

YOUTH AND GANGS

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Abstract

For front-line youth workers in Abbotsford, it appears that the “at-risk” label includes benefits and limitations for youth people. The ways in which youth shed the limitations of this label and its associations with possible gang involvement needed to be examined. Understanding how this label shapes young peoples’ experiences may be one factor in decreasing the number of youth possibly entering into a gang membership. The literature review defines and provides context to our knowledge of youth gangs and captures some risk factors, school responses and gaps in research. The theoretical framework is a combination of Ecological Systems Theory, Labelling Theory and Anti-Oppressive Practice and seeks to assist in developing an understanding of this area of study. The research methodology used an inductive and exploratory qualitative research design. The sample while small in size, was flexible and explored the research topic to gain in-depth additional knowledge about youth and gangs in Abbotsford. This study used semi-structured interviews with key informants in Abbotsford who are working with youth of possible gang involvement. The research will display the findings using a theme analysis along with a discussion and implications of future practice.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to my beautiful wife, Sukhi who has supported me and made many sacrifices throughout my studies. My three lovely children, Devyn, Damyn and Darsyn have shown me a new color in life. Without you, I cannot have done this alone. Thank you!

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Introduction

Working with youth has been a phenomenal experience for me. The way youth think reflects a curiosity of minds eager for information. As a social worker, I know that these minds will be influenced by education, which then influences how the youth will proceed into adulthood. In this research study, I explore the context of youth gangs, and using relevant literature and statistical information provide the reader with some initial definitions of youth gangs. Using data from agencies in Canada, especially Abbotsford, BC, I then examine how youth can be drawn into gang membership, especially regarding the risk factors of the zero-tolerance policy, schools' responses and labelling. I believe it is these labels and risk factors that have a direct correlation for youth of possible gang involvement. It was essential to look into the zero-tolerance policies of the schools due to their potential to negatively label youth, who by not abiding by the school delinquency policy are more vulnerable to gang recruitment. For example, youth get suspended and/or expelled, leaving them with limited options to progress. Most labels that are created are through the zero tolerance policies of the schools and their response to the label can create such a stigma and a stereotypical view of the student. It was necessary to examine the in-depth systemic policies that perpetuate the 'at-risk' label. Therefore, my research question is, *"What do front-line youth workers in Abbotsford believe are the benefits and limitations related to the label of "at-risk" for Abbotsford youth of possible gang involvement, and how can youth shed this label?"*

Given the information collected in the literature review, I further examined which theories best align to explain the effects of labelling. First, as an overarching theory, I looked at Ecological Systems Theory (EST). This theory was necessary as the leading theory for many reasons. It looked at the influence of the environment at a micro level. Micro level influences are

influences that directly effect the person, such as labels. Next, the EST looks at the meso, exo and macro levels influence the person, such as the zero-tolerance policy, school responses, and cultures. Labelling theory was therefore the theory that will emphasize the effect of such labels at micro and meso levels of influence. This theory is considered a practice as it highlights how labelling is experienced by the youth in practice, and how we can use it to understand this process theoretically (Payne, 2013). I chose to use this theory due to its explanation of self-fulfilling prophecies of the labelling process. Lastly, it was essential to examine and utilize the Anti-Oppressive Practice approach to the framework. This allows us to look at power imbalances between youth and adults, specifically authority levels in the school responses to labels. Nonetheless, usage of such information has aided in the formation of my research question and the findings will reflect these theories, gather information and identify gaps.

For this research study, I started developing a literature review of the available information about youth and gangs particularly in Canada. I also reviewed countries such as the US and UK for research on youth and gangs. Once the information was put together, I examined the literature and identified any gaps present to provide a rationale for my research question. Next, I identified theories that are applicable to inform my research study. I gathered scholarly references to utilize the theories involved, this then provided the basis of how I will analyse the data in my research study. The methodology was assembled, then data collection commenced. During the initial stages of this research study, I prepared an application for the Ethics Approval board at University of the Fraser Valley, prior to commencing any data collection. Throughout the study, I worked closely with my first reader Dr. Darrell Fox. I looked at environmental factors that may perpetuate the issue, along with any internal issues of a youth such as mental health and addictions. My hope was to interview youth workers in Abbotsford for data collection

and present this information to my audience using relevant theories and research to help substantiate my research outcomes, including discussion.

Literature Review

In my practice, it seems there has been an increased focus on youth and gangs in Abbotsford, British Columbia, in recent year. In my experience, multiple strategies have been deployed in order to prevent or intervene with youth that are identified as ‘at-risk’ of gang involvement and young people who are not currently in a gang, but possibly on the path toward joining one. The purpose of this literature review is to gain knowledge about the youth and gang situation in Abbotsford, with a specific focus on labelling, and what may be root causes of this issue. Abbotsford, a multicultural city, sits on the border of Canada and the USA in British Columbia. Its population sits just under 150 000 people. There are 30 elementary schools, 7 middle schools and about 7 high schools (Abbotsford School District, 2017). Included in this review is literature dating from 1999 to 2017, from the National Crime Prevention Centre and Public Safety Canada, as well as qualitative studies which include interviews with former gang members, and quantitative research studies conducted both in US and Canada. These studies were located using Ebscohost, and some combination of the terms: at-risk, gang membership, zero tolerance policy, gang, mafia, delinquency, youth and gangs, and qualitative studies. Gaps in the studies are also identified, providing a rationale for the current research conducted in Abbotsford. This literature review provides the lens of looking at my research question from an Ecological Systems perspective, from micro to macro level of influences.

Defining Youth (13-18) and Gang Involvements

Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) describes youth gangs as “[a]n organized group of adolescents and/or young adults who rely on group intimidation and violence, and commit criminal acts in order to gain power and recognition and/or control certain areas of unlawful activity” (NCPC, 2007, p.1). Similarly, Dunbar (2017) citing the Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science and Justice Studies (2015), states that youth gangs are basically a group of “young people who act out in antisocial or delinquent ways and/or is based on involvement in some form of criminal activity usually in an effort to gain from it as a group, whether financially, socially or territorially” (p. 4). Further, the NCPC (2007) explains that the reasons for joining a gang vary, but most youth who join gangs are already using drugs and involved in crime. Dunbar (2017), cites Chettleburgh (2007) and Wortley & Tanner (2006), sharing that much of the research literature reflects that gangs often provide “psychological, social and/or economic benefits, and that those who become involved with gangs do so to meet unfulfilled needs” (p. 4).

Statistical Overview of Youth and Gangs in Canada

According to the NCPC (2007), the most recent available data, Canada has 434 youth gangs with approximately 7000 members: 94% are male members in Canada, and half are under the age of 18. The largest proportions of members include African Canadians (25%), First Nations (21%) and Caucasian (18%) (NCPC, 2007, p. 2). According to Dunbar (2017), as reflected by police-records, youth ages 12-17 years and young adults (18-24 years) represented over a third of all individuals accused in 2014 criminal incidents. The majority of accused youth were co-offenders of serious offences, which included robberies, serious sexual assaults and aggravated assaults (Dunbar, 2017).

Provincially, Ontario has the highest number of youth gangs and members with 216 gangs and 3320 members. British Columbia has 102 youth gangs with about 1027 members (NCPC, 2007). British Columbia has growing number of female gang membership sitting at 12%, according to police agencies and Aboriginal organizations (NCPC, 2007).

Gang related violence is evident in Abbotsford. According to a media report by Bolan, (2009), “Abbotsford-Mission is Canada's Murder Capital”, Bolan quotes Statistics Canada, stating that “now Statistics Canada is calling Abbotsford-Mission the murder capital of the country, with a 2008 rate of 4.7 homicides per 100,000” (Bolan, 2009, para. 6). More recently, an article by Estefania Duran, of Global News (Duran, 2016), cites Statistics Canada, and shares that violence in Abbotsford has gone up 14% in 2015, which included the more recent ‘Townline Hill Conflict’ story. In a recent media report (Hopes, 2017), the Townline Hill conflict is named after the violence occurring in West Abbotsford. There are two groups, most of South Asian descent youth, who are battling over the drug turf in West Abbotsford. “The conflict has resulted in numerous shootings and more than half a dozen murders in Abbotsford alone” (Hopes, 2017, para. 6) and most of those murdered were youth from the Abbotsford Community.

Risk Factors prior to Gang Involvement

Males.

Results from the California based 2007 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey show that “15-21 percent of middle school students have reported a gang presence” (Estrada, Gilreath, Astor & Benbenishty, 2013, p. 626). Estrada et al (2013) reports that mostly male students have claimed to be in a gang and from those males, most of them were Black or Latino (Estrada, et al., 2013). Further, according to a California study (and also relevant to my study), conducted by Sanders (2012), all youth recruited had some form of experience

with either significant histories of gangs, illicit drug sales, and/or crime prior to entering a gang. Sanders (2012) further reports that “26.7% were homeless at some point in their lives; and 25% felt ‘very poor’ or ‘poor’ growing up” (Sanders, 2012, p. 981). Further, McDaniel (2012) explains in his US study, that gang affiliation was mostly associated with minority status, males and included risk factors such as: “depressed mood, alcohol or drug use, school delinquency, and experienced peer victimization” (McDaniel, 2012, p. 255).

Females.

A study by Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler (2010) states that family, physical and sexual abuse were identified as risk factors for female gang membership prior to entering local gangs. They further linked poverty as a significant contributing factor when enrolling in gangs (Moloney, et al., 2010). The young women interviewed in the study by Moloney et al. (2010) reported being involved in multiple risk behaviors, including “street fighting, drug sales, substance abuse, assaults, robbery, boosting (shoplifting), and other criminal behaviors” (p. 8). According to Moloney et al. (2010), the roles of females in gangs follow stereotypical gender lines, such as being personal property, sex toys or even tomboys. Recently the role of female gang involvement has become an interest to media and public concern and hence female gang members are presumed to be rebelling against femininity (Moloney, et al., 2010). Although little research has been conducted about female gang membership, this study highlights that poverty, general risk factors and stereotypical identities play a critical role in understanding why females get involved in gangs.

Other Issues Linking to Gang Involvement

The literature suggests that gang affiliation was least common with youth who had confidence in their “coping skills, positive parental influence, monitoring, support of parents and teachers” (McDaniel, 2012, p. 255). In addition, Sanders (2012) points out that “36.7% of gang members said they currently feel ‘miserable’ or ‘not very happy,’ 53.3% have seen a mental health therapist in their lives, and 28.3% have been prescribed medication for a mental health condition” (Sanders, 2012, p. 981). This demonstrates that vulnerable youth are being drawn in to gang membership, therefore the term victimization has been utilized in many studies. For example, in a US study by Forber-Pratt, Aragon & Espelage (2014) state that “all students claimed that they had indeed witnessed or experienced victimization from gang members in school” (p. 13), which included “picking on somebody, hitting for no reason, talking about them including their race, and name calling” (Forber-Pratt, et al., 2014, p. 13). Recent research suggests that individuals believe that joining a gang is a way to get away from victimization themselves, however, gang members are actually at a high risk of victimization in general (Forber-Pratt, et al., 2014, p. 9). Regarding school and criminal justice risk factors, Sanders (2012) explains that “over one-third (35%) have been expelled from school...83.3% have been arrested, 70% have been to jail or juvenile hall, and 28.3% have been to prison, probation operated ‘camps’ or to Division of Juvenile Justice (formerly California Youth Authority) operated youth correctional facilities” (Sanders, 2012, p. 981).

Overall, the participants in a 2014 US study by Bergen-Cico, Haygood-el, Jennings-Bay & Lane (2014) reveal a consistent attraction to the adrenaline based excitement of crime, which includes alcohol and other drugs. However, drugs and alcohol are secondary motivators. This study highlights the behavioural addiction of street life and gang involvement (Bergen-Cico, et

al., 2014, p. 24). ‘Street addiction’ are the words used by several participants and describe the unimaginable draw to the crime and gang life on the streets (Bergen-Cico, et al., 2014). When describing their concept of street addiction, they say their behaviour is normal in which the environment they live in. Participants described the “adrenaline drive” that continuously takes them back into the life of crime, including “gang involvement” (Bergen-Cico, et al., 2014, p. 22).

General Risk Factors for Youth with possible Gang Involvement in Canada

In Abbotsford, program workers have been active in identifying risk factors to possible gang involvement. One such program is, “In it Together”, run by Abbotsford Community Services. Their criterion for youth (ages 12 – 30) for referral are involvement in “criminal activities/behaviour; violent/aggressive behaviour; selling drugs (at school or in the community); delivering drugs/packages for dealers; may have been previously criminally charged; and may have served a sentence in a youth or adult institution (re-entering into the community)” (Abbotsford Community Services, 2017).

Public Safety Canada board (NCPC, 2007) breaks down the risk factors from an individual level to a broader community level. The specific potential risk factors associated with individual, peer group, school, family, and community are identified. At an individual level, these include: “prior delinquency; illegal gun ownership; drug trafficking; desire for group rewards such as status, identity, self-esteem, companionship and protection; anti-social attitudes; aggression; alcohol and drug use; early or precocious sexual activity; and violent victimization” (NCPC, 2007, p. 2). At a peer group level, the risk factors include “high commitment to delinquent peers; street socialization; gang members in school classes; friends who use drugs or who are gang members; interaction with delinquent peers; and pre-teen exposure to stress” (NCPC, 2007, p. 2). At a school level, risk factors can include: “poor school performance; low

educational aspirations (especially among young females); negative labelling by teachers; high levels of anti-social behaviour; few positive teacher role models; educational frustration; low attachment to school; and learning difficulties” (NCPC, 2007, p.2). At a family level, these include: “family disorganization, including broken homes and parental drug and/or alcohol abuse; family violence, neglect and drug addiction; family members in a gang; lack of adult and parental role models, parental criminality, parents with violent attitudes, and siblings with anti-social behaviours; and extreme economic deprivation” (NCPC, 2007, p. 2). Lastly, at the level of communities, the risk factors include: “social disorganization, including high poverty and residential mobility; high crime neighbourhood; neighbourhood youth in trouble; presence of gangs in the neighbourhood; availability or perceived access to drugs in the neighbourhood; availability of firearms; cultural norms supporting gang behaviour; and feeling unsafe in neighbourhood” (NCPC, 2007, p.2).

Having identified and discussed the context of youth gangs and the potential risks factors for recruitment generally, I am now going to specifically focus on the roles of schools and zero tolerance policies as a major risk factors for gang membership.

Schools’ Responses

Suspensions and expulsions have been around for awhile and realistically, large institutes such as the schools need safety plans for thousands of people enrolled and working within these environments. The implementation of the zero-tolerance policy for student behaviours has become controversial and this is explained more in the next section. According to Hess (2016), when solving a social issue, history shows that people overreach and, in this case, schools are suspending students too quickly and unjustly (Hess, 2016). On the other hand, the British Columbia Ministry of Education (1999) mentions that the BC legislation views violence in

schools as a workplace hazard. Since the teachers and school administration are part of the employee safety legislation, there needs to be an action plan for addressing potential violence. Therefore, suspending students who are a potential threat is ensuring employee safety (BC Ministry of Education, 1999). In addition, Chiodo, Pollock & Bakker (2016) explain that the legislation does not specifically speak to how the suspension and expulsion are to be addressed, but instead leaves it schools to figure it out (Chiodo, et al., 2016). Although the suspension and expulsion policy are there, including zero tolerance approach, the entire process could be subjective to each member of school personnel.

Youth who are involved in gangs, or at-risk of involvement, often have school as their primary place of professional contact. School administrators are thus tasked with setting policy and procedures to deal with potentially dangerous and anti-social behaviours. Many researchers, such as Shah (2013) and Bhattacharjee (2003), have viewed the zero-tolerance policy and have identified both positive and negative impacts of the policy. The zero-tolerance policy is discretionary to the school personnel, and youth are the recipients of its interpretation. This allows teachers to take action against negative behaviors; however, Schiff (2013) states that there is a lack of dignity when suspending a youth because most students do not have much say and they may feel excluded from the process all together (Schiff, 2013). Due to lack of resources in prevention and alternative methods, teachers resort to and over rely on the suspensions and expulsions (Teske, 2011) as well. Alternatively, Milne and Aurini (2015) believe that this process actually gives parents and the youth opportunities to negotiate and become part of the solution. He states that the students learn how to problem solve and practice negotiation skills with the education professionals, which in turn helps them gain confidence (Milne & Aurini, 2015). Nonetheless, according to Rodriguez (2013), educational personnel are not confident in

making changes to the policy. Influences on the zero tolerance policy is heightened by media attention through the over hype of the violence (Rodriguez, 2013). An example of this is the recent gang violence in and around schools in Canadian cities such as Abbotsford (Hopes, 2017). According to Jull (2000), this tension causes a societal hyperawareness.

Zero Tolerance Policy.

Policy outcomes have become the central focus of some researchers. According to Shah (2013), the zero-tolerance idea comes from the US anti-drug campaigns of 1980s and schools became under pressure to use this system as youth violence grew. According to a report by Bhattacharjee (2003), this policy is a more a stricter policy and is causing issues with the discipline policy altogether. Bhattacharjee, cites Gabor and states that most participants defined zero tolerance in Canada as “marking out clear lines for acceptable behavior, along with repercussions for violating the limits” (para. 5). According to the Abbotsford School District (2017), “The Superintendent will ensure that each Principal, in consultation with staff, parents and, when appropriate, students, establishes a code of conduct for his/her school that is consistent with the District Student Code of Conduct and which reflects the provincial standards” (para. 8), and that “students will be disciplined in a timely and fair manner and such discipline shall be in accordance with AP 333 – Student Suspensions” (para. 11). According to Jull (2000) teachers have reported an increase in violence and antisocial behaviour. Therefore, in Canada, teachers are asked to implement, support and enforce school policy, whether they support it or not. Jull (2000) also states that policies borrowed from the US, and the zero-tolerance policy in Canada, do not address culturally acceptable violence such as sports or other social constructs. Furthermore, Shah (2013) explains that in one district, more than half of the youth that were suspended were coloured youth. In this same district, the number of enrollment of youth of

colour was less than 50 percent (Shah, 2013). Cultural biases and/or stereotyping appears to be a factor in the number of suspensions and expulsions delivered by school personnel. Jull (2000) explains that social justice cannot be achieved through the zero-tolerance policy because the perceived ‘unbiased’ zero tolerance policy is limited in various contexts, such as poverty and oppression.

According to the BC Ministry of Education (1999) report, suspension is only one strategy in a complex problem-solving process. Suspension is designed to support the student in changing inappropriate behaviour. Used cautiously, suspension can have positive effects, which include ensuring safety for everyone in the school community; assigning clear consequences for a range of inappropriate behaviours; providing the time for planning support for behaviour change; promoting collaboration among family, school, and other community services to solve the problem (BC Ministry of Education, 1999). Unfortunately, according to Rodriguez (2013), students are not provided equal opportunity towards the goals set in schools. Rather, as he further states, students are excluded through these policies. Suspensions and expulsions have also been identified as predictors of reoffending and contact with the criminal justice system. Studies on the impact of school suspension have found that 40 per cent of suspensions are imposed on repeat offenders (Rodriguez, 2013). Nonetheless, schools need to adopt policies that best suit the social and cultural contexts in schools with an understanding of the local demographics surrounding them. Jull (2000) also explains that times change and traditional methods need to change, these policies need to be looked at as ‘working-documents’ and therefore reviewed and updated periodically.

Youth Development.

When youth are struggling and displaying attention seeking behavior, we know as social workers that there may be more underlying causes. Youth may be working with personal challenges (BC Representatives of Child and Youth, 2014) and according to Millar (2009) the barriers increase making these challenges harder to work with, when we take them out of schools. This sets up barriers to a high school graduation certificate that would help youth secure future employment (Millar, 2009). There is enough research that suggests relationships are important for human development (BC Representatives of Child and Youth, 2014) and youth need love and reliable support to grow into healthy adults. According to Smyth (2013), youth at risk, may not have family to turn to or a great support network but instead issues of addictions, homelessness and poverty surround them. Millar (2009) further cites Raising the Roof, 2009; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009 and Elberle et al., 2007, and shares the common routes that lead youth to homelessness, such as abuse of all sorts; part of the child welfare system and perhaps some connection to the criminal justice system (Millar, 2009).

Shootings and drug related issues have definitely raised safety concerns. According to Blomberg (2003) policy makers justified the zero tolerance because of the safety concerns of weapons and drugs, however, the focus has been mostly on classroom behaviour and not violence (Blomberg, 2003). Moreover, it has also been noted that policy of such strictness creates order in schools (Perry & Morris, 2014). Perry and Morris (2014) further explains that teachers can teach others without getting disrupted and prevent other from taking such routes of destruction. Gregory, Skiba and Noguera (2010) also add that the zero-tolerance policy is used as a deterrent for future students from going into a negative direction (Gregory, et al., 2010). However, there is a higher chance of neglecting equal opportunities regarding education, sports

and employment for all students when suspending or expelling is used (Rodriguez, 2013) which is not part of the school mission.

Race, Culture and Socioeconomic Status

Policy research has shown that race, culture and socioeconomic status are interconnecting factors when youth are being suspended. According to Blomberg (2003), Black males were more likely to be suspended in middle and high school than White males. Schiff (2013), also agrees and states that there is research that found that Black males were suspended more for minor violations than White males (Schiff, 2013). However, the counter argument of Gregory et al. (2010) shares that research actually did not find any correlation of teachers reports linked to Black or White student misconduct. Nonetheless, students of lower socioeconomic status are being suspended at higher rates due to teacher biases. Milne and Aurini (2015) believe that students of lower status are getting suspended more because teachers avoid contact with parents of higher socioeconomic status. Milne and Aurini (2015) share that threats of legal actions and/or demanding parents become a conflict that school administration does not want to deal with (Milne & Aurini, 2015). Schiff (2013) suggests that school policy needs to keep youth in school and hold school boards more accountable. Most importantly, the disciplinary action policy, can be changed to approach the youth appropriately and perhaps provide aid in the prevention area for youth. This can be accomplished by seeking funding from Public Safety Canada or the National Crime Prevention Canada.

Having provided a contextual framework for my study using multiple sources of literature and research, I will now go on to explore gaps in the literature that I have identified.

Gaps in Research

According to Hartwick and Kubisiak (2014), the fact that there are different ideas about the term ‘at-risk’ makes it hard to gain knowledge about such labels and what can be done. Without understanding what ‘at-risk’ entails, it may make research difficult. Other factors need to be included such as gender, culture and geographic location as well. Hartwick and Kubisiak (2014), asked participants to provide an explanation to what it means to be ‘at-risk’. To date, according to Hartwick and Kubisiak (2014) no research has fully explored this issue. They state that the ‘at-risk’ label itself, is new and the different meanings attached is depending on individual and situation (Hartwick & Kubisiak, 2014). We do not understand if these labels of ‘at-risk’ carry on into adulthood or shed completely prior to graduation from high school, assuming that they graduate.

This literature provides insight from former gang members from the US only; therefore, future research can gather information from a Canadian perspective. There is lack of information of gangs when speaking about culture, gender and geographical locations. It is interesting that despite the media’s view that the gang issue in Abbotsford is a South Asian male youth problem, the NCPC statistics do not support this (NCPC, 2007). In addition, zero-tolerance policies have been researched with much negativity; therefore, the benefits of such a policy needs to be examined in the Canadian context. Much literature talks about the school system and the criminal justice system, but fail to provide insight within a family system, health care system and child welfare.

Specifically, there is not any data available about youth and gangs in Abbotsford and how labels such as ‘at-risk’ benefit or harm youth in this geographical location. There have been a number of programs implemented in Abbotsford to address the gang issue, but the root causes

have not been researched in Abbotsford. Frontline workers can share in depth information because of the hundreds of students they have dealt with, in terms of possible gang involvement. Given the above gaps in research and literature, I propose to ask the question *“What do front-line youth workers in Abbotsford believe are the benefits and limitations related to the label of "at-risk" for Abbotsford youth of possible gang involvement, and how can youth shed this label?”*

Theoretical Framework

Ecological Systems Theory

In terms of looking to understand youth and gangs, I used Ecological Systems Theory (EST), which allowed for analysis to occur at multiple levels. This theory, along with an Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP) lens and Labelling theory provided a framework to explore the research findings. EST explains, “how human development is influenced by different types of environmental systems” (Ettekel & Mahoney, 2017, pg. 239). There are four system levels that influenced human development. These are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and the macrosystem (Voisin, et al., 2006, pg. 72) which are explained below. According to Ettekel and Mahoney (2017), they state that researchers, policy makers and practitioners were especially interested how youth spent their time outside of school and interacted with their environment, which in turn would help school professionals understand how to foster positive and a healthy development of youth, especially from different backgrounds (Ettekel & Mahoney, 2017, pg. 239). These included extracurricular activities, after-school programs and activities in the community.

The micro, meso, exo and macro levels of environmental systems helped to define smaller settings where an individual will interact directly with a larger system such as environment or culture. According to Voisin et al. (2006), the microsystem identified the ‘roles

and the characteristics' of the developing individual and the mesosystem identified the 'settings' with which the person interacts with directly. For example, micro level system influences can be directly affected by addictions, mental health or learning. This will lead to other direct interactions with mesosystems such as family members, peers and teachers. Outside of direct contact, Voisin et al. (2006) explains the exosystem, which are settings the individual does not directly interact with but has influence on the individual. For example, neighborhoods, sports or peer groups. Lastly the macrosystem which identifies the cultural values and societal factors that influence the individual (Voisin, et al., 2006, pg. 72), such as media, government or religion.

Using EST as a broader framework allowed me to analyze the micro level findings from the interview data, while exploring their connection to broader organisational practices, (meso/exo levels) and policy developed at a macro level. To assist in the analysis of the impact of these broader system levels on the individual, I will be using AOP and labelling theory.

Anti-Oppressive Practice

Strier and Binyamin (2014), state that AOP as a social work practice, "addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work done with clients and workers. It aims to change the structure and procedures of service delivery through macro-systemic changes at the legal and political level" (p. 2).

Strier and Binyamin (2014) further explain that AOP integration into social services should include "non-hierarchical work relations between clients and social workers, promoting social rights, adopting structural and contextualised views of clients' social problems and developing client representation" (p. 3). Additionally, AOP responds to "social, class, gender and ethnic diversity, acknowledging unequal power relations with clients, creating a non-bureaucratic organisational culture, developing alliances with clients and critical consciousness among clients

and workers, as well as promoting reflexivity between workers and clients (Strier and Binyamin, 2013, p.3). Strier and Binyamin (2014), cite Pollack (2004) and explain that interaction between clients, workers and agencies are formed “within the context of unequal power relations” (p. 4); therefore, anti-oppressive practices have surfaced for social services.

AOP and Youth.

The ways in which adults exert power over youth, may have significant impact on the outcome of their development. From my experience, authority figures target youth that are nonconforming to social order of the educational system, and therefore unrealistic limitations are placed on the youth. The concerns linked to ‘at-risk’ youth have to do with violence and safety in the school communities, which is comprehensible. According to Ferguson, San Miguel, and Hartley (2009), youth violence has decreased significantly since the 90s but the violence is still a core concern when working with youth.

Schools are a safe place where youth can understand, learn and eventually become the adult they have aspired to be. According to Kumashiro (2000) schools have become a ‘harmful space’ and he argues that schools need to become a safer and helpful place for all students and especially for the youth that have been directly affected by oppression, such as poverty. Frontline workers, I believe, can understand the power dynamics between youth and adults. Instead of exerting power and possibly making an example out of students, workers can become partners with youth and empower them. School administration, teachers and counsellors may negatively view students who do not conform to the social order as a person who is violent or emotionally disturbed (Watts & Erevelle, 2004) and therefore can be subjected to suspension or expulsion. Watts and Erevelle (2004) further explain that when social order is given higher priority in the schools, then violence will surface or perpetuate the concern of violence. According to Watts and

Erevelle (2004) the way the zero-tolerance policy has evolved is giving schools power and justification to identify, shame and suspend and/or expel students. Watts and Erevelle (2004) state that prevention strategies such as metal detectors, security wands and zero tolerance policies have been unsuccessful in addressing violence but play a larger part in constructing what violence is in schools.

According to Stanton-Salazar (2011), teachers and school administration personnel have not been mindful of the way they frequently encourage students with higher socio-economic status and not fully encourage students of lower socio-economic status which reinforces the status quo (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Workers in the educational system need to recognise that diversity does exist and that non-academic issues exist and need to be addressed (Kumashiro, 2000). Kumashiro (2000) suggests that that educators and youth both need to examine how people are 'Othered'. This language of oppression is crucial to bring into services because youth can understand the dominant discourses and the constructs of their stories that can be and is possible to challenge.

EST and AOP combined well to allow for a simultaneous analysis of both structural and individual issues. It effectively identified issues at the micro, meso and macro level of systems.

Labelling Theory

Another theory that informed this research was Labelling Theory. This theory aids in the understanding of labels put onto individuals and further explains how it may affect the individual. I believe, the research question of finding out the benefits and limitations of an 'at-risk' identity incorporates labelling theory well. According to Becker (2003), labelling theory is described as "the social 'labels' that we apply to certain people and the way we treat them thereafter that causes and amplifies deviancy, rather than any genetic characteristics they may

have been born with.” (Becker, 2003, pg.134). Becker argued that there is actually not an entity of deviancy but rather deviancy is behaviour which is created by others and defined by others. In his words, Becker (2003) states:

Deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender. The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label (Becker, 2003. pg.135)

Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera (2006), share that Becker focused on the general idea of what a label further evolved into, thereby forcing individuals to look for acceptance in deviant social groups (Bernburg, et al., 2006). Deviant social groups are groups of individuals that allow the label to be present or an accommodated arrangement where individuals can live with the deviant status (Bernburg, et al., 2006). Becker (2003) furthers his argument and states that labelling supersedes all other symbols and statuses an individual may have held prior to their public label (Becker, 2003). Society will start to see this person as their label and the meaning it conveys. According to Bernburg et al. (2006), labeled individuals become more aware of the stereotypical beliefs in the community and may start to perceive this socially constructed label as their individual identity (Bernburg, et al., 2006). Becker (2003) further states that the cycle of labelling leads to self-fulfilling prophecies (Becker, 2003). If you label someone deviant the individual may become that label, live up to that label or even adopt that label as their own (Becker, 2003). Bernburg et al. (2006) conclude that the consequences of negative labelling are that of individuals seek deviant groups that can relate to each other, in terms of disadvantaged social positions and shared self-concept and attitude (Bernburg, et al., 2006) and maybe even provide opportunities that the mainstream society cannot.

Criminal Justice System.

Zero tolerance and subsequent negative labelling can become a possible route into the criminal justice system. Once labelled as delinquent, according to Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin and Moore-Thomas (2012), there becomes a cycle of deviant behaviour. In relation to school, the youth are put on the administration 'radar', with higher degree of monitoring; these youth, get accused of lower violations, which then increases the chances of getting suspended again (Bryan, et al., 2012). These suspensions may eventually lead to expulsion of some students, therefore putting them higher risk of participating in gangs or illegal activities leading to involvement in the criminal justice system (Schiff, 2013). According to Millar (2009), non-completion of high school may be a factor on youth street involvement, which also increases the chances of experiencing other social problems such as: unemployment, drugs and homelessness, therefore limiting potential. However, according to Perry and Morris (2014), some level of suspension or disciplinary action will be needed to achieve higher levels of education. For example, with some disciplinary action students may learn quickly and correct the negative behaviour to conform with the school policies. Nonetheless, the idea of students having weapons at school is dangerous and are be dealt with accordingly. The idea of teacher or school employee safety is not discounted in literature, but rather looking at the different approaches that may be more effective.

How the Label of 'at-risk' can Influence Self-Identity

When it comes to social services or related programs, the term 'at-risk' suggests a focus on prevention and intervention provided together for the offender (Kamenetz, 2015). Kamenetz (2015) further explains the difference between 'delinquent', a state of being; and 'at-risk', suggesting a vulnerable person in need of some help. However, the term 'at-risk' has become a buzz word that is too vague and focuses on the negative (Kamenetz, 2015). According to

Hartwick and Kubisiak (2014) a label is socially constructed and often places a devaluing status on people. The label may mean that a person is in need of services but comes with stigmatizing effects as well (Hartwick & Kubisiak, 2014). Negative labels have been shown to result in internal attributions than external attributions when it comes to negative behavior (Hartwick & Kubisiak, 2014). For example, when a student is labeled ‘at-risk’ of delinquent behaviour such as ‘skipping school’ they will receive internal attributions and then purposely skip school. However, if the label is positive, such as ‘this student is motivated’ then it is more likely to be perceived externally and the student will show others how motivated he/she actually is (Hartwick & Kubisiak, 2014).

Using AOP and labelling theory alongside the macro, meso and exo levels of system theory allows for an exploration of the issues established by policy and its practice at organisational levels. This was helpful especially in relation to the zero-tolerance policy that is well established in the school system. Using EST at the micro levels assisted with extending the analysis to include the impact of that policy on the individual.

Design and Methodology

The research used an inductive and exploratory qualitative research design. The sample was small in size and explored the research topic to gain additional knowledge about youth and gangs in Abbotsford. This study used semi-structured interviews, which is best suited for qualitative data analysis (Dudley, 2011). Semi-structured interviews provide higher response rates by directly interviewing participants versus other means such as surveys (Dudley, 2011). I used probing questions for in-depth information gathering as well. The design and methodology were used to gather information and narratives from frontline youth workers, who work directly with youth, on the path towards possible gang involvement.

Sampling and Recruitment

The research used non-probability key informant sampling technique (Dudley, 2011). It is non-probability because this research will not generalize its findings to a larger population (Dudley, 2011). Key informants were carefully chosen based on special knowledge/experience about a specific topic (Dudley, 2011). The key informants included five participants who work directly with youth who are considered to be at-risk of gang involvement. Participation was voluntary.

The research participants were recruited via email recruitment letter (see Appendix A), approved by the Ethics Review Board of University of the Fraser Valley (see Appendix B). The participants were eligible and accepted as they met the criteria of being frontline youth workers in Abbotsford, who work with youth ages 13-17 deemed to be ‘at-risk’ of possible gang involvement. Combined, the participants represented over 60 years of work experience working with youth in Abbotsford.

Data Collection and Analysis

I completed five one-on-one, in person, semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. The open-ended questions gathered insight into participants’ knowledge base, service, and experience (Dudley, 2011). The interviews ranged from sixteen minutes to fifty-five minutes in length. The place and time of interviews were determined by the participants based on their own comfort and convenience. All participants signed the consent forms approved by the University of the Fraser Valley Ethics Board (see Appendix C). The questions asked were formed by the researcher and approved by University of the Fraser Valley Ethics Board, while additional clarifying questions were also asked as interview progressed. The data was collected

on to the researchers' audio recording iPhone device as the questions were asked to the participants. This iPhone device is secured by a password.

The participants were asked about their experience of working with youth and gangs. The questions asked of participants included what barriers they see to youth becoming productive members of society and their knowledge of how these barriers come about. Next, they were asked about the referral process and criterion, for example mental health and addiction services and have these labels interrupted getting adequate services. There was insight offered regarding the labelling of youth in Abbotsford with various systems involved and participants were asked to identify the benefits and limitations of such labels. The participants were also asked of mentoring or alternative services available to youth in order to shed these labels and become productive members of society. The participants were asked about the risk factors involved when working with youth, such as addictions, negative behaviour and family dynamics as they worked through cases of youth with possible involvement in gangs.

Once the data was recorded on an audio recording device, the data was then transcribed onto the researchers' laptop which was also password protected. I have password protected both the iPhone recording device and my laptop for confidentiality and privacy purposes of the raw data. Participant responses were analysed to discover possible themes arising. The data was then reviewed again to find additional themes. The researcher presented the themes as findings using direct quotes of participants to support the themes.

Ethical Considerations

This research study was completely voluntary and participants could withdraw anytime. Initially, I obtained informed consent by participants signing a consent form before proceeding with the interview. Through this process I made sure the participants knew about the process,

including anonymity, audio recording privacy and destruction of raw data. According to Dudley (2011) ethical issues can arise in studies; fortunately, many can be prevented. Anonymity is important because participants will be speaking about their specific systems and areas they work within. Issues of identification may jeopardize employment. Participants did not have to disclose their names, employment and specific information that may identify themselves. Therefore, confidentiality was discussed and maintained throughout and after the research was completed. Confidentiality is when the researcher knows the names of people interviewed and promises not to disclose outside the research team and making sure that data does not identify the person involved (Dudley, 2011). Data was destroyed from computers and the iPhone device once the research paper was handed in to the faculty of Social Work at University of the Fraser Valley.

The researcher adhered by the University of the Fraser Valley code of Ethics and BC College of Social Workers Code of Ethics. Dudley (2011) explains that “social work values and ethics are central mandate that guides social work practice and social work research” (Dudley, 2011, pg. 57). The researcher did not misrepresent any information and continually consulted with supervisors on a regular and ongoing basis throughout the study. There were no consequences for participants to leave the research at any point nor there were any professional conflicts going forward. The researcher was committed to diversity, professionalism and equality throughout the research project.

Findings

Theme Analysis

The study looked to answer the research question of- *“What do front-line youth workers in Abbotsford believe are the benefits and limitations related to the label of "at-risk" for Abbotsford youth of possible gang involvement, and how can youth shed this label?”* The

questions itself positions three categories to explore. First, there are benefits related to the application of the “at-risk” label for Abbotsford youth of possible gang involvement. Second, there are drawbacks related to the label of “at-risk”. Last, how can youth shed this label. Within these three categories, there are themes identified to capture the insight of each participant interviewed as it relates to the categories.

The *benefits* of the “at-risk” label for Abbotsford youth with possible involvement in gangs identified one theme after taking a closer look at each interview. All participants talked about the opportunities and resources that become available for youth that may be beneficial to “at-risk” youth in terms of education support, employment and alternative support structures. Participants have also recognised that youth may ignore resources offered or it may not be the right resource. Participant 2 shared that it becomes a “filtering process”, (a process of elimination of programs offered to the youth until they get into the best-suited program) to get to the root of the issue in order to provide proper services. They also share that due to lack of funding, services may not be available. This section will discuss collaboration of agencies in Abbotsford.

The *limitations* of the “at-risk” label for Abbotsford youth with possible gang involvement identified three main themes. These include Ongoing Label Attachment, Identity and Negative Labelling. All participants provided insight into what happens to youth, once they have been identified as “at-risk”. However, some participants shared that youth have to struggle harder and some youth may not even identify with the marker. This will be discussed further. The category of *how to shed these labels* of “at-risk” labels identified three themes. All participants provided insight on how coaching helped youth become empowered and, in the process, shed the “at-risk” label. The first subtheme identified is Coaching, a service provided to youth. Second, all participants talked about relational opportunities with youth and where they

can share their experience, strengths and aspirations. However, participants have also shared that some youth cannot remove the label of “at-risk” once identified due to stigma and other psychosocial factors, which will be discussed as Image as the third theme identified by the participants.

Benefits

Resources and Opportunities.

The benefits young people attach to being as “at-risk” are discussed in the interviews. The participants shared their knowledge of how having a label can aid in providing additional opportunities through resources for the youth that are “at-risk” of possible gang involvement. They shared their experience in providing useful resources that could help youth distant themselves from gang life. Tapping into what the goals of the youth is very important.

Programs in schools, I mean, your biggest deterrent to gang activity is giving the kids something else to engage in. So you have to find out what that kid's engaged in and then try to connect that kid to that activity. It could be sports, it could be school, it could be something in the community that is not related to the life of a gang. So I think that's the first part (Participant 4)

I think you get more attention, right? So that at-risk label would give you more resources, and potential people that are willing to mentor these at-risk...better themselves through school or better themselves through a workplace... there are more opportunities at them to get help. (Participant 2)

All participants shared their experience of referring youth to programs across Abbotsford as a beneficial tool for the youth’s development. For example: Participant 5 shared that IMPACT (local service offering substance abuse counselling) and Cyrus (local service of youth “at-risk” of homelessness) were resources that youth could utilize as part of their journey. The participants also highlight the current progression of Molly, which is a street name for MDMA, a popular rave drug.

We're really fortunate to have IMPACT, and have Cyrus. Absolutely. But I think that the whole drug scene has gotten so much bigger. I mean, we never talked about Molly (Participant 5).

Most participants spoke specifically of the “In It Together” program offered in Abbotsford.

Within the ‘In It Together’ program, there are multiple streams, which assist youth who are ‘at-risk’ of possible gang involvement. These streams include South Asian Community Resource Office (SACRO), Youth Resource Centre (YRC), Abbotsford Police Department (APD), School District and John Howard Society. This resource, once youth were identified as “at-risk” of gang involvement offered a positive benefit of the label.

...these type of programs offer a lot of services to different kids, like the In It Together program, for example, that works with kids to accomplish their individual goals. And they have essential skills that works with job-ready, creating a resume, registering for university. And other services are offered are through the family educator that works primarily with the family. And there's also counseling. (Participant 3).

Okay. Well, I know there's a program called In It Together, which is run through Abbotsford Community Services in conjunction with the school board which I believe houses it's main focus, or one of it's main focuses, the involvement of youth in gangs (Participant 4)

In Abbotsford, well, the ones I use are-- well, there's counselors, SACRO, In It Together program. There's some mentorship programs that go through restorative justice and kind of the programs that I would be using (Participant 2)

Well with gangs, the SACRO and the Abbotsford Police are the two main ones... With youth, generally, I use the In It Together program tons. Abbotsford Community Services with the different programs there, YRC, I work with the schools... I use Youth Forensics, and then other full-time attendant programs like Daughters & Sisters, and Head Start, and IPP, and we've got programs all the way in province that we use as well (Participant 1)

Resources were seen as a benefit to “at-risk” youth. However, there were some hesitations by the participants. They expressed their frustration of improper assessments to put in place adequate intervention plan. Hess (2016) reflected this and states people in schools go too far and quickly

suspend or expel youth. As a result of safety concerns, education may be jeopardized or limited and professionals react accordingly, which may also limit resources.

Maybe at first when people try to figure out what area of that risk they're in. But I think it's a filtering out process. I think if they could at least get that first initial person to sit down with them and go through it, there's a process that can be followed after that.
(Participant 2)

And once they're labeled at-risk they lose their opportunity for education. I've got multiple kids connected to the violence who, because they have any kind of connection to that, they're either a risk to people or they're a risk to being around people because they are a potential target. Either of those things put them in a category where we are not going to provide them with education, except virtually, which doesn't work for the kids
(Participant 1)

Participant 1 identifies the lack of collaboration when agencies are involved with the youth. This makes the journey a longer process than anticipated. Participant 1 highlights that professionals need to take a macro look at this issue rather than just using a micro lens (Ettkel & Mahoney, 2017) to identify the issue. Macro issues involves the various systems that play a part in the lives of youth. Jull (2000) explains that as times have changed, traditional methods of schools need to be re-examined, and therefore policies need to be only “working-documents’ (Jull, 2000).

And I think it makes it a little more urgent. I think it may open up additional services. It may open up-- or may increase the frequency of services and may open the breadth of services, as well... We've got not a huge amount of funding going into this, and not a huge amount of collaboration (Participant 1)

Participant 2 expresses the concern of youth actually accepting the resources that are offered to them. This nullifies the benefit of the ‘at-risk’ label when providing services.

But if they're at risk and they're coming in and they don't want to get help, they're not going to benefit from it at all (Participant 2)

Limitations

Ongoing Label Attachment.

The limitations of having a negative label on can be self-defeating. Participant 2 and 4 shared their experience of how the label sticks with the youth moving forward. This becomes challenging for youth when moving around the systems. “At-risk” becomes more a barrier to progress in the future for youth; therefore, youth may have to struggle harder.

And I think the barriers they carry will always be with them, I think, until they move into a different area, or different atmosphere altogether because I think if you're labeled that, people always label you that. They'll always be cautious of that person, or wondering what their underlying motives would be (Participant 2)

They get a sense that there's something different about me, and so engaging in regular programming or main scene programming becomes a little bit more challenging because they've already established in their own mind that they're going to have troubles because somebody told me I'm at-risk or somebody's labeled me as at-risk (Participant 4)

Participant 4 elaborates on how young people internalize the label, thereby reinforcing the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Becker, 1963). This can become a barrier to moving forward.

And they're probably different than the mainstream kids and that they would have to struggle harder, and that they would have other barriers that preclude them from maybe achieving the same level of success in the same amount of time. So I think the self-identification of being at-risk, or troubled, or whatever it is goes a long way (Participant 4)

Identity.

The labels itself may cause professionals to assume certain characteristics concerning the identity of a troubled youth. There are preconceived notions about what the youth's motives may be in terms schooling and future goals. The theory chapter explained self-fulfilling prophecies and their negative affects especially in relation to education and higher education (Hartwick &

Kubisiak, 2014). Participant 4 shares their struggle with the ways in which the assumptions of professionals contribute to inadequate programming. For example:

Another barrier that goes along with that label is just through programming when a kid is labeled at-risk or youth is labeled at-risk, and they transfer from one program to another, there's preconceived notions that end up following that kid institutionally. So from one high school to another, there might be this sense amongst teachers, or administrators, or counselors that we're getting a kid with this label. They'd make the assumptions, and then perhaps those barriers associated with those assumptions already. And that kid might even be put in the wrong program based on assumptions that may no longer be true, or maybe assumptions that were based more on their previous situation rather than what's currently happening. So that could be another barrier (Participant 4)

Furthermore, another participant reveals how professionals may label youth due to liability concerns. This may lead further assumptions about the youth that were initially unanticipated, making things uncomfortable and perhaps intrusive.

It's easy for people with liability to do that more readily. Within the Ministry, I see higher levels more willing to drop a label and less willing to open up what it means. And, I mean, in my practice I try hard not to do that, just so I can use what I need to work with the kid (Participant 1)

Negative Labelling.

Self-negative labelling was another discovery that both participants observed as frontline workers. Youth may adopt the label given to them. They share that youth would often use labels provided by authorities to identify themselves or ‘live up to that label’.

Well, when you see a kid walk in, say, "Yeah, I'm OCD. I'm ADHD. I'm--" all these labels. And so it's kind of a justification for their behavior. "It's not my fault ma'am because I have all these labels." (Participant 5). Another participant delivers their observed behaviour of labelled youth and states, "If you start labeling a kid from a young age that he's a bad kid, he's a bad kid, he's going to live up to the label (Participant 3)

Another limitation of the “at-risk” label was the negative connotation that it provided, along with lowered expectations. Participants shared their experience of how these labels can easily be

perceived as negative by both authorities and the youth themselves. Other participants provided insight that when dealing with multiple disciplines, young peoples actions that can have serious consequences. Participants shares that,

Soon as you start labeling a person as a bad person, well, chances are he's going to live up to the label and it's going to be really hard for him to get away. And once you label someone, it's really hard to peel the label away just because if one school and the police label a kid a bad kid and he gets kicked out or expelled, the other school's going to be hesitant to accept him (Participant 3).

If they're negative labels, labels tend to break down a person I think instead build up a person. So, again, whether a student labels themselves as at-risk or somebody else labels them at-risk, I think they probably know that they're somewhere on the spectrum (Participant 4)

Nonetheless, Participant 1 provided insight that youth may not even know the label that being place upon the youth. Meaning of the label is unusual to the youth and youth may feel simply judged by professionals. The language, jargon and buzzwords that service providers use may not be understood by the youth, as this participant shares:

I don't know if kids necessarily understand what we mean by at-risk. So I don't know that they're going to own that (Participant 1)

How Youth Shed “at-risk” Label

Coaching and Mentoring.

Adult mentors for youth can have positive outcomes as explained by participants. Participants believed that if young people had someone to speak to or be part of their journey through social supports, this can deter youth from gang involvement and possibly help shed the “at-risk” label. The participants share their hopes of what the community can offer.

And so they have more supports, more youth workers in schools, more learning support service people. They have Core, which, has their supports and their counsellors. They have police going into the school when they're grade two, kind of thing. (Participant 5).

And we need more proactive stuff, like productive stuff, to keep kids occupied with their leisure time so they're staying away from their negative peers, from the delinquent activities. So we need more stuff like basketball camps, hockey camps, football camps, and using sports as a gateway to help kids stay attached to school and stay away from negative peers and keeping busy (Participant 3)

Give them opportunities to show that they're not that person that everybody said that they were. Because I think deep down, all of these youth are really not those-- they're not really the labels that they've been placed with. They are different than that. The labels are a product of circumstance, and environment, and experiences, but it's not truly who they are. And so if you give them a chance express who they actually are in a different situation, the label, I think it eventually goes away (Participant 4)

Participant 2 further elaborates that guidance for youth can help shed the 'at-risk' label and eventually become productive citizens.

I think it's guidance. Again, guidance. Get these kids into programs that they become productive and get them to new associates, new friends, people that are trying to be productive citizens (Participant 2)

Relationship Building.

The participants identified what has worked in their field. They shared how institutions and workers can also help youth to shed this label. Relationship building was emphasised when working with youth.

Every aspect comes down to relationship, and that is across the board...Our academic is totally secondary; it's emotional, social support and based totally on relationship. (Participant 5).

But that's the work. I mean, if you hit that level, all the stuff underneath it is done, right? And I wish the systems would recognize that it's a deeper commitment, it's a deeper set of work, it's a deeper set of accomplishments we're trying to get too. (Participant 1)

Another participant also responded that adults who care can help youth shed this label. Going beyond their professional role expectations can be valuable in terms of prevention. For example:

We need adults that care about making a difference in the youth's lives. For example, we had a teacher from an alternate school - I'm not going to mention his name - but he worked really well with kids. And so, for example, for him, he didn't care if a kid was selling dope or you know what, like what color his skin was. He connected well. And the kids engaged with him, worked well with him, and he helped them graduate high school. And that's what we need, adults that care. (Participant 3)

And for the kids, it's a huge leap of faith they have to trust and they have to be open and willing to take advantage of opportunity. But if you built a solid, and sound, and trusting respectful relationship with the student regardless of their background, whatever label they have, you're likely to have more success. Success is not guaranteed, but the relationship becomes the basis for any success (Participant 4)

So if you present, assume with an opportunity to do a work experience placement, or to experience a career, or to take advantage of to change the opportunity, or social opportunity, or a team related opportunity, if they do that, they start to make changes within themselves (Participant 4)

But the real job is deeper than that. It's bigger than that. It's about supporting and helping kids to succeed, and grow, and develop (Participant 1)

Participant 2 talks about making parents aware of issues. This can go along way as there may be a parent who the youth looks up to as a role model.

And if we're talking the gang side of it, it's making the parents aware. If you don't make a guardian, i.e., parents, if you don't make them aware of the issue and acknowledge the issue, then there's nothing that can be done (Participant 2)

I honestly believe, has less to do with the community and the schools and what's offered, and more to do with the parents and the relationships at home. (Participant 4)

Image.

Image becomes a situation where one may have to uphold it or let it go. Participant 2 shares how youth may possibly admire the identity that labels convey as they provide attention or popularity. Youth may perceive these tags as badges of honour or medallions.

It's tough when it [inaudible], I guess because some people like to have that label. They like that image of knowing that people are maybe intimidated or scared by them, right? So I think the individual-- it's going to either go one way or the other basically. I don't think it's in between (Participant 2)

If it's something that they can say is, "Live it up more because I'll get more attention," which comes with an image (Participant 2)

However, Participant 1 and 2 believe that image can change if youth do not care what others think of them. Participant 2 highlights that picking new friends and engaging in sports or activities can create a new and improved label therefore shedding the negative label.

Well, I think A is, not care what other people think about them. So if they can get into this program and have people start believing in them, because they're doing it for the right reasons, then I think they can get through it because the people that they used to hang out with wouldn't be their friends anyways anymore. So they'd be getting new friends and gaining new image as a productive person in society, right? Lot of them that would get out would be-- go to university and then they shed that image stuff behind them. And now they're getting an education of like-minded people, and I think that's one of the ways they'll have to do it or moving away. Getting out of this same atmosphere that they grew up in or live in (Participant 2)

To move beyond that label, I think, what they're going to have to do is improve and show a reduced risk. So they're going to have to do something in their world or multiple things in their world so that the people around them worry less. And when people worry less the label is going to disappear. So they may start attending school regularly. They may get a job. They may start working with mental health. They may stop using drugs. (Participant 1)

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the benefits and limitations of the 'at-risk' label, its contributing factors, and how youth can possibly shed this label moving forward. Youth workers in Abbotsford were interviewed about their experiences, knowledge and interventions. Their input provided clear evidence about the benefits and limitations of the 'at-risk' label when working with youth. These participants also provided input to systemic challenges of using the 'at-risk' label, which will allow my research to clarify possible further research topics. It was interesting that while many participants talked about schools and their influence on young people

and the labelling process, none of the participants mentioned zero tolerance policies. Many of the comments in the previous section appear to implicitly relate to the labelling process of zero tolerance policies at the micro level and not at the higher levels of interaction. This may have been because the workers were all frontline practitioners rather than policy makers or managers. What was also surprising was that labelling was seen as an ambivalent practice offering both benefits and limitations for those youth labelled.

When it comes to benefits of the ‘at-risk’ label, there emerged a theme of resources and opportunities. Second, when examining the limitations of the ‘at-risk’ label, there were three themes evident: Ongoing Label Attachment, Identity, and Negative Labelling. Last, when working with youth, how can youth shed the label? This area provided three themes, which included Coaching, Relationship Building and Image. This area requires work that involves youth participation and service providers to work collaboratively to address the concerns.

According to the research participants, the benefits of the ‘at-risk’ label included the provision of resources and opportunities for the youth to flourish in their adolescent years. The participants gave clear and concrete examples of what services are available to youth during the emergence of the ‘at-risk’ identity. Community resources provided excellent support to youth to further their life and manage the life stressors safely and therapeutically. The issue that the participants noted was, ‘do these youths want the services?’. Therefore, the participants aren’t questioning whether these resources and opportunities are there, but question whether youth are engaging in the best-suited programs. According to the literature, there is lack of resources for the youth to engage in and therefore school responses are to suspend or expel such youth (Teske, 2011). However, according to the literature, Milne and Aurini (2015) explain that having the ‘at-risk’ label provides parents and youth opportunities to become part of the solution and negotiate

interventions with school administrators. The participants did mention that parents are a key focus when providing intervention. Participant 2 provides a great example when stating that parents need to be made aware when youth are presented as ‘at-risk’. Participant 4 further mentions that relationships at home need to be strong in order for the youth to work through issues. Further research can explore family interventions, youth engagement and better school responses and examine the possibility of how these areas can benefit the youth when they are labelled.

The limitations of the ‘at-risk’ label seemed to be the core of the research with in-depth narratives provided by the participants. The themes outlined by the participants were Ongoing Label Attachment to the youth, Identity made by others and Negative labelling. These themes brought up concerns regarding risk factors, self-identity and school responses that were consistent with the literature, especially regarding school responses and zero-tolerance policies. Participants each talked about the ways in which labels potentially perpetuate the risk factors into adulthood, therefore reflecting the longstanding negative influence that labelling of youth in the school system can have. Ultimately, this research illustrates that labels create more damaging effects to youth than actual benefits. This is also consistent with the literature; Hartwick and Kubisiak (2014) explain that labels may mean people are in need of some service but are confronted with stigma as a result of the labelling process as well.

Participants also talked about the school responses and how school personnel may give youth the sense that they are different and some young people may have to struggle harder than the ‘mainstream’ youth to achieve the same educational goals. It was interesting to note that the research participants and the literature were accurate and provided strong evidence that negative self-labelling happens and has far reaching consequences for young people. When youth are

repeatedly told that they are different, then the labelling process leading to suspensions and expulsions takes shape. This leads to some youth internalizing these labels and ‘live up to’ the label, and what that label says about them, fulfilling these self-fulfilling prophecies (Hartwick and Kubisiak, 2014). Further research in this area can look in to the working with youth at the root of their issues and changing the ‘at-risk’ language and possibly better intervention and prevention methods undertaken in schools.

When talking about how youth can shed the label of ‘at-risk’, the participants alluded to the idea of youth and service providers working together and having a strong relationship. However, the benefits of a possibly positive image of the ‘at-risk’ label that may be appealing to youth concerning greater credibility and identity with their peers. Nonetheless, literature and the participant’s responses were consistent when talking about the collaborative relationships that are important to human development.

The Office of BC Representative of Child and Youth (2014) states that youth need love and reliable support to grow into healthy adults. Many participants were clear in providing solid evidence that strong and healthy relationships are important and mention that these relationships can come in the forms of mentorship and role models. It was interesting to learn the schools may not have these resources for youth, thus relying on community services. We know that community resources have limited funds which may only leave the option of suspending or expelling youth from schools. Further research could look in to what programmes schools have that work or do not work. Does more collaboration need to happen in order to get funding or programming? Do schools use the idea of displacement until it becomes someone else’s issue, thus ignoring the issue at hand?

At a macro level, further research could look into how collaborating between the systems such as Ministry of Child and Family Development with the School System could benefit micro level frontline worker interventions. The better the understanding of how policy impacts practice may help to reduce the numbers of youth being excluded from school, and therefore reduce potential gang membership.

From this research study and of the previous research noted in the literature review, we know that traditionally the main disciplinary intervention used by schools is to suspend and expel youth if they were not cooperating with the normal conduct rules set out by the school. We also know, according to labelling theory that “one’s self concept is continually bombarded by the adult world’s hostile treatment, one cannot be expected to consider oneself a worthwhile person” (as cited in Al-Talib & Griffin, 1994, pg. 48). Al-Talib and Griffin (1994), cite Jensen (1972), and also share that once a young person has been declared once as delinquent, then that same person will think and feel themselves as delinquents as well (Al-Talib and Griffin, 1994). Understanding the labelling process and raising awareness in the education system may help educators and service providers to question why we continue to label young people.

Reflecting on the data there were definitely some inconsistencies between what is actually happening and what was discussed in the literature review. Cultural background is an area that could be examined further. For example, the focus in Abbotsford is on South Asian youth gangs, whereas the literature refers to the prevalence of Aboriginal and Black youth gangs. Therefore, the role of race and socioeconomic status is significant when ‘at-risk’ labels are being perpetuated and while beyond the scope of this study, does require further research. Gender is another important area that could have been examined by this research, which was alluded to by the literature that there are specific risks involved with either gender. Also, street addiction and

the ways in which youth find attachment and excitement on the streets to fulfill deficits in their own personal lives is an interesting area that could benefit from further exploration.

Implications

Implications for Social Work Practice

Implications for social workers at the micro level of interactions are quite evident, in terms of involvement in the school system. The Ministry of Children and Family Development are probably the most involved social workers with the school districts. When high case load social workers are working with youth, there are frequent turn overs of social workers, which leads to a lack of consistency in the relationship with the young person. According to Guenther (2012), he shares that youth get assigned to new workers frequently in child protection, which then jeopardizes the trust, relationships and the support plan itself (Guenther, 2012). This inconsistency of social workers directly effects the educational development for the youth. Once again, the case for preventative measures is apparent, rather than services being reactive once the issues have been identified. For example, Guenther (2012) states that the public needs to know that providing supports and resources should be at the front rather than paying for jails and youth detentions later on. In terms of resources, social workers could be more involved in the school district system, rather than just the teachers taking on the caseload entirely, this may not be possible due to funding issues. Hess (2016) explains that professionals who suspend youth do so as a last resort, and this shows a lack of training within their profession (Hess, 2016). However, Smyth (2013) acknowledges that social workers in general also have a tough time working with ‘at-risk’ youth because they constantly challenge the workers’ ethics and boundaries (Smyth, 2013). Traditionally, the process for suspensions was undertaken by school boards and principals, this however changed and now the teachers, with an already high classroom volume,

are part of this decision making. It may be the case that teacher training may overlook issues such as cultural inclusion, crisis interventions, and self-care.

Government and Funding Issues

At the macro level, government funding needs to support programs in communities and schools. According to Guenther (2012) the policy makers are business people and politicians, who have little insight about working with street or at-risk youth. Further, most school board members are usually high-ranking business personnel, who bring in a business model perspective rather than a community development solution (Guenther, 2012). This informs us that community development is not a primary concern and the disconnection between multiple agencies will be ongoing. On the other hand, the BC Ministry of Education (1999) shared in their report that it is the time to bring families, communities and schools together to collaborate on ideas (BC Ministry of Education, 1999). However, as for funding, most resources focus on crisis work at the expense of prevention and support (Guenther, 2012). Social workers need to advocate and lobby policy makers to ensure they are held accountable. To do otherwise, may result in higher rather than lower gang recruitment in BC.

Conclusion

Youth are constantly reminded by adults that adults know best. Stories from young people are not being acknowledged, nor their voices heard. Schools are tasked with the responsibility of addressing safety when working with ‘at-risk’ youth, especially if there are issues of violence. However, the reality is that violence has decreased in schools generally and students are simply being excluded under the zero-tolerance policy of the public educational system, leaving them vulnerable to gang recruitment.

One of the research themes highlights that schools can be safer if there are coaches, mentors, support groups and strong relationships where students can work through their issues, trauma or stress. To achieve this, resources need to be equally allocated in the district so all students can have the same access to opportunities. Schools should not favour the higher socio-economic status youth and exclude the lower socio-economic status youth on to the streets or the criminal justice system. The business model in my opinion is not appropriate when dealing with young people's lives. In my experience, youth who have been constantly rejected by adults, will have a very hard time trusting an adult, which makes the relationship building process longer, resulting in lost opportunities.

The research study has highlighted how the role of schools and the way they implement their policy, and especially the zero tolerance policy, has far reaching, and for the most part negative consequences on youth. Through this policy youth are negatively labelled and this often results in an 'at risk' label being applied to them which shapes and limits their future opportunities, while at the same time increases their vulnerability of joining a gang. A better understanding and more thoughtful application of the policy could reduce the negative consequence of the labelling process, reduce school expulsions and ultimately reduce gang membership.

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Appendix A



Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Devinder Dhaliwal, a Masters of Social Work student at the University of the Fraser Valley. My research study involves working with youth and I am passionate about helping our youth to become productive members of our society. When youth are identified as at-risk youth of possible gang involvement in the community of Abbotsford, there seems to be a multitude of barriers against youth when trying to become productive members of society in adulthood. Once at-risk, youth are negatively labelled which can limit their access to positive resources such as school teams, clubs and school based projects. Long term, their chances of seeking meaningful employment, completing school and access to college can also become limited due to the barriers involved.

Purpose/Objectives of the Study

In Abbotsford, youth, ages 13-18, that are at risk of possible gang involvement, are facing challenges to move forward, once they have become identified. I am curious to find out what frontline youth workers believe are the benefits and drawbacks of the 'at-risk' label and how can youth shed this label.

Procedures involved in the Research

Participants will voluntarily join the research study. Data will be collected through an interview process using open-ended questions. Participants are able to choose the location they are comfortable. The interview will take maximum of 30 minutes about their perception of what barriers at-risk youth are facing when reintegrating back into the community. Participant can withdraw anytime they wish. The interview will be audio recorded using my password protected iPhone. The interview will be anonymous and coded when analyzing data. All documents and audio will be destroyed once paper is handed in.

Potential Benefits

This research is important for frontline youth workers in Abbotsford because we together can advocate for 'at-risk' youth to help minimize challenges of becoming productive members of society. With minimal barriers, I believe the youth can become productive adults in our community.

If you would like participate in this interview, please respond back to my email, [REDACTED]. Thank you in advance, for your consideration!

Devinder Dhaliwal, Masters of Social Work Student, University of the Fraser Valley

Appendix B



Certificate of Human Research Ethics Board Approval

Contact Person Devinder Dhaliwal	Department Social Work	Protocol # 965S-17
Co-investigator(s) Darrell Fox		
Title of Project Youth and Gangs		
Sponsoring/Funding Agency N/A		
Institution(s) where research will be carried out University of the Fraser Valley		
Review Date: 27-Mar-17	Approval Date: 12-Apr-17	Approval Term: 12-Apr-17 - 11-Apr-18

Certification:

The protocol describing the above-named project has been reviewed by the UFV Human Research Ethics Board, and the procedures were found to be in compliance with accepted guidelines for ethical research.



Michelle Riedlinger, Chair, Human Research Ethics Board

NOTE: This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above noted term provided there is no change in the procedures or criteria given.

If the project will go beyond the approval term noted above, an extension of approval must be requested.

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Appendix C



Devinder Dhaliwal

Masters of Social Work
University of the Fraser Valley
33844 King Road
Abbotsford, BC V2S 7M8
604-504-7441

Letter of Informed Consent for Interview

My name is Devinder Dhaliwal, a Masters of Social Work student at the University of the Fraser Valley. My research study involves working with youth and I am passionate about helping our youth to become productive members of our society. When youth are identified as at-risk youth of possible gang involvement in the community of Abbotsford, there seems to be a multitude of barriers against youth when trying to become productive members of society in adulthood. Once at-risk, youth are negatively labelled which can limit their access to positive resources such as school teams, clubs and school based projects. Long term, their chances of seeking meaningful employment, completing school and access to college can also become limited due to the barriers involved.

Purpose/Objectives of the Study

In Abbotsford, youth, ages 13-18, that are at risk of possible gang involvement, are facing challenges to move forward, once they have become identified. I am curious to find out what frontline youth workers perceive are challenges that youth with possible gang issues face to become productive members of society in their adulthood.

Procedures involved in the Research

You will voluntarily join the research study. Data will be collected through an interview process using open-ended questions. You are able to choose the location you are comfortable with. The interview will take maximum of 30 minutes about your perception of what barriers at-risk youth are facing to become productive members of society. You can withdraw anytime you wish. The interview will be audio recorded on my password locked iPhone device. The interview will be anonymous and coded when analyzing data. All documents and audio will be destroyed once paper is handed in. After the interview, you can pass on my contact details to others who may be interested in being interviewed as part of the research.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts to Participants

You may become frustrated when talking about the barriers that you have no control over. Please remember that you do not have to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable and you can stop any time.

Potential Benefits

This research is important for frontline youth workers in Abbotsford because we together can advocate for 'at-risk' youth to help minimize challenges of becoming productive members of society. For example, early intervention prior to suspension/expulsions; focus on prevention with schools; changing the language to minimize labelling; focus on youth goals rather than punishment. With minimal barriers, I believe the youth can become productive adults in our community and deter from possible gang involvement.

Confidentiality

All responses will be kept confidential. Only persons to view the RAW DATA will be the researcher, Devinder Dhaliwal; my supervisor, Darrell Fox AND PROFESSOR LEAH DOUGLAS. Your privacy is respected. All data responses will be coded and documents and audio will be stored on computer with protected password. Once study is complete, the documents and audio will be immediately destroyed. The study will be complete and submitted by March 2018.

Participation

Participation in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without consequences. If you choose not to participate there is no penalty. You can also refuse to answer any questions but stay in the study. If you do decide to withdraw, your responses will not be used in the analysis and the data will be destroyed immediately. You can withdraw from the study by contacting Devinder Dhaliwal.

Study Results

A copy of the Master's Thesis will be held in the UFV Library. Participants will receive a copy of the report.

Questions

If you have any questions about the study you may contact Devinder Dhaliwal at

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If you have any concerns regarding your rights or welfare as a participant in this research study, please contact the Ethics Officer at 604-551-4011 or Research.Ethics@ufv.ca.

“The ethics of this research project have been reviewed and approved by the UFV Human Research Ethics Board.”

By signing below I agree to participate in this study, titled “*What do front-line youth workers in Abbotsford believe are the benefits and limitations related to the label of "at-risk" for Abbotsford youth of possible gang involvement, and how can youth shed this label?*”

I have read the information presented in the letter of informed consent being conducted by **Devinder Dhaliwal** at the University of the Fraser Valley. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive any additional details. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and that confidentiality of all results will be preserved. If I have any questions about the study, I should contact Devinder Dhaliwal at [REDACTED]

If I have any concerns regarding my rights or welfare as a participant in this research contact Dr. Adrienne Chan, UFV Associate Vice President of Research, Engagement, and Graduate Studies, at [REDACTED].

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Once signed, you will receive a copy of this consent form.