The Only Child Grows Up: Exploring
Adult Only-Child Educators

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of adult only-child educators. The researcher explored the extent to which the experiences of growing up in a one-child family influenced the participants’ professional experiences. This was a qualitative study. A narrative case study approach was used, and data were collected from 4 participants through 1-to-1 interviews. The narratives were analyzed, and common themes were identified.

The findings showed that many of the participants’ only-child experiences have influenced their professional roles as educators. This was largely with respect to their interactions with students. These participants valued positive relationships founded on genuine care and concern for their students. The participants also fostered a positive educational environment that provided high levels of support for the social learning and character development of their students.

There are several implications for educational practice resulting from this study. Educators and other school personnel must be critically aware of meeting the socialization needs of their students. Consideration must be given to developing school-wide initiatives related to the social skills development and character education of students. In addition, preservice and inservice teacher education programs must ensure that educators are prepared to provide rich environments where relationships with students are central and social learning opportunities are prevalent.
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CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

This study was designed to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of 4 adult only children whose chosen profession was in the field of education. The participants, 3 elementary teachers and 1 postsecondary educator, were interviewed about their only-child and professional experiences. As an only child and an educator, I was both the principal researcher and a participant in this study. Growing up without siblings, I encountered many of the common stereotypes associated with being an only child and had always been interested in the portrayal of the one-child family as “unique” (Polit & Falbo, 1987). As an educator, I have seen firsthand the impact that teachers have on their students, and the literature that I have read supports the observation that teacher characteristics have great influence on student success (Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). As an only child and teacher, I became interested in determining whether there was a connection between individuals’ status as an only child and their professional roles as educators. Searching for possible interconnections was the focus of this study.

Background of the Problem

Agreeing on a universal definition for the term “family” is difficult, and use of the term has become somewhat controversial lately (Popenoe, 1993). Changes throughout recent history have greatly impacted the structure of the family, and sociologists have expended considerable time mapping the changes in the structure of the family over this period of time (Kertzer, 1991). The family has often been described as the core unit of society and the foundation from which all of society’s structures are built. It has long been credited with the advancement of society, for the better or worse, because of its
primary role in the socialization of children (Bengtson, 2001; Popenoe; Schneiderman, 1979).

The History of the Family

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the household was the primary unit of production. Work and family were closely integrated, and gender roles were flexible (Wilkinson, 1999). All members of the “family” including servants, labourers, friends, and blood relatives, were expected to contribute to the needs of the household, where the emphasis was on completing required work. The family unit was a community of people working together in a primarily agrarian society (Wilkinson).

The Industrial Revolution brought wide-sweeping changes to society, including significant advances in science and technology, which resulted in increased production and urbanization. The family unit also experienced significant change during this period (Wilkinson, 1999). Production outside the household became more predominant, and gender roles became more defined. The extended family of the prerevolution era eventually gave way to smaller family units. This downsized family unit became known as the “nuclear family” (Popenoe, 1993; Wilkinson).

The nuclear family, also commonly referred to as the traditional family, was originally defined as a married husband and wife and their biological children. This definition was precise and unambiguous. Fathers worked outside the home as breadwinners, while mothers took care of the family’s needs inside the home. On average, the traditional family had 2.2 children. This definition of family continued to dominate in the postrevolution years (Wilkinson, 1999).
Our recent history, however, has continued to see major changes in the structure of the family (Bengtson, 2001). Although the nuclear family is still considered the ideal family unit by many, our current reality suggests that families now come in many different forms (Popenoe, 1993; Schneiderman, 1979). The “traditional family” has become the minority, with the number of households comprised of married couples and their children on a steady decline and with many more mothers choosing to enter the workforce (Popenoe; Wilkinson, 1999). As nonnuclear families become more commonplace, society has looked to alter the definition of family. Sociologists have identified and described many different family forms: traditional or nuclear, two-parent working, single-parent, blended, adopted child, test-tube, surrogate mother, and coparent families, for example (Wilkinson).

The structure of the family has changed over the last century, and today the term refers to many different combinations and arrangements. The nuclear family of the past has given way to the nonnuclear families of today. Perhaps one of the earliest deviations from the traditional nuclear family was the one-child family.

*The Role of Family in Socialization*

The significant impact of family environment on individuals’ development has been recognized by social scientists for many years (Popenoe, 1993). Regardless of the exact circumstances of the family dynamic, it contributes extensively to life experiences, behaviours, and development (Schneiderman, 1979). The extent of this impact has been explored from numerous perspectives, including its impact on personality. More specifically, personality theorists such as Alfred Adler have described birth rank, or ordinal position within the family, as having a great influence in overall development.
Individuals sharing the same ordinal position within their respective families have been said to share certain behaviours and personality traits (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Ernst & Angst, 1983; Nyman, 1995; Thompson, 1974).

“Only child” is the common term for an individual that grows up in a family without siblings. Although the one-child family was perhaps one of the earliest variations of the traditional family, early researchers did not show much interest in the experiences of only children (Polit & Falbo, 1987). As researchers began to realize that only children were part of a unique family structure, interest in examining their reality burgeoned (Rosenberg & Hyde, 1992). Early researchers routinely characterized only children in largely negative ways and concluded that their family dynamic was detrimental to their overall development (Falbo, 1977). Although more current research has indicated that only children are in fact more similar to children with siblings than originally thought, these early studies created such pervasive negative images of the only child that stereotypes continue to be commonplace in today’s society (Baskett, 1985; Blake, 1981; Falbo; Falbo & Polit, 1986; Nyman, 1995; Polit, Nuttall, & Nuttall, 1980).

As an only child myself, I was aware of and often experienced these deep-rooted stereotypes firsthand. My experiences growing up as an only child were consistently positive, and I felt that the negative perceptions of only children were unfair and unwarranted. I did not perceive myself in many of the ways that others did. I did not feel that I was spoiled, but those around me expected that I was, simply because I was an only child. People were often surprised to find out that I was an only child because I was quite outgoing and social. They expected me to be shy and reserved, because that was their perception of only children. There is no doubt that being an only child impacted my own
development in significant ways. I developed a very close relationship with my parents, and friendships have always been very important to me. It also influenced my decision to have more than one child of my own.

The current investigation allowed me to investigate more closely the lived experiences of other only children and compare them to my own. Because family dynamic has been shown to impact one’s development (Phillips & Phillips, 2000; Polit & Falbo, 1987; Schneiderman, 1979), I believed it was reasonable to explore the potential impact it has on professional experiences. As a teacher, I was interested in examining the extent to which my only-child status has influenced my role as an educator. Therefore, the current investigation was designed to examine the impact of only-child experiences on professional experiences.

**Rationale**

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of 4 adult only-child educators. Overall, this topic explored two areas that have received little attention in empirical investigations. First, it offered a glimpse into the world of the adult only child. Much of the research on the only child has focused on children and adolescents, exploring their personality characteristics and intellectual development. I was interested in exploring the adult experiences of only children including their reflections on society’s perceptions of only children, their own only-child experiences, and the interconnections between their only-child status and their professional role as an educator. Second, it offered some insight into the professional experiences of only children. The interactions with students, the teaching styles, and educational environments as reported by the participants were explored carefully.
Problem to Be Studied

As a teacher and only child, I became interested in examining the possible connections between these two aspects of my life. Researchers have often described only children as disadvantaged by their lack of siblings, describing them as jealous, selfish, dependent, socially inept, anxious, and spoiled (Fenton, 1928; Howarth, 1980; Thompson, 1974). Despite more current research that describes onlies as remarkably similar to children with siblings (Falbo, 1977; Falbo & Polit, 1986; Polit, et al, 1980), societal perceptions of only children have not changed significantly and popular stereotypes about only children are still common (Baskett, 1985; Blake, 1981; Nyman, 1995). Research on effective teachers has identified numerous teacher characteristics as important determinants of student success. For instance, teachers who use a learner-centered approach, provide clear expectations, and build quality student relationships have been shown to improve student motivation and promote student success (Brophy & Good, 1986; Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The current study sought to explore the possible interconnections between the participants’ only-child status and their roles as educators. The following questions were used to guide the participants’ interviews about their only-child and professional experiences: What is the reality of the only-child experience as viewed by an adult only child? Do adult only children perceive themselves in the same ways that society views them? Does an individual’s status as an adult only child transfer into the craft of teaching?

Purpose of This Study

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of adult only-child educators. Gaps in the only-child literature, namely the experiences of adult only children
and the professional experiences of onlies, helped to frame the investigation. As a teacher, there was a personal interest in exploring the professional field of education. The primary question in this study is: What are the reflections of adult only children with respect to their status as onlies and their profession as educators?

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, I have used the term only child to refer to individuals who did not have biological siblings and who did not have any other children living in their childhood home. The terms only child, only children, onlies, and singletons are used interchangeably throughout this document to refer to this group of people.

**Outline of the Remainder of the Study**

There are four remaining chapters in this study. Chapter Two is a review of the relevant literature on only children and effective educators. Included in this review is a description of the early and current only-child research, with a discussion about the distinct differences found in research during these time periods. Some possible explanations for the discrepancies in these findings are also offered for consideration. The literature on effective educators is also reviewed and categorized into four main categories including teacher knowledge, teaching style and teacher characteristics, teacher affect, and classroom management. Considering the findings of both of these bodies of research is important in order to fully examine the main question in this investigation. Chapter Three outlines the methodology used throughout the study. It describes participant selection, instrumentation, data collection and data analysis procedures, and offers some assumptions and limitations associated with the study. Chapter Four presents the participants’ interviews in narrative form. It offers a detailed
description of each participant's only-child and professional experiences and describes themes shared across the participants' interviews. Chapter Five presents the conclusions and implications of the study. It discusses, in detail, the themes that emerged after analysis of the narratives: relationships as significant, formative experiences, character development, and an ethic of care. This chapter also discusses implications for future research and practice.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychologists and educational researchers have spent a significant number of resources studying the development of personality. This field of study can be documented as far back as 2 millennia to ancient Graeco-Roman physicians such as Hippocrates and Galenus, who linked four basic elements of the universe and four bodily fluids to four personality types (Van Lieshout, 2000). More recent research has resulted in the well-known nature versus nurture debate. This controversy has centered on the contributions of genetic factors and environmental influences (Schiamberg, 1988). Researchers have attributed personality development to both genetics and environment independently (Goldsmith & Gottesman, 1981; Kagan, Reznick, Clarke, Snidman, & Garcia-Coll, 1984) and in combination (Thomas, Chess, and Korn, 1982; Thomas et al., 1983 cited in Schiamberg, 1988). In most cases, social and behavioural scientists agree that children’s development is shaped “in nontrivial ways” by the environment in which they are raised (Downey, 2001, p. 497). One of the primary environmental influences is the family. Family position, or birth rank, has been toted by personality theorists such as Alfred Adler as having an effect on individuals’ experiences and development (Phillips & Phillips, 2000). It is this element that is of particular interest for the purposes of this investigation.

Much birth order research argues that the ordinal position of a child and the specific experiences related to this family position determine a child’s behaviour and personality as an adult (Adler, 1956; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Schacter, 1959; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970; Zajonc & Markus, 1975). Numerous investigations have identified specific personality differences between first-born, middle-born, and last-
born children. Children without siblings, known as only children, have no specific ordinal position in the family and therefore present an interesting and unique study group. It has been widely assumed that the only child’s lack of siblings has negative effects on their development (Falbo, 1977). The research on only children is of particular interest to the current investigation that explores the experiences of adult only children in their professional role as educators. A chronological review of the literature on birth order and only children follows, highlighting the evolving nature of the research over the last century.

**Early Birth Order Research**

An interest in birth order research can be documented for at least a century, and links between ordinal position and individual characteristics have been investigated for just as long (Phillips & Phillips, 2000). In the first half of the last century, behavioural researchers conducted numerous studies to identify the specific characteristics and personality traits held by individuals in various ordinal positions within the family. The research divides these ordinal positions into first-born, middle-born, and youngest or last-born and, in some cases, the only child. These investigations have attributed a wide range of characteristics to each position, often concluding that the first-born child has certain advantages over middle- and last-born children, particularly in the area of academic achievement (Adams & Phillips, 1972). Many studies group only children with first-borns or last-borns because of the perceived similarities in the characteristics that they share, rather than looking at only children as a distinct group (Polit & Falbo, 1987).

Personality theorist Alfred Adler is a strong proponent of the belief that family position greatly influences development (Phillips & Phillips, 2000). According to Adler,
first-borns and only children are more achievement motivated, middle children are nonconfrontational and noncompetitive, and last-borns are carefree, affectionate, and persuasive (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Ernst and Angst (1983) support Adler's position and add characteristics to each birth position. They indicate that first-borns are more likely to surpass later borns intellectually, to seek approval and acceptance from others more frequently, and to be judged as more dependent, serious, seclusive, and sensitive than their later born counterparts. Later borns, according to Ernst and Angst, are more popular, outgoing, and socially oriented.

Research supports the intellectual superiority of first-borns and also identifies them as more achievement oriented than later borns. Adams and Phillips (1972) cite several studies that show two related and interesting conclusions: First-borns are overrepresented among men of great accomplishment (Altus, 1966; Bayer 1967; Galton, 1874; Schacter, 1963; Terman, 1925) and are overrepresented as students in universities, medical schools, and graduate schools (Altus, 1965; Capra & Dittes, 1962; Hall & Barger, 1964). According to Adams and Phillips, these two findings are "probably the two most stable and most often replicated birth-order findings" (p. 156). In their own investigation, they found that first-borns scored significantly higher on four different measures of intellectual and academic functioning than their later born counterparts. They concluded that motivation may have been responsible for these differences and argue that greater motivation may be a result of higher parental expectations of first-born children.

Early research tended to either exclude only children entirely or include them in the categories of first-born or last-born children (Polit & Falbo, 1987). As birth order research progressed, some investigators began to view only children as an interesting
group to study, independent of the other ordinal positions. These early researchers presented a rather unfortunate picture of the only child. Whereas the presence of siblings was described as resulting in the development of both positive and negative characteristics, it was argued that being the only child in a family had only negative consequences on development (Falbo, 1977). Only children were presented as being disadvantaged by their lack of siblings, resulting in the development of numerous negative qualities and personality characteristics.

Only children have been routinely described as dysfunctional. Fenton (1928) quoted psychologist and educationalist G. Stanley Hall as saying that “being an only-child is a disease in itself….Because of the undue attention he demands and usually receives, we commonly find the only-child jealous, selfish, egotistical, dependent, aggressive, domineering, or quarrelsome” (p. 547). Thompson (1974) depicts only children as being “generally maladjusted, self-centered and self-willed, attention-seeking and dependent on others, temperamental and anxious, generally unhappy and unlikable, and yet somewhat more autonomous than a child with two siblings” (pp. 95-96). The list of adjectives used to describe the only child is quite exhaustive and includes the following: “spoiled,” “self-centered,” “maladjusted,” “selfish,” “immature,” “perfectionistic,” “unfriendly,” and “rigid” (Day, 1991; Feiring & Lewis, 1984; Gee, 1992; Leder, 1991; Nachman & Thompson, 1997; Nyman 1995; Sifford, 1989). Howarth (1980) adds “anxious” to the list, and Nyman includes “close-minded,” “insecure,” and “shy.”

Birth order and only-child research presents many examples of behavioural problems and personality difficulties in the only child. The following studies, as cited by
Rosenberg and Hyde (1992), attribute the following characteristics and traits to only children: lack of sociability and negative social behaviours (Claudy, 1984; Petzhold, 1988 cited in Rosenberg & Hyde, 1992; Thompson, 1974), persistent egocentrism and unco-operativeness (Ji, Jiao, & Jing, 1986), lack of friends (Graham-Bermann & Gest, 1991; Miller & Maruyama, 1976), and high incidences of mental health problems (Belmont, 1977; Howe & Madjett, 1975; Makihara, Nagoya, & Nakajima, 1988). The characteristics attributed to only children by these researchers and others present a very unflattering picture of the only child.

**Current Research on the Only Child**

Research focusing on the only child began in earnest about 30 years ago when scientists endeavored to determine the reality of the only child. The burgeoning interest in only children may be related to an increase in one-child families in North America and the Chinese government’s mandate of the one-child family (Rosenberg & Hyde, 1992). Concerns arose that there may be wide-ranging social consequences resulting from the increased presence of only children if they possessed the negative characteristics and traits described by many of the early researchers. Thus, investigators aspired to verify whether these early characterizations were valid. More thorough research and in-depth investigation of the previous only-child literature has weakened the conviction that sibling absence is accompanied by dysfunctional behaviour and other disadvantages.

Toni Falbo (1977) did a comprehensive review of the only-child literature to determine if the popular assumptions about the characteristics and behaviours of the only child survived scientific scrutiny. She also examined whether or not the absence of siblings truly put only children at a disadvantage when compared to children with
siblings. The review focused on intelligence, achievement, interpersonal orientation, and sex role development and discovered that intelligence was the only area that presented consistent, reliable results about only children. The IQ scores of only children fell between first-borns from small families and later borns from large families. The lack of a younger sibling to tutor, Falbo argues, explains why only children did not rank highest in intelligence as expected. In all of the other areas reviewed, the results were inconclusive, and no evidence was found to support the belief that only children are selfish, lonely, or maladjusted.

A number of other studies found no significant differences between only children and those with siblings. In fact, in some cases, only children have been reported to have advantages over children with siblings. Falbo and Polit (1986) conducted a meta-analysis of 100 studies that compared only children and those with siblings in the areas of intelligence, personality, sociability, achievement, and adjustment. In this review, Falbo and Polit concluded that only children were advantaged in the following ways: They had more positive parent-child relations, possessed more desirable personality traits, and that the absence of siblings proved to be beneficial in both achievement and intelligence.

In 1987, Polit and Falbo continued their investigation of the only child by reviewing another 141 studies published between 1926 and 1985, with more emphasis on reviewing studies that specifically related to personality development. In this analysis, they investigated motivation to achieve, the parent-child relationship and its influence on character development, personal control, adjustment, and sociability. They found that only children scored significantly higher than other groups in achievement motivation, but that in most respects, only children were found to be highly comparable to children
with siblings in character development, personal control, adjustment, and sociability. When differences were noted in these four areas they were small, with the overwhelming majority of effect sizes being positive and all significant effects favouring only children (Polit & Falbo).

Steelman et al.’s (2002) review of the literature on the effects of the size of sibling group adds support to Falbo and Polit’s (1986) position that only children are advantaged in the areas of achievement and intelligence by their lack of siblings. These researchers cite numerous studies conducted in the United States and Western Europe that identified a negative relationship between the number of children in a family and academic success. These findings, according to Steelman et al. have been “virtually unequivocal” and are “not only consistent, but strong” (p. 248) when compared against other family characteristics such as family income, gender, race, and parental structure. This relationship is generally constant in spite of the educational outcome being measured. These researchers note however, that the magnitude of the effect of the size of the sibling group varies depending on whether success is being gauged in terms of cognitive ability or educational achievement and attainment (Steelman et al., 2002).

A large percentage of the only-child research has focused on children and adolescents and has not followed the only child into adulthood. Polit, et al. (1980) looked at some characteristics of adult only children in relation to number of important life outcomes. Interviews and questionnaires were completed with 537 families on topics such as family functioning, activities, experiences, and interests. Parents in the sample were divided into three categories: only children, first-borns who were not only children, and last-borns. Significant differences were found when only children were compared to
first-borns and later-borns with siblings. First, only children, both men and women, were found to have attained higher levels of education and had higher occupational status than adults who had siblings. Only children were also found to have smaller families and to be more secularly oriented. The three groups did not demonstrate any significant differences in their overall satisfaction with their lives and were similar in the types of social activities with which they were involved. These data, the authors conclude, do not support the notion that only children are disadvantaged by not having siblings. These results in fact suggest that adult only children have some advantage over adults with siblings in the areas of educational attainment and occupational status.

Only children have often been described as less sociable than children with siblings. Researchers have hypothesized that siblings assist one another with learning important interpersonal skills. The argument is that because only children do not have siblings, they do not benefit from the instruction that siblings provide and therefore have difficulty affiliating with others. Research has shown that only children do not differ from children with siblings in terms of the number of friendships they develop or the quality of those relationships (Kitzmann, Cohen, & Lockwood, 2002). Polit and Falbo (1987) suggested that because of a close parent-child relationship, only children may feel less need to affiliate with peers, although later discovered this suggestion to be unfounded in their review of the available research. Blake, Richardson, and Bhattacharya (1991) used data from two major American surveys, one conducted in 1957 and the other in 1976. In their analysis, they also concluded that the number of siblings one has bears no relation to sociability and need for affiliation as an adult.
Early research depicts only children in a variety of negative ways. They have been described as dysfunctional and maladjusted, spoiled, aggressive, and dependent. However, in the last 30 years or so, several studies and reviews of the literature have demonstrated a lack of empirical evidence to support the earlier conclusions drawn about an only child’s personality. Only children have been found to be remarkably similar to children with siblings. Why the inconsistency between early research and more current investigations? Several possibilities are presented to explain these discrepancies.

Explaining the Inconsistencies

More current studies call into question the earlier research findings that identify only children as maladjusted and dysfunctional. In fact, there has been a decline in American research on birth order and only children during the past 20 years, which Nyman (1995) suggests may be in part due to conflicting results. At best, the research over the last century can be considered inconclusive. It is worth contemplating, however, some of the reasons for the conflicting findings of early research, which presents only children as disadvantaged by their lack of siblings, and that of the more current research, which demonstrates little or no significant difference between only children and children with siblings.

Methodological Concerns

Some of the differences between early research and more current research findings can be attributed, in part, to methodology. Numerous researchers have closely scrutinized the body of only-child and birth order research. For instance, many studies have grouped only children with first-borns, some have looked at only children separately, while still others have omitted them entirely from their populations. These
different methods of categorizing make the findings of these investigations very difficult to generalize to the population of only children (Polit & Falbo, 1987). Toman (1993) adds to the concerns by indicating that a wide variety of measurement procedures have been used, which makes it difficult to replicate many of the studies. Small sample sizes and subjects selected for particular attributes make the conclusions about the characteristics of only children "highly suspect" (Blake, 1981, p. 44).

The criteria of "quality" applied in these studies leave much to be desired. With some, the association with what they purport to indicate or measure, is at the very least, open to question; a case in point being the various tests and measures of intelligence" or "cognitive ability." With others—grades in school, the proportions going on to higher schooling, and the proportions entering the more prestigious occupations, for example—the attributes are openly class biased or of only parochially academic significance. Of still greater significance is the absence of behavioural referents. The research, to date, has focused, at best, only on traits with some presumed behavioural implications: it has not focused on behaviour itself. (Day, 1991, pp. 755-756)

The numerous methods of categorizing only children, the difficulty in replicating earlier studies, small sample sizes, and the lack of focus on actual behaviours have resulted in wide-ranging results in the only-child and birth order research. These methodological concerns have undoubtedly contributed to the inconclusive findings.
Is There Only One Kind of Only?

Rosenberg and Hyde (1992) attempt to explain the inconsistent outcomes in the research on only children by examining to what extent only children form a homogeneous group. The results of their investigation yielded three distinct types of only children: (a) normal, well-adjusted, (b) impulsive, acting-out, and (c) first-bornish. Interestingly, much of the research findings on only children can be explained by one of the three categories of onlies identified by Rosenberg and Hyde. The normal, well-adjusted onlies are those that Falbo and Polit (1986) identified as being remarkably similar to individuals with siblings. The impulsive, acting-out category includes research findings that describe only children as maladjusted, self-centered, and disadvantaged. First-borns are often described as dependable, protective, productive, possessing feelings of guilt, and overcontrolled (Baskett, 1985; Lahey, Hammer, Crumrine, & Forchand, 1980; Rothbart, 1971; Shaffer, 1989; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970). If one considers that only children are indeed first born, then it makes sense that they may share characteristics similar to children who have siblings and are the first-born in the family. Rosenberg and Hyde (1992) argue that the inconsistencies seen in only-child research can be attributed to the fact that researchers may have sampled populations that had a higher proportion of one type of only child over another.

Theoretical Explanations

There are three main theories presented in the birth order literature that may also help to explain the inconsistent findings in the research over the last century. The “resource dilution” model, “confluence” model, and “siblings as resources” model attempt to explain how so much research could result in so little definitive empirical
The Resource Dilution Model. The resource dilution model states that parental resources such as time, finances, and energy are finite. Therefore, as the number of children in a family increases, the resources received by any one child decrease—"[t]he more children, the more these resources are divided (even taking account of economies of scale) and hence, the lower the quality of the output" (Blake, 1981, p. 422). In this model, only children are the sole recipients of parental resources, which are not "diluted" by the introduction of siblings. According to some research, there is little evidence demonstrating that children benefit in any way, even socially, from having siblings (Blake, et al., 1991; Polit & Falbo, 1987). As a result, the dilution model does not view siblings as resources.

The dilution model supports Falbo and Polit's (1986) conclusion that the only child is not at all disadvantaged but is relatively similar to children with siblings. In fact, the resource dilution model would suggest that onlies are at an advantage because of their lack of siblings. Not having to share parental resources—time, energy, and finances—places onlies in an advantageous position over those children who must split these same resources. This model also looks to explain why onlies and children from small families have been shown in numerous studies to outperform children from large families in intelligence and achievement (Alwin, 1991; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Cicirelli, 1978; Downey, 1995; Kuo & Hauser, 1997; Mercy & Steelman, 1982; Steelman, 1985; Steelman & Mercy, 1983; Zajonc & Marcus, 1975). In the dilution model, parents are
able to spend all of their resources on only one child, and that child therefore benefits intellectually from this undivided attention.

The resource dilution model may also help explain why the only child has been characterized, in short, as self-centered, dependent, attention seeking, and spoiled. If all of a parent’s time and energy are focused on only one child, then that child may be perceived to be particularly demanding of the parent’s time, attention, and assistance. Further, a parent’s financial resources do not need to be shared amongst siblings. The only child may benefit from this by receiving a greater percentage of a parent’s financial resources. The only child may receive more material possessions, be enrolled in programs and activities that carry a substantial cost, and may receive more financial support for postsecondary education. For instance, Steelman and Powell (1991) found that parents with numerous children felt less responsible to pay for higher education than parents with few children. Under these circumstances, the perception of the only child as spoiled is furthered. The resource dilution model presents an interesting theory to help explain some of the characteristics that have been attributed to only children in the birth order and only-child literature.

The Confluence Model. Where the dilution model fails, however, is in its inability to explain why only children do not consistently outperform children with siblings on tests of cognitive ability. Researchers have often hypothesized that only children should demonstrate intellectual superiority over children with siblings because they received undivided attention from the adults in their lives. The confluence model attempts to explain why this hypothesis is not realized in research findings. Similar to the dilution model, the confluence model posits that as the number of children in a family increases,
the intellectual environment in the family decreases (Zajonc & Markus, 1975). The confluence model proposes that only children and last-born children suffer due to their lack of a sibling to teach. Only children and last-born children “do not [have the opportunity to] serve as intellectual resources to their siblings....It would be quite surprising if the opportunity to perform such a ‘teaching’ function did not have beneficial effects for intellectual development” (Zajonc & Markus, pp. 82-83). Thus, both the resource dilution and confluence models explain why only children have been shown to be comparable to first-borns in their intellectual abilities when compared with middle- and last-born children.

The Siblings as Resources Model. The siblings as resources model presents an opposing stance to the resource dilution model. Where the dilution model presents only children as being advantaged, the siblings as resources model posits that only children are at a disadvantage, particularly in the area of social and interpersonal skills development. According to this model, children develop the interpersonal skills necessary to participate in a wide variety of social settings as a result of constant contact with siblings.

In learning and practicing a role, a child learns not only his or her own role, but also the complementary ones. Naturalistic observations of sibling interactions indicate that siblings enact asymmetrical, complementary roles with one another. Older siblings act as teachers, managers, and helpers when playing with their younger brothers and sisters, and the younger siblings assume the corresponding learner, managee and helpee roles. (Brody, 1998, p. 16)
In this regard, the siblings as resources model and the confluence model share a common thread—both models view being an only child as disadvantageous—one from a social standpoint, the other from an intellectual perspective. The siblings as resources model considers sibling interactions as training for maintaining and negotiating relationships in other contexts.

Only children fail to learn critical developmental lessons by not being raised with siblings, and consequently would be expected to fare worse than non-onlies in terms of such outcomes as personal adjustment, cooperativeness, and ability to get along with peers. (Polit & Falbo, 1987, p. 319)

These three models—resource dilution, confluence, and siblings as resources—present the findings of birth order research from three distinct standpoints. Depending on which model one uses as a frame of reference, the data from the various birth order studies can be easily explained. The resource dilution model puts onlies at an advantage in a variety of life aspects due to their lack of siblings, presenting an explanation for both some of the negative characteristics (e.g., spoiled, lonely, dependent) and positive qualities (e.g., academic achievement, motivation) attributed to only children. The confluence model also holds that achievement is higher in families with fewer children, yet states that onlies are disadvantaged because of their lack of a sibling to teach. This model explains why onlies do not consistently have higher scores in measures of intelligence. Finally, the siblings as resources model presents onlies at a distinct disadvantage in the development of social skills due to their lack of siblings. This model can be used to explain why research has identified a number of negative characteristics of only children.
The Perception of the Only Child

Despite the inconsistent findings in birth order and only-child research over the last century, the one area that has not changed significantly is the perception of the only child. Despite literature reviews and research studies that show onlies are remarkably similar to their siblinged counterparts (Polit & Falbo, 1987), society still holds certain beliefs about the personality characteristics of only children, many of them negative. Although research on societal perceptions of birth rank attributes is scarce, researchers have found that popular stereotypes about only children are common.

Being an only-child is widely regarded as a significant handicap. Indeed, this belief appears to be so generally accepted that research psychologists Thompson and Maltes suggest that it is a “cultural truism” – an unchallengeable given. (Blake, 1981, p. 43)

Blake (1981) analyzed over 40 years of nationwide American surveys on reproductive preferences. In 1950, a question on one of these surveys asked whether being an only child is advantageous or disadvantageous. Seventy-six percent of respondents indicated it was a disadvantage. In 1977, when the question was asked again, 67% of respondents still viewed being an only child as a handicap. A majority of respondents, 60%, identified only children as having a personality or character flaw. An additional 22% indicated that only children are lonely. Only 2% indicated that the major disadvantage was societal prejudice (Blake).

Studies dedicated to investigating social beliefs on ordinal position and only children are relatively recent. In an early study on social beliefs about birth order, Baskett (1985) asked 278 participants to complete an adjective checklist that described an only
child, an eldest child, and a youngest child. Only children were described by the participants as being spoiled, academic, and the least likeable. Baskett's results also indicated that subjects described first-borns in more positive terms than only children or last-born children. Musun-Miller (1993) used the same checklists to replicate Baskett's results. This study asked 105 parents to describe their own children and to describe what a hypothetical child of each birth position might be like. Once again, only children were viewed as spoiled, academic, and the least likeable.

In his 1995 study, Lawrence Nyman looked to further the research on the perceptions of ordinal positions. Subjects, who consisted of 139 undergraduate and graduate students, were asked to list three adjectives to describe characteristics of each birth position and then rate each word in terms of positive or negative connotations. Although several positive characteristics of only children were named, many of the standard stereotypes of only children emerged. Some of the negative characteristics associated with only children included, "self-centered," "selfish," "spoiled," "dependent," "lonely," "dominant," and "aggressive." Interestingly, Nyman's subjects ranked their own birth position in the same way that others viewed that position. They also ranked the only-child position as the least favoured ordinal position, supporting the long-held stereotype of the only child as disadvantaged.

Stewart (2004) also contributed to the research on birth order perceptions. This study investigated the extent to which clinicians use birth order to make initial judgments about a client's therapy. Each of the clinicians in the study was provided with a vignette of a male client. The only difference between the vignettes was the stated birth order of the client. The results indicated that not only did the clinicians develop different
perceptions about the client and his family experiences based on birth order, but their counseling prognosis also differed. Specifically, only children were perceived by the clinicians to be more likely to experience problems (Stewart).

A review of the literature on only child stereotypes was conducted by Mancillas (2006) who indicated that “although numerous studies have discredited such stereotypes by demonstrating the positive outcomes of being an only child negative stereotyping of the only child remains prevalent” (p. 268). This review indicated that negative stereotyping of only children is cross-cultural and prevalent not only in North America, but also in Europe and Asia. Mancillas also noted that stereotypical thinking about only children exists across different populations including college students (Baskett, 1985; Nyman, 1995), parents (Musun-Miller, 1993), counselors and psychologists (Stewart, 2004) and among only children themselves (Herrera et. al, 2003). Mancillas indicated that the consequences and implications of these only-child stereotypes are far-reaching. He suggested that only children and their parents may have internalized the stereotypes which may have negative effects on self-esteem and self-concept. As well, Mancillas expressed concerns about parents using the only-child stereotypes in their decision to have additional children. Some parents, Mancillas argued may have more than one child simply to prevent their firstborn from becoming an only child because of the negative stereotypes often associated with only children. Mancillas stressed the importance of correcting these stereotypes but indicated that “when a stereotype is so deeply embedded in a society, it is difficult to erase the perceptions, no matter how false the beliefs are” (p. 273). According to Mancillas, correcting these stereotypes by educating professionals who work with only children and their parents (educators, mental health professionals,
researchers, policy makers, counselors) will help to ensure that they receive unbiased representation and support,

It is clear that social beliefs exist about personality characteristics associated with birth rank. However, a very small percentage of the available research on only children examines their self-perceptions. It is these self-perceptions that are of interest to the current investigation. How do adult only children describe their own personalities and behaviours? Do only children view themselves in the same ways that society does? How do the common stereotypes affect them personally? Do they consider themselves advantaged or disadvantaged?

Another area that has been neglected in the literature is the adult only child as a professional. Limited research has been conducted to examine how the characteristics and behaviours of only children transfer into their professional experiences. Do only children feel that their status as singletons affects their professional life, and if so, in what ways? How do the common stereotypes affect them professionally?

Of particular interest for the purposes of this study is the adult only-child educator. It is the purpose of this study to examine if and how an individual’s status as an adult only child transfers into the craft of teaching. In order to explore these questions fully, it is important to be familiar with the literature on effective educators. A review of relevant research follows.

**Effective Educators**

Numerous researchers have attempted to conceptualize the characteristics of high-quality teaching (Collinson, 1999; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005). In this section, several components of effective teaching will be
examined, including a review of the current literature's definitions of quality teaching. Then, four distinct teacher characteristics will be examined including: (a) teachers' knowledge and skills, (b) teachers' styles, (c) teachers' affect, and (d) classroom management. When considered together, these components provide a clear description of effective educators and, in turn, high-quality instruction.

**Quality Teaching**

Fenstermacher and Richardson (2005) explored the concept of quality in teaching. They distinguish between teaching in its "task" sense (i.e., what it is that teachers actually do) and its "achievement" sense (i.e., the student learning that teachers foster). Teaching in its task sense is defined as good teaching which refers to instruction that holds high standards for subject content and methods of practice. Teaching in its achievement sense, on the other hand, is identified as successful student learning. They note that successful teaching requires a combination of four components: a willingness and effort on the part of the learner, supportive social surroundings, ample opportunities to learn, and the use of solid teaching practices. Successful teaching, they argue, is learner dependent. More than just good teaching, successful teaching requires that the other three conditions also be present.

Fenstermacher and Richardson (2005) hold that both good teaching and successful teaching are requirements of quality teaching. The distinction is made, however, that not all instances of good teaching are successful ones, and not all instances of successful teaching are good ones. A teacher can lead a lesson that demonstrates strong knowledge of content and that uses exemplary methods yet have no student
learning. The opposite may also hold true. Student learning may occur; however, the teacher may use immoral or improper methods to exact this learning.

Quality teaching is often presumed to be simply successful teaching, wherein the learner learns what the teacher teaches....[W]hen successful teaching is disconnected from good teaching, the results are seldom favorable for either the student or the subject matter under study. When quality teaching is understood as an integration of both good and successful teaching, it quickly becomes apparent that more than good teaching is required to realize the goal of quality in teaching.

(Fenstermacher & Richardson, p. 192)

Effective educators, therefore, set high standards for teaching practices and possess strong knowledge of subject content, which leads to student learning (Fenstermacher & Richardson).

**Teacher Knowledge**

The desire to identify and define effective teachers has resulted in a large collection of research describing the specific characteristics of effective educators (Berliner, 1986; Brophy & Good, 1986). Teacher knowledge is one such characteristic. Clandinin (2000) makes the distinction between “knowledge for teaching” and “teacher knowledge.” According to this view, “knowledge for teaching” is a set of knowledge and skills needed for classroom management, for example, the knowledge to plan, organize, and deliver a lesson. This information is the focus of most teacher training programs. It is based on a premise that knowledge requires continual updating or is otherwise lost. On the other hand, “teacher knowledge” is described as knowledge gained from experience.
This type of knowledge, Clandinin argues, is a “form of knowledge embedded in teachers’ lives, acquired through living, and expressed in context” (p. 28). Teacher knowledge is more difficult to assess, as it is the phenomenon of learning from experience (Nakiboglu & Karakoc, 2005).

Some studies have measured teacher knowledge using scores on tests of verbal and academic ability. These scores have then been compared and correlated with student achievement scores, leading some to suggest that higher student scores on tests of verbal and academic ability are indicators of teacher quality (Coleman et al., 1966; Ferguson & Ladd, 1996; Hanushek, 1992). Other studies have defined teachers’ knowledge of their subject areas as an indication of their competences as educators. Schempp, Manross, Tan, and Fincher (1998) conducted interviews with 10 teachers to determine the influence of content area expertise on their ability to plan, organize, and guide teaching. The teachers, whose experience ranged from 1 to 26 years, had extensive experience in their expert subject areas. Each participant was asked to plan one lesson and one unit in his/her expert area and one lesson and one unit in a nonexpert area. The results of this study indicate four major differences. Specifically, when planning in areas of expertise, the identification and remediation of student learning difficulties was easier, and there was more detailed planning and organizing for the subject matter. When asked to teach outside of their expert area, participants had more difficulty differentiating learning to meet individual needs and demonstrated less ease and enthusiasm for teaching (Schempp et al.). Having classrooms with subject experts, they concluded, results in higher quality teaching.
Monk (1994) concluded that a "good grasp of one's subject area is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective teaching" (p. 142). In his study, a positive relationship was found not only between student learning and the level of teacher content knowledge but between student learning and teachers' pedagogical knowledge as well. Weglinsky (2002) investigated how math and science achievement levels were related to measures of teaching quality and teacher characteristics. His findings supported those of Monk. Student achievement was influenced both by the level of content preparation and by professional development undertaken by the teacher. The greatest impact on student learning related to teachers' instructional approaches. When teachers provided hands-on learning and activities that focused on higher order thinking skills, students performed better. Therefore, these researchers concluded that quality teaching requires both strong knowledge of content and knowledge of pedagogy.

Collinson (1999) included other components of teacher knowledge in her research with teachers who had been nominated as excellent teachers by their peers. These educators were asked to provide definitions and explanations of teacher excellence. Through their discussions, Collinson generated a triad of knowledge necessary for excellence in teaching consisting of professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge. Professional knowledge includes knowledge of subject matter, curriculum, and pedagogy. This area is consistently recognized as necessary for competent teaching and is often considered sufficient for producing teacher excellence (Collinson). The teachers in this study, however, indicated that knowledge beyond the professional level is required for teachers to be considered effective. Knowledge of relationships and knowledge of one's self were considered equally important. Interpersonal knowledge
refers to human interactions and relationships. According to the participants in Collinson’s study, excellent teachers work to develop high-quality relationships with students, the local community (including colleagues and parents), and the broader educational community. They develop a sense of trust and mutual respect with students, work collaboratively with colleagues, and involve themselves in extracurricular and professional development opportunities beyond their immediate school or school board.

Also important to the teachers in this study was intrapersonal knowledge, or an understanding of self and the qualities that make up one’s character. These teachers indicated that they explicitly teach and model qualities they consider critical for life beyond the classroom including a disposition toward continuous learning, an ethic of care, and the development of solid work ethics. Collinson concluded that effective educators successfully integrate these three forms of knowledge.

Excellent teachers purposefully develop interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge as well as professional knowledge. They seem to grasp the balance between intellectual and emotional intelligence and the importance of both in the many roles required of teachers....What makes excellent teachers recognizable may be a combination of competence (professional knowledge), skillful relationships (interpersonal knowledge), and character (intrapersonal knowledge). (Collinson, p. 10)

*Teacher Characteristics and Teaching Styles*

Motivating students has long been considered an important task for teachers. A number of student-centered factors such as perceived ability, self-worth, learning strategies, autonomy, goal orientation, and locus of control orientation have been
identified as either promoting or undermining student motivation (McIver, Stipek, & Daniels, 1991; Ormrod, 2000; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Siefert, 2004; Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991). However, research suggests that there are a number of teacher-centered behaviours that are effective in promoting motivation in students including sincere praise, guidance, modeling, enthusiasm, and provision of choice (Brophy & Good, 1986). Skinner and Belmont (1993) discovered a strong relationship between teachers’ behaviours and student motivation. Questionnaires were completed by 44 students in grades 3 through 5 and their 14 teachers to investigate student engagement and three dimensions of teacher behaviour (involvement, structure, and autonomy support). Results indicated that students were more behaviourally and emotionally engaged when teachers provided clear expectations, contingent responses, strategic help, and warmth and affection. Students receiving attention in these forms tended to be more motivated than students who did not receive such attention. Effective educators, therefore, create class environments and exhibit behaviours that promote student engagement and motivation.

Student learning, achievement, and attitudes towards subjects can also be attributed in part to teacher behaviours and teaching style (Aitkin & Zuzovsky, 1994; Ebenezer & Zoller, 1993; Wentzel, 2002). Opdenakker and Van Damme (2006) investigated the impact of teacher behaviours and teaching style on classroom practices. Data in this study were collected from 132 mathematics classes over two consecutive school years. Information on teacher behaviours and teaching style were assessed through the use of an extensive questionnaire completed by both the teachers and students in the classes. Two specific teaching styles and the behaviours associated with each style were
compared. It was found that a learner-centered teaching style (which focuses on the learning of the students and the students themselves) resulted in a more positive learning environment and better classroom climate than a content-centered teaching style (one that focuses on subject-matter acquisition, cognitive development, and discipline). Indicators of class climate and the learning environment were determined by examining the quality of the student-teacher relationship, the opportunities for learning, and the level of instructional support that teachers provided to their students. Teachers scoring higher in these three areas were identified as using a learner-centered style. Teachers using this style stimulate active student participation, differentiate learning activities and materials, address issues with problem students, collaborate with colleagues, use test results to direct their teaching, and create relationships built on trust and respect (Opdenakker & Van Damme).

With respect to the importance of a learner-centered teaching style, our results are in line with the literature about effective teaching and effective classroom practices, which shows that beyond verbal skills, subject matter knowledge and academic ability, a combination of elements like concern for children, flexibility, professional knowledge and experience (knowing how to teach), and specific teaching practices provides a strong guarantee of teacher effectiveness. (Opdenakker & Van Damme, p. 15)

Thus, effective teaching is linked to the use of a learner-centered style and the specific behaviours associated with this approach.

Wentzel (2002) hypothesized that models of effective parenting could be generalized and used to identify dimensions of effective teaching. She suggested that
these models are helpful for understanding relations between teacher behaviours and adolescents' school adjustment as measured by their prosocial and socially responsible behaviours, their goal orientations for academic tasks, and their levels of motivation and interests in school work. The study considered five dimensions of teaching also considered characteristics of effective parenting: high expectations, rule setting, negative feedback, fairness, and motivational modeling (Baumrind, 1971, 1991). The students in this study identified clear distinctions among teachers along the five dimensions, suggesting that teachers can be characterized by the socialization contexts they establish for their students. Results indicated that all five of these dimensions accounted for significant variances in student motivation, social behaviour, and academic performance. Of particular importance, however, were the “high expectations” and “negative feedback” dimensions. Students who perceived that their teachers held high expectations of them were more goal oriented, had more interest in school, and had higher grades. On the other hand, when students felt they received negative feedback from their teachers they were more likely to demonstrate negative social behaviour and poor academic performance. Wentzel concluded that effective educators set high expectations, establish clear rules, provide positive feedback and nurturance, treat students fairly, and model motivation and interest in their work. These characteristics create a socialization context that fosters social competence and academic excellence.

An Ethic of Care

Student motivation and engagement have been attributed, in part, to teacher characteristics including the demonstration of warmth and affection (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). An ethic of care in teaching is a relatively recent field of study in education, and
yet has received a significant amount of attention since Noddings’s (1984) work describing this theory. Caring is at the heart of this theoretical framework where connections and relationships are considered paramount to all decisions and interactions. According to Noddings (1992), establishing an ethic of care requires three characteristics. First, teachers must accept students’ feelings and acknowledge the relevance of their experiences so that students feel included and know that their feelings are valued. Second, teachers’ responsibility to care for students takes precedence over everything else. Teachers work to meet student needs and to understand and accept each student. Finally, teachers shift the focus from self to student. In doing so, the teacher is better able to see what motivates students, to identify student goals, and connect subject matter to students’ lives. Noddings (1984) also states that students play a role in creating a caring relationship. Students must be both receptive and responsive to the teacher’s efforts to create an environment of care. When that happens, a reciprocal relationship of caring is established.

Since Noddings’s (1984) work, numerous research studies have been conducted investigating the role of care in the classroom. These studies have focused on several areas, including teacher characteristics that demonstrate care to students, students’ perceptions of caring teachers, and the impact of caring on student outcomes. McLaughlin (1991) found that teachers perceived themselves as caring when they dialogued with students outside of class, trusted students’ spontaneous actions, showed interest in the process of student learning, assisted with school problems, and established personal relationships with students. Teachers also reported demonstrating care by encouraging student learning (Rogers & Webb, 1991), fulfilling needs for security and
belonging (Dempsey & Noblitt, 1993), developing mutual trust, challenging students academically (Cogar & Raebeck, 1989), and including students in decision making (Kohn, 1991).

Agne, Greenwood, and Miller (1994) carried out research with a group of teachers to examine their belief systems. The participants included a group of expert teachers as defined by their designation as “Teachers of the Year” and a group of in-service teachers of various levels of experience and training. Both groups of teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire containing questions around areas known to be positively correlated with teacher behaviour and student achievement: teacher efficacy, teacher locus of control, classroom management ideology, and teacher stress. The major finding of this study was that expert teachers were significantly more humanistic in their beliefs about pupil control and held more caring beliefs about students than did the other classroom teachers. Compared to teachers with similar experiences, education, and teaching situations, expert teachers were found to be significantly more trusting, accepting, friendly, respectful, flexible, democratic, nonpunitive, and student empowering, leading to the conclusion that caring is an essential part of effective teaching (Agne et al.).

Numerous researchers have concluded that student outcomes can be predicted by the students’ affect for their teachers and the level of perceived levels of teacher care (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; Kelley & Gorham, 1988; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). Student motivation which was attributed previously to cognitive processes (Bandura, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Weiner, 1992; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992) and teaching and instruction (Ames & Ames, 1984;
Rosenholtz & Wilson, 1980; Slavin, 1987) has more recently been found to be influenced by interpersonal relationships between teachers and students (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Pianta, 1992; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). It is believed that when teachers foster feelings of belonging and caring, students become more engaged in classroom activities and more motivated to achieve (Wentzel, 1997).

Wentzel (1997) examined whether classroom motivation is a stable, internal characteristic, or whether it can change in response to perceived caring from teachers. Motivation was described as students’ efforts to achieve social and academic outcomes. A group of 248 students were followed for 3 years. Perceived caring from teachers was measured in sixth grade and in eighth grade by the Teacher Social and Academic Support subscales of the Classroom Life Measure (Johnson, Johnson, Buckman, & Richards, 1985). When students’ previous motivation and performance were taken into account, the results suggest that perceived caring does predict students’ academic efforts and their goals to be socially responsible. As perceptions of teacher caring increased, so did student effort (Wentzel).

These results are supported by other research studies demonstrating that perceived support from teachers is a significant predictor of young adolescents’ motivation and academic achievement. Finn (1989) reported that students were more motivated to learn in classrooms where they had a sense of belonging and with teachers they perceived as caring. Further, teachers who are perceived as nurturing, supportive, and helpful assist in developing confidence and self-determination, which leads to learning-oriented behaviours and intrinsic motivation (Siefert & O’Keefe, 2001). Goodenow (1991) found that students’ sense of belonging impacted their academic efforts more so than their
interest in the subject itself, and according to Teven and McCroskey (1997), students who perceive their teachers as caring report that they have learned more in their classes.

Teacher affect and perceived care were also found to be related to students’ evaluations of their teachers, their affective learning, their perceptions of their cognitive learning (Teven & McCroskey), greater achievement gains, and a more positive classroom atmosphere (Baird, 1973; McKeachie, Lin, & Mann, 1971). Thus, caring has been linked to numerous student outcomes, and its importance should be obvious. As Teven (2001) concluded, “If teachers are made aware of what behaviours lead to an increase or decrease in perceived caring, they can become more effective teachers” (p. 168).

**Classroom Management**

Effective classroom management has long been considered a requirement for creating an environment that allows for quality instruction and student engagement and learning (Lewis, 1999). Classroom management can be described as “the arranging of the environment for learning and maintaining and developing student-appropriate behaviour and engagement in the content” (Rink, 2002, p. 136). Classroom management does not simply involve disciplining students for misbehaviours, but also requires the establishment of structures, procedures, and routines that allow for efficient instruction (Marshall, 2005). According to McCormack (1997), teachers at all levels of experience indicate classroom management as their largest concern.

Its centrality in so many circles is easily understood as classroom management is necessary for a safe and functional class, as well as being a prerequisite that allows other effective teaching behaviours to be successful. (Cothran, Kulina, & Garrahy, 2003, p. 435)
Effective educators, therefore, understand the critical importance of quality classroom management in establishing a positive environment.

Teachers’ actions, including the means by which they manage a class, have been demonstrated to have double the impact on student achievement as school policies, curriculum, staff relations, and community involvement (Marzano, 2003). Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1993) completed a comprehensive literature review to compile a list of 228 variables affecting student achievement. When all of the data from these sources were analyzed, they concluded that classroom management had the largest effect on student achievement over all other variables. The importance of effective classroom management cannot be overlooked. Therefore, it is important to examine the means by which educators gain knowledge about classroom management and the process by which it is established.

Garrahy, Cothran, and Kulinna (2005) conducted interviews with 20 elementary physical education teachers to gain insight into their knowledge about classroom management. Three noteworthy themes emerged from these interviews. First, teachers in this study indicated that a majority of their knowledge about classroom management developed through discussions with colleagues, trial and error, and professional development opportunities. Teachers recognized that acquiring classroom management skills was an ongoing, developmental process. Second, teachers recognized that employing a variety of strategies was critical to effectively managing a class. Teachers stressed that consistency, clear rewards, and consequences were necessary for teaching and reinforcing expectations. Last, teachers indicated that using a humanistic approach
allowed for a clearer understanding of students’ needs and behaviours and the development of mutual respect (Garrahy, et al.).

In their meta-analysis of over 100 studies, Marzano and Marzano (2003) found that the fundamental component to effective classroom management is the quality of the relationship between the student and the teacher. They concluded that the foundation for a quality relationship includes the establishment of clear expectations, specific rewards and consequences, an ethic of care, and the use of strategies appropriate to individual needs.

Teacher-student relationships provide an essential foundation for effective classroom management—and classroom management is a key to high student achievement. Teacher-student relationships should not be left to chance or dictated by the personalities of those involved. Instead, by using strategies supported by research, teachers can influence the dynamics of their classrooms and build relationships that will support student learning.

(Marzano & Marzano, p. 12)

Cothran, et al. (2003) found similar results when they interviewed 182 students in grades 6 through 12 about their beliefs about class management. Students described effective classroom teachers as ones who established expectations early and clearly, reinforced positive behaviours, had consequences for inappropriate behaviours, and established caring relationships with them. According to these students, teachers that were effective managers had quality relationships with their students and were more trusted and respected.
Brown (2005) suggested that effective communication also assists in building positive relations and is necessary for establishing and maintaining a comfortable classroom management environment. By using active listening, appropriate body language, and genuine, empathetic responses, teachers establish trust and respect with their students. Teachers communicate their care and concern to students by employing strategies such as making eye contact, facing students while talking with them, rephrasing students’ comments, offering to help solve problems, and discussing concerns or problems with students in private.

It is clear...that building relationships with students begins on the first day of school as each student studies the facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and comments that emanate from their teachers. [Students] are watching and deciding through these constant verbal and nonverbal messages whether this teacher cares about them personally. Most students choose to engage in a mutually respectful relationship when they discover that their teacher does care about them, and demonstrates that through regular displays of empathetic listening and genuine concern. The result of being aware of and responding to students’ communication needs is a classroom in which the opportunities for genuine academic growth are greatly increased. (Brown, p. 15)

Establishing positive student-teacher relationships is the cornerstone of effective classroom management. Clearly, effective educators do not simply hope that quality relationships with their students will unfold. Rather, they work to create these relationships by setting clear expectations, employing a variety of strategies, using
appropriate rewards and consequences, and demonstrating care for their students (Garrahy, et al., 2005; Marzano & Marzano, 2003). In doing so, they create an environment conducive to student and teacher success.

**Effective Educators Revisited**

Creating a definition of an effective educator is not easily constructed. What makes an effective teacher? Numerous research studies have been conducted to examine the answer to this question. Effective educators hold a foundation of knowledge and skills that allow for quality instruction. This includes pedagogical knowledge, subject-specific knowledge, knowledge from experience, and interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge. Teachers that hold high expectations, provide nurturance, establish quality relations, and use learner-centered teaching styles, for example, positively influence student motivation, social behaviour, and academic performance. Effective educators also demonstrate an ethic of care in their teaching. These educators talk with students, challenge them academically, and include them in decision-making. Research focusing on teachers who demonstrate care and concern for students has shown improvements in levels of student motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. Finally, effective educators successfully manage a classroom by building quality relationships with students. In doing so, they create an environment of mutual respect and trust.

**Connecting the Literature: Adult Only-Child Educators**

A review of the relevant literature has shown that effective educators possess specific characteristics and qualities that enhance the educational experiences of their students. Research on only children also suggests that only children are perceived to possess specific qualities and characteristics that distinguish them from children with
siblings. Determining whether these two bodies of research intersect is the purpose of the current investigation. Limitations in the available research on only children assisted in developing the specific direction of the current study. Few studies have been interested in investigating adult only children, the self-perceptions of adult only children, and the adult only child’s chosen profession. The current study will explore each of these areas with adult only children whose chosen profession is in the field of education. The current study will look to explore the extent to which individuals’ only-child experiences influence their roles as educators. It will ask participants to consider and reflect on their experiences as an only child, as an educator, and as an adult only-child educator. It is the goal of this study to provide insight into the reality of the only-child experience from the perspective of these adult only children, and to explore whether these individuals’ status as an adult only child transferred into their teaching practice. The following chapter describes the methodology and procedures used in this study.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the procedures and methodology used to explore the interconnections between adult only children and their role as educators. The intent of the study was to examine the reality of the only-child experience as viewed by adult only children, and to explore whether these individuals’ status as an adult only child transferred into their teaching practice. The research design is examined in the following pages. This includes discussion about participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and assumptions and limitations of this research. Ethical considerations are discussed throughout each section.

Design

A qualitative approach was used in this study. Creswell (1994) described qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (pp. 1-2). Thus, a qualitative research design was appropriate for exploring the research questions outlined in this study. It allowed for the in-depth exploration of participants’ views and allowed them an opportunity to articulate a worldview based on personal experiences and interpretations of the realities of being an adult only-child educator. Qualitative research also allows for the acknowledgement of multiple realities that are socially constructed (Firestone, 1987; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). It does not result in the identification of a single, objective reality. This aspect of qualitative research is important in that it recognizes the individual participants’ contributions to a broader, more global perspective.
A case study approach was used in this study. This approach allowed the researcher to focus on and explore the personal experiences of the participants. In this type of design, participants report their individual experiences, or story, usually through one-to-one interviews (Creswell, 2002). The researcher retells the participants’ stories in order to identify commonalities in the participants’ experiences. This type of design is phenomenological in nature, as it looks at the perceptions, perspectives, experiences, and understandings of the participants. In this study, the data gathered from the individual participants created a more complete understanding and holistic picture of adult only-child educators.

**Participants**

Four participants contributed to this study. Individuals were purposefully selected because they were adult only-child educators. The term “educator” was used broadly and included teaching at any level including elementary, secondary, postsecondary, or other educational setting. No other demographic characteristics, such as age or gender, were used to determine participant eligibility.

A sample of convenience was used. Participants were intentionally selected because they met the specific criteria required, namely that they were adult only-child educators. Snowball sampling was used to identify potential participants, as selection was based on the principal researcher’s and faculty advisor’s knowledge of individuals that met the required characteristics (Creswell, 2002). Further, the researcher met the participant criteria and therefore was also included as a participant.

Potential participants were informed of the details of the investigation through a letter of invitation that described the purpose and methodology of the study. Upon
agreeing to participate, the researcher arranged individual interviews. The participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to the beginning of the interview process. The consent form indicated that participation in the study was strictly voluntary. It also indicated that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without penalty. Participants were reminded of these rights prior to beginning their interview.

Three of the 4 participants in this study worked at the elementary school level, while the other worked at the postsecondary level. All of the participants in the study were female.

The first participant was Pamela. Pamela was a 52-year-old mother of three children who has taught in the public school system for over 30 years. Pamela grew up in Montreal and completed her university education in Quebec. Spending a majority of her childhood in Montreal, Pamela spoke fluent French. She completed her Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education degrees and had FSL qualifications (French as a Second Language) as well. She taught in both the French Immersion and the mainstream English programs at the primary/junior level (kindergarten to grade 6). Pamela described her status as an only child as the result of circumstance. She indicated that her parents had significant difficulty conceiving and believed that they would not be able to have any children. After Pamela’s birth, they continued to try to have additional children but were not successful.

The second participant, Katherine, was not married and did not have any children. Katherine, a 40-year-old teacher, participated in a number of teacher exchange programs. She accumulated 16 years of teaching experience, including a year each in Scotland,
England, and Wales. Katherine graduated from an Ontario university, also with FSL qualifications. Katherine spent the early part of her career in the core French program, teaching a wide range of grade levels. More recently, Katherine has taught in the mainstream English program. Katherine described her only-child status as a combination of choice and circumstance. Katherine’s parents experienced the miscarriage of their first child. Then, Katherine was born prematurely and as a newborn had numerous health concerns. Katherine believed that although her parents made the choice not to have more children, the circumstances of losing their first child and then having one with health concerns deterred them from trying to have additional children.

Mary was the third participant and the only candidate working at the postsecondary level. Mary, a divorced mother of five children, completed an undergraduate degree while raising her family. She became interested in the field of education when two of her own children experienced difficulty learning to read. She returned to school, and attained both a Bachelor of Education and a Master of Education degree. Prior to her role at a postsecondary institution, Mary worked with ESL students (English as a Second Language). While at the college, Mary held numerous roles including course instructor, learning strategist, and advisor to students with learning disabilities.

As the principal researcher, I also met the participant criteria and therefore became the fourth and final participant in the study. I am a 35-year-old mother of two young children. I have been teaching for almost 10 years. I graduated from Brock University’s concurrent education program with a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education degree in 1995. My teaching experience has been primarily at the junior level;
however, I have also taught special education resource and junior kindergarten. My only-child status reflects a conscious decision on the part of my parents. My mom and dad simply decided not to have any additional children.

Instrumentation

An interview guide (see Appendix A) was used to lead the individual interviews. The interview questions reflect an interest in examining the participants’ self-perceptions of the only-child experience, and in exploring whether these participants’ experiences transferred into their teaching practices. The questions were developed using the principal researcher’s personal experiences as an adult only-child educator and the themes that emerged from reviews of the literature on only children and effective educators. An examination of the available research revealed that society continues to hold predominantly negative views of only children despite several investigations indicating that only children share more similarities than differences to children with siblings (Baskett, 1985; Blake, 1981; Falbo, 1977, Falbo & Polit, 1986; Nyman, 1995; Polit & Falbo, 1987). Further, limited research is available investigating the adult only child’s self-perceptions and personal experiences, and even fewer studies have investigated the professional lives of only children.

As a result, the interview questions asked participants about their views on only children in general, their opinions and views about the negative stereotypes associated with only children, how they view themselves in relation to these stereotypes, their experience of being an only child, and the advantages and disadvantages of this experience. Additional questions investigated participants’ views on effective educators,
their own qualities and characteristics as they relate to their role as an educator, and their views about whether their only-child status connects in any way to their professional role.

The purpose of the interview guide was to solicit similar information from each participant such that relevant themes could be identified. The questions were open-ended, which allowed the participants the opportunity to share and explore experiences they believed to be relevant and important.

Data Collection

Participant data were collected during a semistructured interview lasting approximately 1½ to 2 hours. The interviews were conducted with each participant separately and at a time and location convenient to the participant. The participants were informed that they could elect to bring artifacts that held personal significance to the interview. They were encouraged to bring items from both their childhood and their teaching experiences. These artifacts were used to initiate conversation.

The principal researcher also met the criteria to participate in the study and therefore was a participant. The principal researcher was interviewed by a third party prior to the remaining participant interviews. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. This pseudonym was used throughout the stages of data collection, data analysis, and reporting stages. An exception to this process was made in the case of the principal researcher’s interview. The principal researcher was not assigned a pseudonym and has been reported from a first-person perspective.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a confidential third party who signed a confidentiality agreement prior to beginning the transcription process. In order to validate the participants’ responses, each individual was provided with a copy of their
transcript and the narrative written by the principal researcher. This process allowed the participants to make amendments or clarifications to any part of the interview or narrative that did not accurately reflect their intended meanings. Any requested changes were made accordingly in order to ensure the quality and the integrity of the data.

**Data Analysis**

The data in this study were collected in the form of qualitative descriptions based on participants’ views and experiences. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants, read through each transcript, and analyzed the transcripts for themes. The researcher’s personal experiences as an adult only-child educator and the literature reviewed were used to help facilitate data analysis and interpretation. The researcher retold the participants’ stories in narrative form. The process of narrating occurs when the researcher examines the participants’ experiences, analyzes them for themes, and then rewrites the story (Creswell, 2002). When common threads within stories are found, they are coded as themes. After each of the participants’ interviews was analyzed, they were compared to find themes common to all of the participants.

*Locating Relevant Text*

The researcher began by locating relevant text within each interview (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). In this step, data from the interviews were reviewed to identify any statements that were relevant to the research questions. Specific excerpts from the participants’ interviews were extracted and recorded into appropriate categories. This process continued until all relevant data from each interview were placed into a category. Any data that were considered not relevant were placed into a separate category. The
nonrelevant data were reviewed regularly throughout the analysis stage as it was possible that data originally recorded as nonrelevant may have become relevant once themes in the data began to emerge (Auerbach & Silverstein).

Repeating Ideas

Once all of the relevant text was identified and recorded, the participants' stories were retold in narrative form. The relevant text was examined to find any words, phrases, or ideas that were expressed by more than one participant. These repeating ideas were identified and used to organize the participants' narratives. They were grouped together and assigned an appropriate title. Looking for the repeating ideas across categories ensures that all themes are identified (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Identifying Themes

Any repeating ideas sharing conceptual similarities were grouped into a common theme (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The themes were given titles according to the information the theme contained. They were described in detail and linked the data from the current study to existing theory. The data were synthesized, and relationships among themes were described, leading to a summary of the research findings.

A Nonlinear Process

This method of analysis is nonlinear in nature. Creswell (1998) described it as a data analysis spiral, moving forwards and backwards along a continuum. The analysis process required regular reorganization and clarification as it progressed through each stage.
Limitations

The principal researcher met the criteria for inclusion in the research and therefore was also a participant. This shared experience had the potential to influence interpretation of the data because the principal researcher holds thoughts, ideas, and assumptions about the research topic. It was critical that the principal researcher remain objective and neutral during the data collection and data analysis stages. During data collection, the principal researcher suspended any preconceived ideas and refrained from sharing personal stories and experiences that had the potential to influence the responses of the participants. In order to protect the quality and integrity of the data, the principal researcher’s interview was conducted prior to the interviews with other participants. This eliminated the possibility that participants’ responses influenced the principal researcher’s.

The method for selecting participants and the sample size were also limitations of this study. Participants were purposefully selected because they met the criteria of adult only-child educators. A larger sample size would have offered a broader range of experiences for examination. The researcher recognized that the data represented only the experiences of the individual participants in this investigation. These limitations prevented generalizing the findings of the research beyond the study group. However, the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize but rather “to construct a rich and meaningful picture of a complex, multifaceted situation” using the participants’ perceptions, experiences, perspectives and understandings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 147). It involves discovering patterns that are descriptive of a particular phenomenon. As such, it was understood that the information gathered in this study, and the subsequent
null
interpretations, provided insight and understanding only into the experiences of the participants included in this study.

**Summary**

The purpose of the current study was to investigate any interconnections between an individual’s status as an only child and their professional status as an educator. This chapter provided a description of the methodology and procedures that were used to gather data on the experiences of adult only-child educators. It provided descriptions of participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and limitations of the study. Ethical considerations were embedded in each of these sections, as were the safeguards put in place to protect the rights of the participants in the study. The participants’ narratives are presented in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF DATA

As part of this qualitative investigation, 4 participants were involved in an audiotaped interview about their experiences as adult only-child educators. These interviews were transcribed and then analyzed to gain a more holistic view of their experiences. The results were organized in the form of narratives for each of the participants. By first examining their individual story, and then comparing it to the story of the other participants, relationships between the experiences emerged. The patterns found in the data were used as the foundation for identifying themes.

The experiences of each of the adult only-child educators in this study have been organized into narratives. Each participant’s narrative begins with a brief profile of the participant, followed by discussions around their general perceptions of only children, their personal experiences as an only child, and their experiences as an adult only-child educator.

**Pamela**

Pamela is a 52-year-old teacher who was teaching at a school in a rural community in southwestern Ontario at the time of her interview. At Pamela’s request, we met after school hours in her classroom. She was relaxed and spoke easily about her experiences.

**Background of Participant**

Pamela was born in Poland, where she lived until she was 3 years old. At that time, her family moved to Canada and settled in Montreal, where she remained until she left her family home to attend university. Pamela is a married mother of three children, all in their late teens and early 20s. Pamela’s father recently passed away after being ill
for quite some time. She continues to provide care for her mother, who is currently living in her home.

Pamela has been teaching for over 30 years. She has taught in both primary and junior classrooms, with a majority of her experience at the primary level. She has also spent a significant amount of time teaching in French Immersion programs and worked as an Early Literacy teacher for approximately 3 years. Although I worked in the same school as Pamela, we did not spend a significant amount of time together in a professional capacity, as she was in the French Immersion primary program and I was working in the junior level English program. We did, however, develop a working friendship during the time we taught at the same school.

Pamela’s only-child status is the result of her parents’ difficulty conceiving. She described the time at which her parents were trying to have children as “after the war when there was a lot of starvation in Europe” (p. 13) and indicated that her parents believed they would not be able to have any children. After Pamela’s birth, they continued to try to conceive additional children but, in Pamela’s words, “it just didn’t happen” (p. 13). Pamela stated that her mother was “well-suited” to being the mother of an only child, indicating that her mom “didn’t like multitasking” (p. 13). She suggested that her mother would have had difficulty raising multiple children and stated that the circumstances “probably worked out best for them. It was just how nature worked out” (p. 13).

Perceptions of the Only-Child Experience

Pamela described her only-child experience as positive. She openly shared her impressions, perceptions, and opinions about growing up as an only child, including her
thoughts on the advantages and disadvantages of being an only child. Pamela also shared her thoughts about the common stereotypes associated with only children and shared how being an only child impacted her own family planning.

Advantages and disadvantages. While discussing her childhood experiences, Pamela acknowledged some of the benefits to being the only child in her family. Pamela stressed the strong, connected relationship she had with each of her parents. She credited the strength of the bond with her parents to the time they were able to spend together.

They had the time for it. That’s it. You’re an only child, so their time was spent with just you. They didn’t have to split their attention between several children. [It’s] a real advantage. Raising an only child is totally different than raising more than one child. When parents are focused on [one] child, the possibility to extend wisdom [and] knowledge...anything ... the sky is the limit. (p. 8)

Pamela indicated that her parents spent a significant amount of time with her as a child and she believed that the strength of their relationship was closely tied to the amount of time they spent together. Pamela believed being an only child afforded her the advantage of spending large amounts of time with her parents and discussed many benefits from the attention that her unique circumstance presented.

As a child, Pamela appreciated the opportunity she had to experiment with roles. As an only child, she believed that she did not have to fit into a specific family role and felt free to experiment with different ones. She believed that families with multiple children meant that siblings often had to compete with one another for specific roles within the family.
There were no roles. I didn’t have to be the smart one, or the pretty one, or the industrious one, or the talented one. I could be all of them. The expectation, in [a] sense, was that I could be anything, and I enjoyed that freedom. (p. 3)

According to Pamela, the unique circumstance of not having siblings presented her with the advantage of being able to experiment with a variety of roles. She suggested that the freedom she had to experiment with roles helped her learn how to interact effectively with people in different situations.

Pamela believed that she was more mature and responsible at an earlier age than some of her siblinged counterparts. She reported that these characteristics often resulted in people holding her to high expectations, which she believed to be an advantage and disadvantage at the same time. She described it as “growing up more quickly,” and she knew she had no choice but to take responsibility for her actions. “You couldn’t get away with very much. You couldn’t blame anyone else. I think [being an only child] sort of prepared me to be responsible” (p 7). As well, she believed her ongoing interactions with adults taught her to hold mature conversations at a young age, and she found that people often thought she was older than her actual age.

You grow up fairly quickly because you are around adults, and so [you are privy to] adult behaviours, adult norms, and even adult conversations. At the same time, you grow up more slowly, and that’s the irony of it. At one point you feel very grown up because you are privy to a lot of stuff and you are given the responsibility, and yet, you are also the baby of the family and you are over-protected in a sense because they are watching over you to make sure you’re okay. (p. 7)
Pamela recalled being frustrated often as a child because at times people would treat her as “all grown up” and at other times they would be overly protective. She described this as a disadvantage to being an only child.

Pamela noted that this sense of responsibility has not dissipated over the years. In fact, she indicated that one of the most significant responsibilities that she has now as an adult only child is taking care of her aging parents.

*I didn’t see any really big [disadvantages] as a child, but there’s a lot of responsibility as an adult only-child. You know that you are the whole kit and caboodle and...your parents will depend on you at some point.* (p. 6)

Pamela acknowledged that over the last several years her parents have come to depend on her in some very significant ways. She admitted that there has been a lot of pressure and stress as a result of being the only person responsible for caring for parents with increasing age-related needs and identified it as being one of the major disadvantages to being an only child.

*Stereotyping only children.* Pamela did not believe that the disadvantages of being an only child translate into the personality deficiencies often described in the research on only children. According to Pamela, only children are stereotyped just as frequently or infrequently as any other group in society. Although she was willing to acknowledge that stereotypes about only children exist, she did not believe them to be any more accurate or prevalent than the stereotypes that society holds towards other groups. In her experience, identifying someone as an only child and assigning attributes to them as a result of this status is no different than attributing qualities to someone based on their socioeconomic or racial status. She indicated that she rarely has conversations with others about her
only-child status and that when it has become part of the conversation, she believed that it was used primarily to confirm or reject someone’s predetermined views of who she is as an individual.

People will eventually find out you are an only child, and if they like you they will not make any references, and if they don’t like you, they will say that [because she is an] only child [she] doesn’t know how to share or something of that sort. It depends on the perception that the person has of you. [It’s] the same thing as if you told a person that you came from a really wealthy household or a very poor household. Immediately that information would be used to support their view of you. (p. 14)

Pamela believed the common stereotypes about only children are unfair. She noted that, “there are just as many people out there with siblings that hold these same characteristics” (p. 14).

Family planning. Pamela indicated that her status as an only child played into planning her own family with her husband. She remembered thinking about all of the attention that her eldest son received when he was a young boy and acknowledged how close they were to one another.

The sun rose and set on his shoulders. I [remember thinking] to myself, I’d better get going on another child here, because it seemed to me that it would have been too hard [for him] if he had 3, 4, or 5 years with all of this attention and then suddenly [have it taken away]. (p. 12)
Considering the needs of her son was important to Pamela when planning for additional children; however, she indicated that the decision to have more than one child brought with it the challenge of learning to parent multiple children.

Pamela noted that being from a single-child family was a disadvantage when it came time to parent her own children. She indicated that her only-child experiences left her uncertain about how to manage situations between siblings.

*Raising more than one [child] as a parent who has been an only child was tricky.* Everything was about sibling rivalry. That's how I perceived it anyway. It seemed like nothing was about what you were actually doing and everything was emotional. You [would be] pouring Cheerios into three little bowls and...they're checking out to see who has more. For them, it's not about the Cheerios, it's about who you love more because you gave him more stuff. It was a real eye-opener [for me]. (p. 13)

Pamela stated that having her husband, who was from a family with siblings, was a great resource in parenting her children. Although she felt that her mother and father were great parenting role models, Pamela found it difficult to apply their model of parenting an only child to a family with multiple children.

**Early Experiences**

Pamela reported that her early experiences as an only child were characterized by positive relationships and experiences. She discussed the important role that relationships with her parents and friends played in her childhood. She also noted that there were several school experiences that greatly influenced her understanding of social situations that being an only child did not provide.
Relationship with parents. Pamela described her childhood as “really wonderful” and throughout our conversation stressed the strength of the connection with her parents. She discussed their relationship at length and described it as respectful and trusting as well as supportive and nurturing. She noted that she had a unique relationship with each one of her parents and described her only-child status as “the best of both worlds. I could be daddy’s girl and I could be mommy’s girl” (p. 3). She indicated that her parents interacted with her in very different ways, which she believed defined their individual and unique relationships.

Pamela described her relationship with her mother as very close, and indicated that they often played the role of confidante for one another. Pamela brought a butterfly-shaped glass plate to her interview, a memento from her childhood. It sat on the dining room table in her childhood home and was always filled with candies and other treats. As she discussed the role of this plate, she expressed her pleasure in rediscovering it while unpacking some of her parents’ items during a recent move. She was surprised and excited that her parents had kept this plate. “You never know what has significance for a child, and sometimes adults...value something differently than a child would” (p. 2). Pamela’s mother filled the plate with candies and treats, and Pamela remembered going to the dining room eagerly to see what was waiting for her.

[It was something] just for me. It [was] very special, and it makes me smile whenever I look at it. I have happy thoughts when I look at it of when I was little.

[It’s] a visual cue to a happy time and a happy sort of feeling...I liked the way the sunlight came through the window and it would reflect on the plate. I’ve always liked glass for that reason. (p. 1)
Pamela described her mother as "creative," and that said that she would often, "make something out of nothing" (p. 3). Pamela stressed an appreciation for her mother's ability to make even simple things seem special and indicated that it was these "little things" that resulted in a very special bond. The time they spent together often involved craft-making, baking, cooking, and shopping. She commented that during these times they shared their thoughts, ideas, and opinions with one another. They enjoyed talking, laughing, and simply spending time together. Pamela described her mother as a good listener who was nonjudgmental. Pamela always felt very loved and appreciated when spending time with her mother.

According to Pamela, she switched from the role of confidante and companion to the role of listener and student when spending time with her father. She commented that their relationship was characterized by storytelling and learning about literature, poetry, and classical music. Pamela shared how keen her father was to share his interests with her.

*My dad needed someone to listen to his stories or [to] learn about the things he was interested in. My dad's idea of playing was that it had to have a purpose. That was the engineer part of him. If you played cards he would figure "That's not a good purpose. That will just teach you to gamble." There was no way he was going to play cards with me....Games like playing ball, games that would make [me] healthier, like running [were okay]....He [also] liked to play chess with me because that had a purpose.* (p. 7)

Pamela described her parents as unique individuals and indicated that she shared a distinct relationship with each of them as a result. "Because they [are] so different in
terms of their interests, strengths, and personalities, it was sort of like [learning] two languages. [I] had to switch gears” (p. 9). Pamela described her relationship with both of her parents as strong and connected.

Pamela stated that the close connection that she had with her parents allowed for the development of a very trusting and respectful relationship. Although she described her parents as somewhat protective, she shared a conversation that she had with her father just after her 16th birthday that proved to Pamela their level of trust. In this conversation, Pamela’s father told her that she needed to be more independent in making decisions. He told her that he had taught her everything he could and that he trusted her to make responsible choices.

*If I called and said that I was sleeping over at somebody’s house, they weren’t second-guessing and they weren’t checking out [everything] that I was doing. They might have sat around wondering, but they didn’t ask unless I volunteered [it].* (p. 6)

Pamela expressed her appreciation for this level of trust and indicated that she worked hard to maintain it. Despite working towards her independence, Pamela noted that her parents were always willing to help and support her when she was faced with a difficult situation.

*We would chat about [problems], and it felt like I was being guided rather than being told what to do. In a lot of cases, I agreed and followed the guidance. Basically, [they outlined] the pluses and minuses of the situation [and the final decision was] up to [me].* (p. 6)
Pamela reflected that her parents listened without passing judgment and they respected her decisions. She recognized her parents’ role in allowing her to develop her individuality but acknowledged that their trust, respect, and support helped guide her along the way.

*Friendships.* Pamela also discussed the important role that friends played in her childhood. Pamela reported that these relationships, and the interactions she had with her friends, played a critical role in her early life experiences. She compared her friendships to what she perceived it would have been like to have siblings.

*It was sort of neat. I think that my friendships were really close because I didn't have [siblings] and these were surrogate sisters in a sense. The friendships were close, and I kept the same friends right through elementary school. I made new friends in high school because they pooled a few schools together, but again, the friendships were close. You are looking for a surrogate sister because you don't have siblings to go home to and share things with, so you find people.* (p. 4)

Pamela also contemplated the possibility that the relationships she had with her friends were actually stronger than the bonds between siblings.

*I noticed that the siblings all loved each other but they were all so different. They had less in common with each other than I did with my friends. I think very often when you have siblings that are so different, you don’t like them. You love them, but you don’t like them, and you feel badly that you don’t get along better with them. You don’t understand why you can’t get along with your brother or sister.*

*[My] friendships were so solid.* (p. 11)
Pamela described her friends like members of her family and indicated that she connected with them on a very deep level.

Pamela noticed a difference in the quality of the relationships she had with her friends compared to the relationships of people in other friendship circles. She described some of these other groups as being much larger groups that seemed to have “tiers” (p. 5). She explained that some of the individuals in the group were very close to one another, while others in the group seemed to hardly know one another. Pamela noticed that these groups were more fluid than her friendships, with members frequently moving from one group to another. She believed her relationships were quite different.

_In my experience, if you were a friend, then you could talk about everything and could get support from them and depend on them not to talk about you behind your back because they were good friendships. We respected each other’s differences in the best of ways._ (p. 4)

Pamela perceived her friendships as much closer than those of others around her and credited her positive school experiences to the close connections she had with her friends.

The interactions with her friends also provided Pamela with the opportunity to experience environments that were not possible in her reality as an only child. She stressed that she enjoyed the times that she spent in her friend’s homes, particularly during family gatherings.

_I liked going to their houses because it was a different world. [At their homes, there were] lots of kids. I thought family gatherings were [particularly] interesting. At special times such as Christmas, Easter, and all of the holidays, the families had more to do. There was more stuff happening, more commotion, more_
fun and so that's the down side [to being an only-child]. I found the holiday times weren't quite as eventful. (p. 6)

Although she enjoyed the activity at her friends' homes, Pamela indicated that being an only child taught her to enjoy and appreciate the quiet times too.

You don't have a playmate, so you have to use your imagination. At the same time, you don't feel that you are alone because your parents are too busy with a younger or older child, so you are not resentful of the fact that you are on your own. You just figure they are doing their own things. It was a nice childhood that way.... I was really happy being alone without being lonely, and I knew that if I was bored there [were] a lot of people just outside the door. (pp. 4, 15)

When Pamela entered the workforce, she said was drawn to positions in public relations. She insisted that her jobs were not ones where she would spend time sitting behind a desk by herself, as she knew that once she had her "fill" of people, she could go home and not have the activity of a large family.

School experiences. As a child, Pamela believed that her school experiences played a considerable role in helping her to understand the world beyond her only-child experiences. She shared a number of specific experiences that deepened her awareness of the perspectives and experiences of others. The first of these experiences occurred when she was in grade 2. She recalled walking into class to find a classmate crying. Although she did not recall the exact circumstances surrounding why the girl was crying, she remembered that it wasn't because she was physically hurt but rather emotionally hurt. She emphasized that it was "shocking" to see another child so sad. "That was probably one of my first experiences of trying to understand somebody else's emotional pain" (p.
15). Pamela acknowledged that this experience likely came later for her as an only child than for someone who grew up surrounded by siblings.

I wasn’t desensitized to it by a lot of exposure to that sort of thing, because I didn’t experience it at home. I didn’t have siblings at home, so I didn’t see others experiencing that kind of pain. I think perspective-taking was something that I had to learn with time. As an [only] child, I didn’t have that many opportunities to take another person’s perspective except that of adults...so that probably would have taken me a little longer [to learn]. It came late [for me]. Before that I didn’t notice it as much. (pp. 15-16)

Pamela suggested that children with siblings probably learn to empathize with others much earlier in life as a result of their ongoing interactions with siblings.

When she was in grade 4, Pamela had another experience that contributed significantly to her social learning. While playing at a recess break, Pamela witnessed two girls teasing another child. All of the children were in a different class, and Pamela did not know them well. She recalled watching the interaction and trying to make sense of what she was seeing. As she stood and watched, another student who was not involved in the situation walked over and told the two girls to stop teasing the other child.

That girl became a role model and a hero to me because she taught me something about doing the right thing. [It] was a very formative [experience]. Again, if you are an only child, from my perspective, you are always learning about social interactions because you are a novice at them. (p. 17)

She also remembered noticing that some children received an abundance of Valentine’s Day cards, while others did not receive any.
My radar went up. Before I didn’t notice and when I did, I thought, “That’s not very nice.” [These] were some of the first times that I remember seeing another child really, really sad. Not hurt or falling down and being sad because they hurt their knee or had fallen off the seesaw, but hurt feelings about something. It was shocking to me. (p. 11)

Pamela described herself as “hypersensitive” to these situations. Because she didn’t have siblings, she felt that she had not been desensitized to them. Pamela indicated that each of these school experiences contributed greatly to the development of her social understandings.

Professional Experiences

During the latter part of our conversation, Pamela considered and discussed the characteristics, qualities, and traits that she believes assist her in meeting the needs of the children in her classroom. She carefully considered the possibility that her only child experiences have, in fact, transferred into her role as an educator. It is the connections between her only child experiences and the craft of teaching that are explored further in this section.

Only children in the classroom. As we discussed some of the common stereotypes associated with only children, Pamela indicated that she has observed some differences between only children and children with siblings in her professional capacity as an educator. She distinguished these differences as more behavioural than academic in nature. Based on her professional experiences, Pamela described only children as having a social disadvantage because of their lack of experience. Pamela indicated that only children are “always learning about social interactions because [they] are a novice at
them” (p. 13). Pamela did not describe only children as more attention seeking than children with siblings, as a common stereotype suggests. Rather, she acknowledged that only children do speak out inappropriately more often in class. She attributed this behaviour to the fact that only children have their parents’ sole attention prior to entering school and as a result have not had as much opportunity as children with siblings to learn the socialization skills necessary for interacting appropriately with others. Pamela did not suggest that this speaking-out behaviour was purposefully interruptive and attention seeking. Rather, she suggested it was more about a need to learn about appropriate social skills related to taking turns and sharing. According to Pamela, once only children have had the opportunity to observe and internalize these skills, they are able to behave more appropriately in class. In general, Pamela described the only children that she has taught as no more needy than children with siblings.

Another behavioural difference that Pamela identified between only children and children with siblings is the need for public praise or the need to receive recognition and acknowledgement of achievements from others. Pamela indicated that, in her professional experience, only children are less needy of public praise than children with siblings.

*There is a place for public praise, and it’s nice to get, but [students that] come from a larger family often feel more of a need to stand out from the group [because] there [is] a fair bit of competition. [Only children] don’t have that need to stand out from the group because there [isn’t] a group.* (p. 25)

Only children, she stated, seem more content and capable of internalizing praise and recognizing their achievements privately.
While some research indicates that only children can be shy and withdrawn (Nyman, 1995), Pamela stressed that the only children she has taught have been eager to accept both the academic and social challenges that arise upon entering school.

_It's interesting…they just walk right in and it's because they have had so much of mom and dad that they are probably so ready. They're ready for something new. They have never really had to look back and think…I haven't had enough time with mom and dad….They're more ready for school I think._ (p. 23)

Pamela recalled her own excitement about exploring the school environment and described herself as a very social child. “The reading and math would come fairly easily. [I went] to school to socialize [because as an only child] that’s what I was busy learning” (p. 18). Pamela indicated that learning social roles was one of her main tasks when she was a child in school. As an only child, she did not have siblings at home to help her learn those roles prior to entering school and described the only children she has taught in similar ways. She indicated that only children not only need to but are eager to explore the new social environment that school provides.

_Educational environment._ Pamela described her classroom as being characterized by inclusiveness and care. She stressed the need to be aware of situations where children are mistreating others and stated that she works quickly to address these situations.

_I see that some [children] will exclude others by making friends with certain people in order to exclude somebody that they have targeted for one reason or another. Generally, I will find a place for the child that is being excluded very quickly._ (p. 12)
According to Pamela, she purposefully plans activities and lessons to promote inclusion and caring for others, and she emphasized her dedication to teaching her students strategies for resolving conflict in positive ways. The students in her class spend a lot of time working in groups, and Pamela uses a social skills program to promote inclusive behaviour and empathy for others.

*Giving the children time to talk about problems is really important. It’s never a quick, we’re done discussing this so let’s move on. Taking a bit more time to talk about how the other child felt and the impact it had on [that child], I think that’s the biggest thing— the empathy that you try to have children develop for each other. Asking them to think about how the other person felt is really important.* (pp. 15-16)

By encouraging students to talk through their problems, Pamela indicated that her intent is to instill in her students the need to be caring, inclusive, and sensitive to each other’s feelings.

*If [children] don’t feel emotionally safe amongst their peers, they cannot learn as much as they would normally be able to. So it’s pretty important to create [a safe] atmosphere in the classroom. I want them to develop a love of learning, yes, but also to learn that we are a group and we need to include everyone. Competition is great, and sometimes there is a chance to have a race or whatever, but that is the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, we are a group, and we want to do well as a group and help each other be successful as a group. That’s the main goal.* (pp. 15-16)
Pamela commented that teaching social skills is a challenging but rewarding part of teaching primary-grade students. Her own school experiences were critical, she believed, in helping her to develop an understanding of her social environment and stressed the importance of helping her students develop these same understandings. She suggested that it is developing students’ social learning that is most critical for long-term success.

*I want children to be kind to one another...be kind to people as much as they can. We all have our bad days but basically they need to try to be kind and try to do a good job at what they are doing. That’s what I want for them. That will take them a long way in life.* (p. 18)

*Relationships with students.* Pamela discussed the importance that she places on building connections with her students. Pamela recalled a story about a little girl who gave her a glass, star-shaped ornament as a year-end gift. The girl was able to articulate several reasons for selecting this particular gift, including knowing that yellow was her favourite colour and that she liked stars. Pamela recalled her feelings after this experience. “It makes you feel like the kids know a bit about who you are and that you’re not just the person in front of the class every day. That you have a role beyond that too” (p. 21).

Finally, Pamela described her classroom as a “little family.” When asked if she thought that she taught differently because she was an only child, Pamela indicated that the joy she derives from teaching reflects her connection to her class as a family.

*It’s like a little family here. You have this group of kids for the whole year, and they are kids you relate to and they are a part of your life. It’s really neat. I think it serves that purpose for me. I have never thought of it that way before, but it
serves that purpose, and for that year you have this lovely little community; the community that perhaps as a child [I] didn’t have. A community full of friends and playmates. (p. 19)

Katherine

Katherine is a 40-year-old teacher, who at the time of her interview was teaching at a city school in southwestern Ontario. I interviewed Katherine in her own home at her request. The meeting was comfortable and relaxed, and Katherine was very willing to share her experiences and insight.

Background of Participant

Katherine is the colleague of a close friend of mine. Knowing Katherine was an only child, my friend forwarded Katherine’s name to me. I sent her the appropriate documentation, and during our subsequent correspondence she shared her eagerness to participate in my research.

It would be my pleasure to talk with you....I have quite strong opinions on only children and education so it should be great fun. It all looks very interesting and exciting. I will be glad to share what insight I have. (E-mails, April 19, 2006 and May 1, 2005)

Katherine’s 16-year teaching career began as a core French teacher in the elementary school system. Eventually, she decreased the amount of time she spent in core French and currently spends her time teaching in the mainstream English program. Katherine has taught grades 1 through 6 and has also taught in Wales, England, and Scotland as part of teacher exchange programs. Katherine grew up in the same community in which she now teaches. She is unmarried and has no children.
Katherine described her only-child status as the result of both circumstance and choice. Prior to her birth, Katherine’s parents conceived and subsequently miscarried a baby boy. Then, Katherine was born a month premature and spent some time in the hospital as a newborn. Katherine described her parents’ decision to not have any additional children as a choice influenced by circumstance.

*I think maybe they were trying to quit while they were ahead... because they had already lost one. Then I was early and sickly as a newborn. So, I think they probably just decided that for health reasons they would stick with one. Although it was a choice not to try again, I think they were a bit afraid of what might happen if they did try again.* (p. 10)

Katherine expressed deep regret at the loss of her older sibling. Although she stated that she “always like being an only child” and “never had any problem with it,” she mentioned that she would have “liked to have [had] brothers and sisters” (p. 19).

*Perceptions of the Only-Child Experience*

Katherine openly discussed her thoughts, feelings, and opinions about only children. She acknowledged a number of advantages and disadvantages to being an only child and also shared her thoughts on society’s perceptions of only children.

*Advantages and disadvantages.* Katherine identified financial resources as one of the main advantages to being an only child. She acknowledged that she received many material items as a child and indicated that her parents have continued to assist her financially even as an independent, working adult.

*[There is an advantage] financially. They were there to help me out when I bought my first car and to go to university. So that’s definitely an advantage,*
because I think a lot of people may not have had that with more than one child going to university at the same time. That has certainly been a plus. (p. 18)

Katherine noted, however, that her parents taught her to be grateful for what she received and expected her to show her appreciation.

That didn’t mean I could have whatever I wanted...and I was grateful for everything I got. I believe that my parents set down very strong and firm ground rules for me. If we went shopping and I wanted something, it didn’t matter how much I whined, I didn’t get it because the answer was no. So I learned soon enough that no meant no. Yes, I would expect a gift on Valentine’s Day because it became a tradition. But I didn’t expect it to get bigger and better. I do think I was thankful and grateful or that I tried to be. (pp. 5-6)

Katherine believed that her parents taught her about respect by letting her know that she was not free to make demands for the things that she wanted, and Katherine believed being taught to be grateful and appreciative was critical. Katherine acknowledged that being an only child allowed her parents to concentrate their financial resources on only one individual instead of having to share these resources among children.

According to Katherine, another advantage of being an only child was the additional time and attention she received from her parents. She recognized that she likely received more parental attention than her peers with siblings but did indicate that they would have received attention from their siblings as well as their parents and wondered whether that might balance the scales. “I’m so on the fence on this one. Good or bad, you’ve had the attention not only from your parents but from your brothers and sisters as well” (p. 19). Similar to financial resources, her parents’ time and attention
were not divided among multiple children. Katherine believed, however, that children with siblings receive similar amounts of attention, just from different sources.

Katherine believed that being an only child also taught her a sense of responsibility.

*I think it's because you don't have anyone to share [responsibility] with, so you do it all yourself. Also, because you don't have children to play with, you spend [all your time] with adults. Adults are supposed to be responsible and grown up, so you mimic [and] imitate them.* (p. 11)

She believed that being responsible brought with it certain advantages, such as spending time with friends without a curfew. However, Katherine also recognized this sense of responsibility as a disadvantage. By demonstrating she was responsible, people held high expectations of her, and she indicated feeling a sense of pressure to meet those expectations. The adults around her often expected more of her, even as a small child.

“It's a big word. There's just so much that goes along with [being responsible]” (p. 11).

This sense of responsibility, Katherine believed, also created a strong desire to please others.

*I enjoyed doing well [in school], but I don't think I did well for myself. I did it for my mom and dad. I remember taking economics for my dad. He said it would be really good for me. So I did, and at the time I remember thinking what the heck am I doing? I didn't want to let them down....I don't like to see anybody upset either, so I try if I can to avoid conflict. I do it as much as possible. I don't like to cause waves. It stresses me out, and if I upset someone I become very, very apologetic. Yes, I am a pleaser—100%. (pp. 15-16)*
Katherine believed her need to please others resulted from being the only child in her family. After all, as the only child she was “the only one who could” (p. 16).

Despite stating that she “always liked being an only child” and that she “never had any problem with it” (p. 19), Katherine shared that she “missed out” on the intimate connection that siblings share.

When I look at other people, I think about the connections with their families. They have big family gatherings and everybody gets together and it’s a [fun] and loud affair. When there are three people sitting at the table there is conversation but it’s pretty quiet. We would talk about our day, eat, and then do our own things. I think I missed out on the social side of families....It would have been nice to have that bond with a sister or a brother. An older brother to protect you, a little brother to take care of, a sister to do make-up with or to know everything that is going on in your life. [Those] are the things you don’t get when you’re by yourself. (pp.19, 21)

Katherine described herself as lonely and believed this sense of loneliness was one of the greatest disadvantages to being an only child. “I am lonely. That would be a key word for me personally. I go out of my way not to be lonely” (p. 9).

Katherine also shared that she experienced difficulty, both as a child and as an adult, with knowing how to respond to teasing and sarcasm, even when it was lighthearted and in the spirit of fun.

It’s not to say that I don’t have a good sense of humour. It’s just that with teasing specifically or sarcasm or those types of humour where you relate to other people, well, I just don’t understand it. I remember that it was hard growing up. (p. 12)
She attributed having difficulties with these types of humour to being an only child.

My parents weren't the joking kind, and I didn't have siblings. I didn't have anybody to joke around with. As an adult, [I remember] the first time I met someone who was trying to be funny and sarcastic. I thought, “Oh my gosh. She hates me.” I had a friend who tried to teach me a little bit, and she used to say, “Now, we're just kidding here.” I'm better but...I've had to work very hard at taking teasing good-naturedly and not personally. (p. 13)

Children with siblings, Katherine believed, likely understand this type of humour much better because of the teasing that often occurs between siblings. As an only child, her exposure to it was very limited. She believed having siblings would have helped her to develop a deeper understanding of and appreciation for these types of humour.

Katherine also identified the added responsibility to care for her aging parents as a drawback to being an only child.

They're my parents, and I'll do whatever I can to look after them. I suppose it would be nice to share that with a brother or sister, so that [I'm] not the only one struggling with the financial and emotional burden, but that's just the way it is. It's a responsibility. I [don't] consider it an advantage or disadvantage. It's my family. My family is my mom and dad, so I'll be there for them when that happens. (p. 20)

Katherine has accepted that her only-child status puts the responsibility to care for her aging parents solely in her hands and identified this situation as a unique experience of only children.
Stereotyping only children. Katherine agreed that society holds many stereotypes about only children but believed that many of them are unfair and unwarranted. Although she was willing to acknowledge that only children may indeed possess some of the traits described in the literature, she did not believe it was reasonable for society to believe that these characteristics are more prevalent in only children than they are in the general population.

*I get very frustrated when I hear somebody say only children are spoiled. We’re not all spoiled, but that’s what people think. That we’re spoiled and we get whatever we want—that we’re pampered. I do believe society thinks that. I don’t really think that society should judge anybody, whether you are an only child or a sibling of many. I believe there are people with siblings out there who are just as spoiled or who are just as needy or difficult or moody or self-centered or whatever they say only children are. I think people with siblings are the same. It just seems that people think [only children] are like that, so it clogs their judgment. I believe that some only children are like that, but it would seem to me that there are kids who have brothers and sisters that are exactly the same.* (p. 4)

When asked if she believed that only children were more self-centered than children with siblings, Katherine again expressed her belief that everyone, regardless of birth order, demonstrates these qualities at certain times. She then recalled a recent situation that made her question her own self-centeredness.

*I think] all people really need that. Maybe only children are self-centered, but I really think all people need to have a sense of belonging and sense of feeling that they are important. People want to feel worthwhile and feel that people want to be
with [them]. I don’t think that’s just an only-child trait. I think that comes down to self-esteem. You can have low self-esteem whether you are an only child or one of seven. I just recently had an experience in the staffroom talking about a child. I was upset with this child’s parents. He was an only child, and I was ranting and raving...and I said something about the fact that [this student] was an only child and that he thought that the world revolved around him. I remember somebody saying to me, “Aren’t you an only-child, and aren’t you doing the same thing right now?” I’m sure [my colleague] was trying to be funny, but it kind of shocked me. I had never actually seen myself in that kind of light—that perhaps I do need the world to make me feel important. I’d never actually seen it that way. [I’d] never had it pointed out to me before. So, I was a little taken aback, and I remember thinking, “Am I like that?” (p. 8)

Although willing to acknowledge that there are times when she does exhibit some of the behaviours considered typical of only children, she was not willing to accept that these characteristics are any more common in only children than in children with siblings. Katherine expressed frustration with other people’s reactions to finding out that she is an only child.

When they find out that I’m an only child, I know what they’re thinking. They think about all of those negative things they believe are true about only children. Sometimes people will say to me, “I would never have guessed that you’re an only-child,” and I always find that interesting. I think they’re trying to tell me that I’m not a typical, spoiled, bratty only child. (pp. 4-5)
Although Katherine does not believe that the stereotypes about only children are fair, she did acknowledge that she possesses some of these traits and has seen some of them in the only children that she has taught. She believed that only children who possess many of the stereotypical qualities often do so because of parenting style. “I think that comes from parents doing too much for their [only child] at home and maybe being too restrictive. My parents didn’t do that to me. They wanted me to become my own person” (p. 25).

Family planning. Although Katherine is not currently married and does not have any children, she has considered how being an only child would influence her own family-size decisions.

"Unfortunately at my age if I decide to have a child I’ll probably have one, unless I’m lucky enough to have twins or triplets. But knowing that I would like to be part of a big family and have that connection, I think that somewhere in the recesses of my mind I would want that for my kids. If I had only one child it would be fine. My childhood was a positive one, but if I had the choice and it was in the cards, I would definitely have more than one child. (pp. 21-22)

Early Experiences

Katherine’s early experiences were characterized by strong, positive relationships with her parents and her friends, and indicated that these relationships were built on trust, respect, and support. For Katherine, school was an opportunity to forge social connections which she believed was necessary as an only child. Her early experiences are described in further detail in the section that follows.

Relationship with parents. Katherine described her parents as “truly wonderful people” (p. 3) and described her relationship with them as very close. She called herself
“daddy’s little girl and [her] mother’s daughter” (p. 3). In describing their relationships this way, she acknowledged a difference in the type of relationship that she has with each of them. Katherine described her mother as her confidante, and indicated that she does not hesitate to talk with her mom about any problem or concern. “There are times...I turn on the tap and I...pour everything out in one shot. She just sits and listens as it all comes out” (p. 21). Katherine and her mother talked by phone almost every day while she was overseas participating in a teacher exchange program. “We made a real point of...phoning just to say hi, I’m thinking about you” (p. 23). According to Katherine, they have always been very connected, and she expressed her appreciation for this close relationship with her mother.

Katherine described her relationship with her father as equally close; however, she indicated that it is her dad that she turns to when she needs advice or help. She shared a story about receiving a poor mark in her grade 10 math class. As a strong student, Katherine was panicked that her father was going to be very angry and that he would “blow up.” Instead, “he quite calmly asked, so, what are you going to do about it?” (p. 17). They sat and discussed her options and together developed a plan for dealing with the situation. Katherine recognized this as an important moment in their relationship. She said it was at this point that she realized she could rely on him to help, to advise, and to provide her with support in any situation.

Katherine identified trust and support as important elements in her relationship with her parents. She indicated that although her parents were neither permissive nor overprotective, they held high expectations of her and set “ground rules” for her to
Because Katherine followed these guidelines, she believed that their trust in her deepened.

*I didn’t have a curfew. They would simply tell me not to be up late because it was a school night. They wouldn’t demand to know where I was going all the time. I didn’t lie to them, it’s just not part of my nature, and they knew that about me. They trusted that I would tell them the truth, and they just made sure that I knew what the boundaries were. I guess because I knew the boundaries, I stayed within them. I was a good girl, and so were most of my friends. I always made sure that if I was going to be late I would call. That way they didn’t need to be overprotective.* (p. 7)

Katherine acknowledged that her parents were also very supportive of her endeavors. While attending high school, Katherine’s family lived in the country, which meant she could not walk to and from school. Katherine recalled her parents being very willing to plan and organize their schedules around Katherine’s activities.

*After school I usually had some sort of club. I was always into something, the singing club or the drama club. I was very social, I was never one to stay home. My parents worked shift work for a long time, so we always had to do a lot of scheduling around when I needed to be picked up and who was going to do it.* (pp. 6-7)

Katherine believed that the level of trust and support that her parents offered was critical in developing the quality relationship that they share.

Katherine’s parents continue to play an important role in her life, and she stated that her relationship with them is invaluable. They count on each other equally, and
Katherine expressed her appreciation for the reciprocity of their relationship. As she described their relationship, her thoughts turned briefly to her concerns over losing them.

*I try not to think about that. Obviously it can be heart-wrenching for anyone to lose a parent, but if I lose a parent, I lose part of my life system. They are so important to me, and I have a good relationship with them. They are my lifeline. [I don't like to] think about them being gone, but it has obviously crossed my mind. It's a scary thought. When I hear about people who have lost their parents, I think that I'm just so blessed that I still have mine and that they are as important to me as they are.* (p. 22)

Katherine described her adult relationship with her parents as complex, indicating that although there is a distinct parent-child relationship, they now also fulfill the role of companions and friends.

*Friendships.* Katherine also spent a significant amount of time discussing the important role that friends have played in her life. She perceived that the connection she had with her friends resembled the closeness of sibling relationships. As both a child and an adult, she had lots of friends and has always ensured that she was surrounded by people. “People and friends have always been important to me and, honestly, that’s because I am an only child…. I latch onto people. Very, very, much so” (p. 6). Katherine noted that some of these friendships are closer than others but indicated that all of them are important.

*[Friends] play the role of siblings, and they are my confidantes. One hundred percent. I've always said to everybody and anybody who will listen that friendship is a most important gift. That has been my motto for the longest time because I*
don't have brothers and sisters. So, I have extended families. That's what I call them. They're my good friends, and they're like family, because they are ones that I would invite over for Christmas dinner. I've grown up with them, and they are a part of my life. I'm lucky. I have two families. (pp. 6, 14)

Katherine reported that she developed very deep, connected friendships, and she considered these people members of her family. In trying to explain the depth of the connection that she has with her friends she expressed that these relationships have always been closer than the ones that she has with her extended biological family. Katherine indicated that these friendships have played a vital role in her life.

Katherine believed her parents were very aware of the need that she had to be around others and the importance that she placed on developing solid friendships. She indicated that they were always willing to help foster these relationships.

[My parents] let me go to friends' houses, and they let me have people come over to our house. I had sleepovers a lot too. I didn't have siblings to play with or to fight with, so it was always important to have people around me, and my parents were always really good about that. (p. 6)

Katherine reported that her need to be surrounded by people and develop friendships has continued into adulthood. She has participated in a number of community theatre groups, often committing to more than one group at a time. Katherine acknowledged that her need to be surrounded by people is due to a deep sense of loneliness, which she credits to being an only child.

School experiences. Katherine described her school experiences as very positive. She did not recall having difficulty interacting with other children and believed that she
made friends quite easily. Katherine viewed school as an opportunity to interact and meet kids her own age. As the only child in her home, the time she spent with other children was limited. According to Katherine, school offered many occasions to socialize and interact with children of various ages, and she took advantage of many of these opportunities. She described school as a place she could spend time with people and indicated that although she liked school and was quite strong academically, being surrounded by kids was what she enjoyed the most about her school-aged years. Katherine was involved in a wide variety of activities and programs that her schools offered, including teams and clubs. She was “always into something” and “was very social” (p. 6). She saw school as an opportunity to build friendships and engage in activities that allowed her to interact with children her own age.

Professional Experiences

As we discussed her role as an educator, Katherine shared her thoughts about the only children she has taught. She also noted the importance of creating an inviting and safe environment for her students, as well as the importance she places on building quality relationships with her students. Despite Katherine’s initial hesitation to link her classroom to her only-child experiences, she did acknowledge that her upbringing influences her classroom practice. Only children in the classroom. As we discussed only-child stereotypes, Katherine recalled some of her experiences with the only children that she has taught. Katherine compared these students to the stereotypical traits we had been discussing and although she acknowledged that some of the only children that she has taught do, in fact, exhibit
some of these negative stereotypes, she qualified that she has taught many children with siblings who also exhibit these same characteristics.

Katherine has also noticed that some of the only children in her classes have experienced social difficulties. She recognized that, on occasion, they have needed a lot of attention and have had difficulty solving social problems effectively. She questioned whether the parents of only children unintentionally fostered this quality.

My parents allowed me to have lots of friends around. A lot of only children that I see, at least children in the classroom, might not have all of that. They have more adult company, more adult communication. When they get to a place like school, they need to have the attention of the teacher, and they aren’t as sure around the other kids as children with siblings. (p. 9)

Although she did not share this experience personally, Katherine believed that for some onlies, their lack of interaction with children was a disadvantage to their social learning, particularly as young children. However, she indicated that the onlies that she has taught who have experienced social difficulties have always seemed to “catch up” socially to their siblinged counterparts after a short time in school.

Educational environment. Katherine described her classroom as safe and comfortable and indicated that creating this type of environment was purposeful and deliberate. According to Katherine, teaching her students about respect is one of the most important criteria in developing a positive classroom atmosphere. Respect for others was a key element of her upbringing, and therefore she expects the children in her class to treat each other respectfully. “Teaching children about values is what’s most important. I really believe that is what it’s about. That’s who I [am]. That’s how I was raised” (p. 41).
Katherine emphasized the need to model respectful behaviour to her students and to encourage the development of values in them as well. As a result, Katherine stated that her only classroom rule is to treat others respectfully.

*I expect them to be respectful of each other. The one rule [I have] is respect, and that truly covers everything....I can say, you are being disrespectful of somebody because you talked mean, and they understand. I can say to somebody, you need to put that away because you are distracting your neighbour, and they know they are being [disrespectful]...I believe in politeness and I believe in respect. That’s what I want to convey to my [students], and I think I do. (pp. 36, 41)*

Katherine indicated that she also encourages her students’ academic development by emphasizing effort over achievement. She holds high expectations of the children in her classroom to put forth their very best effort.

*I want them to try their best at all times. If they don’t learn the multiplication table this year, they’ll learn it next year. If they don’t learn adding this year, that’s fine. What’s really important is that they tried to learn it. If you only give a half-hearted effort, then you’re not giving your best, and that’s not good enough. I’m like that myself. (pp. 37-38)*

According to Katherine, teaching her students that not all things come easily and that effort goes a long way towards success is one of her primary goals. Katherine suggested that teaching children about values is often more important than ensuring that curriculum is covered. She recognized that she plays a central role in helping her students learn important values and recalled the group of students she taught while on exchange in England.
I know for a fact that...I didn’t teach those grade 3s and 4s anything academically, because they were a very difficult group of kids....but...it [didn’t] matter to me that they didn’t learn [the curriculum], what mattered to me was that they [learned to] believe in themselves. (p. 40)

Katherine understood that focusing on curriculum was not what this group of students needed most. Instead, she taught them about pride, effort, and respect, which she believed would be more important to their future success.

*Relationships with students.* In preparing for the interview, I asked Katherine to bring an artifact that held special significance to her from her teaching career. Katherine had located about 10 items, each of which had been given to her by a student she had taught. Years after receiving these artifacts, Katherine was able to provide many details about each of the students who had given her these items.

*It brings back all of my memories. It reminds me not only of the child but of the year as well. It floods me with memories. I can say that Megan [gave this to me] and it wouldn’t mean anything to you, but when I think of Megan, I think of her and the rest of the kids in that class.* (p. 29)

Katherine indicated that each of the items, plus many more, have their own special place in her classroom. As she shared each of the items, she recounted several stories about each of the children, often recalling details about their personal interests or circumstances outside of the classroom. Katherine indicated that she had a very special connection with each of these children. She cared about their well-being, celebrated their successes, helped them with challenges, and demonstrated genuine interest in their lives beyond the classroom.
Katherine’s ability to connect to the children in her classroom was also apparent as we discussed some of the high-needs children she has taught.

*I tend to get kids that have [needs], whether they’re emotional or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Asberger’s or whatever. I think that’s because they know that I can deal with those kids and that I connect with them. I do well with that type of student, and apparently I have a reputation for that in my school. I didn’t know that, [but] a parent told me that the other day.* (p. 41)

Katherine indicated that she is very comfortable working with special needs children and shared that she welcomes the opportunity to work with them. She suggested that these children in particular seem to find their own “space” in her classroom. According to Katherine, the environment she creates helps them feel comfortable and safe.

Katherine suggested that the strength of the connections that she has with her students is related to her status as an only child.

*I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s one of the reasons why I connect with [people], whether it’s the kids in my class or my fellow teachers. Maybe it’s because they’re little bit like an extended family. I can certainly say that I think that’s probably one of the reasons why I connect so well with kids.* (pp. 44-45)

Mary

Mary, a 52-year-old educator, was working in the postsecondary domain at the time of her interview. She became a participant in the current study through the process of snowball sampling (see Chapter Three: Methodology for a description of this process). Mary’s interview took place at Brock University, as this location was most convenient.
She was a very willing and eager participant who shared and recounted her numerous experiences as an only child and educator.

Background of Participant

Mary is the divorced mother of five adult children, four boys and one girl, ranging in age from 24 to 31 years old. She has fulfilled numerous roles throughout her career in education. Her interest in the field of education emerged while raising her own children, two of whom had difficulty learning to read. One of these two children was later diagnosed with a learning disability.

Mary completed an undergraduate degree in music while also starting and raising her family with her husband. She halted her studies for a period of time while raising her children and then returned to complete both a Bachelor of Education and Master’s Degree in Education. Mary has spent a majority of her career working in the field of adult literacy. She has spent a significant amount of time working at the college level, where she has taught as a faculty member, worked as a learning strategist, and also acted as a counselor to students with learning disabilities. Prior to her time at the college level, she worked as a trainer and supervisor in an ESL (English as a Second Language) program.

Mary indicated that she was an only child due to a combination of circumstance and choice. Mary’s mother was 32 years old when she had Mary. After her birth, Mary’s mother had to wait for a period of time to have additional children due to health complications. When Mary was 2 years old, her mother opted to return to work. When her doctor indicated that she was healthy enough to have another child, Mary’s mother and father decided that they would not have additional children.
Perceptions of the Only-Child Experience

Mary described her experience as an only child as positive. She openly discussed her feelings and thoughts about being an only child and agreed that there were definite benefits and challenges to being the only child in her family. It is these elements of her experience that are explored in this section.

Advantages and disadvantages. Mary acknowledged that there were definite benefits to growing up as the only child in her family. In addition to receiving her parents' undivided attention, Mary enjoyed having the full share of her parents' financial resources. She recognized that being sibling-free offered her many opportunities.

I traveled, I had skidoos, I went skiing, I went horseback riding, I did ballet, I had baton, I had Brownies, I had Guides. You name it, my mother says I tried it. I didn't have to work. I was on the beach in the summer. I was going horseback riding every week, I was playing with my cousins, I was sailing. My dad bought me a sailboat, and he would have bought me a horse but I wanted to have it on the property so I could make it into a pet. I didn't want to just go and ride. But [getting a horse] was a definite option for me. Almost everything was an option....[My parents] constantly gave me money. If I ran out of finances, they would provide it. Whenever I wanted money for something like new clothes or new skis, it was given to me. They rarely said no. (pp. 32, 35)

Mary recognized that her experience as an only child was very different than her friends' experiences. She indicated that, in most cases, her friends were required to have jobs and were expected to provide their own financial resources for many of their activities.
The financial benefit to being an only child has continued into adulthood for Mary. She noted that her parents continue to provide financial assistance to her by helping to pay for vehicles and postsecondary schooling for some of her children. They have also offered to help her with the costs incurred in completing her university degrees. Although Mary identified it as an advantage to being an only child, she noted it is accompanied by a disadvantage as well.

All of a sudden when you grow up and get married, the money tree isn’t there. It has made budgeting very hard for me....I’m 52 years old, and I’m still not standing on my own feet. Financially, I am still not independent. (pp. 36, 48)

Mary indicated that although having full access to her parents’ financial resources was highly rewarding as a child, it has caused her to struggle with financial independence as an adult.

As an only child, Mary indicated that she has struggled to learn how to address disappointment effectively. She stated that she became accustomed to being the “center of the universe” in her family (p. 57) and recounted a story from her high school awards assembly.

Two of my friends ended up tying for athlete of the year, and I remember being very disappointed that I didn’t get it. Then there was the intramural award. I thought that I had done just as fair a job as my friends, so those two girls, so when it came time to announce the winner, I expected to get it. When they called another girl’s name I was so stunned and so disappointed. (pp. 13-14)
Mary indicated that this was one of only a few times that she had to deal with great
disappointment and felt that her difficulty in dealing with it was directly related to being
an only child.

As a child, I expected to be noticed, I expected to be treated differently. I can say
that now. There was such an expectation that I would be recognized, and I think
that is part of the problem of being an only child. You are always the center of
your parents’ universe, so when you have an experience where you’re not, you
don’t know how to handle it. (p. 14)

Mary recalled struggling with these same feelings when her mother-in-law passed away.
Her relationship with her mother-in-law had always been very close, despite being
divorced from her husband. While dealing with her grief over the loss, she recalled being
“devastated” and “dismayed” because her own children’s energies were focused on
comforting their father and grandfather.

They were doing what was right by providing support to them. I know that now,
but I remember thinking, what about me? I wasn’t part of it, wasn’t included, and
that was horrifying for me. It was a total shock. I didn’t see it coming. It was hard
to realize that I was not the center of their universe. (pp. 57-58)

Mary admitted that dealing with disappointment and situations where the focus is on
others continues to be difficult for her. She stated that, as an only child, the “world
revolved around [her]” (p. 53), so she found it very difficult to deal with situations where
she was not the center of attention.

According to Mary, another disadvantage to being an only child was that she
spent a majority of her life trying to please others. As a result, she believed it took a long
time to develop her own identity. Mary stated that she had a strong need to be liked by others, so throughout high school and into early adulthood, she “tried to mould [herself] to be pleasing to whomever” (p. 19). She described herself as a follower and believed that in playing this role, she was less likely to run the risk of losing friends and being alone.

She stated she also tried to please her parents by excelling academically and in all of her extracurricular activities. According to Mary, she continued to be a “pleaser” well into adulthood. “I’d say that only within the last 8 years or so have I started to become my own person. That’s pretty old, and it’s tough to admit that” (p. 19). Mary identified her mother as a “pleaser” and felt that this modeling had a profound impact on her.

*My mother’s whole life revolved around my dad. So, when I think of my parents, I don’t think of her as having a separate identity. I don’t see her as an individual. My dad is, though. He worked in the college system, he golfed, he did this and that. My mother looked after [my dad]. I don’t mean that in an unkind way. But when I got married, that was what I knew. My role was to look after my husband and kids, so I constantly denied myself. That’s what was modeled for me.* (pp. 23-24)

She reported that her need to please started to diminish when her husband pushed her to go back to school. She believed she began to develop a sense of self when she was accepted into a master’s program.

*It changed my life. I went from just a housewife to 2 years later having done a lot of research, working as a teaching assistant...it was amazing. In 2 years, I had a resume. My husband didn’t want me to do my [graduate degree]...but I finally decided to do something for myself. And then my marriage fell apart after that.*
think that’s why my marriage ended. All of a sudden I started to say, I’m not
going to please anymore. So, the education started opening up another avenue. I
started to see myself as more than a mother and wife. I had more to offer.
(pp. 25-26)

Family planning. Mary described herself as lonely on several occasions during
our conversation and identified this as a drawback to being an only child. She stated very
clearly that her decision to have many children of her own was because she was often
lonely as a child.

That was what I liked about having lots of kids myself. If my son or daughter
wasn’t getting along with the kid across the street, they could come home and
play with their brothers or sister. They played with each other. As an only child, I
didn’t have that. If I went home, I had to play by myself. I spent a lot of time
alone. (pp. 21-22)

Mary indicated that her parents always tried to compensate for her lack of siblings by
allowing her to have friends over to play. Regardless, she recalled many times that she
wished she had a sibling.

My husband is the one with a brother, and they do not get along at all. I just can’t
fathom that. If I had a sibling, I would be so happy. I would cherish it. I always
wanted a sibling. (p. 59)

By having more than one child, Mary believed that she was ensuring that they wouldn’t
be lonely, something she struggled with as an only-child.
Early Experiences

In our discussions about her childhood, Mary described at length the relationship with her parents. She also noted that she had a very close circle of friends, and credited both the relationship with her parents and her friendships for a very positive childhood experience. Mary indicated that her school experiences were also positive, and she used the experiences and activities that school offered as an opportunity to further her relationships and friendships.

Relationship with parents. Mary described her relationship with her parents as very close, but she noted that it has evolved and changed over time. Mary described her parents as very "protective" and "restrictive" when she was a young child (p. 28). "[They] knew almost every second of the day where I was. I always had to report home. I was never allowed to take risks. My childhood was very controlled" (p. 9). Mary believed that her parents' need to protect her stemmed from an accident that killed her father's youngest sister when she was just 3 years old. This accident was recounted to Mary many times when she was a child, and she knew that it had a profound impact on her father. She believed that her parents' protectiveness, particularly her father's, was directly related to losing his sister at such a young age.

As a young child, Mary entertained friends in her home most of the time. It was rare for her to spend time in other people's homes. According to Mary, inviting children to their house was her parents' way of controlling the situation. "They wanted me [at home]. They wanted to know who my friends were. It was control, but that way they [felt that they] could keep me safe" (p. 16). Mary indicated that the restrictions that her parents placed on her served to keep her safe; however, there were times when she
believed their need to protect her resulted in missed opportunities. Mary recalled wanting to go to summer camp when she was 16 years old. The camp provided paid opportunities to take care of horses. Mary, a horse lover, was very excited about the prospect of attending the camp and recalled discussing the opportunity at length with her parents. She was deeply disappointed when her parents decided not to let her go. “My parents could have afforded it. They just wouldn’t allow it” (p. 18).

Although there were restrictions, Mary indicated that her relationship with her parents was also characterized by trust. As a child and young adult, she co-operated with her parents and abided by their rules and expectations. According to Mary, her parents knew that she would meet their expectations, and they gradually began to give her more independence. By following the rules and meeting their expectations, Mary gained her parents’ trust.

To my parents’ credit, I was able to get my license when I was 17, and they let me have the car whenever I wanted, even at night. As long as I told them where I was going, what I was doing, there was no problem. (p. 16).

Mary’s parents continued to put rules in place to protect her and keep her safe. She had a regular curfew and was expected to “check in” with her parents when she was out with her friends.

Mary believed that her parents’ motivation to keep her safe and to protect her meant that she was rarely allowed to make her own decisions. She stated that “even simple [decisions]” such as what courses to take in high school were ones that her parents made on her behalf (p. 15). Her parents told her that she would attend university after high school, regardless of her own intentions or desires. Although Mary was often a
participant in the discussions, the final decision rested with her parents. She expressed some regret about this aspect of their relationship.

* I think that's one of the deficits to being an only child. My parents didn't allow me to go out there and experience life. I experienced it through them more or less. It was always a supervised experience. I was never allowed to fail and learn from experience. I was always rescued. (p. 84) *

The lack of opportunities to make decisions fostered feelings of insecurity and self-doubt that Mary carried for a long time.

* I couldn't measure up. It was constant disapproval. I was very insecure. *

* If I did 99 things right, my parents would focus on the one thing that wasn't right. [It's] not that they weren't proud about all of the good things, but they [just] didn't focus on all of the good things as much as [they did on] the areas that needed to be improved. (p. 14) *

Although Mary reported having difficulty with the high expectations her parents set for her as a child, she stated that she has learned to appreciate them. As an adult, she holds herself to high standards. She recognized that her motivation and ambition as a child were driven primarily by her mother and father; however, as an adult that drive has become more internal.

* As a child, I think it was something outside of myself. My father always pushed for excellence. In grade 3, I remember him writing in my book, "If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing right. And every job you do, do with all your might." The message was very clear as a child. Now it has become part of who I am. I do not
want to be classified as average. I am not average. I will never be average, and I
will never accept average. (pp. 29-30)

Although Mary's parents do not live close enough that she is able to visit them
regularly, this has not affected their close emotional attachment. Mary described her
parents as always being concerned for her well-being but at the same time, supportive of
her endeavors, and indicated that her adult relationship with her parents is open, honest,
and respectful. They speak on the phone daily, and she indicated that she shares almost
every part of her life with them and she continues to rely on them for support and
encouragement.

*If something goes wrong, I will call my mother and say okay, are you ready for
another episode of Payton Place, and she will listen without worrying about it. I
couldn't do that to my dad. He wouldn't be able to listen and not worry. It would
eat away at him. But it's great [with] my mother. She's my confidante. I always
have someone to share with.* (p. 59)

Mary commented that her relationship with her parents serves a true emotional need, and
she expressed her sincere appreciation for their close bond. She recalled a recent
conversation with two of her students who were not looking forward to going home for a
Mother's Day visit.

*I can't even imagine that. If and when one or both of [my parents die], I'll be a
basket case. They have been there [for me] my whole life....My parents have never
held me back. They've always encouraged me.* (pp. 35, 44)

*Friendships.* Mary's friendships had a "huge impact" in her life (p. 4), and she
indicated that they were long-term relationships. As a young child, Mary's primary group
of friends consisted of a group of girls that attended her school and lived in her neighbourhood. She indicated that they spent a lot of time together and acknowledged that these individuals played a significant role in her childhood. “You know, there weren’t siblings at home, so my friends had a huge, huge impact. My friends were my family” (p. 4). Mary’s small but close circle of friends remained constant throughout most of their elementary school years. Within this group of friends, Mary developed a very close connection with one girl in particular.

*We were all close but [she] was my best friend. There were other girls in our group too, maybe three or four, but she was it. From the time we were little, we were together all the time. We were the best of friends all through elementary and junior high school.* (p. 5)

Although this relationship dissolved when they went to high school, Mary was fortunate to meet another girl with whom she developed another very strong friendship. This relationship was maintained throughout high school and university, and they continue to be very close. “She is still my best friend today. I am very lucky to have had such great friends” (p. 12).

As we continued to discuss her friendships, Mary also discussed the important connections that she had with her cousin Jessica (pseudonym) and her family dog. Mary described her cousin Jessica as “the closest thing [she] had to a sister” (p. 5). When Mary was 2 years old, her mother decided to return to work, and her aunt, Jessica’s mother, babysat Mary up until the time she entered kindergarten. Jessica became Mary’s best friend. Because they spent so much time together, and because they were close in age, they became very much like sisters, playing games, sharing secrets, and hanging out
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together. Mary recalled that they often fought like sisters too. Although Mary was unable to bring her artifact to our interview because it was stored in her parents' home, she indicated that she would have brought a set of plastic horses that she and her cousin played with "for hours on end. We made up stories about these plastic horses and just had a wonderful time together." (p. 4). She indicated that these plastic horses symbolized her love of animals and also brought back wonderful memories of the times she spent with Jessica.

As she got older she started spending less time with Jessica. Mary's dog became an important "friend" in her life. Mary described herself as an animal lover and said she had wanted a dog for a very long time. She became obsessed with getting one, so much so, that her grades in school slipped. Her parents agreed to get her a dog if she recommitted herself to her school work. Mary refocused, pulled up her grades, and her parents bought her a dog. Mary's dog filled the void of not having a brother or sister to play with. Mary shared stories of dressing her dog up in clothes, pushing it in a baby carriage, and playing with it constantly. Mary described him as "the best animal ever" and as "a great companion" (p. 4).

Despite having really wonderful friendships, Mary did indicate that there were times when she experienced some difficulty interacting with other children.

*As an only child you're always trying to figure things out. [I] was so involved with adults that I couldn't always understand how to act around kids my age. I had a hard time playing with kids. They can be so petty and mean. You're just all thumbs because it's not your experience. Because you're around adults all the*
time, you're always treated with kindness and respect, but kids can be kind of mean. (p. 19)

Mary described these social interactions as “complicated” and attributed her difficulties in these situations to her only-child status. She suggested that her lack of experience with siblings was a drawback when dealing with other kids. Being an only-child limited her opportunities to learn about social interactions through experience.

School experiences. Mary described her school experiences as very positive, and she credited this to the great friendships, her involvement in many activities, and her academic success. When she was asked how she felt about school, Mary responded by saying, “I loved school. I really just adored school my whole life” (p. 8). She continued to discuss, at length, the many activities that she participated in with her friends.

It was so great. I had such a good group of friends, and we did everything together. We were heavily into sports...swimming, synchro, track and field, gymnastics, and intramurals too. My high school experience was outstanding.

(p. 12)

Mary acknowledged that her friendships and the activities that they participated in were closely connected. She viewed the extracurricular activities as a means of being socially involved and staying connected to her friends.

Mary indicated that she was very successful academically while in school. Despite being involved in many activities, she was able to maintain high grades. High marks were a priority for her parents. “Of course marks were always important. It wasn’t that I always had to get 90, but I was definitely expected to do my best” (p. 12). Mary’s parents did not allow her to take a job while she was in school. They believed that school
was her “job,” and they wanted her to focus her energy on her studies. Mary believed that not working allowed her to really enjoy her school experiences because she could participate in many activities, spend lots of time with friends, and concentrate on achieving academic success.

Professional Experiences

As our conversation shifted to her role as an educator, Mary shared many of her experiences and attitudes towards working with students in the postsecondary domain. She discussed at length the importance she places on connecting with her students and assisting them as they learn to self-connect. She emphasized the importance of using a student-centered approach to instruction and helping her students work towards individual success. Mary noted that she has many goals as an educator.

_I want to be someone who creates change when I work with a person or a group. Not for my own sake. Not for my own satisfaction or to look good, but to open doors for them....[Sometimes] it’s a battle to get them to believe in themselves, but I know that I have to find a way to let them see themselves as successful._ (pp. 75, 78)

_Relationships with students._ Mary indicated that connecting with her students is one of her priorities.

_I really believe if, as educators, we are going to reach people, whether it’s kids or adults, we have to tie into the affective, not just the cognitive. We need to get them emotionally engaged._ (p. 79)

In her role as a learning strategist and counselor to students with learning disabilities, Mary stated that she is better able to relate to her students’ experiences and understand
their reality when she establishes affective connections with them. Mary explained several approaches that she uses to make these connections. First, she indicated that she spends a significant amount of time listening to her students to find out what they need. She noted that some of her students need her to actively listen to their frustrations and difficulties, while others require direct assistance with solving problems. Either way, Mary stressed, she is prepared to offer what they need.

*It’s very much a student-centered approach. They need someone who is willing to listen and accept them for who they are, or whatever condition they are in, or whatever mindset they are in at that moment in time. They need to feel accepted, and when they feel that way, then we can move forward.* (p. 80)

Mary indicated that she wants each student that she works with to know and feel that they are her “most important priority” for that moment in time (p. 98).

Mary also indicated that helping students connect with themselves is another means of promoting their success. She indicated that the students that she works with often have low self-esteem and emphasized the importance in helping them to recognize their strengths and teach them how to use them to be successful.

*I want my students to be able to connect within themselves, to recognize that they are capable. Many of them have anxiety. They tell themselves things like, “I’m not good enough” or “I’m not going to make it because of my learning challenges or personal problems.” So you encourage, and break things down for them into small bits, small enough to get them to the midterm. Then you have external feedback and you can say, “Look, now you have validation. Now you know you can be successful.” That’s what I do.* (pp. 77-78)
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Mary indicated that she needs to teach her students to connect to what they want in life and plan for it. She elaborated by stating that even if it doesn’t look like a student “will make it on paper, you can’t deny the strength of the human spirit” and stressed that she wants her students to learn that “all is possible” (p. 101).

Mary also indicated that she holds high expectations of the students that she works with. She wants them to be successful and wants to teach them that working hard and putting forth a strong effort is important. Mary indicated that the students she works with have to be willing to put forth the effort necessary for success. She recalled two students who set appointments with her twice a week and showed up to each and every meeting they booked. “They were working hard. It wasn’t like they were expecting anything to be handed to them” (p. 88). Mary expressed her admiration for their efforts, and noted that “if the student will show up, I will not give up on them” (p. 89). Mary recalled telling these students, and others that “I’m not a terribly intelligent person. But I am very hardworking. It’s the hard work that will get you through” (p. 89). Mary indicated that she has difficulty working with students and colleagues that do not put forth a lot of effort and stressed that although it’s difficult, she has sometimes needed to let a student fail because they didn’t put forth the effort necessary to succeed. Mary indicated that setting high expectations for her students is for their benefit, not her own, and stated that her greatest reward is her students’ success.

Michelle

As the principal researcher, I also met the criteria for participating in this study. I am 35-years-old and have been teaching in Southwestern Ontario for approximately 10 years. My interview took place at Brock University with a third-party interviewer. Our
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Michelle

As the principal researcher, I also met the criteria for participating in this study. I am 35-years-old and have been teaching in Southwestern Ontario for approximately 10 years. My interview took place at Brock University with a third-party interviewer. Our
conversation was comfortable and relaxed, and I enjoyed sharing my only-child and teaching experiences.

Background of Participant

I am married and have 2 children aged 3½ and 2 years. I have taught mainly in the junior grades and recently began working in a city school after spending a number of years of teaching in a rural community. I have additional experience as a special education resource teacher and in the junior kindergarten program.

My only-child status was a conscious decision made by my parents. In discussing this decision with my mother, she indicated that they had anticipated having more children but after my birth decided to have only one.

*From what I have gathered, my dad was a very nervous first-time dad, particularly when my mom was pregnant. Then, my mom had a very difficult delivery, so from what I've gathered, they didn't want to go through that experience again, so they decided to stop.* (p. 2)

My parents, who were married when they were 20 years old, waited for about 10 years before starting a family. This was a conscious decision as they wanted to spend time together as a couple before having children. Delaying the addition of children as they did may have also played a role in their decision to not have additional children.

Perceptions of the Only-Child Experience

My experience as an only child was very positive and rewarding. I acknowledge a number of advantages to being an only child; however, also recognize several disadvantages as well. My thoughts and perceptions about the only-child experience are explored further in this section.
Advantages and disadvantages. There were several benefits and drawbacks to being the sole child in my family. One advantage that I noticed was that I did not experience sibling rivalry.

I don’t remember as a kid ever really desiring a brother or a sister or really wishing that there was someone else there. I would see my friends fight with their siblings or try to beat each other at something and kind of think, I’m glad I don’t have to deal with that. It’s just not anything that I had ever had to worry about.

(p. 6)

My closest friend in high school always competed with her brother for high grades. The competitive nature of their relationship was not always positive, and they often argued. I remember several times when she was very upset that his marks were higher than her marks. I was thankful that I did not have to compete with anyone.

There were definite financial benefits to being an only child. I did not have to share my parents’ financial resources with a sibling, so I received a lot.

I wouldn’t call myself spoiled though, in a negative sense. Did I receive more things than some of my friends? Yes, probably. I was definitely fortunate in terms of the things that I owned. I remember getting a waterbed for Christmas one year and my friend making a pretty big deal about it. I certainly didn’t get everything I wanted. My mom and dad were pretty good about teaching me to appreciate what I received and also to know that just because I said I wanted it, didn’t mean I was going to get it. (p. 6)

I was also fortunate because my parents were able to contribute substantially to my university education. Many of my friends, particularly those with siblings, had to apply
for student loans in order to go on to postsecondary schooling as their parents could not afford to assist them in the same manner that my parents did.

Another advantage to being an only child that I have discovered since becoming a parent is that my children are my parents’ only grandchildren. As a result, they receive their grandparents’ full attention.

*My children definitely benefit as their only grandchildren. My kids spend a lot of time with my mom and dad. My dad was my daughter’s babysitter when I went back to work the first time, and now my mom is watching both of them now that I’ve gone back this time. They are always willing to babysit on the weekends. It’s a huge advantage to [my husband] and I because we don’t have to share them with other grandchildren.* (p. 13)

As a child, I benefited in the same way. I received my parents’ full attention and whenever I wanted or needed it.

The main disadvantages that I associate with being an only child are not related to my childhood. As an adult only child, I am concerned about being the only person to shoulder the emotional and financial responsibilities of caring for my parents as they age.

*My mom has gone through a particularly rough year this year with depression, and it got so bad at one point that I finally had to step in and make a doctor’s appointment for her. She had promised and promised that she would do it and didn’t. My dad tried too, but she just kept avoiding it. She was getting worse and I couldn’t stand to watch it, so I felt that I had no choice....I do see that responsibility starting.* (p. 16)
My mother is the primary caregiver for her own parents, who are 90 and 91 years. She holds a strong sense of commitment and the need to care for them rather than placing them in a nursing home. I feel pressured to provide the same commitment to care for my parents as they age.

*I know how my mom feels about putting her own parents in a home, and I can't help but think that she feels the same about going into one herself. There is definitely pressure to care for my parents.* (p. 15)

I also worry about feeling disconnected from family after the death of my parents. Once they have passed, I will be the only member of my immediate family, and the relationship with them is an important part of my life. As an only child, I do not have sibling relationships that can take the place of the relationship that I have with my parents. This sense of being alone and disconnected from my family weighs heavily on my mind as my parents get older.

*I have never mentioned to my parents how I feel about being an adult only child after they have gone. I just don't want to make them feel guilty about that, because my experience has not been a negative one. I'm not sure what purpose it would serve if they knew how I felt about it. My husband is certainly aware of it.*

*It's something I have talked about with him a lot.* (p. 13)

*Stereotyping only children.* As an adult, I have become very sensitive to dialogue around the characteristics of only children. I react strongly to the negative traits that are often associated with being the only child in a family.

*When you say "spoiled," "self-centered," "selfish," "dependent," and "lonely," the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I really hate when only children are
described that way. I really do get my back up about it because I often feel that it is unjustified. I don't think of myself in those negative ways, and I don't think it's fair for others to think of me that way simply because I'm an only child. (p. 6)

There were many times when people told me that they would not have realized that I was an only child.

I often took that as a compliment. I interpreted that to mean that I wasn't all of those negative things that people think are true about only children. It made me feel good to think that people didn't think I was spoiled or needy or self-centered. But it really highlighted for me just what some people think of only children.

(p. 6)

Family planning. Being an only child greatly influenced my own decisions around family planning. As mentioned, one of the disadvantages that I associate with being an only child is feeling disconnected from my family of origin upon my parents' death. These feelings played a significant role in the discussions that my husband and I had about having children of our own.

When we were deciding on how many kids to have, I knew that I didn't want just one. Not because I ever remember being lonely or because I really wanted a brother or sister or because I hated being an only child. I just didn't want a child of mine to be alone after my husband and I are gone. I think I'm going to have a hard time with that when it happens to me. I didn't want that for my kids. [My husband's] brother isn't planning to have children, so my kids will not have any cousins that they will grow up with. That's a big deal to me. I guess I'm hoping
that my grandchildren will have that benefit. I’m looking toward the future. Greg and I decided very early that we would have more than one child. (p. 41)

Early Experiences

My childhood was characterized by a very close relationship with my parents. We spent a significant amount of time together; however, they always ensured that I had many opportunities to spend time with friends. School was also a very positive experience. I was a very dedicated student who wanted to be academically successful. The relationships with my parents and friends as well as my school experiences are examined more closely in the section that follows.

Relationship with parents. The relationship I have with my parents is very close. I value the connection that I have with them, and I remember spending a lot of time with my parents as a child. They spent a lot of time playing and interacting with me.

At those times when there wasn’t a friend around, he was definitely someone that I would play with. My dad enjoyed playing. He is still a big kid. He loves to put toys together and put all the stickers on the toys that my kids get for Christmas. He still loves to play that role. He was definitely someone who I played with and spent time with as a kid. (p. 1)

When I was in elementary school, my mother chose to work in the evenings so that she could be home with me during the day. I was able to come home from school every day for lunch. My mom walked me to school in the mornings and met me at school at the end of the day to walk me home. We spent a lot of time talking during those times. In the evening, my mother would go to work, and my father was responsible for the evening
routine. As a result, my father and I also spent a lot of time together. The evenings were “prime play time and we made the best of it. I remember playing together a lot” (p. 1).

During my teen years, the relationship with my mother deepened and our emotional connection became stronger.

*My mother became the person I would turn to with my problems. I would talk to her about my friends, boys, and anything else that was going on. I mean, there were things that I talked about with my friends that I maybe wouldn’t talk about with my mom, but if it was something that my friends weren’t able to help me with, I knew I could always turn to her.* (p. 3)

Our adult relationship is equally close. My mother is the caregiver for my children, so we see each other every day. Even still, we often phone each other in the evening.

*Sometimes we just need to connect when there isn’t the distraction of the kids. We need to talk and reconnect, and we’ll often do that in the evening. If we haven’t called each other in a few days, I feel like I don’t know what’s going on, and I need that. I need to check in, and so does she.* (p. 5)

Although I am very close to both of my parents, the relationship that I have with my mother is different than the one I share with my father.

*I really don’t know how to describe it. Even though we are mother and daughter, my mother and I are friends too. You know, we talk, laugh, cry sometimes—all the things that friends do. I’m not sure that I would describe my relationship with my dad that way, but I feel a very special connection to him too. I admire him and respect him. I guess maybe it’s that daddy’s little girl thing. There is something*
unique to our relationship. I can’t quite describe it, but I definitely appreciate it.

(p. 5)

We will often meet my parents on the weekends for breakfast, and despite babysitting all week, they often help out on the weekends as well. “We see a lot of each other, and I love it. I love it for me and for my children” (p. 16).

My parents were somewhat protective of me as a young child and as a teen. I had curfews, and my parents expected that I would share where I was going, who I was going with, and what we would be doing. They also expected me to call home to verify that all was well.

It was just the way it was. It wasn’t awkward or anything. My friends were used to it, and it really didn’t take away from what we were doing. [My parents] didn’t give me the third degree when I called. They just asked how things were, and then they would say, see you when you get home. It was very minor. (p. 6)

My mother was a “worrier.” If I was even slightly late for my curfew my mother would be waiting for me to get home. I usually did not get into trouble for being late, but I recognized my mother’s sense of relief when I finally arrived. Because I knew she worried while I was out, I always called home if I knew I was going to be late.

Our relationship was characterized by trust, support, and respect. Despite being protective, my parents trusted me to make my own decisions and to behave in ways that they would find appropriate and acceptable. When I was 16 years old, I wanted to date a boy that was 4 years older. I remember my parents being very hesitant to allow me to go out for dinner with him. Ultimately, they demonstrated their trust by agreeing to let me go.
They felt comfortable that they had raised me well and trusted that I would make decisions that would make them proud. They were good that way. They set high standards, and I was pretty good about meeting them. (p. 8)

There were occasions when I made poor decisions, yet my parents were always there to support me. As an adolescent, I often borrowed my parents’ car to go out with my friends. On one such occasion, I went to a field party despite knowing my parents would not approve. While there, the driver’s side window was broken. When I got home, I told my parents what had happened. They told me that I would have to take responsibility by paying for the repairs and expressed their disappointment with my decision to go to the field party. It was dealing with their disappointment in me that was most difficult.

[But] I knew that no matter what, I could talk to them about anything. Even if I didn’t want to, I knew I could. They were always there for me—unconditionally. I never had to question it. (p. 8)

My parents’ support has continued to be unwavering. They have been supportive in every possible way, and it is comforting to know that my parents are prepared to help and support when needed.

**Friendships.** Friends were a critical part of my life growing up. I had many close relationships with friends throughout my childhood. My parents tried to compensate for the lack of siblings by ensuring that I had many opportunities to spend time with friends and family. My mother carried some guilt about not having another child. Many of her own friends and family suggested that I would be very lonely as an only child. As a result, my parents made conscious efforts to surround me with other children. I often
had friends stay for dinner, and many of these dinner-dates extended into sleepovers. My parents also opted to stay in a rented home instead of purchasing a home.

*They didn’t want to move and take away the social network that I had. The street we lived on when I was a kid was filled with other kids. We played outside together all the time, and they purposely waited to move until I was older. By then I had established closer friendships. I wasn’t as dependent on the neighbourhood kids then, so they felt it was okay to move.* (p. 10)

Members of my extended family also provided social connections. Two of my cousins were regular companions and playmates. My cousin Leanne traveled with my family on a trip to Florida.

*She came to keep me company. I was only 4. She was about 11 or 12, so she could go on all of the kiddie rides with me. She took me down to play in the sand on the beach while my mom and dad stayed in the hotel room and watched from the balcony. She kept me entertained on the car ride. [My parents] were very practical.* (p. 11)

There were also many sleepovers at Leanne’s house on Christmas Eve.

*I would wake her up at 4 o’clock in the morning and try to convince her it was time to go see if Santa had come. She’d tell me it was too early and that we needed to wait a bit longer. Then, when we both felt we had waited long enough, we’d go together to wake up our parents.* (p. 11)

My parents began this tradition so that I would not be alone opening toys and other gifts on Christmas morning. They wanted me to experience the excitement of Christmas with another child.
I also spent a significant amount of time with my cousin Jennifer. Jennifer was often invited for play-dates and sleepovers, and despite being related through my father’s side, Jennifer often accompanied me when I slept over at my maternal grandparents’ house. Like Leanne, Jennifer was also invited to travel with my family on vacation.

*I definitely enjoyed spending time with Leanne and Jennifer, and I think they enjoyed it too. They both had brothers, so it was nice for them to have a girl to play with. They were more than just cousins, they were friends. My parents were very aware of my [only-child] status and worked around it. They didn’t want me to be a “lonely only” as so many of their friends were sure I would be. They made every effort to make sure that wouldn’t happen.* (p. 12)

Although I still see Leanne and Jennifer at Christmas and for some other family events, our relationships are not as close now as they were as children.

At school, I had a close circle of friends. There were two friendships in particular that played a significant role in my childhood. In grade 4, I developed a strong friendship with a girl named Carolyn that lasted into our early high school years. Carolyn and I spent a lot of time together. She was from a single-parent family, and she did not have as many restrictions as I did.

*I think her mom was very busy working to make ends meet, and Carolyn was often left to fend for herself. She spent a lot of time at my house—after school, after dinner, and there were many times that she would stay for dinner. I remember that she didn’t have to be home before dark like I did but my mom didn’t like letting her walk home alone in the dark, so we often walked her home.* (p. 4)
Carolyn and I became very close, and our friendship was very important to both of us. Carolyn also became very connected to my parents.

*She was almost like a second child for awhile, because she was always there. She liked to be at our house. I think she just wanted to be connected, and she didn’t get that at home. I remember she used to buy my mom mother’s day gifts. She needed to feel wanted and loved, and I think she got that when she came to my house. (p. 5)*

We stayed very connected until high school. At that point in time, Carolyn started skipping school and experimenting with drugs and alcohol. Although it was difficult to give up a friendship that had lasted for so long, I was not willing to become involved in these activities in order to maintain the friendship.

After my friendship with Carolyn ended, I became very close to Marci. It was probably the “closest friendship I ever had” (p. 5). We met in grade 9, and we continue to be close friends today. We were “inseparable” (p. 5), and we shared everything with one another.

*It was really great to be so connected with someone. We did everything together, we shared everything, we laughed, we cried. We were just so close. We wanted to be together all the time, and we were. It was really hard for both of us when we each went off to university. I think I went through withdrawal. I really missed her. (p. 6)*

Marci and I continue to talk on a regular basis, although we are not as close as we once were. After university, Marci took a job out of province, so our opportunities to spend time together are very limited. We still communicate occasionally by phone and e-mail.
School experiences. I was a very dedicated student, and being successful in school was very important to me. "School played a very big role in my life. I loved the academic part of school. It was something that I was good at, and I liked to show that I was good at it" (p. 7). I was somewhat competitive with my friends for the highest marks, but I was extremely competitive with myself.

I always wanted to do better than the time before. I remember being really upset if I didn't like the marks on my report card. I always got really good marks in French in grades 7 and 8, and one term I slipped below 90% and I was devastated. I look back on that now and I wonder how could I have been disappointed with something like that, but I remember feeling that way. (p. 7)

My drive to perform academically came from within, although my parents reinforced the high standards I set for myself.

They definitely reinforced it. I remember that if there was a mark that was below what we expected it would be, or it wasn't quite as high as my other ones, they would joke with me and say, what happened to that one? I guess it was intended to be a joke, but maybe as a child I didn't interpret it that way. Maybe I did feel a bit of pressure from them, but I remember putting a lot of pressure on myself.

(p. 8)

By all accounts, I had a positive school experience. I had a good circle of friends throughout my school years. Although I had a close circle of friends, the social environment in high school changed. "I didn't love high school from the social standpoint. I hated the cliques, and I hated all of the teasing and bullying" (p. 7). I was
always comfortable within my immediate group of friends, but there were times in high school that I felt socially awkward.

*I was very timid about speaking to kids outside my own social group. I was always afraid of saying something stupid and being made fun of. I didn’t really know what to talk to them about. There are times even now as an adult that I find that I have difficulty knowing what to talk about when I’m around people I don’t know very well.* (p. 7)

**Professional Experiences**

As I discussed my role as an educator, I expressed the emphasis that I place on creating a positive and safe classroom environment, and on building connected relationships with my students. Each of these is a priority for me and will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

*Classroom environment.* I believe it is very important to create a positive classroom atmosphere.

*I feel responsible for making my students feel connected in the classroom. I want them to feel that it is a safe place and that it is a place where they want to be. I want them to know that I care about them and what’s going on in their lives. It’s not only about academics. There is more to it than just learning how to write a letter.* (p. 14)

A few years ago, I had a student named Jonathan (pseudonym) in my class. He was having a particularly difficult year because of problems at home.
I wanted [Jonathan] to feel safe when he came to school. I wanted him to know that there was someone there he could trust and someone there he could feel safe around. It was important that I play that role for him. (p. 15)

As a child, I was fortunate to know what it meant to feel safe and secure. It is important to me that my students know that at the very least, my classroom offers them some sense of comfort and security.

Another important expectation in my classroom is effort. It has always been an important part of my personal story. As a young child, I was a hard worker who put effort into my school work and extracurricular activities. In my own experience, effort and success went hand-in-hand. I equate hard work, motivation, and effort with the achievement of goals. On occasion, this philosophy has produced the desired results. A number of years ago, I was hired as a special education resource teacher to replace a teacher that took a leave of absence. The position was part time, but I worked full-time hours in order to complete academic testing with students who had been on a waiting list for a long period of time.

I had been told over and over again what a great job I was doing by administration. Then another part-time job came up at the same school that would have bumped me up to full time. I interviewed for it but didn’t get it. I was really disappointed and even a bit embarrassed. I maybe set myself up by believing that all my hard work would create results. (p. 26)

I was comforted by the fact that I had put forth my best effort. “I would have been more upset if I had felt that I hadn’t done everything I could” (p. 26). Instilling a sense of work
ethic, effort, and motivation in my students is very important to me. In my classroom, I emphasize the importance of effort and hard work.

*I really work at teaching them about hard work and effort. I think these two characteristics are really important in life. I know that not all of my grade 6s are working at a grade 6 level when they go on to grade 7, but I hope that they have learned that working hard is important. Marks aren’t everything, but effort is definitely important to me.* (p. 23)

Teaching my students to understand that the results of their hard work are not always immediate is also an important instructional mandate.

I believe that commitment and motivation are more important than academic achievement. I expect my students to put forth strong effort, regardless of ability or exceptionality.

*Katelyn (pseudonym) was an identified student. Sometimes she worked hard, and other times she just didn’t. When her effort was strong, she would do quite well, but then there were times where she would do next to nothing. I felt like she was cheating herself because she was capable of more than she was accomplishing.* (p. 25)

Trying to motivate students is challenging, and there are times when I become frustrated by students who do not work hard to do their best.

*I have been very fortunate in life. Working hard is a philosophy that has worked well for me. I demand it of myself, and I try to instill it in my students. I believe that it will serve them well and that it’s a good personality characteristic to have. Working hard is something that everyone can be good at.* (p. 28)


Relationships with students. One of my most important roles in the classroom is to connect with students and establish positive relationships with them. Connecting with my students is a conscious process.

Family and relationships have been such a big part of my life. I feel very connected, grounded, rooted. Family has always been very important to me, and I value these relationships greatly. I feel responsible for making my students feel connected in the classroom because I know some of them don’t have that in their own life. I can’t imagine not feeling connected, and I want that for all of them. It’s my job to make them feel like they belong. (p. 14)

In preparation for my interview, I brought a necklace that had been made for me by several of my students during a 3-day camp trip. During one of the arts and crafts sessions, a small group of students worked together to make me a necklace with my nickname on it.

This artifact symbolizes the relationship that I had with those kids. They motivated me and I motivated them, and it was just a really neat reciprocal relationship that way. I was comfortable with [the nickname] and they knew the appropriate time to use it. I guess [this artifact] represents a level of intimacy that I had with them. It was an intense relationship that really was person to person and still respectful. (p. 7)

I believe that I have always connected well with my students; however, my ability to do so has matured over the years. Early in my career, I placed a heavy emphasis on teaching content. “Over the years I’ve realized that you have to connect with the kids before you
can engage them and motivate them. Now, I put the students at the center of my
classroom, instead of the curriculum” (p. 21).

Chris and Jordan (pseudonyms) are two students with whom I developed very
strong relationships. Chris came into grade 6 with a reputation for poor behaviour and
was “one of those students that you hear about all through their younger years and then
you see the name on your class list and think, ‘oh dear’” (p. 19). I spent a lot of time
talking with Chris about hockey and video games, two of his interests, and I often asked
him to help me with odd jobs. I discovered that he had a great sense of humour, and we
joked back and forth a lot. Over time, we developed a close relationship.

*We really did connect with one another. He had a great sense of humour, and so I
really tapped into that. I worked on the relationship part before I tried to push
him academically. We developed respect for one another, and then he was more
receptive to the work that I started to require of him. He became more confident
and started to experience success.* (p. 20)

I continue to have a strong connection with Chris. Despite being in high school, Chris
often returns to my school to visit.

*He still has younger siblings at the school, so on special events he will often come
with his family. He will make a point of finding me, or I will make a point of
finding him if I know he’s there, and we catch up with one another. It’s a very
comfortable relationship between the two of us. It’s really quite amazing, and I
love having that ongoing connection.* (p. 20)
Jordan was another student with whom I developed a close relationship. Jordan’s parents were divorced. At the time Jordan was in my class, his mother was living with her boyfriend. He and Jordan often had confrontations.

_I really felt for [Jordan]. He spent one week with mom and then the next week with dad. He seemed sort of like a lost soul, like he didn’t really know where he fit in or where he belonged. I have always had roots, and I felt for him because he didn’t. There was a time during the year when his mother’s boyfriend was rough with him, and the police were involved. I sat with him while he talked to the police and helped to support him through that. It was important to me that he felt that even though he was disconnected from the two places that were supposed to be home, he felt connected when he was at school. (p. 37)_

I recently started teaching in a school in a low socioeconomic neighbourhood where many families rely on various forms of social assistance. Many of the students in my class are from troubled families, and the need to connect with these children is one of my priorities.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the participants’ interviews were reported as narratives. Each narrative was reviewed and compared to the narratives of the other participants for the purpose of identifying relationships between the participants’ experiences. Patterns emerged in the data and the following themes were common among the participants’ narratives: relationships as significant, formative experiences, character development, and an ethic of care. A brief summary of each of these themes is provided below. A more detailed examination of each theme is provided in Chapter Five.
Relationships as Significant

The participants in this study spoke at length about the close, connected relationships in their lives. They reported that the relationships they established with their parents, their friends, and their students were important components of their childhood and professional experiences. They described these relationships as close and committed and based on trust, respect, and support. All of the participants indicated a very strong emotional bond with their parents. The participants indicated that their friendships were long-lasting, and they described these relationships as sibling-like. The participants also believed that they developed quality relationships with their students. They described their students in remarkable detail and developed deep emotional connections with them. Katherine and Michelle both noted that many of these student relationships have been long-lasting, noting that past students have often returned to visit years after leaving their classrooms. The participants recognized that relationships have been important in their lives. They believed that the quality of their relationships with their parents and friends impacted profoundly on the relationships that they built with their students.

Formative Experiences

The participants believed that a number of childhood experiences directly impacted on their professional role as educators. First, the participants indicated that they were aware overtly of the stereotypes associated with only children and on occasion experienced these stereotypes firsthand. As educators, they believed they were careful about using stereotypes to categorize and generalize about their students. Second, the participants recognized the important role that peers and school experiences played in developing their social understandings. The participants reported that they carefully
constructed educational environments that promoted the social growth of their students. When they encountered children experiencing difficulties with social interactions, the participants made efforts to intervene and facilitate positive social experiences. Last, it was the participants’ perception that they purposefully constructed educational environments that promoted respect, inclusion, and empathy. They believed that these traits were emphasized in their relationships with their parents and became defining elements of their classrooms.

Characters Development

The candidates also stressed the importance of character education. As young children, the participants’ parents placed high expectations on their behaviour. They were expected to consistently demonstrate respect and responsibility. Support, care, trust, effort, and motivation were also highly valued and reinforced in their childhood homes. The participants believed that they internalized these values and considered them foundational elements of their character. They believed that developing these traits in their students was an important part of their roles as educators. These participants believed that they modeled routinely and taught their students explicitly about interacting with others. In doing so, the participants believed that they were helping their students interact in the world beyond the classroom. The participants agreed that as educators they played a significant role in their students’ character development.

Ethic of Care

The participants also reported that demonstrating genuine care and concern for the well-being of their students was a critical element of their educational environments. The participants emphasized the importance of teaching students, not curriculum. They
believed it was essential to connect with their students beyond the academic level. As the only child in their families, the participants received undivided attention from their parents. Their childhood homes were characterized by care, nurturance, and support. In turn, the participants believed that they included these same elements in their educational environments. According to the participants, they demonstrated affection and care for their students and ensured that their students felt safe in their educational environments. The participants believed that they provided students with high levels of support and guidance and believed that doing so was a means of promoting student success. These participants reported purposefully enacting an ethic of care in all of their interactions with students.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The goal of this study was to explore the possible interconnections between the experiences of adult only children and their role as educators. The findings of this study provide an understanding of the experiences of 4 adult only-child educators. This study was qualitative in nature. This type of research design allowed for the development of deeper understandings of participants’ experiences through personal interviews. Collectively, the participants’ experiences have created a broader understanding of the realities of adult only-child educators. While a review of the literature revealed an abundance of research addressing issues related to only children as children, there was minimal research that examined the influence of only children’s family status on their chosen professions.

Conclusions

The participants’ experiences as adult only-child educators were presented as narratives in Chapter Four, with several themes emerging as a result of analyses of these narratives. This chapter contains a discussion of these themes in relation to the literature and the associated implications related to future research and educational practice.

Relationships as Significant

The participants described the relationship with their parents as a key component of their lives and expressed a sincere appreciation for the close bond they shared with their parents. In families with only one child, the parent-child relationship is not shared, and therefore it is often intense and perceived to be advantageous (Falbo & Polit, 1986; Roberts & Blanton, 2001). Throughout the interviews, participants used words such as “supportive,” “respectful,” “trusting,” and “loving” repeatedly when describing the
quality of the relationship with their parents, both as children and as adults. Other researchers have also found that the parent-child relationship is often rich, attentive, and highly positive in one-child families (Falbo & Polit; Roberts & Blanton). Consistent with these findings, all of the participants in this research study reported that they received their parents' undivided attention and affections, which they believed resulted in highly positive interactions. According to research, the strength of the parent-child relationship is considered an advantage to only children (Falbo & Polit).

The participants described a deep emotional connection to their parents and indicated that the closeness of these relationships inadvertently created feelings of “stress” and “anxiety” in the context of the age-related needs of their parents. Specifically, two of the participants expressed both financial and emotional concerns about their abilities to provide care for their aging parents—feelings common to the experiences of other adult only children (Roberts & Blanton, 2001). They reported that the death of their parents evoked significant emotional stress, with one participant describing this loss as “losing a lifeline.” Research findings exploring this unique aspect of only children’s lives are consistent with the feelings reported by these participants. Roberts and Blanton discovered that adult only children expressed similar concerns about the loss of their parents and the disconnection from their family of origin upon a parent’s death. One of the participants in the current study indicated that the death of her parents created sufficient anxiety about being the only remaining member of her family that it substantially influenced her decision to have more than one child. She did not want her own children to experience the same anxieties that she has endured.
Although early research on only children considered them to be socially dysfunctional (Claudy, 1984; Petzhold, 1988; Thompson, 1974), more recent findings have indicated that their social abilities are remarkably similar to children with siblings (Blake, et al., 1991; Kitzmann, et al., 2002; Polit & Falbo, 1987). All of the participants in this study reported that they established quality relationships with their friends. Throughout the interviews, the participants reinforced the importance of friendships, with three of the participants referring to them as “sibling-like.” They stressed the importance of close and intimate connections with these individuals and qualified that these friendships were often long term, beginning in childhood and continuing into adulthood. Research has shown that friendship quality is more influenced by the parent-child relationship than by sibling relationships and that early parent-child attachment may lay the foundation for close relationships outside the family (Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). All of the only children in the current study reported strong parent-child relationships, which may have assisted them in developing strong, connected friendships. Consistent with this perspective, the participants indicated strong relationships with their parents as well as strong and sustained relationships with peers.

Effective educators possess the interpersonal knowledge necessary for building strong relationships with their students (Collinson, 1999). All of the participants in the current study stressed the importance of developing quality relationships with their students and reported that they made a conscious effort to develop strong teacher-student connections. They believed that relating to their students on a personal level was a means for motivating and inspiring them. The participants also believed that demonstrating
genuine care and concern for their students' well-being promoted positive learning experiences and resulted in a positive classroom environment.

According to the participants, relationships were, and continue to be, important elements of their life experiences. In reflection, it is not surprising that these educators held positive relationships with students at the center of their educational environments. They identified relationships as central to their lives. Their early relationships with their parents and friends may have assisted them in setting the foundation for building positive relationships with their students. The participants reported learning about trust, respect, care, and support from these early interactions and as a result believed they developed the knowledge necessary to build quality relationships with students. The participants believed that they used these highly positive and rewarding interactions with parents and peers as models when building relationships with their students. Two of the participants shared several short stories about the deep emotional connections to their students. Several of these relationships have continued beyond the classroom, reminiscent of the long-term friendships that the participants developed with their childhood friends. All of the participants stressed the value they placed on connecting to their students. One participant described the students in her classroom as a "little family." According to the participants, building quality relationships with students was a high priority in their professional lives.

Formative Experiences

According to the participants, addressing only-child stereotypes and exploring social learning opportunities were also important elements in the participants' early
experiences. The participants indicated that these formative experiences greatly influenced them as children and ultimately as adults and educators.

Societal perceptions of only children have remained relatively unchanged (Baskett, 1985; Blake, 1981; Nyman, 1995) despite growing research highlighting their similarities to children with siblings (Falbo, 1977; Falbo & Polit, 1986; Kitzmann, et al., 2002; Polit & Falbo, 1987). Common stereotypes of only children have described them as self-centered, spoiled, or dependent (Nyman, 1995). Despite these common stereotypes, the participants in this study described their only-child experiences as positive and rich. Three out of the four participants discussed only-child stereotypes during their interviews. One of these participants quickly dismissed these stereotypes indicating that only children were stereotyped just as frequently or infrequently as other groups. She indicated that although she was aware of the common only-child stereotypes, they did not affect her in significant ways as a child. She acknowledged though that she was often aware of the family status of her students but indicated that she was very careful about paying too much attention to that information for fear of using it to “label” her students.

The other two participants reacted to the only-child stereotypes by describing them as “unfair” and “unjustified.” These two participants disagreed with many of the traditional stereotypes and believed that the characteristics or traits often associated with only children are just as prevalent among children with siblings. Both expressed frustration with these generalizations and judgments about only children, and shared that others often reacted with surprise when they disclosed they were onlies. These participants believed that these individuals’ responses reflected their expectations that only children often possess negative characteristics. Both participants acknowledged that
they found individuals' surprise at their status as only children flattering because they did not want to be associated with negative stereotypes. One of the two participants indicated that she was unaware that studies had shown that many of the stereotypical only-child characteristics were unsupported. She stated that she grew up believing many of the long-standing stereotypes that attributed certain characteristics to only children.

Due to their personal experiences with only-child stereotypes, these educators believed that they were sensitive about stereotyping the children in their classrooms. Although these three participants indicated that they were aware of the family status of their students, they also stated that they were careful about using this information to make judgments or draw conclusions about their students' personalities or academic abilities. As children, and even as adults, these participants reported occasional encounters with societal stereotypes related to only children, and two of the participants described having intense responses to being typecast by their family status. These participants believed that their personal experiences resulted in a heightened awareness of the need to protect their students from the same types of generalizations and judgments. They indicated that this was true for all of their students, not just those who were only children. They reported that being exposed to only-child stereotypes created a deeper awareness of stereotypes in general. These educators believed they made conscious efforts to avoid stereotypes in their classrooms.

Throughout history, developing the social skills of children has been considered an important function of the education system (Brint, Contreras, & Matthews, 2001). The participants acknowledged that school experiences played a critical role in their social learning. Lacking siblings, the participants recognized that their interactions with friends
and peers at school became key influences in their social development. All of the participants in this study reported careful observation and construction of the social environments of their respective educational contexts to promote the social development of their students. Drawing from their own experiences, they believed they understood the important role that schools and peers hold in the development of students' social skills. As educators, they believed that they purposefully created classroom environments that positively promoted the social development of their students. According to the participants, they promoted inclusive practices and focused on having their students develop empathy for others. For instance, based on her beliefs that she learned to empathize with others later than her peers due to her status as an only child, one participant used stories regularly to help her students understand the concept of empathy and taught social skills explicitly as part of the curriculum. All participants discussed the importance of modeling and teaching social skills. They stressed the desire to create environments that provided students with a sense of security and belonging. Direct instruction about positive interactions with others was reported by all of the participants and they qualified that it is important for educators to assist students to develop and maintain close relationships. When students struggled socially, they believed that they intervened as necessary.

*Character Development*

The participants believed that character development was an important component in the socialization of students. Character development is often categorized into three main categories: self, others, and community (Pearson & Nicholson, 2000). The participants believed that they promoted a safe educational environment where
support, guidance, and belonging were paramount. They also believed that they emphasized the development of responsibility, motivation, and effort in their students. Collectively, these characteristics were ones that the participants reported were highly valued in their childhood. All of the participants described themselves as responsible and effortful individuals and attributed the development of these attributes to their parents' high expectations. Parents of only children are more likely to hold high expectations for their children's accomplishments, in part because they have only one child on whom they can place these expectations (Polit & Falbo, 1987).

As children, the participants' parents expected that they would put forth a strong, committed effort to be successful. They reported that hard work and responsibility were valued and reinforced, and the participants viewed effort and success as being highly correlated. Three participants described themselves as wanting to please their parents, which they believed contributed to their motivation to perform. Although parental expectations often motivated them, these participants indicated that they developed a strong sense of internal motivation as well. In general, only children tend to score significantly higher than children with siblings on measures of achievement motivation (Polit & Falbo, 1987). The participants believed that they encouraged the development of effort, motivation, and responsibility in their students. Two of the participants indicated feelings of frustration when they encountered unmotivated students who did not put forth effort or demonstrate responsibility.

The participants also spoke at length about character development with respect to others. They all noted that their families stressed values such as mutual respect, care, support, and trust. As children, these elements were also reinforced at school. The
participants shared examples of their school experiences that taught them about empathy, self-discipline, and responsibility. They believed that as educators, they teach and model these values directly to their students. All of the participants identified themselves as important elements in their students' socialization processes and believed that by teaching and modeling these values, they were also teaching their students how to interact in the world beyond the classroom. In short, the participants believed they demonstrated these values in their interactions with their students and, in turn, expected their students to demonstrate these values in their interactions with others.

Traditionally, schools have been expected to contribute to the development of children's character, behaviours, and values (Brint, et al., 2001). All of the participants in this study agreed that, as educators, they played a significant role in their students' character development. They indicated a desire and determination to teach their students about the value of hard work and effort. Often, the participants reported valuing the demonstration of these traits above and beyond the associated products or outcomes. Research has shown that students are more likely to demonstrate positive achievement and behavioural outcomes when their teachers set high academic and social expectations (Wentzel, 2002). The participants in this study believed character development related to life outside of the classroom. By encouraging values such as responsibility, respect, empathy, and effort, they believed they were teaching their students how to be successful in all aspects of their lives. The participants in this study reported a strong sense of intrapersonal knowledge--the knowledge of self and the qualities that make up one's character--and they believed they used this knowledge to guide their efforts to develop their students' character (Collinson, 1999).
The participants’ beliefs are supported in the Ontario Ministry of Education’s character education initiative. As part of this initiative, which will be implemented in Ontario schools during the 2007-2008 school year, the importance of educating the whole person is acknowledged. The primary goal of the Ministry’s initiative is to establish educational environments that promote care and respect. “There is a need to re-commit ourselves to the central mission of schooling—namely, to transmit from one generation to the next the habits of mind and heart that are necessary for good citizenship to thrive” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 2). The program requires that schools develop specific plans to focus on the character development of its students. As part of this plan, schools will be expected to demonstrate a commitment to modeling, teaching, and demonstrating positive character attributes in all school activities (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 3).

Consistent with the participants’ perspectives, the Ministry’s character development initiative agrees that character education cannot be acquired passively. The participants in the current study reported that character education was an important element in their classrooms and that they actively modeled and taught their students about care, respect, and empathy. Under the Ministry’s initiative, teachers across the province will be expected to participate in the active modeling and explicit instruction of important character attributes. According to the initiative, “quality education…emphasizes all aspects of the self…the cognitive, affective, attitudinal and behavioural….Character development…encompasses all of these domains [and] therefore becomes a fundamental goal of education in Ontario (p. 3). The participants in this study stated that character education is an important element of their educational context.
An Ethic of Care

All of the participants commented that care, nurturance, and support were elements of their early experiences. As only children, they acknowledged that they received undivided attention and commitment from their parents. The resource dilution theory posits that as children are added to a family, parental emotional resources available to each child become diluted (Blake, 1981). In a one-child family, therefore, the child assumingly benefits by receiving all of the emotional resources. The participants in the current study indicated they experienced high levels of parental care, nurturance, and support. In turn, the participants stated that they attempt to extend and apply these traits in their interactions with their students. The participants perceived that they demonstrated affection and care for their students, ensured that their students felt safe in their educational environments, and provided appropriate instructional and emotional supports.

Researchers examining teacher affect have determined that a number of student outcomes are positively related to the perception of teacher care (Wentzel, 1997). When students perceived that their teachers cared, they were more likely to demonstrate effort and motivation (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1991; Siefert & O'Keefe, 2001) and show greater achievement gains (Baird, 1973; McKeachie, et al., 1971). According to these educators, they skillfully and purposefully created relationships with their students beyond the academic level. They reported deep connections with their students, characteristics of an ethic of care in teaching (Noddings, 1984). This suggests that these educators possessed the intellectual and emotional intelligence necessary for building interpersonal relationships with their students (Collinson, 1999). The participants reported that their students trusted them and that they, in turn, respected their students. As
educators, they believed that they prioritized building and maintaining positive affective relationships.

All of these educators indicated that students were at the core of their educational environments. They reported using a student-centered approach which emphasized quality student-teacher relationships and high levels of instructional and emotional support. Educators using this approach tend to address student problems, stimulate student participation, and differentiate learning activities more successfully than those who adopt a content-centered teaching style (Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2006). The participants stressed the importance of acknowledging students’ feelings and experiences and focused on individual needs in order to motivate them. These are the required elements in creating an ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) and in developing learner-centered environments (Opdenakker & Van Damme).

Caring for students is an essential part of effective teaching (Agne et al., 1994; Christophel, 1990; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). Teachers that demonstrate warmth and affection for their students have been shown to impact student motivation and engagement (Finn, 1989; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 1997). In research studies investigating teacher affect, students who perceived their teachers as “caring” developed self-confidence, self-determination, and intrinsic motivation (Siefert & O’Keefe, 2001), perceived improvements in their cognitive learning (Teven & McCroskey), and demonstrated achievement gains (Baird, 1973; McKeachie, et al., 1971). All the participants in this study believed that they expressed sincere care for their students’ well-being and that they consistently provided high levels of support and guidance. They reported that demonstrating care for their students was a means of promoting positive
student-teacher relationships and student success. As children, the participants reported that they received ongoing support, guidance, and encouragement. They believed that their deep, connected relationships with their parents provided security and nurturance. The participants' reported that they have afforded their students these same benefits by providing a positive educational environment. According to the participants, their respective environments purposefully included elements of care, support, guidance, and security. These educators believed that they consistently demonstrated an ethic of care for their students.

Implications for Future Research

Although there is an abundance of research on only children, few studies have explored the experiences of adult only children, and even fewer have investigated the adult only-child’s professional experiences. The goal of the current study was to explore these two areas. The experiences of the 4 participants included in this study only tap the potential of this research area. Ongoing research into the lived reality of adult only children as well as their professional experiences continues to be an area for further exploration.

The participants in the current study were all female. Investigating the experiences of male adult only-child educators may provide additional insights about the focus of this study including whether male adult only-child educators’ experiences differ from those of their female counterparts. The female participants in this study emphasized the importance of establishing quality relationships with their students. The question remains as to whether establishing quality relationships is as important to male onlies. If so, another question is whether males and females establish relationships using the same
strategies. What significance do male onlies place on character development, and what are their core teaching values? A male perspective on the current topic of study would provide additional insight into the lived experiences of adult only-child educators. These perspectives may offer a welcome complement to the experiences of the participants in this study or may serve to present new questions for examination.

In the current study, the participants valued the relationships in their lives. They believed that their relationships with parents, friends, and students were strong, committed, and sincere. The literature on only children has recognized that only children have a strong parent-child connection (Falbo & Polit, 1986; Kitzmann, et al., 2002). Participants also described their friendships as key factors in their childhood experiences. Examining the specific characteristics of these relationships more carefully presents an area for further study. Questions for future investigations could include: What qualities are characteristic of the friendships that only children develop? Are these qualities similar to the ones they establish with their students? How do only children develop and maintain friendships? How do they develop and maintain relationships with students? Are there similarities between these two phenomena? Examining how only children build relationships with friends may present insights into how they, as educators, develop quality relationships with their students. An in-depth examination of quality teacher-student relationships may highlight some of the intricacies of these connections. Research of this nature may also include an examination of specific teacher and student behaviours that either promote or inhibit the development of quality relationships. Examining what happens when these connections are not established would present another interesting area of study.
The current study relied on self-reports of the only-child participants, and thus, the information presented here is based on perception only and not behavioural data. Future research could compare subjective experiences to objective experiences. Observational data could be used as a follow-up to the self-reported data. Do the participants demonstrate the behaviours, characteristics, and actions that they reported? The participants in the current study reported that their efforts to build quality relationships with students are purposeful, and that these relationships are based on an ethic of care. Ongoing research could examine whether these perceptions are actualized in the classroom. Research of this nature would require formal observation of classrooms and schools. Once the data is collected, it could be compared to the participants’ perceptions. In addition to comparing subjective and objective experiences, research could be conducted to examine the similarities and differences between the experiences of these adult only child educators and the experiences of educators who are non-onlies. This avenue of study may provide additional insight into which themes identified in the current study are specific to only children and which are common to educators in general.

There continues to be a wide range of potential topics for investigation related to adult only children, adult only-child professionals, and adult only-child educators. With concerns being raised about a decline in the birth rate (Popenoe, 1993; Wilkinson, 1999) and more parents opting to have one-child families (Newman, 2001), ongoing research about only children continues to be an important field of study.

**Implications for Practice**

The themes that have been identified as part of the current investigation offer some interesting implications for practice. The participants in this study commented that
their school experiences played a primary role in their social learning. As only children, the participants’ opportunities to learn about social interactions with peers largely occurred during experiences outside the home. Research has shown that individual differences in social competence emerges in the preschool years (Mize & Ladd, 1990) and stabilizes in the early elementary years (Ladd & Price, 1987). Social difficulties, which often intensify as children become older, can impede the development of age-appropriate skills (Han, Catron, Weiss, & Marciel, 2005). Children with siblings are said to possess better social and interpersonal skills than only children because siblings provide interactions that assist with early social development (Downey & Condron, 2004). Schools have the ability to influence the social competence of their students and must be aware of their socialization needs. Teachers can play a major role in assisting the social development of only children. In their early years, the participants’ parents put forth a concerted effort to ensure that they had opportunities to spend time with children their own age. They were surrounded by children and thus had opportunities to develop strong relationships and friendships. Not all only children will have had these same opportunities. In these cases, schools may play a significant role in developing the social learning of only children. Therefore, schools play an important role in students’ social development. School personnel may need to help onlies develop and maintain close friendships, particularly those who are experiencing difficulty establishing connections independently. Schools need to make efforts to be aware of their only children and, if necessary, intervene and assist with the development of their social skills. One means of doing this would be through explicit program initiatives. Schools could provide instruction and activities geared towards social skills development. For example, case
studies could be used as discussion tools. Groups may focus on identifying problems, discussing the feelings of individuals involved, and offering possible solutions. Social problems and possible solutions could also be explored through role-playing activities. Indirect methods could include invitations to join school clubs, teams, and other extracurricular activities.

Three of the four participants in this study reported an acute awareness of the common stereotypes associated with only children, and believed that they were occasionally victims of prejudice as a result of them. Despite research highlighting the similarities between only children and children with siblings, many individuals continue to perceive onlies in a number of negative ways and research on society’s perceptions of only children has demonstrated that only-child stereotypes are deeply entrenched and widely accepted (Baskett, 1985; Blake, 1981; Nyman, 1995). As significant adults in the lives of children, educators need to be aware that the stereotypes about only children are unjustified and largely unrealized. An awareness of the advantages and challenges of being an only child may help to ensure that educators provide relevant assistance and opportunities to the only children in their classrooms (Mancillas, 2006).

For instance, an educator that holds misperceptions about only children may overlook the only child who is quiet and reserved around other students. An educator who believes that only children are shy by nature, may neglect to realize that this student requires assistance in forging important social relationships. Instead, the educator may judge the student’s behaviour against the common stereotypes, and decide that the student is making a conscious choice to be less involved in social situations, and thus, is more comfortable in this role. Doing so has the potential to further complicate the
problem. If this child continues to be viewed as shy throughout his or her school experiences, it has the potential to limit this student’s long-term ability to develop successful relationships. An educator who recognizes that being shy is a common stereotype of only children may also recognize this “shy” student needs support to develop skills for interacting with others. In situations where prevailing stereotypes are accepted, educators may lose valuable opportunities to assist only children and prevent biases from entering the classroom. As educators become more aware of the lack of truth in the dominant stereotypes, they will be better prepared to intervene as necessary.

The education system has been concerned about its at-risk students for a considerable length of time (Henderson-Sparks, Paredes, & Gonzalez, 2002). Approximately 40% of students under 18 are considered at risk for completing high school due to social and/or academic factors (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). Meeting the needs of at-risk students has become increasingly important. Many of these students may lack strong, connected relationships at home and may receive little in the way of appropriate guidance about important values. In some cases, these students may be similar to only children in that their school experiences become particularly important for their social development. Schools, and perhaps more pointedly teachers, have the opportunity to become significant adults in the lives of the children they teach (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Supportive relationships and guidance from teachers increase the likelihood that at-risk students will complete high school (Croninger & Lee). The adult only-child educators in this study placed an emphasis on developing strong relationships with students by creating inviting and inclusive educational environments. These adult only-child educators emphasized affective relationships and the development of students’
social understandings. Therefore, they may be in a unique position to assist at-risk students. Placing at-risk students in classrooms with educators who possess these characteristics and qualities needs to be considered. Educators who provide supportive relationships and guidance increase the likelihood that at-risk students will complete high school (Croninger & Lee). The participants in the current study consciously built quality relationships and provided high levels of support and guidance to their students, and therefore may be in a position to influence a student’s at-risk status. Placing needy children in classrooms where caring and nurturing environments are emphasized and emulated may offer these students increased opportunities for success. This is not to say that only-child educators alone value these particular elements. Yet, knowing that these participants valued these aspects presents opportunities for planning and organization that may not have been previously considered.

There are potential implications for preservice and inservice teacher education as well. The educators in this study emphasized the importance of promoting social skills and character development as well as establishing quality student-teacher relationships. The content of many teacher qualification programs often focuses on professional knowledge such as curriculum content and pedagogy (Clandinin, 2000). However, research on effective educators recognizes that teachers must possess more than just this type of knowledge (Clandinin; Collinson, 1999). Effective educators have also been characterized by their interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge (Collinson); their personality characteristics (Skinner & Belmont, 1993), and their teaching style (Brophy & Good, 1986; Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2006).
Teacher educators and those who coordinate professional development opportunities should consider creating specific curricula aimed to develop teachers’ abilities to promote students’ social skills development and character development. The participants in the current study included both as part of their curricula. Required coursework that includes theory and practical strategies for implementing explicit social development and values education in classrooms is necessary. Social learning and character education cannot be done effectively through classroom routines and expectations alone. It must become more unambiguous. Socialization is often considered part of the education system’s “hidden curriculum” (Berreth & Scherer, 1993); however, developing social skills and character through primarily indirect means is not sufficient. Although knowledge through experience is considered an important element of teacher education (Clandinin, 2000), it seems somewhat ineffective with regards to developing students’ character and social understandings. Educators who receive explicit instruction about social skills and character development early in their careers (perhaps as part of teacher education programs) may be better prepared to explicitly develop these attributes in their students than those who acquire this information through indirect means later in their careers.

Beginning and experienced teachers must also be made aware of the benefits of building affective relationships with students. Teacher education programs and professional development opportunities need to provide educators with strategies for establishing quality student-teacher relationships. Educators should not be expected to form these relationships by chance. Professional development opportunities and teacher
qualification programs need to provide teachers with workshops and coursework that highlight the importance of creating an ethic of care in education.

Good teachers are most often characterized by their personal identities, not by their teaching techniques (Palmer, 1999). Teacher education programs need to acknowledge the role that lived experience plays in developing the individual identity of teachers. Regardless of the specifics of our individual circumstances, these experiences influence who we become as teachers (Palmer). Our life experiences shape our classroom consciously and unconsciously. They form the content of our teaching and the way we relate to our students and the colleagues with whom we work. The participants in this study provided “lived” support for these findings through the sharing of their professional stories and personal experiences.

As a teacher, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.

(Palmer, p. 2)
References


## Appendix A

**Potential Interview Prompts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Study:</th>
<th>The Only Child Grows Up: Exploring Only-Child Educators</th>
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<tr>
<td>Investigator(s):</td>
<td>Michelle Schmid, MEd Candidate Dr Vera Woloshyn, Faculty Advisor</td>
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</table>

### PART ONE

i) What do you believe is society’s perception of only children?

ii) Is this a fair evaluation? Why or why not?

iii) Generally speaking, how would you describe an only child?

iv) When you hear that someone is an only child, how do you react?

v) Are there characteristics that do you believe distinguish only children from individuals with siblings? Are there characteristics that you believe are shared by only children and individuals with siblings?

vi) The following adjectives have been used to describe only children: independent, responsible, caring/thoughtful, ambitious/motivated, spoiled, self-centered, maladjusted, selfish, dependent, perfectionistic, lonely, dominant/aggressive, rigid.

   i. What is your response to these descriptions?
   ii. Which ones do you agree with? Why?
   iii. Which ones do you disagree with? Why?

vii) Based on your own perceptions of only children, how would you say you compare (similarities and differences) to the descriptions we discussed above? Which ones accurately describe you? Which ones do not?

viii) Findings from early research on only children suggested that the lack of siblings had negative effects on the development of only children. What is your response to that position?

ix) Thinking about your own experiences as an only child, do you believe that there are any advantages to being an only child?

x) Based on your personal experiences, do you believe that there are disadvantages to being an only child?
xi) What attributes, other than those we’ve already discussed, would you use to describe yourself?

**PART TWO**

i) How would you describe an effective educator?

ii) Does an individual’s personality influence his/her role as an educator? If yes, please explain.

iii) We explored your thoughts on characteristics that distinguish only children from individuals with siblings earlier in this interview (see question (v), Part One). In what ways do you think these characteristics influence one’s teaching?

iv) Describe your teaching style including your interaction with students.

v) What extra-curricular activities are you involved in? What types of leadership responsibilities have you assumed?

vi) What professional development activities are you currently involved in (or have you completed recently)?

vii) Do you believe that only-child educators are similar to educators that have siblings? Do you believe that they are different? Please explain your beliefs.

viii) Is there anything that we did not discuss, related to only children or your role as an educator, that you would like to comment on?