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Natalie Brown  
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An Action Research Study of the Supporting the University-Ready through Empowerment  
(SURE) program

By

Natalie Brown

THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of Science/Department of Psychology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

MA in Community Psychology

Wilfrid Laurier University

2009

Natalie Brown © 2009

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## Abstract

The current research documented the processes and outcomes of an educational access program for women living in poverty at the individual and organizational level of analysis. The purpose of this study was to understand barriers, strategies to reduce barriers and outcomes achieved by a grassroots program: Supporting the University-Ready through Empowerment (SURE). The 12 participants consisted of three women learners of the SURE program, three SURE co-directors (including myself), three university partners and three community partners. Life narrative interviews were conducted with the learners with structured interviews conducted with all other informants. Additionally, focus groups were run with the SURE team (a team consisting of learners and directors), as well as a structured researcher journaling process. The findings address two separate research questions: What are the processes and outcomes of SURE at the (a) individual and (b) organizational level? At the individual level, barriers to the learners, direct and indirect strategies to reduce barriers, and outcomes (positive, negative and outcomes yet to be achieved) for the learners, family members and other women in the learners community were found. At the organizational level, barriers to the program, university, government and societal level were found with little focus on strategies to reduce barriers at this level. Within the organizational level, achieved outcomes and outcomes yet to be achieved are reported. The findings are interpreted through an empowerment lens utilizing current understanding of empowered and empowering individuals/organizations. The interrelations and connections between different levels of empowerment are explained using ecological and empowerment theory, and future research is proposed.

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## Introduction

Access to Canadian institutions of higher education proves to be challenging for women living in poverty as they face a multitude of financial, social, and systemic barriers. The probability of this population attending an institution of higher learning is low due to a number of factors that extend beyond their financial need. It has been demonstrated in much of the literature that this narrow access to higher education has long-term impacts on the overall health and well-being of low-income women and their families (Reynolds & Ross, 1998; Ross & Wu, 1995). Though enabling access to university for women living in poverty is challenging, a small group of women, including myself, are striving to address this inequity.

Supporting the University-Ready through Empowerment (SURE) is a grassroots program attempting to address the lack of access for women living in poverty. This program is being developed as a poverty reduction strategy aimed at helping women receive an education and break the cycle of poverty. SURE is being developed collaboratively by myself, a graduate student from Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), a professor from the University of Waterloo (UW), a fellow graduate student from WLU, future learners of the program, as well as funders, UW administration, local government and local community organizations. The program aims to provide "wrap-around" services, a set of services addressing the financial and social/emotional needs of the future learners, and non-traditional admissions. These services are being provided to women living in poverty who are both mentally and physically capable of attending university and motivated to complete a degree: that is they are "university-ready". The population that has been targeted by this program includes single mothers, currently living in poverty who are accessing government support in the form of Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), and who currently suffer from mental health issues. When discussing

this population for the remainder of this thesis I will refer to them as "women living in poverty". The program has been created to support the individual needs of each learner. This population is unique in its struggles and simply providing financial support would be insufficient in promoting access to the university. The program aims to target change at the individual, organizational and, in time, the systemic level as it works to reduce barriers to those living in poverty in our region. This program targets women, as women face a multitude of barriers when living in poverty, as can be seen by the feminization of poverty (Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001).

In this action research study I worked in partnership with stakeholders of the SURE project. The purpose of this project was to support women living in poverty in accessing a university education based on the theory of change that providing higher education will lead to an alleviation of poverty for this population (Price, 2005). Complete wrap-around supports were provided, as well as individualized planning and support. This study documented the change process occurring as the SURE project worked towards accessing higher education for these women in the Waterloo Region. In addition, the stories of the women participating were documented through life narrative interviews to further understand the challenges and barriers that have kept them from completing their education. My action research study placed me as an insider to the research in the role of co-program director and researcher. I documented the process of change at the individual and organizational level and the lived experience of the women participants.

My research illuminated the processes and outcomes of the change related to this program at both the individual and organizational levels. To accomplish this, the research documented the beginning of this innovative program to help break the cycle of poverty and

created a detailed narrative of the processes and outcomes that may be utilized by others attempting to make similar changes in the future.

I begin the literature review with the "big picture" of unequal access to higher education with a discussion of the benefits, including improved finances, and physical and psychological health benefits. Within this discussion of macro level factors I have developed a conceptual framework utilizing empowerment theory as a lens from which to understand the barriers, interventions and strategies to reduce barriers to higher education. I then continue by discussing literature on access to education, including barriers and interventions at the individual, university, and government level of analysis. The bodies of literature chosen for review in this thesis were based on education more generally, while focusing on women, health and government policy more specifically to address the unique situation, challenges and potential outcomes for women living in poverty. Following the literature review I shift my attention to the local program discussed above as the focus of this research study. I finish the literature review with a discussion of the implications of the literature for action research on SURE.

## Literature Review

### *Benefits of Higher Education*

Research shows that higher education accrues significant benefits for the financial, physical, and psychological well-being of individuals. For individuals living in poverty, higher education is a reliable way of becoming financially stable. Persons living on social assistance who receive a bachelor's degree have demonstrated the capability to end their use of government financial support (Price, 2005). This financial stability allows educated individuals to attain the following benefits from their education, and thus shows the urgent need for programs to develop and promote equal access to higher education for women living in poverty.

### *Financial Benefits*

The most obvious benefit of higher education is that of improved finances. Education for people from all backgrounds leads to an increase in financial security. On average, individuals with a greater number of formal years of education have larger incomes (Ross & Wu, 1995; Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). This link between education and increased financial security is particularly important for women living in poverty who struggle to gain access to education. In fact, education is the strongest factor helping to alleviate poverty experienced by women and minorities (Price, 2005). Women living in poverty face more difficulty in accessing formal education than their male counterparts due to their increased responsibilities surrounding childcare and unpaid labour. These are issues perpetuated by gender, creating a country where women make up the majority of the poor (Armstrong, 2004). The phenomena called the "feminization of poverty" refers to the increased tendency for the majority of those living in poverty to be comprised of women (Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001).

Studies have shown that 100% of women achieving a four-year degree and 81% of women receiving a two-year degree were able to achieve incomes significantly above the poverty line, helping raise their families out of poverty (Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001). This finding has been reported in several studies, showing that education is indeed a strong factor in the achievement of higher occupational status and increased economic security (Georg, 2004; Pandey & Kim, 2008; Price 2005; Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001; Zhan & Pandey, 2004).

### *Physical Health Benefits*

Accessing higher education is relevant to the overall health and well-being of all individuals. The social determinants of health literature has demonstrated a link between education and the health of a population. Michael Marmot (2004) states "the higher the



education, the longer people are likely to live and the better their health is likely to be" (p. 15). As years of education increase, so do health benefits (Ross & Reynolds, 1998). This finding of health benefits from higher education remains consistent after holding the effects of social origins constant. Therefore, low-income students benefit to the same degree from health impacts of education, as do those from financially stable backgrounds. One study showed that "the effect of education is no greater for those with better educated parents" (Reynolds & Ross, 1998, p. 238).

Pandey and Kim (2008) discuss the effects of post-secondary education comparing wed and un-wed mothers. It was clearly demonstrated that the effects of helping single women through their education, in comparison to placing them into menial jobs, had a stronger effect in reducing welfare dependence. In almost all cases, women who receive a higher education were able to pull themselves out of poverty and gain a significantly higher salary, leading to their increased health and well-being (Curtis, 2001; Pandey & Kim, 2008; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Lone-mothers are more likely to be uneducated and live in poverty, and lone-mothers with university degrees were substantially better off in reference to health and well-being. According to Curtis (2001), policy makers should move their focus from work-first programs to policy and programs that increase a mother's education to reduce the negative health impacts of poverty, to help end the cycle of poverty and reduce the feminization of poverty.

Additionally, those who complete higher education are more likely to be employed. Women benefit the most from being employed in jobs that provide a sense of control and dignity. Within the workplace, men have traditionally exercised more control in their jobs (Jackson, 2004), and by providing the education needed for women to attain jobs with a higher sense of control, they become healthier. However, the benefit not only comes with a sense of

control in the workplace, but also the benefits of education ripple into the lives of women. Women who work, but who remain in poverty after completing an education, consistently show better health than those women in similar situations without a higher education (Ross & Wu, 1995). Therefore, women who continue to live with a financial burden after completing their education are healthier than women who have remained in poverty without furthering their education. In addition to the physical health benefits outlined above, the impact of education extends into the realm of psychological well-being.

### *Psychological Health Benefits*

The health benefits of achieving higher education are plentiful and significant. Educational achievement affects the overall physical *and* psychological well-being of those who currently participate or have participated in higher education (Reynolds & Ross, 1998). These benefits can be partially accounted for by the lower frequency of smoking and binge drinking in those with higher education, as well as the increased likelihood of participating in a consistent exercise regime (Kempen, Brilman, Rancor & Ormel, 1999; Ross & Wu, 1995). The psychological differences are demonstrated in the differential coping mechanisms of those with differing educational backgrounds. Those with higher levels of education are more likely to have learned positive coping mechanisms, such as utilizing social support, versus those with lower education who have fewer opportunities to develop these positive coping mechanisms and therefore may cope in ways that lead to poorer psychological health (Kempen et al., 1999).

One unforeseen effect of increasing educational attainment is the development of self-esteem among the educated and its effects on mental health. The sense of control that comes from an education aids in the development of this self-esteem. Those who have lived on welfare, and have faced the barriers created by welfare, benefit immensely from increased self-esteem, as

they move towards financial independence through education (Aries & Seider, 2005; Price, 2005; Tiarniyu & Mitchell, 2001). Therefore many benefits can be linked back to years of education and access to higher education.

### *Conceptual Framework*

The conceptual framework developed for this research uses the ecological model and empowerment theory to understand access to education and its consequences at the individual, university and government level of analysis. The framework was developed for this study to encompass the relationships between different barriers women living in poverty face in accessing education, and interventions designed to address such inequalities at the individual, university and government policy level (See Table 1). This table provides a conceptual framework of the literature demonstrating the barriers, and strategies/interventions to reduce barriers as presented in the literature regarding higher education for women living in poverty. Following this framework each section of the table will be discussed.

*Table 1*

*Barriers to Access and Interventions to Reduce Barriers and Improve Access at Different Levels of Analysis*

Levels of Analysis	Barriers to Access	Interventions to Reduce Barriers and Improve Access
Women in Poverty (individual level of analysis)	Financial struggles Poverty of time Stigma (poverty/mental health) Poverty of relationships	Personal empowerment Change readiness - Pathways to education
University Policy	Lack of needed services	Organizational change

and Practices (organizational level of analysis)	Exclusionary admissions requirements - High tuition	Supported education - Clemente - Harvard
Government Policy (organizational level of analysis)	- ODSP - OW	Ameliorative change efforts Lack of educational reform

### *Empowerment Theory and Barriers*

One can apply empowerment theory to understand how these barriers operate at multiple levels of analyses, how barriers are interrelated, and how strategies to reduce these barriers can be conceptualized and implemented. Empowerment theory is discussed in the literature in terms of multiple levels, mirroring the levels of barriers presented above, including personal/psychological empowerment, as well as organizational and community empowerment. Although these levels of analysis are conceptually interrelated and mutually influential, I will discuss them as separate constructs below.

There has been much discussion in the literature surrounding personal empowerment (PE) and its basic constructs for many years in community psychology (Maton, 2008; Maton & Salem 1995; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Speer, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000). One construction of PE discussed in Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) was put forth by the Cornell Group in 1989 as an:

"intentional ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources." (p. 570)

Maton (2008) went on to define PE as:

"a group-based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environment, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced social marginalization." (p. 5)

Zimmerman (2000) elaborated on this definition to say that an effort to exert control is the epicentre of empowerment, with a focus on participation to achieve goals, efforts at acquiring resources, and the presence of critical awareness of one's sociopolitical environment.

Zimmerman (1995) proposed a PE framework that is a helpful approach to understanding and synthesizing the literature on barriers to higher education for women living in poverty. He outlined three core concepts in the framework, including an intrapersonal component, an interactional component, and a behavioural component. These three key components of empowerment are envisioned as leading to an individual (a) who believes that he or she is capable and influential in his or her setting, (b) who is knowledgeable about how the system works and how to access/influence the system, and (c) who engages in behaviour to actively change or promote an aspect of her or his setting. An individual demonstrating these three key pieces of PE, according to Zimmerman, would be an individual who has participated in empowering processes and has achieved empowered outcomes due to those processes. Understanding the barriers to higher education as interrelated levels of analysis, we can begin to conceptualize strategies to reduce these barriers by looking to empowerment processes (community participation) and empowerment outcomes (intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural empowerment).

Some theorists have combined empowerment theory with feminist theory to demonstrate the importance of conscientization of women as an oppressed group (Carr, 2003).

This amalgamation of theories has gone on to explain empowerment as a process to aid women in overcoming marginalization through the acquisition of skills and development of a sociopolitical understanding of external conditions framing their oppression (East, 2000). Carr (2003) argued that empowerment is a cyclical construct (with a focus on empowerment as a continuous process) starting from a position of oppression and moving through a process of conscientization leading to political action and change and back again in a cyclical manner. It is through this process that Carr argues women develop an identity. Members of oppressed groups, she argues, remain invisible to themselves and remain apolitical in their oppression. The process of empowerment, according to Carr (2003), therefore provides a dynamic and continuous creation of a collective identity through which political action can occur. This conception of empowerment through the feminist lens as a process to reduce oppression and increase political action is relevant in our understanding of the present study. The systemic barriers faced by the current intervention include the feminization of poverty (Tiarniyu & Mitchell, 2001) and distinct barriers faced by women living in poverty (Price, 2005) as previously discussed around childcare, and unpaid labour.

For the purpose of this research, empowerment is considered not only a process, but also an outcome. Empowered outcomes are the consequences of empowering processes discussed in the aforementioned definitions (e.g., developing skills). Empowered outcomes are context specific and may differ depending on the population (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995), but can include situation-specific perceived control, resource mobilization, community participation, mastery (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995), sense of control, critical awareness, participatory behaviours (Zimmerman, 2000), self-determination, decision making, voice, and assertiveness (Nelson, Lord & Ochocka, 2001).

The next level of analysis encompasses organizational empowerment, which is not simply a cumulative effect of individual empowerment (Perkins & Zimmerman, 2005), but can be understood as an empowering organization and/or an empowered organization. An empowering organization is one in which the organizational processes and structures promote empowerment processes and outcomes for individuals, such as participation in decision making, shared responsibilities, and shared leadership (Zimmerman, 2000). On the other hand, an empowered organization is one that works towards improving the organization's overall effectiveness by increasing its ability to have an influence, increasing the organization's resource mobilization capabilities (Zimmerman, 1995), effectively competing for resources, networking across organizations, and having policy influence (Zimmerman, 2000). In using the organizational empowerment lens, it is clear that an intervention for change must identify multiple levels of analysis and provide empowering processes to be successful in empowering the marginalized. It must also become an empowered organization/intervention that can access necessary resources and influence.

The third and final level of analysis is that of community empowerment. Community level empowerment refers to an organized group of individuals working in a participatory and collaborative fashion to improve their collective quality of life (Zimmerman, 1995). Empowering processes at the community level would include access to valued community resources such as media outlets, as well as a government body that promotes citizen participation in decision making, and explicitly seeks community input and participation in local decisions affecting the community (Zimmerman, 2000). An empowered community, on the other hand, would have well connected, empowered and empowering community

organizations that provide an outlet for citizen involvement and equal opportunity to participate and influence resources in the community (Zimmerman, 2000).

From this summary of the multiple levels of analysis of personal, organizational and community empowerment, the differentiation between ameliorative and transformational change has emerged as key component in the literature explaining the ability to address root causes when analyzing barriers to an oppressed population. Ameliorative or first-order change is defined as change within a system that does not alter the underlying assumption or structure, while transformative change works at changing the underlying structures to address root causes (Evans & Loomis, 2009). Zimmerman (2000) outlined the need to search for environmental influences, or root causes, as an alternative to blaming the victim. Therefore, when conceptualizing empowerment, it is important to consider what is being targeted for change and in addressing barriers to higher education, we must ask ourselves whether we are addressing incremental ameliorative change or a more radical and transformative shift in assumptions and structures. With this empowerment frame in mind I now move into a discussion of the barriers to education for those living in poverty followed by strategies and interventions to reduce these barriers previously discussed in the literature.

#### *Barriers to Education for those Living in Poverty*

Poverty is a key barrier to accessing university education. In a study that utilized data from the third cycle of Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), Frenette (2007) broke down the gap in university access between the lowest and highest income quartile to examine the differing influences on university access. Frenette found that factors such as standardized test scores for reading at age 15, marks achieved at age 15, parental influences, and high-school quality accounted for a total of 84% of the variance between income quartiles in accessing university,



while only 12% of the variance was related to financial barriers. This finding demonstrates that other factors are important besides the provision of material resources. Poverty, however, is not unimportant; it may be that educational achievement mediates the relationship between poverty and access to higher education. All variables were related to the differing income of parents, meaning that extra time, social support and access to educational resources increase as parental income increases. Therefore there is a need for interventions that focus on barriers extending more broadly than financial support when working towards equal access to higher education.

St. John, Tuttle and Musoba (2006) state that "students that take the steps to prepare for college should have the basic right to attend college if qualified for admission, rather than be denied access based on their financial ability to pay" (p. 337). Currently, those who struggle financially, who experience mental health issues, and who have social barriers have been excluded from higher education in Canada and around the world. This is unjust and those who are university-ready should be provided the opportunity to reach their full educational potential (St. John et al., 2006). Women currently living with the struggles of poverty and lone motherhood face daily stressors that come with that position and have an increased number of stressors when accessing higher education including individual, university and government level barriers. These barriers are described in the following sections.

#### *Individual Level Barriers*

For those living below the poverty line in Canada, accessing higher education remains distinctly out of reach. There are multiple barriers exerting pressure on the individual in her or his attempts to access higher education. These individual level barriers include financial struggles (Bellamy & Mowbray, 1998), poverty of time (Curtis, 2001), stigma (Mowbray,

Gutierrez, Bellamy, Szilvagyí & Strauss, 2003) and poverty of relationships (Jennings, 2004).

These barriers function as disincentives to education for women living in poverty.

One obvious barrier when attempting to access higher education for women living on welfare is limited finances. This is due to the fact that women require access not only to childcare, proper housing, and transportation in order to attend higher education, but they also incur the costs of university (Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001). Lack of access to these resources is a large deterrent for this population, making accessing higher education next to impossible (St. John et al., 2006).

While financial struggles remain an obvious barrier to women living in poverty, other resources are lacking for this population, including time. Single mothers living in poverty and/or on welfare suffer from a lack of time, as they attempt to complete welfare requirements, raise children, sustain part-time employment and accomplish other life tasks. Curtis (2001) labels these women "time-poor". Adding to this, the accountability to a university program would lead to severe time shortages, and issues with balancing family, work and university life.

Women who subsist on social assistance are stigmatized and branded as "lazy" by society and are believed to manipulate the system (Jennings, 2004). This ideology creates stigma against "welfare mothers", who are presumed to accomplish nothing or, conversely, that they attend school to be exempted from workfare requirements, thus creating a lose/lose situation for this population (Jennings, 2004). Workfare is a result of welfare reform in both Canada and the United States attaching work requirements to an individual's eligibility for social assistance. This view of "welfare mothers" leads to stigma, therefore further discouraging women from accessing higher education.

In addition to stigma due to poverty, if women have a mental illness they may also face stigma for their mental illness. Research has shown that mental illness has been ranked low on the social distance scale (Hinshaw & Cicchetti, 2000), meaning that the general public distances itself from people with mental illness. This distance restricts this population from acceptance into formal institutions such as education (Hinshaw & Cicchetti, 2000). One explanatory mechanism that has been proposed to explicate stigma is causal attribution. Individuals who attribute the cause of mental illness to biology or individual weakness (i.e., causes that present individuals as out of control of their illness) are most likely to distance themselves from people with mental illness (Dietrich, Beck, Bujantugs, Kenzine, Matschinger & Angermeyer, 2004). According to Hinshaw and Cicchetti (2000) "stigma's impact on a person's life may be as harmful as the direct effects of the [mental illness]" (p. 558).

Yet another individual level barrier is the "poverty of relationships" that occurs for individuals living in poverty. Family support systems often break down for those living on social assistance (Jennings, 2004). This phenomenon according to Jennings (2004) is the "poverty of relationships" meaning that to earn an adequate income all adult members of low-income families would likely need to work outside of the home. Because adults in these families are more likely to work, there is less available support in the home, leading to a breakdown in extended family support. This decreased support negatively influences one's access to university, in that there are fewer supports in one's home and community to motivate and sustain individuals who wish to further their education through a lack of childcare support.

Due to this "poverty of relationships" phenomenon, those living in poverty seek social support and/or are required to utilize community supports that extend beyond family and friends to include case workers, social workers, and other community resources. However,

relationships with professionals do not always provide positive support. When these support systems do not provide positive support, access to higher education is further inhibited.

Christopher (2005) found that more than half of the social assistance case worker participants were not always supportive of their clients' choosing education over work placements and held back and/or were unaware of crucial information or policy that would aid in the attainment of a higher education for low-income individuals. Successful applicants to higher education were consistent in their discussions of familial support and support they received from their extended social networks; having a strong external support system is key to success in obtaining a higher education (Bolam & Sixsmith, 2002).

Although these individual level barriers are deterrents to higher education for women living in poverty, there are often higher level barriers that need to be addressed in order to create any long-term and sustainable change. Following is a discussion of university level barriers with which organizational change can occur to create system level change.

#### *University Level Barriers*

University level barriers include policies and practices related to limited support services (Thomas, 2001), traditional minimum admissions criteria (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002), and high costs of attending university (Balderston, 1997; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Institutions of higher education develop policy to regulate university practices and, whether intentional or not, these policies risk excluding groups or erecting barriers to potential applicants and current students (Thomas, 2001). One potentially limiting set of policies surrounds the different social/emotional supports provided for potential and current students. Although most universities provide an array of services, many limit the number of times one can access any support. Additionally there can be long waits or inaccessible information concerning the supports. Many non-traditional

students, including older adults and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, require different and more intense supports in order to be successful in accessing and completing their education (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). University policy needs to be responsive to the needs of a diverse student population and ensure that those requiring more intense resources are able to attain the supports they need.

Secondly, the admissions procedures of universities lead to barriers for many individuals living in poverty. Frenette (2007) found that individuals who live in the bottom income quartile in Canada score lower on standardized test scores by age 15 than those in the highest income quartile. Therefore, obtaining the minimum criteria for admission at a university based on standardized test scores and high school transcripts decreases the likelihood that individuals living in poverty will be eligible for admissions. It is necessary for universities to develop admissions criteria for non-traditional students to increase equal access.

Another barrier to individuals living in poverty is the high cost of applying to and attending university. This barrier was discussed at length in the individual level of analysis section. Universities in Canada have significant autonomy in designating tuition and fees, whereas other countries are more government driven (Schuetze, Slowey, 2002). Therefore universities play a part in the creation of financial barriers for future learners along with government level policy.

#### *Government Level Barriers*

Continuing with the multiple levels of analysis framework, I outline barriers erected at the government level that create disparate access to higher education for women living in poverty. In Ontario there are two forms of social assistance available to mothers living in poverty that amplify barriers to higher education: Ontario Works (OW), which is general

welfare assistance for eligible individuals and families in financial need, and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), available to those individuals with financial need living with a mental or physical disability that is projected to interfere with quality of life and ability to sustain a livelihood for a minimum of one year. The policy directives referring to post secondary education reveal the internal barriers created by the programs for women living in poverty.

OW, introduced in Ontario in 1998, shifted the manner in which individuals could access social assistance. The shift was to assistance in the form of workfare introducing mandatory participation requirements for all able bodied individuals. Single mothers were strongly affected by this shift as it redefined this population as "undeserving" of social assistance (Mayson, 1999). The intent of this new policy was to help individuals obtain permanent employment as quickly as possible (in order to reduce government transfers and increase self-reliance). OW supports basic education surrounding the need for literacy, language and a high school diploma. Beyond that it states that it will fund "an education or training program approved by the administration" (OW policy directive 37.0). However, OW does not fund long-term educational aspirations. This government level policy directive therefore creates barriers for those wanting to access higher education: they cannot be approved for a university education to count towards work requirements and therefore are required to spend their time elsewhere at an approved site to ensure continued social assistance, thus reproducing the cycle of poverty and government dependence.

In addition to these educational restrictions, OW policy states that one must apply for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) when accessing education, or one will become ineligible for financial assistance. To complicate the situation further, if an OW recipient is

successful in receiving OSAP, she also becomes ineligible for OW assistance (unless the OSAP provides less than the original monthly assistance provided by OW). This is not the case in all Canadian provinces. According to a national review of social assistance programs Newfoundland provides stipends to students to cover tuition and other school expenses through a student work and service program, while continuing to provide their social assistance payments (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 1996). Therefore, OW policy creates the conditions for decreased financial stability when attempting to complete a higher education as an individual must live on the same amount of money with the increased burden of educational costs. The policy directive for OW that relates to higher education does nothing to contribute to or to lessen the financial burden of university. These government level policies have created new barriers to those who already struggle to attain a higher education.

ODSP, relative to OW, creates fewer barriers for individuals to access higher education. Although the same regulations apply to the mandatory application of OSAP, one is not automatically made ineligible for assistance when approved for a student loan. The regulations for ODSP state that OSAP may cover educational costs such as tuition, transportation and book costs. This amount will not be considered against an individual's benefits and therefore these individuals will continue to be covered for their living expenses through ODSP assistance. This difference between OW and ODSP can be explained through the categorization of individuals who qualify for ODSP; they are constructed as unable to work, and therefore believed to be more deserving of services. Therefore, the application of ODSP policies, though stigmatizing, may in fact provide some benefits to these women who are attempting to access university and sufficient funds to do so.

Whereas these programs have some flexibility, they have failed to consider the realities of those living in chronic poverty. Obtaining approximately \$30,000 in OS AP debt in a four-year degree is daunting to those who subsist on much less than that in a year and frightens many individuals in poverty from trying to access a higher education (McMullin, 2004). Therefore, more supportive and flexible programs are needed to help this population feel capable and comfortable accessing a higher education.

Though much of the research on workfare and welfare has been done in the United States, these findings may be generalized to a Canadian workfare context. One U.S. study demonstrated the effect of labeling women on welfare as lazy (Coffield, 2002). As mentioned earlier these women are perceived to manipulate the system and this has led to changes in policy that further limits the low-income population from accessing further education. While, educational hours were initially counted towards workfare requirements, currently workfare only applies to an educational program that can be completed within 12 months thus discouraging the completion of a university degree (Coffield, 2002). In Canada, welfare policy change has had similar negative repercussions for women, more specifically lone mothers. Breitzkreuz (2005) argues that a key problem with the Canadian welfare system is its conceptualization of gender equality by providing "equal" services to men and women alike. The system makes no consideration of the differing responsibilities of lone mothers and their need for quality child care and job flexibility. Therefore, women under current welfare policy have less time and fewer resources than their male counterparts to conduct their workfare requirements, and any educational initiatives.

As outlined in the literature review thus far, there is a strong knowledge base showing barriers at multiple levels of analysis including the individual, university and government



levels. Therefore, when addressing the issues of women and access to higher education it would thus be logical to address these barriers at each level. Many programs have been developed to address these inequities. Discussed in the following section are interventions for change that attempt to address barriers within each ecological level. I take an empowerment focus to synthesize the interventions and explain how ecological strategies are necessary for sustainable reduction in barriers faced to women living in poverty.

### *Interventions to Overcome Barriers*

In order to address the barriers erected at multiple levels of analysis, interventions have been developed at the individual, university, and government policy level to reduce or remove these barriers.

#### *Individual Level Interventions*

Interventions designed to address barriers at the individual level are generally ameliorative in nature. These interventions aim to promote well-being but ignore power dynamics (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). In order to create more meaningful changes, individual level interventions should be linked to social transformation and should challenge the status quo. When developing an individual intervention, literature demonstrates the importance of an individual's readiness for change. Prochaska, Norcross and DiClemente (1994) outline four stages of preparation for change readiness in individuals. These are pre-contemplation, contemplation, action and maintenance. The purpose of these stages is to understand whether a program will be successful in a context with certain people. This change readiness does not necessarily mean that the individual has the financial resources to change or that he or she knows how to overcome the barriers they face. Instead, this change readiness presents itself in the thought patterns of the individual. The individual has come to the realization that he or she has

faced immense barriers due to poverty and life experiences, and become ready to fight for change in his or her life, and to work towards overcoming barriers. This change readiness is not always enough as the barriers presented to this marginalized group can be daunting and sometimes difficult or impossible to overcome. Therefore, change readiness is important as change cannot be forced on those who are unwilling or scared to move forward. However, this cannot be the only factor in creating change.

Another factor that is critical when developing an individual level intervention is that of PE as discussed above. In order to rectify injustices and reduce barriers, individuals must feel a sense of empowerment and control over their lives before moving forward to engender change. PE as previously mentioned is both a process and an outcome that can lead to self-determination, independence, personal control, development of skills, self-esteem (Nelson, Lord & Ochocka, 2001), and an understanding of the sociopolitical environment (Zimmerman, 2000). However, no matter how empowered an individual becomes on a fixed or low income he or she will remain excluded from higher education without receiving the necessary finances or supports needed for tuition and other educational costs. Therefore, PE needs to encompass the interactional and behavioural components as well including resource mobilization and knowledge of sociopolitical context. Also necessary for sustainable change for the individual is empowerment processes at multiple levels of analysis (Zimmerman, 1995), targeting more transformational and radical change.

Although interventions have been designed for the individual level of analysis to help move individuals from powerlessness to personal empowerment, there are few interventions that work to address more structural inequities in an individual's access to higher education. One such intervention is the Pathways to Education program developed to address inequities in

education for teenagers living in poverty. This intervention provides wrap-around supports including academic, social and financial support to all teens in a catchment area. This program has succeeded in increasing high school completion from 44% to 90% and post-secondary attendance from 20% to 80% in a low-income neighbourhood in Toronto (Boston Consulting Group, 2007). Pathways to Education is a successful program in the neighbourhoods in which it has been implemented, and much can be learned from its "wraparound" support system. However, the participants of the program are individuals who are currently in high school. Therefore, the program does not benefit those individuals who have left high school because of personal issues or financial struggles.

Individual interventions provide a starting point for change, and are beneficial to those who have the privilege to participate. However, in order to create more systemic change to university access one must address barriers at the organizational level and work to change policy and practices that create these barriers for individuals attempting to access higher education.

#### *University Level Interventions*

When interventions are aimed at addressing university level barriers, they are more likely to work towards transformative change, meaning that they aim to change power relationships and make structural changes. In implementing this change, there are certain pre-conditions to success. Little research has been done on these pre-conditions of change within university institutions. However, there is research in other settings which can be applied to change in higher education. According to Nelson et al. (2001), the process of change in mental health organizations is comprised of several steps, some of which create the conditions necessary to implement a sound action plan for change. An organization must (a) clarify its mission and goals; (b) compare its newly developed mission and philosophy to the reality of how the

organization is run, as well as to the organizational structure, making explicit areas of necessary change; and (c) develop change goals that fit with the new mission (Nelson et al., 2001). These three steps are the building blocks of a change effort and must occur before moving into the steps of creating an action plan and evaluation plan. These steps are useful when framing a change effort as they help set priorities and create work plans in a systematic fashion.

Gornitzka, (1999) presented change in the context of higher education discussing how the interaction between public and university policy create change in higher education institutions. This study outlined an integrated theoretical framework of change and how universities adapt to or resist government policy. Mid-level change was found to be most likely to succeed in institutions of higher education. Changes within higher education institutions were also more likely to succeed if there exists a key leader with the necessary resources to enforce policy and to shift an organization's focus onto the implementation of policy and not simply on policy development. Maton (2008) discussed leadership as one of the key organizational characteristics for empowerment, outlining leader talent, sharing or roles and responsibilities, being committed to the setting and members, as well as emulating empowered outcomes such as access to needed resources.

One key pre-condition to university level change that has received no attention in higher education is that of change readiness. Change readiness is the process of creating an organization that is both ready for and capable of change (Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder, 1993). In addition, organizations must feel a sense of urgency for change and include key players that believe the change is a necessity (Evans & Loomis, 2009). In order to create readiness for change, the university must be presented with the discrepancy between the current and desired

context. Simultaneously, the university must be shown that not only is there a discrepancy, but that it is in its power and skill to create and sustain change.

Therefore, in line with the organizational change literature and the previously discussed university level barriers, programs have been created in an attempt to rectify inequities in university access. Three interventions will be discussed below: Supported Education (Bellamy & Mowbray, 1998; Mowbray, Bellamy, Megivern & Szilvagy, 2001; Mowbray, Gutierrez, Bellamy, Szilvagy, Strauss, 2003), the Clemente model (Shorris, 2000), and tuition policy at Harvard University. These programs each address different factors that are perceived to be the cause of the access gap: emotional/social support needs, non-traditional admissions and financial needs, respectively. These programs have been created to address the obvious inequalities in accessing higher education. Some interventions have demonstrated the potential for universities to change policy in order to accommodate alternative populations; three will be discussed below.

Supported Education began in the U.S. to create supportive environments for mental health consumer/survivors who wish to achieve a post-secondary education (Bellamy & Mowbray, 1998; Mowbray et al., 2001; Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001). Supports are provided to the students including educational resources, tutoring services, transportation, stress/time management skills, and group support (Mowbray et al., 2001). Such programs have proven quite successful with this population and a similar program for those living in poverty would be beneficial as a future area of research.

The program has three different models. The first is the self-contained classroom. In this model the consumers/survivors attend a separate class without integration into the larger university community. The second is the on-site model in which mental health consumer/survivors attend regular classes with any extra support needed from on-site workers.

Lastly, the mobile support model allows students the freedom of attending the classes they wish with support from community workers (Collins, Bybee & Mowbray, 1998). The purpose of these programs is not to attain a post-secondary degree, but to allow individuals with mental illnesses to have a short experience with higher education to develop career goals and vocational skills (Collins et al., 1998). Limitations of these programs include a lack of continued provision of on-going support to those continuing with their education making it difficult for those who have completed a Supported Education program to further their education at university.

The effectiveness of Supported Education programs has been demonstrated. Those who participated were more likely to continue with higher education (research does not specify college, vocational training or university). Moreover, those who participated in the self-contained model fared better and were more likely to complete their course, while those in the individual placements were less likely to participate as the supports were less systematic. One of the aims of the Supported Education model is for participants to feel comfortable and ready to enter into full-time studies upon completion of their program. Wolf and DiPietro (1992) found that 7% of those in a Supported Education program registered for a four year university degree and 75% of those who attempted more education successfully passed their courses. These programs address the need for emotional and social support for mental health consumer/survivors as a marginalized group to ensure success in education. However, these supports are not continued after completion of the program. Therefore, the Supported Education model has promise to help individuals with mental health challenges while they are registered for the program.

The Clemente model of education, named after the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Centre in New York, was developed to address the cycle of poverty and help individuals exit poverty through education in the humanities and development of critical thinking skills. These

programs are based on the premise that providing an opportunity for education in the humanities with this population will help to alleviate their poverty and life challenges. In Canada, universities have begun to implement this model to address the inequalities of access, through the development of non-credit programs within the university based on humanities curricula. These programs have sprouted at the University of Victoria, University of British Columbia, University of Ottawa and St. Mary's University College in Calgary. The latter three are in the process of an evaluation of their implementation and outcomes. These programs are called *Humanities 101*, *Storefront 101*, and *Discovery University*, respectively. Storefront 101 at U.B.C. was the first of these programs in Canada and was created in 1998. It was developed to empower individuals living in poverty by providing them with critical thinking skills and a passion for life-long learning. It remains a program that at its core strives to empower. The steering committee which helps run the programs is made up entirely of students and alumni of the program. One of the aims is to allow the individuals to bring skills and ideas into the classroom based on political activism and experience in social change, which provides opportunities for meaningful participation and skill development: two key empowerment processes. The program proposes that the poor are kept out of the political sphere due to their lack of education in humanities. Therefore, after completing their humanities course and after being taught about political action and activism, the students from low incomes are given opportunities within the program to develop and utilize their political knowledge, their own power for change and their perceived control within the context.

The program's main goal has been to allow those living in poverty who do not meet traditional admissions criteria (i.e., high school diploma, standardized test scores) entrance into higher education with a projected outcome of fostering citizenship and political engagement. The

program serves the learner and the community needs concerning powerlessness of marginalized groups and works towards creating public awareness and eradicating poverty through the use of radical humanities curriculum (Groen & Hyland-Russel, 2007). Groen and Hyland-Russell (2009) presented an updated study that included the narratives of participating learners. They found that the learners identified the acquisition of all needed resources, an engagement in the learning process and the ability to see positive outcomes in their future. They highlighted the importance of the process of empowerment as an end in itself as the design of the programs delineates "frame factors," which are defined as boundaries through which the program could not expand. These frame factors restrain the programs from developing into degree-tracked programs where the members of the community can become a part of the university campus in the same manner as traditional students. The benefits and limitations of such programs have yet to be seen, as the program remains in the initial phases of evaluation (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2007). The inherent design of the program, however, does not address barriers to access to full-time education for those living in poverty. Though it does address the need for non-traditional admissions to an institution of higher education, the program lasts only eight months with minimal continued support for those motivated and ready to complete their education.

Lastly, a program has been implemented at Harvard University's financial aid office, which allows all students who meet the admission criteria and whose parents' income falls below \$60,000 to attend Harvard free of tuition charges. This protocol was developed based on data that showed only 10% of Harvard's student population fell in the bottom 50% of the income gradient. In order to rectify this situation they have waived tuition fees for this income group. Therefore, the financial needs are met for these students. While, this program addresses the financial needs of individuals living in poverty who wish to attend Harvard, it does not account



for the social and emotional needs of marginalized groups, or have non-traditional admissions criteria to compensate for the likelihood that they are more likely to receive lower standardized test scores (Frenette, 2007).

As demonstrated above, there are programs at the university policy level that address key challenges surrounding the issue of access to higher education. There has yet to be a program that encompasses these multiple levels of analysis and all three factors allowing those living in poverty to access a higher education (non-traditional admissions criteria, financial, and emotional/social support) to aid in achieving success. This may be due in part to the restrictions placed on universities from the level of government (meaning that in the face of government, universities and their respective interventions for change may not have access to required influence and resources at higher policy levels). The interplay between university and government level policy and programs is complex and these policies do not always complement each other.

#### *Government Level Interventions*

The federal and provincial government policies relating to post-secondary education create barriers to access for those living in poverty, as was shown earlier. As such, there are no direct government interventions aimed at the barriers surrounding OW and ODSP assistance and the consequent barriers apparent in their policies. However, the government does provide certain monetary interventions that aim to improve equality of access for different populations in Canada. Therefore, in this context the government plays the role of the empowered community, as it has access and control over resources and influence over policies.

Currently, the federal government has funding opportunities for individuals from low-income families, as well as individuals living with disabilities. These include the Canada Access

Grant which provides the funding required for these populations over and above funding received through Canada Student Loans (including OS AP). One is not eligible for these extra funding opportunities if the individual is not eligible for OSAP, and did not apply for OSAP (Service Canada, 2008). Therefore, the appearance of extra funding opportunities does little to remove the barriers presented in OW and ODSP policy surrounding mandatory application to OSAP and eligibility requirements for assistance. This policy demonstrates government rewards for and expectations that people will go into debt to achieve their education.

Another government program aimed at addressing access issues for families living in poverty is the Canada Learning Bond. This program provides a \$500 bond as the starter capital needed for a Registered Education Savings Plan (RESP) for families receiving the National Child Benefit Supplement. An additional \$100 dollars is added to the RESP by the government every year until the child reaches 15 for a maximum of \$2,000 a child. The purpose of this credit is to begin an RESP when children are young, allowing the capital to build before the individual wishes to attend post-secondary education. The impacts of the program remain to be seen as the program was only begun in 2004.

As previously mentioned, Zimmerman (2000) outlined empowerment at the community level as including an open government structure that provides opportunities for meaningful participation and decision making as empowering processes, and the development of participatory skills, pluralistic leadership and organizational coalitions as empowered outcomes. This level of analysis can help support government change and empowerment processes through the provision of meaningful roles for oppressed populations in policy discussions affecting them, as well as providing skills and knowledge needed to negotiate government level resources and programs. Overall, government interventions are accomplishing little when it comes to reducing

barriers for women living in poverty. The problem lies in the ameliorative work of governmental interventions. The change effort at this level does not address power differences and societal inequalities that create the issue of access in the first place.

### Summary of Literature Review

Becoming familiar with the literature on benefits and barriers of higher education through the lens of empowerment theory has helped set the stage for the following study. In this literature review I have outlined the benefits that can be achieved for those who successfully access higher education. Following this I presented a conceptual framework of the individual, university and government level barriers to higher education for individuals in poverty. I then reviewed current interventions attempting to address these barriers. The literature clearly shows that individuals living in poverty benefit from higher education, yet they currently do not have equal access. In addition to this, current programs are not addressing the multiple levels of analysis required to comprehend and address this complex issue. What follows is an attempt at addressing these issues of inequality by documenting a program that aims to break the cycle of poverty through higher education.

### *Focus of Research: SURE Case Study*

Thus far the introduction and literature review has focused on the "big picture" of educational access and empowerment theory with a focus on barriers and strategies/interventions for change at multiple levels of analysis. Here the discussion shifts to the case study for this research, a local program aiming to increase access to higher education in Waterloo.

Pseudonyms will be used when referring to participants to protect their identity while continuing to differentiate between the unique individuals included in this research. SURE was envisioned in 2007 by a concerned faculty member, Andrea, at the University of Waterloo during her

volunteer work at a local supportive housing residence, Lincoln Road (LR), for "hard to house" women. The idea was born out of interactions with women and children who had faced previously insurmountable barriers in life due to poverty, experiences of abuse, addiction and mental health issues. These barriers in concert with Andrea's appreciation for their intelligence and capabilities led her to research programs that aim to remove barriers to this population. After discussing the idea for a supportive education program with staff at LR, Andrea approached two potential learners to gauge interest in attending university. While reacting in very different ways, the learners accepted the offer to begin work on launching a program for supported university education.

The program was developed in a participatory manner and included the input and influence of SURE directors, learners, LR staff as well as input from different community organizations and funders. In her interview, Andrea explained that she "spoke with [the learners] a lot about envisioning the program, and what barriers they would need help overcoming". She also spoke with multiple community foundations, key community leaders on poverty reduction as well as government officials. The learners were included in much of the process including program design (through identification of barriers and provision of experiential knowledge) and program promotion in the community.

At this time the program has yet to be successfully implemented or receive "buy-in" at the university. The program directors continue to develop relationships and meet with key stakeholders to understand university policy and processes to implement such a program. However, other levels of program implementation have occurred. Three learners have returned to high school where they have completed university level high-school courses in English, Biology, Health, etc. in preparation for university courses. In addition, the process thus far has offered

wrap-around supports for the learners as well as opportunities to participate and influence program development. Therefore, the end goal has yet to be reached but the process and initial outcomes derived from involvement in this initial phase of the process were the object of study. A summary of the literature review is provided in Table 2. This table outlines the barriers, strategies to reduce barriers and outcomes that were found in the literature on both the individual and organizational level of analysis.

*Table 2*

*Barriers, Reduction Strategies and Outcomes at Different Levels of Analysis from the Literature*

Levels of Analysis	Barriers	Strategies to Reduce Barriers	Outcomes
Individual Level	Financial struggles Poverty of time - Stigma (poverty/mental health) Poverty of relationships	Wrap-around supports Empowering processes (i.e., access to resources)	Empowered outcomes (i.e., skill acquisition, increased participation) Increased self-esteem Increased physical and psychological health
Organizational Level	Lack of needed services Exclusionary admissions requirements - High tuition Societal attitudes	Social/emotional support Financial support - Altered admissions procedures	Empowering organization (i.e., pluralistic decision making) Empowered organization (i.e., influence policy decisions, control resources)

### Research Questions and Rationale

As noted above, there has yet to be a program designed to intervene on multiple levels of analysis to provide "wrap around" supports for this population in their attempt to access a higher education. My research provides links to fill this gap by detailing the process and outcomes of the SURE program in its initial stages of implementation.

Developing a topic was complicated as a number of projects were considered in which I had interest but lacked passion. I felt certain that SURE would be a good thesis topic for me after becoming involved as a program director. I realized to a great extent the parallel between my own values of equality and education and this issue of access.

My participation as a co-program director for the SURE program demonstrated the dire need to address the issue of access to higher education for single mothers living in poverty; there are currently no resources for this population of women to attend university in a part or full time capacity. My interactions with the future learners led me to understand that it was not a lack of intelligence or any deficiency in motivation that had kept these women out of universities. Conversely, I learned that their financial and social situations had created innumerable barriers, continually discouraging and making impossible the task of attaining a higher education.

Although programs with similar features to the SURE program have been researched and evaluated in the past as demonstrated through the supported education model, the Clemente model, and Harvard's new financial aid regulations, there have been no programs developed for this population to address their long-term educational needs at the university level. This change effort in an institutional context will be the first of its kind to be documented and therefore will

be helpful in understanding how this change occurs at the individual and organizational level.

The research questions for this project are:

1. What are the processes and outcomes of the change effort at the *individual* level of analysis?
2. What are the processes and outcomes of the change effort at the *organizational* level of analysis?

Although the government level of analysis was discussed in the literature review, it did not fit within the scope of this research. Future research would be required to study the government level changes and strategies to reduce barriers of the SURE program.

### Methodology

This research documented the process of change of the SURE program in Waterloo. The data collection period commenced in December 2008 and was completed in March 2009, during which time the program directors and I developed the SURE program. The research provides thorough documentation of the program/organizational change (which includes SURE program level change and university/community level change), as well as the individual level change of SURE learners and directors.

### *Research Philosophy*

The research philosophy that I have adopted is a critical constructivist paradigm. The critical paradigm espouses the values of social action, transformational change, anti-oppression, and emancipation of marginalized groups (Kirby, Greaves & Reid, 2006). Additionally, the critical paradigm examines social structures and the respective power relations as a way of explaining and understanding social inequality. The constructivist paradigm, on the other hand, theorizes that all knowledge is socially constructed and that there is not one truth or one

knowledge, but multiple truths and ways of knowing (Willig, 2001). Our knowledge is co-constructed by our understanding and experiences with the social world (Kirby et al., 2006). This idea of multiple realities was key in the development of the research design. Through discussions with my participants I have amalgamated information from multiple realities to co-construct a timeline and story of the development of SURE and its effects on future individuals and organizations. Therefore combining the philosophies of the critical and constructivist paradigms permits a worldview comprising socially constructed knowledge that attempts to illuminate societal structures influencing power and oppression. The critical constructivist paradigm is a strong fit for this action research thesis, which aimed at creating transformational change within an institution using the lived experience of women, and the constructions of key stakeholders.

#### *Action Research Approach*

Utilizing the anti-oppression framework of action research is a complex process, as it includes issues around power dynamics and it removes itself from traditional research that conducts research *on* participants. Action research can be defined as an "inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization or community, but never *to* or *on* them" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 3). This process is value driven and requires critical reflexivity on the part of the researcher in this respect. When conducting action research one must be conscious of the power dynamics and be explicit about assumptions within a setting. In working towards transformational change and equity, action research focuses energy on the action component of research and does not wait until dissemination to work towards social change.

#### *Social Location*

I had multiple roles within the research: I am the principal researcher, a member of the SURE committee and a co-program director/developer. Because of these many roles my interests



and involvement go beyond the research and extend beyond the end of this research initiative. These many roles also required reflection on my social location. Going through an intensive reflection process prior to the research and continuing throughout the research process has allowed me to discuss influences and experiences that have led me to this research, as well as aspects of myself as the researcher that may have affected the research process. During the research process, as well as during the analysis and writing phases of the research, I continued to reflect on these issues and the power relationships and dynamics of my research.

The process of reflecting on my social location has been a complex and difficult one. On the one hand I tried to share as much of myself with the future learners as they have with me, and there are parts of myself that I have not consciously thought about or discussed publicly and therefore have struggled to convey. Therefore I began this journey of thinking about my past, my opportunities, my barriers, my family and other influential people and how I have come to be the woman I am today. This reflection is a necessary step when working with vulnerable populations. I have written an extended version of this section which was shared with the women participants as a form of reciprocity and a sign of trust at the beginning of the research process. They have been courageous and kind in sharing their stories and baring their fears and struggles with me, and therefore, I feel it necessary and appropriate to share my story with them.

To begin, the first relevant aspect of my social location is my class background. I come from the upper class where I have had no financial struggles and where I have been provided many opportunities. My parents wanted to teach me the value of money by requiring that I work summer jobs and part time jobs and although I believe I learned lessons about responsibility and time management, I do not believe I learned much about the experiences of poverty. Working part time for my parents could not simulate the experiences of those who live paycheck to

paycheck and who must experience the stress and complications of wondering from where their next meal will come from.

I began to learn about these lessons when I met my partner. His background is vastly different than my own and he has spent his life working to help his parents, and to work towards a financially secure future. Even with the hardships my partner has suffered, he is of strong character and continues to help those around him even to the detriment of his financial security and well-being. My father says that my partner has taught me "fiscal responsibility" because of my experiences with him. However, I have learned so much more than that. I have learned that those with different backgrounds from me and my family can have more character and strength than those from privileged backgrounds. I have learned that respect is not something that can be bought but must be earned. I now understand how differences can be put aside to come together as a unit. In working through these lessons, I feel that I am more ready to work with the future learners as equals, and as individuals who have much worth to share, and lessons to teach. These experiences have helped me to understand the role of power in my life and my ability to hold and exert power on those around me. My privileged background has provided me with the ability to retain power in my life, but my knowledge and experience have helped me to see how I can share that power to work for social change.

Many of my experiences as a woman from a privileged background have led to frustrations with society; it is these experiences that moved me towards working with people traditionally oppressed in Canada. From a young age I have disagreed with family members and friends when told that those who were different than us were less deserving. I believe this is because of the friends I had. Many of these friends suffered from experiences with poverty and abuse. I could see that as children, they could not be blamed for the family's situation.

Furthermore, I witnessed their parents do what they could to provide a better life for their children. As we grew up I could begin to see the distinction between myself and my friends, not because they were less worthy than I was, but because they did not have loving homes and the resources needed to live a healthy and happy life. I witnessed many of them make life-altering decisions at a young age; many had children, some became involved with drugs, and some died because of their addictions. I felt helpless against the movement towards destruction because I as one friend could not provide all of the love and resources that a growing child and young adult require. Conversely, I had friends prosper despite their disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom have confided that their success was in part due to my parents and their support. In my journey of reflecting on my past, one factor that repeatedly came up was that of education and the different influences and experiences one can have within and around education.

The women that I worked with have had multiple experiences pushing them away from education. These experiences include abuse, poverty, illness, negative people and bad experiences in formal education. On the other hand I have been pointed towards higher education since the day I was born. I was given the opportunity to attend educational camps; I attended a private school to help prepare for university and my future. There was never an instance in my past where my family or friends said "If Natalie goes to University" it was discussed as "When/Where/For what will Natalie go to University". I was an academic as a child and spent much of my time trying to help my friends who struggled. I learned at a young age from my mother that it did not matter who you were or where you came from, everyone deserved love, healthy food, and a solid education. On numerous occasions she chose to foster friends that spent the majority of their days at my house to escape from their disruptive family lives. The combination of these experiences is why I have always tried to help those around me.

Adding to these experiences the knowledge I have gained in my Community Psychology experiences I now know that charity is not always the way to help people. I believe it is important to first learn what people need and work *with* them to promote change in their lives. If I enter a setting with a pre-conceived solution I am disempowering the community instead of providing a space to embrace their collective power.

My past experiences have helped me realize that it is a skewed view of the world when those in power believe that we can teach those whom we oppress and that that learning is not of a reciprocal nature. Although I hope that there is something that these women have learned from me and their experience with this research, it is with a humble heart that I understand that I already have and will continue to learn more from them than I could ever imagine. I have learned from their strength, perseverance, and their ability to be brilliant women no matter what they encounter in their lives. I have developed as a person through my interactions with the women and my fellow program directors. This is perhaps the first time in my life that a setting has helped me be the best that I can be.

In my research I spent time with these women as a researcher as I learned about their experiences and I strove to provide a safe place for them to reflect on and learn from their experiences through open discussion. I understand that we continue to differ based on class and educational background, and we must be explicit in these differences, as we have been in many discussions regarding our past experiences and our current relationships. However, I believe that through open discussion and honest dialogue we found common ground that empowered us all as women and as community members. This research has helped those involved to work through differences and understand ideas commonly out of our comfort zone. Although the main purpose of this research was to document the development of the SURE program, an integral piece to that

is our new understanding. Also important was learning from and enjoying the journey of the partnerships and friendships that have developed between program directors and participants.

### *Context*

The SURE program is being developed in the Region of Waterloo, Ontario. The Region of Waterloo has a low-income rate of 10.2% before tax income across all gender and age categories, and a low-income rate of 11.1% for women in the Region (Statistics Can, 2006). The program will be run out of the University of Waterloo (UW), a university that has a population of roughly 30,000 students and includes five institutions and five professional schools. The SURE program will be run out of the Faculty of Health Studies at UW which has the aim of developing successful interventions and prevention strategies to improve health and quality of life in communities.

The future learners reside in the City of Waterloo at the Lincoln Road (LR) women's residence funded by the local YWCA. This is an apartment building of rent geared to income units for single women with children living in poverty. It is a supportive housing facility that provides permanent housing thus creating an atmosphere of stability for the women and their families.

### *Stakeholders/Recruitment*

My research included multiple stakeholders, as it is based on a collaborative program with multiple community and university partners. The stakeholders included the future learners, SURE program directors, community partners, funders, involved UW faculty and key UW administrators. Each key stakeholder was presented with an information letter and informed consent form requesting their participation in this research prior to their interview. In the following section I detail the stakeholder roles in the research process, the process by which they

were recruited and interviewed with respect to their participation throughout the programs development process.

First and foremost among the stakeholders are the three future learners. These women have been committed to this program for the past two years and representing them in a truthful and holistic manner was integral in the process and writing phases of this research. These women plan to continue to work collaboratively on our team to create and develop strong research and a sustainable program. The women were involved in the research process since its inception. This involved participating in the development process of the proposal; they were thoroughly briefed about my research before they gave me permission to work with them and document their lived experience. The women continued to participate in the process of the research through critical discussions about the research and power structures as well as providing data and allowing me into their homes and family lives. A recruiting protocol was not required for recruitment of the women as they had been collaborating in partnership with SURE and myself since before the research development stages. Informal discussions occurred between the women and SURE directors about potential benefits and barriers to conducting this research before the decision was made to do the research. The input and openness of the learners was key in moving this research agenda forwards. Since this time they have remained integral in directing the focus of the research and are important members of the research team.

The second stakeholder group is comprised of the SURE program directors. There are three co-directors, including myself. As a group we have a stake in this project as this research will help move the program into implementation. My fellow co-directors and I developed this research in a manner that this final document will be useful in describing the development of the program and moving towards a longitudinal evaluation of the pilot program. Similar to the

women, a recruitment protocol was not necessary for the program directors as they too were involved prior to this research and participated in the original discussions about the plausibility and usefulness of this research process. Both program directors were aware at this early stage that they would be asked to participate in the research and contribute to the data gathering.

Our community stakeholders include individuals from the local YWCA and their women's residence (LR) as well as a local funding agency. The future learners reside at LR and therefore those who have a stake in LR have a stake in SURE. The YWCA was a signatory on our funding applications and therefore is considered a full partner of the SURE proposal. This research is accountable to this stakeholder group as we must respect the confidentiality and regulations set out to protect the women of LR. Discussions were held with the head of LR as to the access I have as a researcher to their space. LR and YWCA participants were recruited through purposive sampling, a method that chooses participants based on their unique experiences and knowledge about the research (Kirby et al., 2006). Two members of the LR staff and one member of the YMCA staff were contacted for participation in the research. While the two LR staff members consented, the YWCA staff member chose not to participate. These community stakeholders were chosen based on their involvement with the project, and their availability during the data collection period.

Program funders also have a stake in this research as they have invested monetary resources into our program for public awareness as well as seed money to begin program implementation. This group was recruited using purposive sampling. The population of funders is quite small and therefore all funders were asked to participate (currently two organizations). Two funders were contacted regarding the research, and one consented to participate in the research.

The last stakeholder group is comprised of the university stakeholders. This group includes interested faculty and administrators from UW. There has been support from within the Health Studies faculty and beyond, as well as within different levels of administration. Rallying their support through participation in the research process as well as documenting their involvement in this process helped to strengthen the relationship between the university and the program as well as gaining support for implementation forward. These participants were recruited through snowball sampling, a method where individuals are asked to suggest others who have experiences with the phenomenon (Kirby et al., 2006). The program director who works out of the Health Studies faculty was asked to suggest individuals who have been involved with the program within the Health Studies faculty and university administration, thus far. The director suggested eight individuals within the university. Out of this initial group five were recruited to participate in the research with three consenting to participate.

In summary, my total sample included the three women future learners, three program directors (two co-directors and myself), three community partners (one funder and two LR staff) and three university stakeholders (two faculty and one administrator), for a total of 12 individuals.

### *Data Gathering*

In order to answer the two research questions I utilized multiple data collection methods. My data gathering involved researcher journals, key stakeholder interviews, life narrative interviews and focus groups. These methods are pictured in Table 3 with the breakdown of the research questions based on participant groups and appendices.

#### *Table 3*

#### *Overview of Research Questions, Participants, and Data Collection Tools*



Research questions	Participants	Data collection tools
Individual 1. Process 2. Outcomes	Two future learners	Appendix A - Interview guide
	Researcher	Appendix B - Personal journal
Organizational 1. Process 2. Outcomes	Two future learners	Appendix A - Interview guide
	Two program directors	Appendix C - Interview guide
	Key stakeholders (Two LR staff, one program funder, two UW faculty, one UW administrator)	Appendix D - Interview guide
	Researcher	Appendix E - Organizational Journal guide

Prior to the data gathering, this research was subjected to a research ethics review and approval process. The thesis and research processes were evaluated by the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board and the ethics proposal was approved. Information letters and consent forms for each participant group were included in this ethics process and approved for use (See Appendix F).

The actual data gathering process deviated from the proposed data gathering process which had initially included network member interviews as well as journaling from the directors and learners to provide triangulated methods of data. The network member interviews that were initially included were developed to help triangulate the constructions of the learners to help

illuminate their educational past and current educational experiences. Ethically it was mandated that the learners suggest network members and provide permission for the researcher to interview them regarding the learners' educational pasts and current experiences. The network member interviews did not occur as the women chose to opt out of the process. One learner gave her initial support to the process. However, due to her significant decline in mental health I as the researcher decided it would be unethical to move forward with her network member interviews. (In addition we did not finish our life narrative interview due to her mental health challenges).

Also, journaling by the directors and learners was created to allow consistent (weekly) and critical reflection on the process of program development, outcomes, barriers, etc., to help the researcher develop a complete picture timeline of program development. However, the journals were not completed. I completed both individual and organizational level journals after all SURE meetings providing both the timeline and significant milestones/opportunities/barriers that occurred through the data collection period.

To replace these missing forms of data, the SURE team (three directors and two remaining learners) participated in three unstructured focus groups. These focus groups provided the opportunity for the participants to discuss their experiences with SURE and issues of power within the group. We discussed "working across our differences" to understand the process of working across class differences as a participatory team. It was through these discussions that a conference presentation on class differences emerged and we began delving deeper into the issues of social class and privilege. Although not initially considered during the proposal stages of this research, these discussions led to a multitude of new outcomes for the learners and the directors, through relationship building, new academic experiences (will be discussed further in

the findings section), as well as the exchange of knowledge around social class perceptions and systemic power differences and oppression.

Therefore I had to reevaluate the proposed methods and alter the process as they were not an appropriate fit to the context and the research participants. Increased time in the field helped to alleviate issues of missing data. However, a clearer process for participant journaling would have significantly improved the process with pre set submission dates and a lengthier training with each participant and support for the writing process.

### *Data Analysis*

To conduct my analysis I used abbreviated grounded theory. Grounded theory is a method of theory generation that ensures that the data and theory stay closely connected (Kirby et al., 2006). It categorizes data under the assumption that theory generation is based on emerging themes from the data, and not from a previously created framework, with a theory being the end product of analysis (Willig, 2001). Charmaz (2006) extends the framework of grounded theory by introducing the idea that researchers "construct" theory from data, and the data do not "emerge" on their own from the data. This process involves the social understanding of the researcher and his or her surroundings.

Willig (2001) discussed grounded theory as having a full version and an abbreviated version. The full version is grounded theory as applied to research question, methodology and analysis development as these components work in a cycle, moving from data collection to analysis and back again. For the purpose of this analysis I used abbreviated grounded theory. This theory provides a framework for categorizing data without limiting the method used or the types of research questions that can be asked. As the research questions for this study ask for documentation of an innovative program, grounded theory creates a good fit to the types of data

collected and the goal of the final product. An additional rationale for this method is its fit to the argument made by Strauss and Corbin (1998). They argued that in grounded theory data analysis one can focus upon the manifestations of process and change constructed from the data. As my research questions were concerned with processes and outcomes of program development, there was a natural fit between grounded theory, as espoused by Charmaz (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1998), and the current research questions.

As I prepare to explain the process through which I conducted the analysis some context is necessary surrounding the data collection period. The SURE learners were registered in school during the data collection period (taking high school courses through adult education program). In the midst of these interviews one of the learners experienced significant health issues. Therefore, there were high levels of tension in the program that led to negativity emerging in the interviews on the part of the learners and directors. This negativity surfaced as doubts about the program's feasibility as well as the future of the relationships created on the SURE team. In follow up discussions and meetings this negativity has remained to a certain degree but has subsided substantially.

To try and reduce researcher bias and increase the trustworthiness of the findings the participants have been consulted (i.e., member checks) throughout the analysis process and were consulted again upon completion of the final analysis. This ensured that I portrayed the lived experience of my participants honestly and authentically. This process consisted of meetings after the initial phase of analysis to discuss the codes and the emergent analytic framework. This form of member checking will strengthen my theory.

All data received were entered into NVIVO to be categorized. All data including interviews and journals were transcribed. Before completing my initial analysis I conducted

member checks with interview transcripts, providing the opportunity for the participants to read over their transcripts to ensure they are accurate representations of what was said.

The analysis was conducted in NVIVO. I began by doing open coding, the analytic process of categorizing each sentence or idea from a transcript to help understand links between different ideas in the data (Willig, 2001). This coding process began with first order open coding of all transcripts (learners, directors and key stakeholders). As I constructed the findings from the emergent data, I used the ecological model and empowerment theory as sensitizing frameworks. It is therefore with this frame of multiple levels of analysis and personal and organizational empowerment that I approached the data for analysis. Nearing the end of this process few new nodes emerged suggesting that across stakeholders saturation was reached. Subsequently I coded the three focus group transcripts as well as my researcher journal entries. Similarly, few new nodes emerged suggesting theoretical saturation.

Shifting from open coding to a thematic higher level coding I returned to my research questions to help frame the emerging model. To create these higher order themes I utilized axial coding. Axial coding is the process of putting data back together into comprehensible and higher order codes. This process helps to explain codes and their relationships to each other as a theory begins to emerge (Charmaz, 2006). To ensure that the codes represent the data closely as possible, grounded theory concerns itself with two more principles, constant comparative analysis and negative cases. Constant comparative analysis involves continuously comparing codes and segments of data at each stage of the analysis to help make distinctions between codes and themes, as well as find similarities between chunks of data and low-level codes (Charmaz, 2006).

Negative cases, on the other hand, help the researcher strengthen the emerging theory through the provision of data that do not fit with the theory. This process pushes the researcher to refine the theory to create a stronger and more grounded theory. This form of coding describes the properties of a category and all data bits that fit within said category. A set of relationships was created to bring together similar bits of data under an umbrella term for the purpose of reintegrating fractured data into a rehabilitated whole that answers questions of "when, where, why, who, how and with what consequences" (Charmaz, p. 60). For example, many different forms of barriers emerged during initial stage (i.e., lack of familial support, childcare barriers and stigma). These nodes when brought together and compared across nodes created a hierarchy of barriers based on the ecological model from individual to system level barriers. Therefore *barriers* emerged as higher order theme within both research questions (i.e., responded to both individual and organizational level change)

### Findings

The purpose of this research was to identify the process and outcomes at both the individual and organizational level during the development of the SURE program. The changes that emerged thus have been broken down along these lines to respond to the two original research questions. First to be addressed is the individual level change process outlined below, followed by a discussion of the organizational level change process.

#### *Individual Level Change*

Working within the ecological framework, the analysis looked at micro level changes at the individual level. This level of analysis included individual changes in the learners, program directors, family members of learners and members of the LR community. What I found as I constructed the analysis was a documentation of learner barriers and strategies to reduce or

remove these barriers nested within the SURE *process* of change. Also found were *outcomes* that are categorized as positive outcomes, negative outcomes and outcomes yet to be achieved.

Elaborated on in the following section are the process and outcomes at the individual level of change.

### *Process*

Participants acknowledged a number of key barriers and SURE processes/strategies to reduce barriers for individuals. Empowerment processes, as discussed previously, were found to be key both in understanding barriers but also explaining and understanding the relative success of SURE strategies to reduce barriers. For example, there was significant discussion regarding participatory processes and accumulation of resources at the individual analysis. To begin I will outline the relevant findings that emerged as barriers before moving on to discuss the reduction and removal of barriers at the individual level of analysis.

### *Barriers.*

"I am my biggest barrier, out of everything I allowed people to make me feel less than what I was, I didn't allow myself to be more than what I am, (pause) I never really had any breaks." (Anita, program learner)

All participants spoke about significant barriers to the learners both in the context of SURE as well as barriers previously encountered in the lives of the learners. A barrier was defined as any inhibiting factor either external or internal to the individual that decreased an individual's chance of success within an educational context. There was significant agreement between stakeholder groups that learners face barriers at multiple levels of analysis, including systemic, educational, family, health and internal level barriers when trying to access education. Additionally, many barriers discussed were faced prior to the learners involvement with SURE, but were seen as continuing stressors

and inhibitors to learners in their educational success, such as mental health struggles, troubled family lives, and past educational experiences. One learner, Erin, stated that "being poor had an effect on your mental health, [being poor] has an effect on everything". Barriers to the learner, although related to the aforementioned pre-SURE barriers, were seen as sizeable and influential in the development of the SURE program as well as the relative success of the learners.

In terms of current barriers, learners were seen to struggle with their current living environment, expectations from others, financial resources, lack of support, internal characteristics, stigma and systemic oppression. In some circumstances the learners not only faced a lack of support for the educational goals, but blatant animosity and opposition. One learner shared that her family was adamantly opposed to her becoming involved in the SURE program.

"In a conversation that my mother had with like other staff members who work here, her exact words about my schooling were like 'I am going to put a stop to this'. Really she felt that I was incapable of, this is my mother I am talking about, incapable of (pause) ever accomplishing like the final product. And that in the process of it, that I was only going to destroy everything I had accomplished this far, so I wasn't going to be healthy, I wasn't going to be stable, and um, my focus wasn't going to be in the right place and she always came back to very same thing of 'you had your opportunity to do this before and you chose not to, you need to be focusing on your daughter's.. education and... future because you gave up that opportunity.'" (Jan, program learner)

This opposition was faced by all learners from family, friends, partners and/or children as well teachers and guidance counselors where the learners are currently enrolled in high school courses. Interrelated with this barrier was a level of distrust surrounding the program as many individuals in poverty have had few positive interactions with researchers and professionals in their community. Erin faced accusations of director intentions, and stated that "people are like 'you better watch yourself, what does this chick want'".



More recently, in discussions with Jan, barriers emerged that were caused by SURE. This included the stress of multiple and conflicting roles for the learners through their participation in the program. For example, one learner not only is a tenant at LR but also is a staff member in the building. Conflicting situations arose where this learner was caught between being a staff member, a fellow LR tenant and a SURE program participant adding stress to her job and her family life. These barriers were only mentioned by one learner but were significant in her life.

In conclusion, barriers to the learners both in pre-SURE terms as well as current barriers were numerous and difficult to overcome. Each stakeholder group recognized these obstacles and discussed the added stress brought on by SURE in the lives of the learners. However, many of these barriers were pre-identified and systematically reduced and/or removed. One staff member at LR described SURE as a program that had "barriers removed to women who have had hopes and dreams of something else" like education. This is discussed further in the following section.

*SURE processes/strategies to reduce barriers.*

"If you picture like this brick wall, so every brick being an obstacle, one by one they were removed so like here is the opportunity for admission, here is the financial aspect, here is you know some coping, learning, memorization, whatever skills to carry you, so I mean piece by piece it kind of became more and more possible and because I had you know you guys to rely on for those things had those not been there like, there would have been no opportunity, it just never would have happened". (Jan, program learner)

The processes and strategies of SURE aimed at reducing barriers to educational attainment is defined as any helping process of SURE that occurred throughout the implementation process providing opportunity at the individual level that is actively reducing or removing external or internal barriers. These processes include: participatory processes,

provision of access to previously unattainable monetary and non-monetary resources, supports, and radiating effects for children of the learners.

Many strategies to reduce barriers were identified as emerging from positive experiences and supports provided by the SURE program. Many of these strategies were conceptualized as opportunities presented to the individuals. The most common theme in terms of strategies was that of strategies aimed at directly reducing barriers to the learners. All stakeholder groups discussed this theme as prevalent during the process of program development. This category included positive relationship development, academic and non academic supports, "SURE making the impossible possible", educational opportunities, and most interesting and unexpected, learner opportunities to effect change through increased awareness. One learner explained the supports provided:

"the people from SURE and how they support me it wasn't just 'here we are going to give you this', [it was] 'we are going to support you through this, what is going on, if you need me call me, do you need a babysitter, are you ok?' It was that stuff that keeps me going". (Erin, program learner)

The strategies to reduce barriers including the provision of wrap-around supports and opportunities for participatory relationships were found to reduce some of the aforementioned barriers such as lack of supports, and financial barriers.

Additionally, some of these strategies involved personal empowerment processes for the learners. In Jan's case the SURE program processes, mainly support, helped her achieve an important life goal through the acquisition of her high school diploma. As for Erin, the SURE process provided her with the supports and resources needed to become involved in her community through participation in local poverty reduction programming and political activities. Anita on the other hand felt personally empowered through different processes such as social and emotional support and participation in decision making that allowed her to believe in her own

intelligence and capabilities. Personal empowerment will be discussed further in the outcomes section as there was much overlap between empowerment processes and outcomes.

Some less concrete reductions in learner barriers emerged as well including the opportunity to envision a positive future, in other words, the ability to set and visualize goals. Many of the women mentioned that prior to their involvement with SURE they recall having no educational goals and an inability to see positive outcomes in their future. The SURE process created a shift in the thinking for the learners as can be seen in the following excerpt:

"it was I mean come on we all sit around as kids and we're like 'I want to be, I want to be, I want to be', but this is like the actual opportunity. You know 'you can! What do we need to do?'" (Jan, program learner)

This shift in thinking developed out of the positive supports and positive expectations from the SURE directors and LR staff. When asked about personal outcomes, one learner stated "Educational goals didn't have any before, major ones now".

In summary, successful strategies to reduce barriers for the learners and their children were implemented during participation in the SURE process. The main processes that were mentioned included provision of financial and support resources, as well as the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the community. Empowerment processes can be ends in themselves. However, in addition to the key helping processes and empowering strategies, program outcomes at the individual level were also important in understanding the SURE program.

### *Outcomes*

Building on the SURE program process themes, all stakeholder groups touched on positive and negative outcomes as well as outcomes yet to be achieved for the SURE program at the individual level. Although the program has not yet been implemented in its entirety, there have been significant individual level outcomes and milestones attained by learners and the LR

community including empowerment outcomes. Outcomes, defined as any change in attitude or behaviour (positive or negative) in an individual due to their participation in the SURE program, have been achieved based on experiences with the SURE program. In addition to achieved outcomes discussed, participants also addressed outcomes yet to be achieved that were defined as future indicators of program success at the individual level.

*Positive outcomes.*

"They get out of bed because I don't want to say only because of the SURE program but I know quite certainly say if I look at their blogs or websites or facebook, their identity is student and that is huge." (Andrea - director)

The most discussed theme found at the individual level of analysis was that of positive outcomes. These include outcomes in respect to the learners, family members of learners as well as other women in the LR the community. Discussed in relation to empowerment processes including participation and acquiring support resources, a multitude of outcomes were found for the learners, including educational benefits, mental and physical health benefits, behaviour change, perceptions of normality, and shifts in thinking. This theme of positive outcomes was discussed most by learners and LR staff.

Educational outcomes encompassed all references to current educational developments. All three learners returned to school through an adult education high school program to work towards completion of their high school diplomas. These experiences, resulting from their involvement with the SURE program, led to a multitude of positive educational outcomes, such as successfully completing course work, succeeding in university level high school courses, and supporting Jan in achieving her high school diploma. In addition to educational outcomes, another code that emerged regarding individual level change was health outcomes discussed by the learners. Each of the learners discussed mental and physical health improvements due to their

involvement with the SURE program (and interestingly only the learners discussed this code). Erin discussed both physical and mental health improvements, as well as a decrease in substance use. A sense of pride can be seen in the following excerpt from a learner "certainly like the mental health, huge impact, just in even being able to talk to people about the fact that I'm doing something, that I have a goal that I am currently involved in this".

Discussed at length by the learners and also mentioned by the LR staff was the code of behaviour change. The learners through their involvement with the SURE program began to develop healthy behaviours surrounding the development of healthy daily routines and self-care, removing negative influences from their lives, improved daily hygiene and decreases in aggression. Experiences in SURE affected even the most minute detail of the learner's life. For example, Erin shared her behaviour change around daily hygiene "I shower everyday now, I didn't do that before, because I didn't care, I had no reason to get up. I had no reason to go on. I had nothing to dream for". Participation in SURE has penetrated multiple aspects of the learners' lives far outreaching simply accessing and returning to education.

A shift in the perception and thinking of the learners was found as a significant outcome. Discussed by the learners, LR staff, university partners as well as triangulated by researcher journal entries this category included codes such as increased self-worth, changing expectations, creation of student identity, ability to envision a career, and developing a love for learning, as well as many other shifts in learner thinking and self-perception. One learner said:

"I have kind of opened myself up to the thoughts of me actually having intelligence and the stuff that I had to let go of and work through and stuff like that just really opened up my own sense of feeling of smart." (Anita, program learner)

Another learner stated that the SURE program "makes [her] a much more confident person". This category was triangulated with excerpts from the research journals including one

passage stating "[the learner] was describing her future in ways that were very different than in the past... This was neat experience to hear her be knowledgeable, passionate and really excited about her potential education".

Positive outcomes were not restricted to the learners. Learner family members as well as community members at LR benefited from the radiating effects of the SURE program. The women's residence in which the learners reside has reaped the benefits of SURE as well as faced negative consequences as will be discussed in the following section. These positive outcomes were demonstrated through LR staff and director discussions of the example the learners set within the community as well as the ripple effects felt with other women living in the residence. LR staff mentioned numerous times the influence that the learner's educational attainment and experiences were having on the community. Discussed by the learners, directors and community partners were the ripple or radiating effects of SURE within the LR community. Not only were the women who currently participate in the SURE program attending school but numerous other women from the LR community have returned to school to work towards completing their high school education. One LR staff person described the shift in the atmosphere at LR:

"I mean we could talk until we are blue face about going back to school and the benefits. But all it took were two of them to go back and say 'fuck this, I can do it' but you know what I mean right? Really that they can just jump on board and do it. So now we've got five of them going to school, it's like wow, I'm thinking why couldn't we have figured that out earlier".

These radiating effects were unforeseen outcomes, but have had significant impacts on the level of educational attainment for women living at LR and have increased participation in formal education beyond the SURE learners.

Additionally, the process of participation had radiating effects that extended beyond outcomes found for the learners. These effects were framed as any indirect consequence of

reducing barriers to learners. One ripple effect noted was the positive opportunities for the children of the learners. Multiple stakeholder groups discussed the direct benefit of having the learner's modeling and encouraging education for their children which occurred due to SURE supports. One program director, Emily, stated that "it's affecting these women's families, like you ... the cycle of poverty and just having one person from that family go to university is huge". Jan went on to outline how this educational opportunity will affect her daughter by saying,

"I can't imagine what it must be like when the kids at school are like um, 'so what does your mom do?' Um, well, like does she even have an answer for that? Like so when I think about how it, the impacts that it will have on her life there will be a multitude of them, I mean like leading by example. [Education] is important."

Children of learners witnessed their mothers take on education and begin to identify as students. One director noted:

"[the learners] are modeling education for their kids, they are students, they do homework, their days are filled with reading and writing and thinking in exactly the way we would like them to do in the university. So that is surely an indicator of success we have already achieved".

When discussing her children, Anita said "it gives [her children], 'oh my god, mom's doing it, why wait until we are mom's age to do it, why don't we just deal with it now and get her done'".

The final positive outcome links to the development of close relationships between the three program directors and the three learners. This category was discussed not only by the directors and learners but also by LR staff members. Included in this category were the benefits of friendship across difference and the level of reciprocity in learning and support within the relationships. The relationships were seen as an end in itself, but also many outcomes came with having positive relationships across such vast difference. One director noted that "the friendship I have established with one of the other learners ... I think has propelled her forward faster and

with more enthusiasm than I even envisioned early on". These relationships provided stability for the learners as well as a vehicle for accessing resources such as tutoring support, educational costs, and study skills.

In conclusion, the learners, LR community and learner children have experienced numerous positive outcomes due to their participation in the SURE program and its emergent process. Many of these outcomes link directly to strategies to reduce barriers, such as provision of supports. However, outcomes have exceeded the limits of these strategies to include the radiating effects for LR women and children as well as the positive outcomes achieved through relationship development for the learners and the directors.

*Negative outcomes.* Although many positive outcomes for SURE learners were found, it was also discovered that negative outcomes existed for the learners. These outcomes encompassed negative health outcomes due to increased stress, feelings of failure, "destruction due to SURE", negative impacts on learners' children, as well as the development of negative perceptions and relationship due to the SURE program failing to provide what was promised. Although many of these outcomes were deemed temporary or non-causal by the learners and LR staff, they nonetheless occurred and are important to discuss. Jan explained that her lack of time management during her coursework was difficult for her daughter. She said:

"the first course that I took was brutal for [my daughter], just because I had no time for her at all, and the time that I did have for her I wasn't exactly chipper you know? I was pretty short and distant and uninvolved". (Jan, program learner)

Additionally, one learner faced some significant health challenges and had to leave the program. Although this cannot be causally linked to her involvement with SURE, it nonetheless was compounded by the added stress of SURE in the learner's already stressful life. One LR staff member explained that:



"there have been some big adjustments; there have been positive leaps forward; and I think there have been few setbacks for some of them in that this has just been an additional stress that has perhaps knocked them a bit off of their feet but I also believe that is just temporary".

In recent discussions with Jan it was shared that during the initial data collection phase she did not feel comfortable sharing her concerns with the program due to her fear of loss of status in the program or other possible ramifications. Therefore during her initial interview she did not address the negative aspects of the program. These negative outcomes, however, she perceived to be central to the program and are currently causing her to doubt the long-term benefit of SURE. Due to interactions between Jan and other SURE team members, conflicting situations arose that jeopardized her job at LR and led to significantly increased stress for herself and her child. In these more recent discussions with Jan it was clear that she has become disenchanted with the program due to its slow implementation. One further negative outcome resulted from the previously discussed shift in thinking regarding education. Jan explained that she had never entertained the possibility of a higher education until SURE. This previously discussed shift in thinking followed, only to have nothing come to fruition during her two years of involvement. These negative outcomes are not insurmountable and time will shed light on whether they can be overcome as the program moves forward.

Additionally one negative outcome that was discussed by a learner was that of power differences. As a team, SURE attempted to work across difference and address power inequality between SURE team members. However, Jan felt that this did not help her feel powerful or in control of her situation. Therefore, she felt that in certain circumstances power was abused and trust was partially lost. She presented these issues as occurring throughout the program implementation stages. However, she did not feel comfortable sharing these concerns with anyone around her as the relationships had become complicated between SURE and LR. She felt

that a safe space to present her thoughts without negative repercussions was not made available to her thus leading to deterioration of SURE relationships.

Although negative outcomes did exist, and have been extensively discussed by one learner, positive outcomes considerably outnumbered them and were discussed as longer lasting and central to the learner's identity and educational experience.

*Outcomes yet to be achieved.* In the interview structure, key stakeholders, learners and directors were asked to explain how they envisioned the success of SURE; what would need to occur at the individual level in order for the program to be deemed a success. Therefore, the following categories are not achieved outcomes, but necessary outcomes for program success. Not surprisingly, there was significant overlap between indicators of program success and positive achieved outcomes discussed in the previous section. Therefore, this section will focus only on those outcomes mentioned by key stakeholders that have not yet been achieved by the program. Included in these discussions were indicators for the learners, family and UW students.

When asked to discuss indicators of success participants emphasized the importance of measuring learner indicators. They discussed not only traditional educational indicators expected to be important in program success, but also touched on the importance of internal indicators with the learners. Clearly educational indicators were at the forefront for measuring program success. Program directors, community partners and university partners elaborated on educational indicators by discussing three levels of academic success: completion of assignments, completion of a course and completion of an academic program. Therefore, SURE was not interpreted as requiring university graduation to be deemed a success. Different academic achievements were regarded as equally important. One university faculty noted that "actually successfully complet[ing] a course, you know, that would be another huge piece"

towards program success. While another faculty shared that "if they are able to go on and successfully complete a regular academic program eventually, that would be a huge indicator of success". Although the learners have had success in completing academic papers, coursework, and classes in university-level high school courses, they have yet to do so within a university context. These remain unachieved outcomes. Some stakeholders discussed more short-term goals as indicators. For example, a community partner stated "the fact that somebody wrote an essay for the very first time. That is huge right?"

In addition to educational indicators were discussions regarding internal indicators of individuals which were mentioned as relevant to measuring program success. Interestingly, university partners were the only key stakeholder group to omit this portion of the indicators. Community partners, directors and learners all considered internal indicators of success as integral to understanding SURE success. One community partner mentioned the need to measure such internal indicators:

"all of those sorts of things that the women are feeling and thinking and articulating about themselves and those changes are really key and should be captured as indicators of success for the program regardless of whether or not graduation actually occurs".

Additionally program success was discussed outside of the arena of learner development and change to include family indicators and developments with other university students who would be interacting with SURE learners. Family indicators were discussed solely by program directors and in relation to the ripple effects expected to reach the children of learners. In the process section, this was discussed as relevant to parental modeling of education. However, in the context of a future outcome this was discussed more with a focus on children's future educational attainment. A community partner mentioned that "looking at the academic

progression of the children [is important] because my hypothesis would be that just by these women being enrolled in this they are going to influence their children right away".

In relation to current university students, an increased awareness of inequality was deemed a strong indicator at the individual level demonstrating a shift in university culture and acceptance. Directors and university partners discussed the potential for SURE implementation at UW to affect the knowledge and understanding of current students around inequality in the local community. One director went so far as to say if:

"student awareness grew regarding the relatively elite nature of university in Canada such that they could agitate for change or at least recognize that they have been harbouring illusions that university is accessible to everyone because it is reasonably priced here in Canada",

then that could be regarded as a strong indicator of success of the SURE program.

To conclude, there were many indicators of program success mentioned by key stakeholders. However, with significant overlap with achieved outcomes, a select few remain unachieved. Outcomes yet to be achieved was an interesting category as there was very little agreement between stakeholders, meaning that everyone had different ideas as to how to measure success. Indicators ranged from provision of space at the university as a sign of buy-in, to the extreme of changing societal attitudes and procedures leading to a system of complete equality across Canadian university institutions. Discussed above were those more mid-range goals that many stakeholders mentioned in their interviews and thus were more measurable and significant outcomes.

### *Organizational Level Change*

In response to the second research question, I identified the processes and outcomes of the SURE program at the organizational level. This level of analysis included program, university, community and government level processes and outcomes.

### *Process*

Although participants acknowledged a number of key processes of the SURE program that were seen to be influencing the individual level change process, additional processes and outcomes were discussed in relation to the organizational level change. In the following section, I describe the barriers and strategies to reduce and remove barriers.

#### *Barriers.*

"Most people's first response was you know 'you should really work on putting them in college they should really go to college' that was everybody's first response, that university couldn't possibly be for them. Which is so revealing about people's assumptions about what it means to be, to live in poverty, that somehow university is only accessible and attainable if you have if you come from privilege or at least a middle class background. So that was really sad, and but I think that the (pause) the positive outcome of that response was that it made me dig my heels in." (Andrea, program director)

Each participant addressed the issue of organizational level barriers. These barriers fell into multiple levels of analysis including SURE program level, as well as systemic barriers within the university and government levels. The learners touched mainly on SURE program level barriers, while the community and university partners as well as the directors mentioned all levels of barriers. Similar to the individual level change definition, a barrier was defined as any inhibiting factor either external or internal to the organization that decreased chances of program success.

The most prevalent barriers were those associated with the SURE program level. These barriers included a lack of resources (time and money), as well as a lack of knowledge. One director discussed funding limitations to the SURE program structure:

"[A] barrier to in terms of how difficult it is for funding agencies to be willing to give money for tuition, which is pretty disturbing to think that education is probably, arguably the most important predictor of people's health and the best predictor of children's university attainment is their parents and yet so many programs that serve our community and serve the underserved and their children

and families don't want to pay to put people who are from very distressed circumstances, don't want to help us actually get them into university classes. So that has been, that is probably an unforeseen barrier, and remains a huge hurdle". (Andrea, program director)

Although funding restrictions and unsuccessful funding proposals were not the only barrier mentioned, it was a major theme communicated by most stakeholders as a cause for slow implementation and a lack of forward momentum of the SURE program. Another frequently mentioned barrier was that of a lack of knowledge. The SURE program directors did not begin this process as experienced agents of change and many process barriers were due to their lack of knowledge in different areas of community/social change and resource acquisition. Andrea, one of the directors, stated that "the three [directors] are not overly sophisticated in knowing how to ask for this money, it's out there, and we've tried knocking on various sizes of doors to varying degrees of success". One university partner elaborated that not only was the SURE team unaware of due process for funding at the university, the team in fact broke protocol in some of their partnership developments by attending a funding meeting in the community without informing the development office of the university as is procedure set out by Andrea's department. Following this process the SURE team was informed of how the process worked to acquire funding at this level.

Some funding attempts were successful, and the SURE program managed to obtain a small public education grant as well as a seed grant for program implementation. However, one director discussed issues surrounding the utilization of this grant money in saying that the "seed grant that is too small for us to use to run the program, but too big for us to burn through," thus creating tension as there was no clear sustainable plan of action. Therefore, funding at the program level has been a significant barrier in implementing and moving forward with the program.

The second major theme discussed within barriers at the program level was that of time. When discussing struggles with moving the SURE agenda forward one director, Emily, mentioned time as an issue: "just trying to keep the momentum alive, like sometimes there will be weeks and weeks that will go by and then we are like ok we've got to get back on it". As the directors are volunteering their time for the SURE program they all have other commitments.

Another director stated that:

"with co-directorship that is fairly equal... there could be a diffusion of responsibility and no one pushes it forward if someone doesn't push it forward and if we are all so busy ... because they know themselves 'I don't have the time so it's not like I can ask somebody else to find the time'" (Andrea, program director)

Time was also discussed indirectly around the lack of available time to create a clear and concise vision. The pre-planning at the individual level regarding barriers was well thought out.

However, at the organizational level much confusion arose around terminal goals and processes in which to achieve these goals. Additionally, this lack of time for planning led to the directors overlooking certain participatory processes in order to save time. Therefore, time was a barrier for program success for multiple reasons.

Similarly, barriers were found at the university level that slowed or halted continued development of the SURE program. Barriers mentioned include policy barriers, lack of knowledge regarding university process, and university attitudes/culture. The idea of an inaccessible university culture was discussed by multiple stakeholders surrounding the negative attitudes/stereotypes that could be burdensome to the SURE program. For example, one community partner discussed negative attitudes that could arise from the student population, stating that a student reaction could be "why should these women be supported more than I'm being supported". Similarly, Andrea stated that in discussions with university students one

reaction tended to be "why should they be able to skip the traditional application process or route to university, why should they have the benefit of doing that, shouldn't they be like everybody else". Therefore, attitudes surrounding deservingness and alternative supports were erected as a barrier within the university context.

Policy and information barriers appear to be more temporary than barriers within university culture and attitudes. One university partner acknowledged this when she said:

"we don't know who makes [these policy] decisions and how they make the decisions and what kind of hoops we have to jump through to make it happen and maybe it isn't, maybe it is something that [the university president] says 'I love this idea let's do this, we are going to make this happen' or he says 'well it's a great idea we are going to have to take it Senate or take it to the board'". (Marg, university administrator)

Therefore, these barriers were discussed more as surmountable and removable, versus a more ingrained and systemic barrier of university culture.

Although minimal interaction has occurred with the government surrounding the SURE program and its development, initial meetings were held between SURE directors and local government officials. These discussions surfaced barriers regarding assumptions towards those in poverty as well as assumptions regarding the success and breadth of government programs.

For example, Andrea noted that at one meeting a government official

"felt that these learners could go through the OSAP program for funding that they, that that's the route they should go, meaning that they should again be more like traditional, they should take the traditional trajectory towards university that other people do. And he felt strongly that there were enough resources for people living in poverty that they should be just fine". (Andrea, program director)

However, Andrea went on to discuss, this politician was unaware that by obtaining OSAP these learners would lose their government support through OW or risk losing ODSP supports.

Therefore government barriers, beyond those discussed in the literature review surrounding policy and practice, emerged as attitudes and assumptions regarding marginalized populations



and preconceived notions for how to aid these populations. Other system level barriers surrounding assumptions and stigma emerged as a barrier to the program. It was noted by many participants that with negative attitudes in society, as well as false assumptions regarding learner capabilities and intelligence, the SURE program could face significant resistance within the broader community.

In conclusion, barriers to program success were found at the program resource level, as well as university, government and societal levels. The most difficult and prevalent barrier discussed across ecological levels was the assumptions and cultural attitudes towards oppressed populations interrelated with societal views regarding deservingness versus meritocratic and more traditional routes to university. Currently SURE has little influence in the community as well as little access to valued and necessary resources to move forward. Below I discuss processes and strategies that have aimed to reduce these barriers, however with this lack of resources and influence in the community, barrier reduction has shown low levels of success.

*SURE processes/strategies to reduce barriers.* The processes and strategies of SURE aimed at reducing barriers to organizational level change and program success were defined to include helping processes of SURE that occurred throughout the implementation process that directly or indirectly reduced or removed external or internal barriers. These strategies included funding acquisition, non-financial resource acquisition, partnership creation, and public awareness.

As funding was the most significant barrier discussed at this level of analysis, the program directors, with participation from community and university partners, worked on acquiring funding to remove financial barriers to program success. This strategy for barrier reduction relates closely to partnership development within the community and the universities.

Although these partnerships aimed to increase access to resources beyond funding (i.e., community/university support and community/university "buy-in"), much focus has been put towards creating strong relationships with funders and university personnel in the development office to obtain sustainable and sufficient funding. The program directors have utilized their current professional networks to further the SURE goals. One director discussed her use of such networks: "all the connections I have in the community, they all are supportive of the SURE program and our work and though they may not be giving funding at this point they continue to be interested".

Beyond funding acquisition, additional opportunities presented themselves through relationship and partnership building with key community and government stakeholders. These include key stakeholders taking an interest in SURE and lending their support through non-financial mechanisms. For example, according to one program director, a government official who was approached "said that it is something that he would be very supportive of, nothing he could fund, but something he would be supportive of and a letter of support from this politician was given to SURE directors to help legitimize the process of program development.

Additional strategies for barrier reduction came in the form public awareness. Program directors faced the aforementioned barriers of attitudes and assumptions regarding those in poverty. With the acquisition of public education funding, the program directors ran workshops at LR and are currently planning a community conversation to discuss these assumptions with potential partners to work together towards reducing barriers to program development. Public awareness has increased during the past two years as the process of meeting with community and university partners has continued. One university faculty shared that community interest has

grown and "individuals in the community are starting to hear about this program and are getting excited".

Overall, while the SURE directors have only just begun removing barriers at the organizational level, little effort has been put forth to reduce barriers of time, and lack of knowledge as well as university culture/attitudes. However, the process has begun to have promising reductions in barriers surrounding funding and non-financial resource acquisition as well as support from community and university partners to move forward.

### *Outcomes*

Most stakeholder groups touched on achieved outcomes and program milestones as well as outcomes yet to be achieved at the organizational level. Most discussion arose from interviews with university and community stakeholders as well as program directors. No negative outcomes were found at the organizational level.

*Achieved outcomes.* Fewer outcomes emerged at the organizational levels than what was found at the individual change levels. However, community and university partners discussed achieved outcomes at more a macro level of analysis including SURE's impact on community settings. Multiple community partners discussed SURE as "an enhancement to what we were already doing". The SURE program was seen as a benefit to the settings in which it was being implemented including LR, funding agencies and the university.

In addition to these community and setting specific benefits, certain program milestones were discussed by all stakeholder groups. These milestones include identifying capable learners and receiving learner "buy-in," partnership development and funding milestones. One significant and extremely important milestone was learner "buy-in" and trust of the program and SURE directors. One director stated:

"we have the buy-in from women living in poverty, who had no reason to trust us and they do. And they have built us into their lives, and they have built the SURE program into their lives and their futures". (Andrea, program director)

Although, as mentioned above current levels of trust are tenuous as SURE goes through some internal conflict. Therefore, it should be noted that this learner "buy-in" is dynamic and based on the quality of relationships that occur between learners and directors.

Funding milestones were discussed by community, university and directors with all groups mentioning SURE's successful funding applications. As the SURE program has not been implemented at the university, many of the projected outcomes and milestones have not been reached. Therefore, in a similar structure to the individual level change section, outcomes yet to be achieved were identified by different stakeholders.

*Outcomes yet to be achieved.*

"If you spoke with someone living in poverty, if you did interviews and surveyed people living in poverty that they would be equally likely that they will or won't go to university as anybody else. That would be an indicator of success". (Andrea, program director)

As stated previously, key stakeholders, learners and directors were asked to explain how they envisioned the success of SURE. In this section I present outcomes yet to be achieved at the organizational level of change. The learners had nothing to share regarding the organizational change process; therefore this theme emerged from community, university and director data only. None of the mentioned outcomes overlapped with the achieved outcome section, as was the case for the individual level of analysis.

The outcomes yet to be achieved ranged from short-term goals, such as altered admissions process and reduced tuition at the university, to long-term cultural shifts around systemic outcomes of university access and access to education. Much of the discussion focused on the shifting of academic admissions policy for SURE learners as this would be key in

launching the program at the university. One faculty member explained that a key outcome would be that "administratively you would see openness to the idea [of SURE] and inviting, you know, these women and others in similar circumstances into the university community", while one program director stated.

"If the university entrance application process wanted to sit down with us and say 'how can you help us open our doors to people living in poverty,' if we could have a conversation with them that they would be willing to learn from us that we are not doing a good job of educating everyone in Ontario who has access to a public university".

Some more ambitious future outcomes were discussed surrounding the public education aspect of the SURE program. One director noted that an important outcome would be that:

"professors and everyone who makes the university run, recognize that we are not educating everybody and that they also start to demand that the university fill our classrooms with a more accurate cross-section of the community." (Andrea, program director)

Around the cultural shift and transformative change in university policy, Andrea framed it as "putting ourselves out of business". She went on to say that the final indicator of success would be that a program like SURE is not necessary as the university would be "willing to embrace SURE's philosophy and incorporate SURE's philosophy into how they attract candidates, that they start going into non-traditional places looking for students," therefore accomplishing the same equality in educational access as espoused by SURE.

In conclusion, many of the measurable outcomes at the organizational level have yet to be achieved. This is due to the multiple barriers previously discussed surrounding lacking resources and societal attitudes. The SURE program directors and community/university partners have identified altered admissions criteria, reduced tuition and increased public awareness regarding marginalized populations as future goals and indicators of program success.

### *Summary of Findings*

The findings section outlined the processes and outcomes of the individual and organizational change processes of the SURE program. What was found was a multitude of barriers and conscious and indirect strategies/processes to remove barriers. Overall, at the individual level, several significant outcomes were achieved through the development of successful strategies to reduce barriers. However, at the organizational level, the barriers found have continued to hinder program success due to a lack of time and resources from the program directors and within the program structure. I summarize the findings in Table 4, including both process and outcome data at both the individual and organizational level, mirroring Table 2 based on similar themes emerging from the literature. Through comparing Table 2 and Table 4 in my discussion I outline where this research has overlapped with past literature and knowledge, as well as where it differentiates itself, and builds on prior knowledge.

*Table 4*

#### *Barriers, Reduction Strategies and Outcomes at Different Levels of Analysis from the Data*

Levels of Analysis	Barriers	Strategies to Reduce Barriers	Outcomes
Individual Level	<i>Learner barriers</i> (systemic, educational, family, health, internal) financial resources lack of support internal characteristics stigma	<u><i>Participatory processes</i></u>  Opportunity to effect change - Participation in decision making  <i>Access to monetary and non-monetary resources</i>  <i>Radiating effects for children</i>  <u><i>Positive relationship</i></u>	<i>Positive</i> Educational benefits Improved mental and physical health Increased self-esteem Behaviour change Shifts in thinking Ripple effect for other women and children  <i>Negative</i> Health outcomes Increased stress Feelings of failure Negative impacts on children

		<i>building</i>	<p>Negative/conflict filled relationships Abuse of power</p> <p><i>Outcomes yet to be achieved</i> Learner indicators  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>completion of assignment at university</li> <li>completion of course at university</li> <li>- completion of program</li> </ul> Family ripple effects Current UW students increased awareness of inequality</p>
Organizational Level	<p><i>Program barriers</i> Lack of resources  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>time</li> <li>money</li> </ul> Lack of knowledge</p> <p><i>University barriers</i> Policy barriers University culture</p> <p><i>Government barriers</i> Assumptions towards those in poverty Assumptions about universality of government programs</p> <p><i>Societal barriers</i> Attitudes Stigma</p>	<p><i>Funding processes</i></p> <p><i>Non-financial resource acquisition</i> (support and "buy-in")</p> <p><i>Partnership creation</i></p> <p><i>Public awareness</i></p>	<p><i>Achieved outcomes</i> SURE impact on settings Program milestones  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identifying capable learners</li> <li>learner "buy-in"</li> <li>partnership development</li> <li>successful funding acquisition</li> </ul> </p> <p><i>Outcomes yet to be achieved</i> Short-term  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>altered admissions processes</li> <li>reduced tuition</li> </ul> Long-term  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- cultural shifts</li> <li>awareness of and effort to reduce</li> </ul> </p>

			<p>systemic oppression by the university</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "putting ourselves out of business"</li> </ul>
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In the discussion that follows, these findings will be interpreted through the literature to help clarify the process and outcomes of the SURE program to date.

Discussion

The outcomes of this study are twofold. To begin, the current research provides a thorough understanding of the processes and outcomes of the SURE program in relation to empowerment, building on previous literature at the individual and organizational level. Secondly, the findings have led me to propose an adapted empowerment framework that demonstrates interactions between levels of analysis and an overlap between process and outcomes emerging from the findings within the SURE context (see Diagram 1). The discussion is subdivided into these two sections, presenting interpretation of the current findings followed by the proposed framework of empowerment.

*Revisiting the Literature*

Despite the extensive literature on the multitude of benefits of higher education (Price, 2005; Ross & Wu, 1995; Zhan & Pandey, 2004) for women living in poverty (Curtis, 2001; Tiarniyu & Mitchell, 2001), and the literature on the benefits of empowering processes and outcomes for oppressed groups (East, 2000; Nelson et al., 2001; Zimmerman, 2000), few programs have been created to address the diverse and complicated needs of this population. Following the above summary of findings for SURE program development at the individual and organizational level, I now move to interpret the findings through the lens of empowerment



theory. I will identify places where the processes and outcomes overlap with prior literature, as well as new information and current contributions that have emerged from this research. In short, I will compare Table 2, barriers, reduction strategies and outcomes at different levels of analysis from the literature with Table 4 barriers, reduction strategies and outcomes at different levels of analysis from the data to note discrepancies.

*Research Question 1. What are the Processes and Outcomes of the Change Effort at the Individual Level of Analysis?*

*Is SURE Empowering for Individuals?: Empowering Processes at the Individual Level*

As defined in the literature review, personal empowerment is an:

"intentional ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources." (Zimmerman, 1995)

According to Petersen and Speer (2000), an organization that empowers individuals has leadership that delegates authority, rotates roles and opportunities, provides social support and has a shared vision. The findings of this research at the individual level of analysis were consistent with past research on empowerment and outcomes of educational programs. Many of the barriers found were expected based on the literature on similar empowering processes and populations. Barriers that fit into this previous framework include financial barriers and a lack of support as (described in part in Table 1 as poverty of relationships and financial struggles).

However, this research provided insight into internal characteristics as well demonstrating the learners' perceptions of intelligence, and fear of failure and the unknown as significant barriers to educational achievement. Groen and Hyland-Russell (2009) discussed such barriers within the Clemente program including previous trauma, addictions and belief in personal capabilities. Overall, the barriers found in this study were consistent with the literature

for marginalized populations. However, it is with innovative strategies to reduce these barriers that SURE stands out. One new strategy found to reduce barriers to the learners was that of positive relationship development between learners and directors. This was an unexpected finding that points to the importance of informal supports as a way to reduce barriers to education. Through the development of healthy and positive relationships for SURE team members, the directors were more able to help learners identify barriers and work towards reducing them together. This is linked to social support (Christopher, 2005; Frenette, 2007), as previously discussed in the literature. However, within an empowerment framework these relationships allowed the learners to have greater access to knowledge and social/emotional resources in addition to the support that was provided. As mentioned above, for one learner these relationships were not always positive and due to some of the previously discussed negative outcomes, the shared vision discussed by Petersen and Speer (2000) is no longer true for the SURE program. The program is working on a process of conflict resolution to deal with these negative outcomes and work towards a new and stronger shared vision in order to empower the members of the SURE team.

In their discussion of the empowerment-community integration paradigm in the field of community mental health, Nelson, Lord and Ochocka (2001) share three values pertaining to empowerment: stakeholder participation and empowerment, community support and integration as well as social justice and access to valued resources. To different extents these three values were espoused by the SURE program as applied to the population of women living in poverty, and were found to be key aspects of the SURE process. First, SURE worked as a collaborative and participatory team with learners, directors, and key stakeholders working together to make decisions, therefore upholding the value of stakeholder participation and empowerment. The

second value, community support and integration, defined by Nelson, Lord and Ochocka (2001) constitutes a valued individual participating within a community rather than simply existing in a community. Efforts to integrate the learners into the educational community through workshops, registration in high school courses, as well as through participating in SURE activities increased their value in the LR community and placed them in the position of role model for other women in the community around education and furthering their knowledge. Lastly, social justice and access to valued resources emerged as a key finding at the individual level of the SURE process. Increasing the learner's access to educational resources as well as support increased their personal control and ability to make conscious decisions regarding their future, unimpeded by their own self-doubt and life obstacles previously preventing them from furthering their education. Therefore, utilizing these key empowerment processes, unlike previous strategies to reduce barriers (with the exception of Clemente during some aspects of its process), the SURE program empowers its members.

*Were SURE Participants Empowered?: Empowerment Outcomes for Individuals*

SURE processes led to empowered outcomes for most of the individuals during the process of SURE development. The learner who left the program due to personal struggles was also on the road to empowerment before unforeseen obstacles arose, as she had become politically involved in her community and was working towards completion of her education. The two other learners have achieved empowered outcomes. Empowerment, as mentioned is a dynamic construct and therefore, as both positive and negative outcomes unfold the level of empowerment perceived by the learners fluctuates. Empowered outcomes discussed in the literature are described as the consequences of empowering processes and include situation-specific perceived control, resource mobilization control, community participation, mastery

(Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995), self-determination, decision making, voice, and assertiveness (Nelson, Lord & Ochocka, 2001). Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) went on to say that empowered outcomes are contextual and therefore some may not be appropriate goals or outcomes within different populations or settings. As previously mentioned Zimmerman (1995) outlined the PE framework to include an intrapersonal, interactional and behavioural components.

The opportunities and empowerment processes emerging from the SURE program were essential in reaching the many outcomes discussed above. These included participatory processes and collective decision making. Due to these opportunities, the learners experienced many of the same outcomes outlined in the literature discussing the benefits of higher education, including improved psychological (Kempen et al., 1999; Reynolds & Ross, 1998) and physical health (Curtis, 2001; Pandey & Kim, 2008; Zhan & Pandey, 2004), increased self-esteem (Aries & Seider, 2005; Price, 2005; Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001), and a shift towards a more positive and future oriented frame of thinking (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2009), leading to empowered outcomes such as situation specific perceived control. Many of these achieved empowerment outcomes, such as the perceived control by the learners, address the intrapersonal component of PE for the learners. On the other hand, due to some of the more recent negative outcomes one learner discussed some opposing forces that led to decreased psychological health, self-esteem and thinking about one's future. Therefore, follow up research is required to better understand the long-term impacts of the process as many constructs have fluctuated as the SURE program struggles to move forward.

The current results also reveal a broader array of outcomes illuminating both the costs of such programs, as well as more far-reaching positive effects. The costs of the program were

framed as negative outcomes to the learners and their children and are important to document to get a complete picture of program effects. Pancer and Cameron (1994) reported similar negative outcomes in relation to a community development-oriented, prevention program. Their study outlined both time away from children and stress as two of these negative outcomes, corroborating the findings of this study with a similar low-income population.

Additional positive outcomes not previously discussed in the literature were achieved, including behaviour change. Behaviour change thus addresses the behavioural component of Zimmerman's (1995) PE framework. For example, learners began to speak publicly about the issues related to poverty and systemic oppression. One learner presented to Kitchener City Hall regarding the barriers that she experienced as a marginalized woman. Additional active behaviour to change their current living environment was reflected in the conference presentation by the SURE team. These outcomes, including the collaborative dissemination of findings is typical of participatory action research (PAR), which is defined as an approach that provides maximum opportunity and support for participation in the research process to provide opportunity to create change. This opportunity provided the space for the SURE learners to address their issues with an academic audience and work towards publishing their stories to help increase awareness regarding systemic oppression and sociopolitical barriers faced in their lives.

Another outcome not found in prior literature with this population is that of radiating effects. Radiating effects are discussed in the literature in the context of consultation processes with teachers (Kelly, 2006) and the understanding of these processes can be applied to the current population. These radiating effects outlined by Kelly occur when an individual or group receives an intervention and through interactions with surrounding individuals radiates the positive effect through knowledge translation and modeling of behaviour. The learners'

modeling of education radiated out into the LR community changing the atmosphere and attitudes towards education both for other women residents and the children of SURE learners. This was an unexpected finding and the long-term effects of these radiating effects would benefit from future research with this population. A more recent outcome achieved after the data collection period was completed was that of critical awareness (the interactional component of PE according to Zimmerman (1995)). As previously mentioned, the directors and learners worked together to create a conference presentation that examined some of the challenges and opportunities arising from working together across class differences. During these conversations and a follow up conference presentation, the SURE team dissected issues of power and systemic oppression leading to an increase in critical awareness of the sociopolitical environment and systemic barriers. The learners in these discussions began to understand the conceptions of root causes, underlying oppression and assumptions as well as power within society. Although interactional components have been found in previous research (i.e., shifts in thinking), this process of open dialogue regarding power and systemic barriers across social class emerged as a novel finding for this population.

Therefore, the SURE program led to developments in all three categories of personal empowerment according to Zimmerman (1995): intrapersonal, interactional and behavioural components. Now I shift into the next level of analysis to understand whether SURE is empowering and empowered at the organizational level.

*Research Question 2: What are the Processes and Outcomes of the Change Effort at the Organizational Level of Analysis?*

At the organizational level of analysis some overlap was found between the projected barriers, strategies and outcomes as outlined in the literature and those emerging from the data.

However, as was the case with the individual level section, the current research identified new barriers, such as time limitations, new strategies, including partnership development, and additional outcomes, including learner "buy-in".

In the literature on access to higher education, the organizational level is conceptualized as the university level. Therefore, the description presents organizational barriers as challenges that a program or intervention will face at the university including exclusionary admissions processes and high tuition, with less of a focus on barriers to organizational empowerment (OE), such as a lack of resources and influence. The current conception of organizational barriers in this paper is, however, linked to empowerment, as without access to resources and influence (empowered outcomes) an organization would not be capable of overcoming the aforementioned university barriers. As such, the SURE findings extend beyond these barriers to include societal and government barriers, but also to encompass empowering strategies and empowered outcomes.

#### *Is SURE Empowering to the Organization?: Empowering Processes at the SURE*

##### *Organizational Level*

As will be discussed in the contributions to literature section, many of the empowering processes at the organizational and individual level both work towards individual empowerment (as opposed to creating an empowered organization) and therefore do not need to be revisited in detail in this section. Those factors that were found as empowering at the individual level as previously mentioned were participatory processes and learning to access resources, and these were processes provided by the organizational structure of SURE.

There were, however, empowering processes at the organizational level that contributed to the development of SURE as an empowered organization. Petersen and Zimmerman (2004)

outlined a conceptual model of OE that includes intra-organizational, inter-organizational and extra-organizational components of an empowered organization. The intra-organizational component includes aspects of an organization's internal structure that provide support for members to actively work towards goal achievement, including resolving ideological conflict and resource identification. The SURE program is currently lacking this component of the framework, as it is currently experiencing ideological conflict in the SURE team and has yet to identify a creative way to move through this conflict. However, according to Petersen and Zimmerman (2004), if we successfully navigate this conflict we will emerge stronger and more internally ready to effect change in our community.

The inter-organizational component of OE includes community collaboration and the procurement of resources. With this component the SURE team has been largely more successful. The most important process at this level was partnership development to increase the social networking capacity of SURE, as well as extending university and community support of the program. These partnerships have increased access for SURE to community resources and knowledge and are important processes in the development of an empowered SURE organization.

SURE has begun to amass these resources and influence through significant partnership development with local funders, service organizations and government officials. Additionally, with access to small pots of money through successful funding applications SURE has managed to stay afloat, as it navigates the local community. SURE is far from a sustainable program both in leadership and resources. However, through critical reflection and dialogue the SURE team and the organization are shifting towards a more transformative approach and will be utilizing this research as a resource to build on their current knowledge. Perkins, Bess, Cooper, Jones,



Armstead and Speer (2007) argue that organizations that are successful in empowering staff and volunteers (as SURE has) will fare better at community transformation. This relates to the third and final component of OE as outlined by Petersen and Zimmerman (2004). The extra-organizational component of OE includes an organization's ability to influence policy, and utilize resources in a manner that creates community change and community action. Therefore, as the SURE team moves towards the utilization of their current resources, as well as working towards accruing more resources, the goal would be to influence policy at the university level (i.e., admissions criteria), as well as to mobilize community action surrounding the barriers discussed in the findings section.

*Is SURE an Empowered Organization? Empowerment Outcomes for the Organization*

In short, no. An empowered organization is one that can compete for valued resources, and have tangible influence in the community. As discussed above, Petersen and Zimmerman (2004) identified three components of OE and state that in order to be an empowered organization all three must be addressed successfully. Currently SURE has had successful outcomes at the inter-organizational level including collaboration and resources procurement but has yet been able to exercise extra-organizational OE or intra-organizational OE. As an organization, SURE was found to lack necessary and valued resources and influence in the community. Although the individuals participated in empowering processes and experienced empowered outcomes at the individual level, as discussed above, the organization has very little power in the community. According to Perkins and Zimmerman (1995), OE is not the sum of empowerment within each individual, but entails the ability to effectively compete for resources, has a strong network with other organizations and sectors, and can influence policy (Zimmerman, 2000).

As discussed in the preceding section on empowering processes at the organizational level, SURE has gone through significant empowering processes at the organizational level. However, few empowerment outcomes have yet to be identified. Future research is needed to identify more long term outcomes including policy influence and competitiveness for valued community resources. These extra-organizational components are key in determining organizational success and sustainability.

In summary, SURE is an organization that is empowering to individuals both due to individual and organizational levels of empowering processes. However, it is less successful at becoming an empowered organization. According to Perkins et al. (2000), an organization that strives to create transformative change and has access to valued community resources in order to be able to affect this change must critically reflect and study assumptions and its theory of change. This organization must frame its vision and values as addressing root causes in order to facilitate radical change movements, versus more incremental and ameliorative change. Therefore, to increase the empowered outcomes of SURE at the organizational level, the SURE team must take the time to critically reflect on these findings and experiences in order to re-frame the targets of change and action for change (Evans & Loomis, 2009). The complexity of the emerging picture regarding SURE within the empowerment framework has led me to develop a visual representation of empowerment theory as a first attempt at understanding some of the complexities between levels of analysis.

#### *Contributions to the Literature*

Many representations and frameworks for empowerment have been proposed within the literature (Carr, 2003; Prilleltensky 1994; Zimmerman, 1995) that define different frame factors for the construct. These theories all present empowerment as either process, like Carr (2003) who

argues that empowerment is a cycling of processes moving through different rounds of conscientization and change, versus Perkins and Zimmerman (1995), who argue that empowerment is both a process and an outcome. The current study found evidence to support an amalgamation of these two separate frameworks to explain the current findings. Arguably, creating a framework to define empowerment to be generalized outside of the SURE context and population is not feasible, as empowerment differs within contexts and populations (Zimmerman, 1995). The proposed framework emerging from this study does not aim to alter empowerment theory, but simply to make explicit interrelations between levels and structures that already exist and that emerged within the context of the SURE program processes. This restructuring is twofold: (a) empowerment processes and outcomes may not be mutually exclusive constructs, but have areas of overlap leading to interchangeability; and (b) individual and organizational processes are interrelated in that both lead to individual or personal empowerment.

The first proposed change, that which questions the mutual exclusivity of an empowerment process and outcome, arises from both the literature and the findings from this study of SURE. For example, Groen and Hyland-Russell (2009), as well as the current study, found that empowerment processes can be outcomes or ends in themselves. Overlap can be seen in aspects of empowerment such as support (i.e., support can be a process and an outcome). Therefore, the differentiation between a process and an outcome within empowerment theory can be unclear. During both the analysis and findings of this study seemingly arbitrary separations were necessitated to present the information in a logical and clear manner.

Additional support for this relationship comes from Carr (2003) in her "Rethinking Empowerment" article, in which she envisions empowerment as a circular process moving

through mutually enforcing processes before re-cycling again. For example, findings from the current study showed that self-esteem and physical and psychological health for the learners are outcomes. However, as empowerment progresses and develops it can be conceptualized as a dynamic process. Therefore, the line at which we differentiate between the process of developing self-esteem or improving health versus conceptualizing these constructs as achieved empowerment outcomes was blurred in the current study. This blurred line demonstrates that within the context of SURE these processes have overlapping tendencies. Although many processes and outcomes can and should be differentiated (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995), Diagram 1 demonstrates the overlap that emerged from the SURE program data. This overlap can be seen by the two interrelated green circles labeled empowerment processes of the individual and organizational level.

Secondly, the relationship between levels of analysis appears to be complex and non-linear. Maton (2008) explains that empowering settings focus on multiple levels of analysis to simultaneously provide the mechanisms for individual development, community betterment and social change. Additionally, Zimmerman (2000) and Petersen and Speer (2000) present these levels of analysis as connected and interdependent. Therefore, there is general consensus that the empowerment processes at the individual and organizational level of analysis are not mutually exclusive constructs. However, for the sake of clarity, visual frameworks of empowerment continue to conceptualize them as separate (Maton, 2008; Zimmerman 1995).

Therefore, emerging from the complex interrelation of the current findings, a visual representation of the empowerment framework with considerations for the interrelation of levels as well as the proposed theoretical overlap in processes and outcomes is presented below. The relationship can be seen through arrows pointing at the individual level empowerment outcomes

coming from the empowerment processes at multiple levels of analysis. Future research utilizing this framework would need to be completed to understand the degree to which this interdependence occurs as well as its generalizability or applicability to different populations and interventions. The empowerment outcomes at the individual level relate no new information and with a bent arrow simply represent the non-linear relationship between an empowering and an empowered organization (i.e., an organization can be either empowered, empowering or both)

Although the following depiction of empowerment only begins to scratch the surface of the construct, it is helpful in clarifying relationships and interconnections. This visual aid is not meant to replace other models but simply to add another layer to the already complex and interrelated construct. Future research would be needed to see if these relationships are relevant and useful when studying other populations and contexts, as well as how these relationships fit within the larger construct including its values (Prilleltensky, 1994), frame factors (Maton, 2008; Zimmerman, 1995) and underlying theory (Speer, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000)

*Diagram 1*

*Visual Aid to Demonstrate Interconnectedness of the Empowerment Framework*



### *Limitations*

Constraints on the current research included data gathering issues, complex relationships and omitting government level data. Data gathering issues presented themselves not only through the missing journal entries and learner data, but also limitations due to my timeline. An arbitrary data collection period had to be set in order to finish this research in a timely manner. However, as the SURE process continued after this period, new findings may have continued to emerge (as was discussed with the increase in critical awareness due to the SURE team conference presentation). This can also be demonstrated by the more recent conversations with Jan as she felt that her lived experience was not being represented in the thesis based on this arbitrary timeline and chose to add to her data at the culmination of my writing period. Therefore, follow up research would be beneficial to understand how the different outcomes progress, whether or not the negative outcomes subside or increase, as well as to continue documenting this innovative process as the SURE team works towards being an empowered organization with real influence and competitive access to valued resources.

The complex relationships created before and during this research process were exciting and important. Although these relationships led to empowerment outcomes as discussed above, they also could be inhibiting to program development and create new unforeseen barriers for the SURE team members. The strong interconnections between learners and directors led to a very difficult time when the health of one learner unraveled leading to an enormous amount of pressure and needed support for that learner. This occurrence disrupted the group dynamics and the SURE team has not recovered from this imbalance. Therefore, these unforeseen health barriers and changing relationships at LR limited the research as well as SURE's access to LR during these events. Additionally, the lives of the SURE team members became complex in part

because unforeseen events developing out of learner/director relationships. This additionally disrupted the group dynamic and demonstrates the interconnections and close relationships developed between these women.

Lastly, the scope of this research did not include a focus on government level processes and outcomes. This occurred for two reasons: (a) very little had yet to occur at the government level and should be looked at in future research as the SURE program moves forward; and (b) frame factors had to be set in order to develop a manageable study. Therefore, some depth was lost as little understanding of government barriers and initial outcomes is known within this context. Some pieces of information regarding government were accrued through discussions of OW and ODSP and issues surrounding assumptions and understanding or root causes that emerged and therefore need to be addressed through the SURE program.

#### *Implications for Research and Action*

Coming to the end of this research, reflecting on the experiences the SURE team has encountered during the past two years I begin to look into the future, beyond the scope of this research. The current action research rooted in anti-oppression, social action and transformative change has framed our understanding of barriers as well as outcomes yet to be achieved for the SURE program and helped to surface assumptions about root causes. This understanding rooted in action will help the SURE team structure its work to target and reduce barriers to learners and program development while aiming to achieve projected outcomes through transformational change and empowering processes/outcomes.

Additionally, implications arose from this research surrounding the need for public awareness around systemic issues in the local community. In discussions with different partners and the program learners it became apparent that many held assumptions influenced by the

dominant discourse of meritocracy and individual responsibility. Therefore, armed with this knowledge the SURE program plans on increasing its public education campaign to include more general information addressing these deep seeded assumptions and worldviews.

The proposed visual aid for empowerment theory additionally has implications for research and action. Building on this conception of empowerment will require research at additional levels of analysis with this population, as well as new research on different populations and contexts to understand its relevance to the field and how it can compliment previous conceptions of empowerment. With this visual aid comes another important implication of this research; the understanding of the interrelation of barriers at multiple levels of analysis. In order to work towards transformational change, Evans and Loomis (2009) discuss targets of change as the "identified beliefs, actions, and conditions that we deem unacceptable and thus aim to modify" (p. 379). Therefore, now that we have surfaced barriers and assumptions at multiple levels of analysis, we have a clear definition of our target of change. Evans and Loomis (2009) also go on to say that a key explanation for failed interventions arise from ill-defined problem situations based on faulty assumptions about the root causes of a issue. Therefore, to increase chances for success, the SURE team will utilize the current findings to reevaluate our problem situation we wish to address to make certain SURE is working towards appropriate root causes while removing barriers, not simply incremental or ameliorative change.

### *Personal Reflection*

I began this research process with intensive self-reflection consisting of not only internal reflection regarding my experiences (or lack thereof) with poverty, but also intense and sometimes emotional discussions with friends, family and my partner. These discussions and reflective processes culminated in my social location section presented previously. However,



nothing I could have done as I began this research could have prepared me for the confusing, difficult, rewarding and painful pathway I was to journey down.

As an action researcher my work is consumed by the importance of being explicit in my values and ideologies, as well as the importance of a common understanding of power relations and systemic oppression. However, through conversations with the SURE team after the culmination of the data collection period it became clear that no matter how hard I (or we) pushed for equality in our relationships, each of us came into the process with such different pre-conditions and brought such different worldviews to the table that we were always talking from our place without fully crossing the boundaries of class, education, age and life experiences. This research has challenged my ideologies as well as my methods. After working for two years attempting to create an empowering program that can help break the cycle of poverty, I have had to re-evaluate my strategies and manner of interacting with others as many negative outcomes have arisen for the learners. Perhaps it was naive to believe that sitting together discussing power could help five women overcome the immense barriers society has erected around systemic oppression. However, continuing this struggle as a team has proved to be immensely important in our understanding of each other and our need to be open minded in our work.

In recent discussions with Jan regarding her experience with the program and the research process, it became clear that this research represents a moment in time, like a snapshot of program development, in the dynamic and complex story of SURE. This process has been and will continue to be organic in its process and will in all likelihood result in future positive and negative outcomes for the learners, directors and our community. The process has taken us all through phases of optimism and pessimism both of which colour our views on program outcomes and processes. Future research is needed to understand long-term outcomes that will

arise in the event of full program implementation as well as outcomes that occur if the program does not come to fruition. As the SURE team wrestles with the many barriers discussed in the findings section there remains the possibility that SURE will not come to be as we envisioned two years ago. If this occurs, what will be the long-term effects on our learners and the community in which we worked? How will this process have affected all of us in our personal and professional lives? This has become a part of my personal narrative as I feel the weight of this program on my shoulders, as the goals we were striving for as a group will impact the SURE team members with unequal consequences.

In the days leading up to the completion of this document, intense discussions were had between myself and Jan about her concerns with the validity of the research, as she had previously felt she could not be forthcoming regarding her perceived impacts of the program. Through building in her thoughts and experiences I feel that the strength of my research has increased and that we are provided with a clearer understanding of how to move forward as a team and address the multitude of barriers presented. Her perspective on our group discussions regarding difference and power were enlightening. To reiterate from my social location, I continue to learn and grow through my interactions with the learners. The many struggles I have faced during this process as a researcher, a student and as a SURE program director have all been great learning experiences where I have felt challenged and pushed to reach my potential. I can only hope that this research can move one step closer to creating a sustainable program that can provide that same challenge and push to the SURE learners.

In closing I feel that this research has had far reaching implications on my identity, my relationships to my community as well as my understanding and compassion for difference and collective voice. It is through this process that I will continue to strive towards working and

learning across difference as well as working towards providing a space for our collective and unique voices on the issues of access to education. This journey continues beyond the scope of this research and only time will tell how this story will end. I look forward to continued involvement in SURE as a program director, future researcher and friend. During this last conversation I had with Jan, there was a moment in time, sitting together at a picnic table in the rain that I feel the next chapter of this story began. It was in that moment with Jan that I felt for the very first time that we were truly connecting not across difference but simply as two women with a common vision and a hope that we can continue to write this story together.

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## Appendix A

### Life Narrative Interview Guide for Future Learners

#### I. Process

##### A. Before SURE

1. Can you tell me about your past experiences with education?
  - a. Level (elementary, high school, continuing education)
  - b. Influential people (family, teachers, others?)
  - c. Memorable moments (low, high, turning point)
  - d. Barriers and opportunities to being a successful student

##### B. SURE

2. What has it been like for you to become involved with the SURE program?
  - a. When was the first time you thought about going on to higher education?
  - b. Why did you want to be involved with SURE?
  - c. Tell me a bit about how you came to be involved in SURE?
  - d. Influential people in your involvement (family, teachers, others)
  - e. Memorable moments (low, high, turning point)
  - f. Barriers and opportunities
  - g. Tell me about your experiences with SURE?

#### II. Outcomes

##### A. Personal

1. Tell me about how your involvement with SURE has affected you in respect to
  - a. Education goals
  - b. Other life goals

- c. Your health
- d. Your children
- e. Other

2. Please describe any other changes in yourself as a result of your participation in SURE.

**B. Organizational**

1. What changes have occurred at the University of Waterloo because of SURE?
2. What changes need to occur?
3. What role have you or could you play in creating these changes at U of W?





## Appendix C

### Interview Guide for Program Directors

#### I. Process

##### A. Before the Beginning

1. Please tell me about how the SURE program came to be (asked of program founder only).
  - a. When did this occur?
  - b. Who was consulted?
  - c. How did you approach the learners?
2. Tell me about your role as a program director for SURE.
  - a. How did you become involved?
  - b. Tell me about how your role or involvement addressed organizational change?

##### B. Organizational Process

1. What important milestones or turning points have occurred in SURE with respect to:
  - a. Funding
  - b. Implementation
  - c. Partnerships
  - d. Other
2. What barriers have presented themselves to the program's success?
3. What opportunities have presented themselves to the program's success?

#### II. Outcomes

1. What indicators are necessary for you to consider this change effort a success at the organizational level (What needs to happen)?



- a. Financial
  - b. Academic
  - c. Institutional Change
2. What major accomplishments has SURE been able to make thus far?
  3. How has your role and involvement contributed to this organizational change?

## Appendix D

## Interview Guide for Key Stakeholders

## I. Process

1. What is your involvement with the SURE, program?
  - a. How was this partnership created?
  - b. Has your role changed during the process? If so, in what way?
  - c. Tell me about how your role or involvement addressed organizational change
2. What was it about the program that led to your involvement?
  - a. Were there any aspects of the program that inhibited or discouraged your commitment to the project?
3. Has the SURE program had an impact on your setting? (i.e., faculty, funding org, etc.). If so, explain how.
  - a. What indicators of change exist?
4. What important milestones or turning points have occurred with respect to
  - a. Funding
  - b. Implementation
  - c. Partnerships
  - d. Other
5. What barriers have presented themselves to the program's success?
6. What opportunities have presented themselves to the program's success?
7. What barriers have presented themselves to your partnership/involvement with SURE?
8. What opportunities have presented themselves to your partnership/involvement with SURE?

## II. Outcomes

9. What indicators are necessary for you to consider this change effort a success at the organizational level (What needs to happen)?
  - a. Financial
  - b. Academic
  - c. Institutional change
  - d. Other
4. What major accomplishments has SURE been able to make thus far?
5. How has your role and involvement contributed to this organizational change?

## Appendix E

### Journal Guide for Researcher (Organizational Level)

This journal is to be filled out after each meeting with SURE partners from November until February. Some sections may not be relevant to your experiences. Feel free to leave these sections blank and focus on those that are more relevant. The last section is open ended to allow you to include any information that you believe is relevant to the documentation of the program or understanding of change effort.

Date:	People present:	Location:
-------	-----------------	-----------

1. Tell me about the purpose of the meeting (i.e. to create partnerships, make decisions, gain resources).
  
2. Tell me about how your role or involvement addressed organizational change.
  
3. What important milestones or turning points occurred with respect to:
  - a. Funding
  - b. Implementation
  - c. Partnerships
  - d. Other
  
4. What barriers presented themselves to the program's success?
  
  
5. What opportunities presented themselves to the program's success?

## II. Outcomes

1. What needs to happen next? What steps need to be taken to move forward?
2. Were any major accomplishments achieved today?
3. How has your role and involvement contributed to this organizational change?
6. Please add any details or extra information that is relevant to understanding the process and outcomes of the SURE program.

## Appendix F

### WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY INFORMATION LETTER

#### An Action Research Study of Supporting the University-Ready through Empowerment (SURE) Future Learners

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to document the development of the SURE program from December 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 to February 15<sup>th</sup> 2009. The SURE program is designed to help low-income women access higher education. The project aims to understand both the individual and organizational changes occurring since the SURE program began its development. The principal investigator for this research project is Natalie Brown, a Master's student in the Community Psychology Program from Wilfrid Laurier University. This research is supervised by Dr. Geoff Nelson.

#### **INFORMATION**

You are asked to participate in a one hour in-person interview regarding your educational past, present and future. This interview will be set up through e-mail or phone correspondence to choose a convenient time for you. With your permission this interview will be recorded and we will make a transcription of the recording. In addition you will be asked to complete a journal entry once a week from December 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 to February 15<sup>th</sup> 2009. This journal will provide a template for you to share your experiences during the SURE program and any educational experiences that occur during this time. You will be asked to suggest 2 to 3 members of your friends and family or SURE staff who we could interview for them to share their insights into your educational past and experiences with the SURE program. This is completely voluntary.

The interview with you will take approximately 1 hour and will occur in December. The journal entries will take approximately 20-30 minutes for an approximate total of 3.6-5.5 hours of journaling. In addition, you will be asked to review the transcript from your interview and approve the initial analysis of that transcript. Therefore, you will be asked for a total time commitment of approximately 6.5-9.5 hours (1 hr (interview) + 20-30 minutes x 11 weeks (journaling) + 2-3hrs (review of data and analysis) = 6.5-9.5 hours to complete all activities). There will be a total of 14-22 participants in this research. They will include all interested parties of the SURE program, including people using the program services, program staff, and university staff.

#### **RISKS**

Risks for this study are minimal. These include social risks such as a risk that loss of privacy could occur through using third party information from your family and friends. There are also minimal psychological or emotional risks as difficult personal information may be revealed. You may feel distress or regret over revelation of such information. In addition, it is possible that questions from the interview may surface negative memories and cause emotional unrest. You may choose to skip questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. All efforts will be made to reduce these risks. SURE staff and other support services will be provided and information for other supports will be made available. These supports will include resource staff from your place of residence as well as contact information for available support staff in your community. These will be provided in a separate document.

Participant's initials

## **BENEFITS**

The benefits of this research include the provision of data in creating a strong educational initiative in Waterloo region aimed at helping women living in poverty access higher education. Past research has demonstrated the health, social and financial benefits of achieving higher education among this population.

In addition, participants will be provided with an opportunity to share their stories, and may be empowered by the research process. Both the local and the research community will benefit from this research as concrete steps in the development of an anti-poverty initiative will be uncovered.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information you provide will remain confidential. Your data will have an ID number associated with it and all identifying information will be removed from the data. Only the principal investigator Natalie Brown will have access to the data. The interviews will be taped and transcribed. All personal and identifying data will be removed from the transcripts. Only the principal investigator will hear the tape and it will be erased after transcription. The electronic data will be stored in a password protected computer with access only available to the principal investigator. The raw data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the principal investigators research office. The data will be destroyed after seven years, and during that time will remain in a locked cabinet in the office of the researcher, and on a password protected computer accessible only to the researcher.

The research will be written into a thesis document, published in academic journals and in local forms of knowledge transfer (i.e. newsletters, community forums). All identifying information will be removed from publications. With such a small sample complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. However, all efforts will be made to ensure confidentiality. Quotations will be utilized from all forms of qualitative data. Again, all identifying information will be removed from any quotations used.

## **CONTACT**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,\*) you may contact the researcher, Natalie Brown, at [nataliebrown@rogers.com](mailto:nataliebrown@rogers.com). and (519) 884-0710 extension 3494. You may also contact my thesis supervisor Dr. Geoff Nelson, [gnelson@wlu.ca](mailto:gnelson@wlu.ca) or 519 884-0710 extension 3314. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Bill Marr, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-0710, extension 2468 or [bmarr@wlu.ca](mailto:bmarr@wlu.ca).

## **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is

Participant's initials

completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed. It will be your choice to allow use of previously submitted data if you choose to withdraw from the study. You have the right to omit any question(s)/procedure(s) you choose.

### **FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION**

The findings of this research will be provided in the form of a final report to all research participants. In addition, you will be provided with a copy of your transcript prior to the analysis stages of the research. This will give you a chance to ensure proper interpretation of your words and your thoughts. Following this you will be asked to participate in different levels of analysis to guarantee the trustworthiness of the analysis and to ensure your true meaning is maintained during data interpretation. This will take approximately 2-3 hours and has been accounted for in the information section of this document. The final report will be available to you June 1, 2009. You will obtain the final document through the mail. The findings will be written into a final thesis document and will be published in academic journals, presented at academic and local conferences and will be disseminated in the local community through community conversations including findings in local newsletters and publications.

Participant's initials



## RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

I have received a copy of the **INFORMATION LETTER**. I have read it or had it read to me and understand it. It describes my involvement in the research and the information to be collected from me.

I agree to participate in the individual interview for this research. Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to have the interview tape-recorded. Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

I understand that quotes of things that I say may appear in published reports, but only in an anonymous form, so that I cannot be identified as the source of these quotes.

Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to complete the journal guide at my convenience approximately once a week from December 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 until February 15<sup>th</sup> 2009.

Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to allow the interviewers to interview a family member, friend or SURE staff member about my educational past.

Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

If yes I would like you to contact (up to three people)

Name:\_\_\_\_\_e-mail/phone\_\_\_\_\_

Name:\_\_\_\_\_e-mail/phone\_\_\_\_\_

Name:\_\_\_\_\_e-mail/phone\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature.

Date

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY  
INFORMATION LETTER

An Action Research Study of Supporting the University-Ready through Empowerment (SURE)  
Program Directors

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to document the development of the SURE program from December 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 to February 15<sup>th</sup> 2009. The SURE program is designed to help low-income women access higher education. The project aims to understand both the individual and organizational changes occurring since the SURE program began its development. The principal investigator for this research project is Natalie Brown, a Master's student in the Community Psychology Program from Wilfrid Laurier University. This research is supervised by Dr. Geoff Nelson.

**INFORMATION**

You are asked to participate in a one hour interview regarding your experiences with the SURE program at an organizational level. This interview will be set up through e-mail or phone correspondence to choose a convenient time for you. With your permission this interview will be recorded and we will make a transcription of the recording. In addition you will be asked to complete two journal entries once a week from December 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 to February 15<sup>th</sup> 2009 or after any relevant meetings. The journal will provide a template for you to share your experiences of the SURE program with a focus on organizational change and will be completed after meetings with funders, local organizations, government and any other individuals involved in the SURE program. The other will focus on individual changes regarding the future learners and will be completed after any meetings with the future learners regarding the SURE program and their education,

The interview with you will take approximately 1 hour and will occur in December. The journal entries will take approximately 30-40 minutes for an approximate total of 5.5-7.3 hours of journaling. In addition, you will be asked to review the transcript from your interview and approve the initial analysis of that transcript. Therefore, you will be asked for a total time commitment of approximately 8.5-13.5 hours, (1 hr (program director interview) + 0-2 hours (network member interviews) + 30-40 minutes x 11weeks (journaling) + 2-3hrs (review of data and analysis) = 8.5-13.5 hours to complete activities).

There will be a total of 14-22 participants in this research. They will include all interested parties of the SURE program, including people using the program services, program staff, and university staff.

**RISKS**

Risks for this study are minimal. You may feel distress or regret over revelation of any personal information. All efforts will be made to reduce these risks. You may choose to skip questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. Information for support services will be provided. Contact information for local supports will be provided as needed.

Participant's initials

## **BENEFITS**

The benefits of this research include the provision of data in creating a strong educational initiative in Waterloo region aimed at helping women living in poverty access higher education. Past research has demonstrated the health, social and financial benefits of achieving higher education among this population.

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The research will be written into a thesis document, published in academic journals and in local forms of knowledge transfer (i.e. newsletters, community forums). All identifying information will be removed from publications.

With your permission quotations will be utilized from all qualitative data. Again, all identifying information will be removed from any quotations used.

## **CONTACT**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,\*) you may contact the researcher, Natalie Brown, at [nataliembrown@rogers.com](mailto:nataliembrown@rogers.com) and (519) 884-0710 extension 3494. You may also contact my thesis supervisor Dr. Geoff Nelson, [gnelson@wlu.ca](mailto:gnelson@wlu.ca) or 519 884-0710 extension 3314. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Bill Marr, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-0710, extension 2468 or [bmarr@wlu.ca](mailto:bmarr@wlu.ca).

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**Program Directors**

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Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to completing the journal guides at my convenience approximately once a week from December 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 until February 15<sup>th</sup> 2009.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date

Researcher's signature

Date

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY  
INFORMATION LETTER

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The data will be destroyed after seven years, and during that time will remain in a locked cabinet in the office of the researcher, and on a password protected computer accessible only to the researcher. The research will be written into a thesis document, published in academic journals and in local forms of knowledge transfer (i.e. newsletters, community forums). All identifying information will be removed from publications.

With your permission quotations will be utilized from all qualitative data. Again, all identifying information will be removed from any quotations used.

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The findings of this research will be provided in the form of a final report to all research participants. In addition, you will be provided with a copy of your transcript prior to the analysis stages of the research. This will give you a chance to ensure proper interpretation of your words and your thoughts. This will take approximately 1 hour and has been accounted for in the information section of this document. The final report will be available to you June 1, 2009. You will obtain the final document through the mail.

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Participant's initials

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM  
Community Partners

I have received a copy of the INFORMATION LETTER. I have read it or had it read to me and understand it. It describes my involvement in the research and the information to be collected from me.

I agree to participate in the individual interview for this research.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to have the interview tape-recorded.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that quotes of things that I say may appear in published reports, but only in an anonymous form, so that I cannot be identified as the source of these quotes.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date

Researcher's signature

Date