partook in the reflective expressive writing sessions. In addition to finding a way to allow the participants' voices and perspectives to be shared with others, it was also important to implement a case study approach in order to add to the gap in literature that exists around writing programs for at-risk and incarcerated youth. Not only did the case study approach prove to be necessary, but also the ability to engage in further conversation with Johnny and Dominique after writing was helpful. Conversations after writing allowed me to avoid influencing the boys with what they chose to write about, and provided me with the opportunity to come to an understanding of what the writing experience was like for them that day. As noted in Chapter 2, the majority of research surrounding reflective writing has been focused in the field of nursing. Researchers such as Langley and Brown (2010) focused on the benefits of reflective learning journals within the field of nursing. When looking at-risk youth, there was very little literature available to discuss alternative literacy programs that focus on increased self-esteem and sense of belonging. Through working with Johnny and Dominique with reflective expressive writing, I discovered that my focus on self-esteem and sense of belonging needed to expand slightly. I learned about the defining character traits that Johnny and Dominique looked for in order to develop positive relationships. It was through the presence, or lack, of trust and respect, that Johnny and Dominique were able to determine whether relationships with friends, family, educators, and volunteers were positive or negative for them. It was these relationships that helped form their opinions of self and their feelings of acceptance. Educators should, therefore, look to form trusting and respectful relationships with their students in order to meet the needs of the at-risk youth that they may work with in the future. Later in this chapter, I will present the advice the participants offered to future educators when it comes to finding ways to support youth in similar situations as themselves.

Response to Research Questions

How does reflective expressive writing affect male teens that have recently been released from a closed custody facility?

In the initial interviews with Johnny and Dominique, they stated that they felt like they already had a high sense of self-worth. They both said that they possessed confidence in themselves, yet their actions and dialogue in other scenarios demonstrated a bit of doubt in some of their relationships – whether that be with family members or friends. Although both of the youth mentioned that they had high self-esteem, there was still mention of increased esteem after taking part in the reflective expressive writing program. It appears that the increase in esteem was found in ways that the youth may not have expected. Johnny, for example, stated that this program allowed him to feel more confident in his writing ability, “it clearly helps my process of getting [words] on the paper, clearing my thoughts to get them out on paper” (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014). Johnny recognized that he had not been in school for close to three years and, thus, did not find himself writing as often. This program allowed him the opportunity to write on a more regular basis and, in turn, improve his ability to put his thoughts on paper. Prior to taking part in the study, Johnny self-reported that he had high self-esteem, but admitted that he felt much more comfortable with his oral expression. After taking part in six writing sessions, it was clear that Johnny has also begun to increase his level of confidence concerning his written expression as well.

Although Dominique also stated that he did not feel that the level of his self-esteem increased, he did talk about attributes that one may associate with one’s self-worth. In particular, Dominique mentioned that he was proud of his involvement with the reflective expressive writing initiative and what he was able to achieve. He said he was proud of being able to write

and share stories and experiences with me that he found to be particularly difficult. When asked why he was proud he said,

Because, like, some of the stuff I really felt uncomfortable talking about and just being able to, like, talk about those stuff, think about them hard, you know, and, like, let you kinda understand being in my shoes you know what I mean? I think that's a big one (Dominique, interview, September 16, 2014).

Although he said that his self-esteem did not seem to be impacted, Dominique still found the experience valuable in being able to trust others by sharing his voice and story.

During both of the participants' pre-study interviews, Johnny and Dominique mentioned the various communities of which they felt a part. Neither of the youth mentioned communities that they were hoping to become a part of in the future. With that being said, after taking part in the reflective expressive writing, both youth felt a new sense of acceptance when it came to their relationship with me as the researcher.

As presented in Chapter 4, Johnny spoke of his ability to connect with me through participating in the reflective expressive writing process. In addition to connecting with me, Johnny mentioned that this newfound connection afforded him the opportunity to feel more at ease when communicating with the adult community in general. Johnny said his sense of belonging within the adult community has improved, as he once felt intimidated when trying to approach, or dialogue with, adults (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014). After spending time writing with me, he felt more confident with relating and spending time with people that were older than he was.

Although Dominique stated that he did not think that his sense of belonging to other communities changed throughout the writing program, it appeared through actions and

conversations that it may have shifted slightly without him noticing. Dominique's statement of not feeling a new sense of belonging is contradictory to the fact that he stated that the reflective writing was able to connect with me, "we're meeting and writing occasionally we were able to get to know each other better, you know, like we were able to connect better and relate some stuff" (Dominique, interview, September 17, 2014). Although Dominique did not recognize the relationship that he formed with me to be part of a small community, some may still view this new connection as an example of a community development that has been made. It is in moments like this that it is important to understand the context and definition of community that we are working with. Initially, Dominique stated that he believed community to refer to a group of people. In this context, he does not believe that the writing brought him closer to a community; however, in the context of feeling a sense of belonging in general, it is clear that he felt a stronger connection build with me as I spent the time with him and read about his personal stories and experiences.

Working with Dominique also afforded me the opportunity to come to an understanding of how he formed his feelings around belongingness. In my final interview with Dominique, he was able to confirm that it is through the aforementioned qualities of trust and respect that Dominique essentially determined his relationships. He agreed that all of his relationships, whether with family, friends, teachers and mentors, are based off of whether he felt that trust and respect is given and received. I continued to ask Dominique if I was accurate with the rest of my findings:

Based on those relationships, if you have that trust and respect, then you will have a positive relationship and, if you haven't had trust in the past, then you have had a negative relationship. After that, when I look at your relationships, based off of what I

have seen you write or conversations that we have had, it seems like those people that you have positive relationships with are the ones that are helping you to continue to have a high self-esteem, and help you feel like you belong to part of the community whether that be at the [local gym], school or wherever (April King, interview, September 17, 2014).

Dominique confirmed that the above description was accurate to the way that he determined his level of both self-esteem and sense of belonging to a community.

In order to explicitly answer the research question being addressed, it appeared that both of the youth that participated in reflective expressive writing demonstrated a stronger sense of community developed. Both youth developed a stronger relationship with the researcher and Johnny demonstrated a stronger connection with other community members that he did not initially intend to.

Does reflective writing about intensely positive experiences (IPEs) have a positive effect on one's perceived sense of self?

Although neither of the boys spoke specifically about the effect that writing about IPEs had on their perceived sense of self, both youth mentioned that their favourite writing prompts were those that allowed them to write about the good things that they have experienced or accomplished. Johnny's reflective expressive writing journals and his conversations with me post-writing, allowed me to see that his preference was to write about the memorable positive moments that he has shared with his friends and his mentor, Steve. When asked to write about prompts (see Appendix A) that asked him to consider some of the more difficult times in his life, he was not able to do so with ease and, at one point, even changed the prompt provided so that he could write about more enjoyable experiences (Johnny, journal, September 9, 2014).

Dominique said he preferred to write about, “how I feel about some of the stuff I accomplished” (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014). Walking away from the sessions where he wrote about IPEs, Dominique consistently said that he enjoyed the prompt and was more talkative during the drive home. Although he still enjoyed writing about difficult times in his life and said that it helped him to get issues off his chest, Dominique admitted that the hardest topics to write about were, “Just stuff that I’ve uh done in the past and stuff that happened to me in the past” (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014).

It is clear that, throughout the process, both of the youth confirmed the benefits of writing about IPEs. They both felt better about themselves and exhibited confidence in their body language and conversations post writing. Johnny genuinely struggled when writing about past difficult experiences, but was okay speaking to me orally about his tough times. An example of this was the instance in which Johnny asked me to provide him with strategies and advice for encouraging his girlfriend to go to school and not make the same mistakes that he made in the past. Dominique was able to write about difficult topics, such as many negative peers that he had in his life, but there was one topic in particular about which he was unable to write. Rather than write, he also chose to speak directly to me about the situation. Both youth admitted that writing caused them to reflect further than oral expression and, thus, found it easier to discuss their difficult moments with me. When it comes to writing, this study was able to validate the research that spoke to youth feeling more benefits and positive feelings of self-worth when writing about IPEs.

Suggestions for Schools to Support At-Risk Youth

As previously discussed in Chapter 2, Finn (1989) reminds us of the importance of youth feeling a sense of belonging within the school system in order to be successful. Finn’s (1989)

model demonstrated that, if a student does not feel any connection or sense of belonging within their school, the youth will begin to gradually disengage and eventually increase the likelihood of dropping out. In order to combat this disengagement with at-risk youth in a traditional school setting it is suggested that educators implement more opportunities for youth to actively reflect on their lives. Whether reflectively expressing themselves in writing in class or even in a possible club, the at-risk youth that took part in this case study show the potential that this program may offer in assisting at-risk youth in increasing their self-esteem and sense of belonging within the school and community.

Creating such a program would not be as simple as inviting students to write would. It is important to understand the youth that you are targeting and, thus, determine how you can gain their trust and the respect so that they understand the benefits of reflective expressive writing. Both of the participants in this study placed a high priority on developing a sense of trust and respect in the relationships that they deemed to be positive. It is important for people working within the traditional school system to understand the need to role model respectful behaviour. Educators can help youth feel like they belong in their school community by developing trust with their at-risk students. Through my experience in the school system, it is evident that the at-risk youth, in particular, have already been exposed to many people that do not trust or respect them. By showing these youth that they are worthy of respect and that they can be trusted, youth may begin to feel like they belong and have a much more positive experience in the school setting. As at-risk youth begin to engage further, this feeling of belonging may encourage them to stay in school. Goodenow and Grady (1992) alert us of the importance of a high sense of belonging, as students that have a strong sense of belonging in school are more motivated and academically successful in school (p.67).

In attempting to assist at-risk youth with reflective writing in the traditional school setting, it is also essential to consider the writing prompts that are being used. Knowing that youth would be writing with me for several sessions I was able to scaffold the writing prompts by starting with prompts that were positive and slowly increasing the prompts to be more reflective. I was also able to ensure that, when I provided the youth with prompts that were more difficult, they were spread out throughout the course of the writing and not placed in a way that the youth were constantly thinking about difficult times and potentially feeling negatively. If implementing reflective expressive writing, I would encourage teachers to continue to read more about the benefits of writing about IPEs (Burton & King, 2004).

Suggestions for Closed Custody Facilities

When asked whether the participants thought that the reflective expressive writing program would be beneficial for youth who were incarcerated, both Johnny and Dominique said yes. Although Johnny was the most reluctant participant and participated in fewer sessions, he still said, “Yes! One hundred percent, one million percent, I do think it would be beneficial because, well, they’re all in there and they all have no one they feel they can trust. So why not trust a book?” (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014). Spending time within the closed custody facility reflecting and writing about experiences is something that Johnny believes could be cathartic and could assist the youth in beginning to build a form of trust and to learn from one’s experiences.

Dominique also agreed that the reflective expressive writing program would be beneficial in a place like House of Opportunity. Although he believed it would be beneficial, he cautioned that it would only be helpful for a certain group of people that are there, as he recognized that participants need to be willing and have a mindset of being willing to take part in the entire

process and reap the potential benefits. Dominique said that the program should be implemented in a place like House of Opportunity, but it

depends on who the person is. If it's some kid whose not really trying to see changes in the near future than probably not, but anyone who is willing to, you know, step up their game and kinda, you know, step out of the dirt and stuff, maybe they would want to do it (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014).

It is clear, through Dominique's words, that he saw the potential that this program could provide in helping youth "step out of the dirt" and 'clean' themselves off to be in a more positive head space. I believe the advice of Dominique's to be valuable in reminding oneself that somebody may provide the program to youth in need, but, in order to reap the benefits, the participants need to be willing to stay open to the entire process. It is clear from Dominique's words that in order to benefit from this form of writing, one needs to be open to the possibility of personal growth. When considering if this program is suitable, it is important to ensure that the participant feels ready for potential growth and change in one's character or views. If the participant is not open to such possibilities this initiative may not be well suited for that particular individual.

Limitations

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, there are a few limitations that were initially noted when setting out to implement this reflective expressive writing program. In addition to the limitations previously noted (measuring depth of reflection, and the lack of literature written about this topic), there are two additional limitations that became clear post-study.

When I initially noticed the grown sense of community in my Grade 9 and 10 English classes, the community that developed went beyond the relationship between the individual writers and me. The community that I found my students forming was one among themselves.

Although in my findings I speak to the grown sense of belonging that the participants felt between themselves and me, or even the adult community as a whole, it is still important to note that the participants were not writing together at any time, and thus there are no statements of evidence to show a sense of belonging within a community among those that were writing.

Although I made a conscious effort to remind readers that this study discussed two case studies that took place in the same geographical area about two youth that stayed in the same closed custody facility, it is important to note the limitation of generalization. This study worked with two individuals and although, at times, I generalize their experiences to a broader population, this is done based off of my personal experiences working with at-risk youth in a school system for the past nine years, examining literature and having conversations with other key stakeholders. Talking to the social worker, director, and staff at House of Opportunity, the staff and experts at Pathways to Community, and the participants has allowed me to make some statements that speak beyond the two youth that took part. With that being said, it is still very important to caution readers and future researchers about the dangers of generalizations and assumptions. It is important not to generalize so that we are dealing with accurate information. Johnny and Dominique would also caution readers to avoid making generalizations and assumptions about youth based on their experiences, as it became clear that the voices of these youth are important voices to be heard. I am pleased that they participated and allowed future researchers and educators the opportunity to see the value that their views and advice can add to the way that we approach our research and approach our work within education, communities, and incarcerated facilities.

Recommendations for Future Research and Developments

After working with at-risk youth for nine years and with youth that have spent time in a closed custody facility for over a year now, it has become clear to me that I have a true passion for working with those youth that feel that their voices have been silenced due to the past negative experiences that have lead them to be deemed at-risk. In the future, it is my hope to continue to work with Johnny and Dominique, as well as continue to be a circle volunteer with future male teens that are released from House of Opportunity and choose to work with Pathways to Community. In addition to continuing to volunteer with these groups, I will continue my work advocating for at-risk youth within the traditional and non-traditional school settings. My future aspirations to work with these groups will be outlined later in this chapter. First, it is important to look at recommendations for future research within the field of reflective expressive writing and programming within agencies that work with youth after being released from closed custody facilities as well as within the closed custody facilities themselves.

Existing Gaps in Literature

When initially conducting my research in order to write the literature review, it was extremely difficult to find existing literature that addressed the following topics: reflective expressive writing programs for incarcerated male teens, reflective expressive writing programs in general, literacy programs within organizations geared to working with male youth recently released from a closed custody facility, and the use of reflective expressive writing in the traditional classroom.

Although there was literature found on various ways that at-risk and marginalized youth can express themselves, there is still very little literature to be found on the use of reflective expressive writing about life experiences and/or goals. Future research may include implementing a program such as this within the closed custody facility and discussing the results

that both the youth and the staff experienced. It would be very interesting to see if the writing not only benefited the self-esteem of the youth, but also if it assisted the sense of belonging to a community. Researchers may want to discover if the community bond with the researcher would continue or would there be a bond with the fellow youth in the program as well. Along these lines, it would be interesting to see if the building of relationships in such a manner would be viewed as positive or negative. As well, the connection that youth may begin to find with the staff at the facility would be an interesting topic to explore.

Not only was a gap in literature discovered surrounding the use of reflective expressive writing within a closed custody facility for male teens, but the literature regarding reflective expressive writing in general was fairly sparse. Although the nursing field demonstrated a significant use of journaling and diary keeping, there was not a lot of reflective expressive writing found within many fields of research. It is important to recognize that Burton and King (2004) and Long and Davis (2011) addressed writing about IPEs and the positive results that can come of it. Future researchers may find this idea interesting and should consider implementing reflective expressive writing programs that are focused on both the pros and cons of writing about IPEs versus writing about more difficult experiences. The concept is a fascinating one and there is still not enough literature at our disposal to assert that the benefit of writing about IPEs is well proven, on a generalizable level, to reap more positive results than the well-known cathartic potential of writing about one's difficult experiences.

After spending time researching programs offered for youth in closed custody facilities and volunteering in a specific facility for over a year, it is clear that there is a gap in literature about existing literacy programs that are offered to male teens that have been incarcerated. It is evident that many closed custody facilities offer the youth an educational classroom in order to

work towards earning credits for their high school diplomas, along with programs that allow youth to take part in sporting and more active programs. However, there is very little to be known about the use of additional programming that allows the young males to work on their literacy skills or take part in the writing process for their own personal satisfaction. While volunteering, I recall being told that there was once a program offered to allow youth to write music and many used the tool of music to write about their own life experiences. Unfortunately, this music-writing program was cancelled when the instructor decided to no longer volunteer his time. I would like to assume that there are most likely other programs that encourage writing in other facilities, but there is not a lot of literature available that discusses the successes and failures of these programs geared specifically to literacy.

Not only does this gap exist within the facility itself, but literature is also lacking on literacy programs being offered by organizations that are focused on working with youth that have recently been released from incarceration. As I found with my experience as well, there are many resources available to work with youth in getting back into school, obtaining a job, finding a place to live, etc. However, there is a gap to be found when discussing organizations that work with these youth and offer programming that specifically links to improving the literacy skills of those released. This gap may be so because people are not writing about practices that are in place and are not advertised and well known, or the gap in literature may be lacking because there is just no programming with this focus. Either way, it would be very interesting to come to understand how researchers can assist in filling this gap in literature.

Finally, this study has come to note that there is a need to understand how the use of reflective expressive writing can be implemented with success in the traditional classroom setting. As mentioned in Chapter 2, McKee and MacDonald (2006) discussed the idea that

diaries have been used as instructional tools within the classroom. Although literature can point to various examples of educators implementing the use of diary writing in the traditional classroom, there is still a gap to be filled when considering the use of reflective expressive writing within the classroom. Further research in understanding the potential that reflective expressive writing has within the traditional classroom may be something that not only advances research, but also allows educators the opportunity to help prevent youth from disengaging in school and potentially becoming at-risk to dropping out.

Recommendations for Future Educators

Advice from Johnny and Dominique. When asked if they had any advice for new teachers that may encounter youth in a similar situation as Johnny and Dominique's, both of the participants shared a similar view about the need for trust and respect. Johnny cautioned new teachers working with youth in a similar situation as him not to:

go out there expecting them to listen to them just because you want them to. Literally, that's an annoyance when teachers expect their students to just, like, 'okay listen to me I want to teach you some things'. Because no kid is going to think 'okay, I'm going to listen to this person trying to teach me something when I feel like I already know it'. You're dealing with teenagers most of the time, they're, excuse my language, they're assholes. It's true, most of them don't take initiative well so just come into it with a friendly environment and you can't just be like, 'okay we're going to go sit in a 6 x 12 and we're going to get some work done'. No, the way you have been doing it every time like we are in a friendly location, like a McDonald's or something and just kick it, that's it. Makes it not hostile, see what I'm sayin? (Johnny, interview, September 17, 2014)

Although it is not as easy for an educator to bring their students to a friendly location as I was able to do, these words still hold merit to the wishes of this young male. It is clear that Johnny does not appreciate educators that assume their role of authority entitles them to automatic respect and trust from all of the students in their classroom. It is also evident that, although educators may not be able to bring their students to places like McDonald's, Johnny simply suggests that one sets the classroom up to be a friendly environment in which nothing is made to feel hostile. Johnny believes that the environment is essential to helping at-risk youth in being more successful. Along with creating a friendly and non-hostile environment, Johnny mentions that the best way to gain the respect of these youth is to:

Just try something different. Honestly, don't get in there with the same approach because that's what your teacher did. Because I'm assuming that not every student is the same as you were. Every student is different right? [...] go in there with an approach that not every student's gonna be exactly the same. Don't expect this guy over here is getting A pluses all the time, don't expect the guy getting D pluses to randomly be as good as him. It's just different learning. It's simple. Everyone is at their own level, so try different stuff (Johnny, interview, September 28, 2014).

Johnny urged educators to remember that teaching does not have a one size fits all approach. In order to gain the respect and trust of one's students and, thus, engage the youth, it is essential to find the teaching approach that works best for each individual educator. Once the educator understands their personal approach it is important to remember that each student also needs to be identified as an individual and, thus, be treated in their own unique way.

Dominique also provided advice for future educators that will potentially work with youth in a similar situation as him. First, Dominique addressed the issue of being treated with respect:

If a teacher is being rude to me or having, like, bad mannerisms or uses, like, a strange voice, you know, I can't learn if the teacher's being like that. Like, I could learn easily if I have a good teacher. You know, like, if my teacher is respectful, uses a calm voice, you know, like, lets me work at my own pace, let's me get my things done. Let me get through my stuff and give me the help that I need [...] If I'm respectful to the teacher, if I treat the teacher with respect, if I do the things I'm supposed to do, like, I expect the same thing back. If I respect you, I expect you to respect me (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014).

Along with wanting to be treated with respect and spoken to in a kind and calm voice, Dominique raised another point for future educators to consider. Allowing youth to work at the pace that is best suited for their needs is something that, to Dominique, would cause less stress and show that the teacher understands, respects and cares about each individual's needs. Both of the participants offer similar advice to future educators about important to model respect and to create a positive learning environment. In order to create an environment where at-risk youth feel comfortable, educators should consider their tone of voice, the casual feel of the classroom and the pace in which they are expecting their youth to work.

Aside from the environment and general rule of role modeling a sense of respect, Dominique offered advice for future educators working with youth that may have just been released from a closed custody facility,

Just give them time. Just give the person some time, some space. Uh, see what the situation is, see what they're working with and, you know, just try to help as much as you can and just the most important thing is just give them some space and time and there will probably be some results (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014).

Not only did Dominique remind us that it is important to give these youth their space and time to figure out their new situation and find a way to pave their future path, he also urged educators to simply "try to talk to the kid" (Dominique, personal communication, August 21, 2014). The conversation need not be pressing for information about their past choices and their current potentially difficult situations, but talking to the youth and treating him as if he is just like every other student in the classroom will prove to be beneficial. Although this youth may have a more troubled past than some do, it does not mean that they do not have common interests, hobbies, or desired forms of entertainment with other youth in the class. In part, treating these at-risk youth with respect is seeing beyond their past decisions and/or actions and remembering to treat them as equal to the other students in one's classroom. By treating the youth like every other student in the class, one is able to avoid the perception of judgment, something that Dominique felt strongly about:

Another thing I could add, like, I don't like people who judge me before they even get a chance to know me. I don't like people who are prejudiced. Just like Tupac said, I will always remember this, like, '*You don't know me, don't judge me*', you know? Like that's a real quote and I think that I can relate to that because so many people in my life just see me as a piece of paper. Because, like, at all of these schools they see me like 'oh Dominique we don't want him here he's trouble', right? Come on, like, half those people don't know who I really am. Never really worked with or seen me, you know? And I hate

that people just automatically think that this guy is trouble, before they see me. I think everybody deserves a chance, no matter who, how big, small, like gay, straight, like, black or white I don't care. Everyone deserves a chance (Dominique, interview, August 21, 2014).

Since being released from House of Opportunity, Dominique has had many school doors closed to him, saying that they did not want him on their premises. Throughout the final stages of our writing together, Dominique often expressed how often he felt judged in school prior to being in trouble and again after being released. He also questioned how he was supposed to improve himself and prove himself to be better than his past choices, if he was never given a chance to do so. After being denied entry to his former high school, Dominique expressed his concern with a system that denies him entry to school without ever meeting him, as he believed that they “see [him] as a piece of paper”. This situation can assist future educators in understanding that no matter the past choices that a youth may have made, the students in our classrooms still want to feel accepted and do not want to be treated with judgment.

Judgement, to Dominique, went beyond being judged for past poor choices. As made clear in Chapter 4, Dominique often felt judged based on his race. Following Dominique's advice to educators with regards to avoiding judging their students, it is important to remember the importance of equity within the classroom and the school community as a whole. Ensuring that students do not feel oppressed or negatively labeled for attributes that are beyond their control, is important. All youth should be provided with the same opportunities, no matter their race, gender, religious beliefs, sexuality, age, and ability. In order to continue to build a trusting and respectful relationship with youth it is important to establish a sense of equity within the classroom. As Goodenow and Grady (1992) stated, school belongingness can be accounted for

the general motivation and academic success of youth (p. 65). Modeling the appropriate ways to treat people with varying attributes and appearances are ways in which educators can gain trust and respect, along with teaching youth the ways in which they should treat people that they perceive to be different than them.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout my childhood, adolescence and, now, adulthood, I have always found healing in the art of reflection and writing. Whether it be my young attempts at journaling and writing about difficult moments in my life, my best friend being buried with one of my journals by her side, or the reflective writing that I asked my students to take part in throughout our English classes, writing has allowed me to consider my past experiences, current situations, and future goals. After experiencing success with the at-risk male youth in my classroom, I was able to develop the reflective expressive writing prompts and implement the writing initiative with male teens that have recently been released from a closed custody facility.

This journey has allowed me to explore the various creative literacy programs that have been offered in differing situations, the diary keeping and journal writing that occurs in the education and nursing fields, and the pros and cons of writing about intensely positive or especially difficult times within one's life. Beyond reading about what other researchers have been successful in accomplishing, I have been able to learn more about male youth in closed custody facilities. I have met many young men in the past year and a half that have been in trouble with the law, yet still have goals to make more positive choices upon release. Although I was not able to follow all of the males post release, I was fortunate enough to be able to work alongside Johnny and Dominique as they volunteered to take part in this case study approach. Johnny and Dominique found the reflective expressive writing program to be valuable and to

assist them in different ways associated with self-esteem and sense of belonging, and I, too, benefited from being a part of their journey post release. Not only did I learn a great deal and present my findings about this case study and the gaps in literature, but I also was able to learn a significant amount about myself as an educator and researcher. In this study, I have attempted to allow Johnny and Dominique's voices to be heard in order to remind researchers, community members and educators that, although these youth may have a troubled past, they still have a future ahead of them. With the help of all of those surrounding Johnny and Dominique, we can all contribute to a process that allows their futures to be positive.

Final Personal Reflection: Update

With a study on reflective expressive writing, it only seems fitting to end this study with my own personal reflective expressive writing entry. Here, I will speak to the areas of this study that surprised me, the boys and what they are doing now, and how this study as a whole has affected me.

Throughout the past year and a half, I have constantly been surprised by the ways in which the male youth, in and out of a closed custody facility, have been willing to work with me and help me through my journey to learn more about the benefits that reflective expressive writing might have on at-risk male teens. Initially, many questioned why I wanted to encourage males in particular to write reflectively and why I did not just want to play sports with them as a way to get to know them. Upon explaining my experiences in the classroom, the research that supports the reflective writing process and the desire to work with a demographic that does not traditionally take to writing in a journal, there was much more support offered my way. I was surprised by the amount of people that rallied together and supported me through the setbacks and that still check in out of curiosity and genuine interest to hear how the study is going and if I

have found there to be merit to the program. My response to all of these people is thank you and YES! Not only did I find there to be merit for the youth involved, but I also found there to be tremendous benefits for me as the researcher.

I have learned a lot about the research process, the youth that worked with me, and me as a person and educator. The youth have taught me more than they know. I was surprised with the ease in which these boys were willing to sign letters of consent, share their difficult personal stories, and encourage me to share them with others. Both Johnny and Dominique taught me to continue to look beyond one's past decisions and/or actions and to get to know them as people. They have too often been defined by their labels of criminals, marginalized youth, troublemakers etc. These two young men have taught me the importance of reminding and educating others about treating all humans with the respect that they deserve and seeing past labels to truly get to know someone for the person they are and not the actions that got them in trouble. They are much more than their pasts.

Not only was I surprised with how easily these youth were willing to share their life experiences with me, but I was also impressed by their willingness to be themselves without worrying about how I, as a researcher, might perceive them. Johnny and Dominique were both willing to be real and genuine with me from the start, there were no moments where I was worried that they were not being honest, genuine or respectful. Both of the youth were not only willing to share about their lives, but they were also always asking me how I was doing and wanting to know that things in my life were going well. Both demonstrated a real interest in how my study was going, but beyond the research, how I was doing. They did not treat me as a researcher there to learn about their experiences, but as one of their peers and mentors that wanted to help them move forward in positive ways.

During one of the many writing sessions that I had with Dominique, he expressed the uncomfortable feeling that he had when he thought the man serving us was homosexual. He told me that he thought it was weird and he just felt funny about it (Dominique, conversation, August 17, 2014). Later in our writing sessions, I was pleased to have an opportunity to talk with Dominique about the negative connotations that some associate with homosexuals and the sad reality that many homosexuals are also judged without people getting to know them. I was delighted that he was not only open to this conversation, but he added to it and said that he agreed. He had told me that he was trying to cut out swearing and comments like “that’s so gay”. Later when interviewed at the end of the study, I was pleased to hear Dominique say,

It doesn’t matter who they are! It doesn’t matter if you’re gay, you’re retarded or you’re white; I don’t care. As long as you are respectful to me I will be respectful to you. I go by the Golden Rule it’s as simple as that. That’s my top thing, just respect. That’s one of my main qualities or whatever (Dominique, interview, September 17, 2014).

Although I initially struggled with the boundaries of being an educator versus a researcher, there were moments such as these that allowed me to find ways to blend the two roles and find ways to continue to connect with both of the participants.

Post study, as of November 2014, these young men are continuing to work hard and stay out of trouble. Although on disability for some past injuries, Johnny is still working when he can, living on his own and is now the one encouraging his girlfriend to stay in school and graduate. He has recently turned 20 years old and continues to stay in touch with his mother and brothers. Johnny is looking forward to continuing to meet with me for coffee in order to stay in touch with one another and have another person in his life who supports him. His mentor, Steve, has also

encouraged this continued relationship, as he is happy to see the positive impact that our time together had on Johnny.

Dominique has recently been approved to return to a traditional high school and is in process of trying out for his high school basketball team. In his spare time, he is playing basketball and working hard to help his mother and family in any way that he can. Dominique requested that I become a part of his circle group with Pathways to Community and his parole officer has encouraged this request. While in the process of writing my findings, Dominique continued to email me updates. Now that the writing process is complete, we recently attended an NBA game and are currently working on finding a way for him to complete his high school community service hours. Dominique has also offered to speak to a class of future educators in order to answer questions, share his experiences and offer advice on how to work with and engage youth in his situation. He has mentioned that he would like to continue to write within a program like this or even on his own at home.

If there's anything else that we could do, I'd be down for it, but if there's not, I could always just, you know, if I'm like angry or if I'm, you know, like, not too happy or whatever I could just, you know, I have a notebook at my crib I could just write down whatever (Dominique, interview, July 30, 2014).

Reflective expressive writing has clearly affected Dominique and it is something that I will continue to encourage him to take part in when filled with both positive and negative emotions.

Since taking part in the study, life has also changed for me. I have continued to work with House of Opportunity and Pathways to Community while teaching, but my role as an educator has changed dramatically. My obvious passion for working with at-risk youth has transformed my professional path as I am now working with my school board in an alternative education

setting. I have taken on a new role with three other educators in working with youth that have given up on going to school. Many of these youth suffer from mental health illnesses, are teenage moms, or are living on their own and need to work to support themselves and/or their entire families. I have been afforded the opportunity to travel around the entire school board to meet with my students in environments that are familiar to them and work one-on-one to assist them in continuing to work on earning credits and eventually graduating. I have spoken to my colleagues about my work with this reflective expressive writing program and will soon be speaking to all of the principals and superintendents within my school board about how my research for the Masters in Education program has been able to support my work with the youth that I work with daily. In the future, I hope to not only encourage educators in the traditional classroom to implement opportunities for their students to write, but also begin discussions with university faculty of education departments to encourage them to offer courses for future educators to learn how to effectively engage youth that may appear to be at-risk or may be in the early stages of disengagement. I believe that, if educators are offered the resources to reach out and engage with at-risk youth, the youth, educators and communities at large will reap many benefits.

Appendix A – Writing Prompts

1. Tell me about your experiences with Pathways to Community. How do you feel about your involvement with them?

2. Tell me about a time that you felt brave. Why did you feel brave?
3. Tell me about a time that you were proud of yourself. What happened to make you feel that way? How does it feel to feel proud?
4. Tell me about a time that a loved one of yours felt proud of you. What happened? How did you know that he/she felt proud of you? How did you feel, knowing that he/she was proud of you?
5. Are there people that you may have hurt in the past that you would like to make amends with? If so, whom and why? Is there a person that may have hurt you in the past? How did they hurt you and how did this action make you feel?
6. Tell me about a time that you felt alone. What was happening and how did it make you feel? Tell me about a time that you felt like you belonged. What was the scenario?
7. What does your ideal life look like? Explain.
8. What is your biggest fear? Explain why.
9. What in your life causes stress? What do you do to release stress? How do you feel after taking part in said process?
10. Who is someone in your life that has had a positive influence on you? Explain why this person was so positive.
11. Who is someone in your life that has had a negative influence on you? Explain why this person was so negative.
12. Who do you admire? Why?
13. What are your three best qualities? Explain why.
14. What is something that you perceive as a weakness that you possess?

Appendix B – Informed Consent

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY, INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

THE IMPACT OF REFLECTIVE EXPRESSIVE WRITING ON RECENTLY RELEASED INCARCERATED MALE TEENS

You are invited to take part in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of reflective expressive writing on recently released incarcerated male teens' self-esteem and sense of belonging to a community. This research is completely voluntary and hopes to provide insight to other education systems, restorative justice programs, and closed custody facilities about the potential benefits of reflective expressive writing.

My name is April and I am a Masters of Education student at Wilfrid Laurier University. I am currently conducting research on the use of reflective expressive writing with recently released incarcerated male teens and I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

Information for this research will be conducted through the use of interviews (before, during and after the writing program), field notes and the physical journals themselves. All interviews will be audio-recorded, but there will not be any identifying information disclosed in the final data provided to fellow researchers. This study will require twelve 30 minute sessions. These writing sessions will consist of me providing you with writing materials and a writing prompt in which you will independently reflect and write about.

All of the information collected will only be used for research purposes, and neither your name nor information that may identify you will be used. All information for this study will remain anonymous and confidential. The only exception is if you disclose a want of injuring yourself, injuring someone else, or someone else injuring you. If you disclose any of the aforementioned scenarios, it is my duty to report such statements to Pathways to Community.

All of the data will be stored in a secured area and I will be the only one to have access to said data. The only opportunity for another researcher to access data from this study will be if I need the assistance of my adviser, Dr. Steve Sider. All data will be destroyed upon completion of the study (by approximately January 2015). Quotations found within interviews or journals may be used and/or published in the results of this study, but all participants will be provided with a pseudonym and at no time will real names or identifying information be used. You also have the right to participate in the study and ask that quotations are not used in future publications.

If you have any questions or concerns about my research, or any comments to make now or a later date, please contact me at king7340@mylaurier.ca or my adviser Dr. Steve Sider from Wilfrid Laurier University at ssider@wlu.ca. Your circle volunteers will also make themselves available if the writing experience results in any social or emotional discomfort that you need to discuss. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. If you need to contact the Research Ethics Board, your file number is 3989. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 4994, or rbasso@wlu.ca.

Initials of participant _____ Initials of investigator _____

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study, every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study, and have it destroyed. You have the right to omit any question(s)/procedure(s) you choose. When participating in any interviews or survey questions, you have the right to pass on any questions that you may not wish to respond to.

After the study has been completed, final results will be included in my final Thesis paper, as well as possible journal articles and presentations to come. In order to access the final results, I will make myself available to meet with you to present the overall findings that have been collected.

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

I agree to allow April to use quotations from my interviews and/or journal notes in her final Thesis paper.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Initial interview: Are there any communities that you currently feel a part of or that you would like to be included in?

Post interview:

- 1.What was the reflective-expressive writing experience like for you? How did you feel about the provided writing prompts?
- 2.What were the best and worst parts of this writing experience been for you?
- 3.What types of emotions did you feel when you were reflectively writing? Explain.
- 4.Did you find that the reflective expressive writing process affected you in any personal way(s)? If so, please elaborate on how.
- 5.Did anything about the reflective expressive writing process surprise you?
- 6.Would you recommend reflective expressive writing for anybody else? If so, for whom and why? If not, why not?
- 7.Would you consider taking part in the reflective expressive writing process on your own? Explain why.
- 8.Did the reflective expressive writing process effect or influence your relationships with others? If so, whom?
- 9.After taking part in the reflective expressive writing process are there any communities that you currently feel a part of or that you would like to be included in?

Figure 1 – Rubric

| Criteria/Level | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Depth of Reflection | <p>Writer has a clear understanding of the writing prompt provided.</p> <p>The reflection demonstrates conscious and thorough attempts to reflect deeply on the provided prompt.</p> | <p>Demonstrates a decent understanding of the writing prompt provided.</p> <p>The reflection is well thought out and has consistent evidence of genuine reflection.</p> | <p>Demonstrates a limited understanding of the provided writing prompt.</p> <p>The reflection has moments where depth of thought is evident.</p> | <p>Demonstrates little or no understanding of the writing prompt provided.</p> <p>This entry lacks depth of reflection and appears to be merely surface level writing.</p> |

This assessment will be used while taking into consideration the age and context of participants.

Figure 2 – Physical Journals

Will you please write a letter to the
of yourself and suggest a letter to be
sent along the line of the paper?

within the first 30 days of my divorce.
 I was proud of myself. The feeling of
 coming home was ~~like~~ during, at first,
 but I got better when ~~the~~ I realized
 that I deserve to be home. The last ~~month~~
 of my life had been a slow and
 painful ~~to~~ time. There was alot of times
 where I was ready to wild out, but I
 held back. Times where I would be
 depressed, emotionally and physically, but I
 would overpower it. Times where I couldn't
 let people get in my head, but I didn't
 All I know is that I don't perfect.
 I know that the whole time I was there
 I could've been a whole different person.
 But I chose to have respect for my separation.
 Respect for my future, respect of all who
 don't fuck with me. Now when I see the
~~progress~~ ~~of~~ progress of who I was
 6 years ago and now, I feel proud of
 what I've done and how hard to be who I be

a few feet above water level
was a small boat, next to it.
Dad pointed out cliffs
to the left of the channel and
inches high in it was a small
boat to see all the old mine
equipment inter water from
being flooded such as the
mine cart and old crane.

~~1. Long~~ boat to me long-boat
is Long ball sea

Pumping felt alert hitting
water huffs

It was like your time at the quarry was
g. I could only imagine the feeling you
before you jumped.

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