

**TEENS IN TRANSITION  
STORIES OF DISAFFECTION AND HOPE**

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## ABSTRACT

The paper is based on four hours of interviews with two female high school students in Western Canada and traces their successful completion of secondary school in an alternative setting. The girls' recollection of elementary, jr. high school and high school experiences highlight their perception of what was lacking for them in the traditional school setting and what they perceive as positive in the alternative center. Many quotes give a clear sense of the girls' voices and the themes evolve from their comments. Relationships emerge as central to all school situations with issues such as classroom climate, teacher and peer personalities, lack of privacy in school settings and ownership of their learning choices falling under this category. Youth culture is a key component in their stories and the themes of pushout, underachievement, peer pressure and hidden curriculum appear throughout. The interviews trace the evolution of their future goals during their semester at the alternative school and the reasons they perceive the setting to be such a positive venue for learning.

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TEENS IN TRANSITION:  
Stories of Disaffection and Hope

How do teens dissatisfied with school view their own educational experience? The question which compelled me arose from a need to know how the school system looks from these students' point of view. As I refined my question it became focused on the stories of two teenage girls who had abandoned the traditional schooling model and were attending an alternative school in Western Canada in what seemed to be a productive setting for them. In retrospect, the most challenging part of the project was getting the logistics of the method, ethics approval and access in place. What emerged was a type of composite case study and collaboration based on four hour-long taped interviews with K and D, best friends who were attending the centre regularly and were committed to graduating that year.

The focus of the interviews was their perception of past and present school experiences, but along the way they shared glimpses of their families, friends, childhoods, relationships and future goals, and generously gave me entree to their worlds through their stories. My intent was to concentrate on teen-age girls' voice, to document their perceptions about their school history and by so doing gain insights that as a teacher and adult are usually not visible to me. We conducted our interviews in a private office at the center where K and D were currently students. It was a new alternative school with a flexible and supportive philosophy which provided a site where teens could earn high school credits, get remedial help if needed plus counseling, social services and job training. K and D were enrolled in the high school program with the goal of graduating in June 1995.

## THE RESEARCH METHOD

My motivation for undertaking this study was to try to see school through the students' eyes, to gain a measure of understanding about their reality and to use this to become a better, more empathetic and more humane teacher. I found that doing qualitative field research was unlike anything I had ever done before and the logistics surrounding it were time consuming and frustrating. After several months, I finally had the site, the method, and the participants, but the research continued to unfold in unexpected ways.

The structure of interviewing evolved into a **collaborative format** with the two participants, since I saw their input as the only way to insure that my interpretations were accurate. Although I had prepared a list of suggested topics for the interviews, the actual taping sessions became more like conversations which led to the freedom for K and D to initiate topics and added a richness to the entire process. After transcribing the first two interviews, analyzing them for themes and writing up my own **preliminary interpretations**, I decided that the girls should read this first draft and comment upon it, which then became the format for the third and fourth interviews. I felt that it was important that we together present an accurate picture of what was said, and that I make sure that I had not added meaning or emphasized themes where that was not the girls' intent. It was during the third interview that K corrected my comments about peer pressure and this led to my seeing my own bias more clearly.

An additional insight followed my reflections about my own bias. I admitted to myself that that no amount of good will and desire on my part would allow me a 100% understanding of teen reality. This realization made me skeptical of people who claim this understanding, and cynical about administrators, department of education curriculum writers and other educators in positions of authority who arrogantly claim that they know what's good for students. What frightens me even more is that these decision-makers are

predominantly male and that in most cases the needs of both sexes are perceived to be the same. I am convinced that more time and more data are urgently needed to close these gaps of understanding, particularly now that so many changes are being made in education which will impact on the next generation of students, both male and female. Total insight is not a realistic goal, but honest communication and the desire to learn about the students we serve should be the motivating factors.

I could find very little research by classroom teachers into student perceptions, and these are the very people for whom such knowledge would be the most beneficial in their work. Much is written about students, particularly dropouts, but their own views are rarely solicited. In my library research I most often discovered that the articles focused on specific teen problem areas, such as teen pregnancy, girls' math avoidance or eating disorders whereby the information had clearly been collected in a structured manner by the adult authors. I wanted teen voice to be the focus, and in the process I got free-flowing transcripts that were a joy to read and a challenge to interpret.

I think that I am suited for this particular type of research because it combines many of my **personal strong areas**. In an introductory exercise I did with a new group of ED 2500 college students I described myself as empathetic, determined and eclectic, and these attributes have served me well during this past year. I was surprised that the centre students were so willing to talk to me; in fact, I could have had several more participants and expanded the data base to thesis proportions. My own eclectic approach to learning suits this type of qualitative research, where the process and the direction are to a large extent created in adaptation to circumstances. However, I found that I am not as flexible or patient as I had thought and it was an effort to **suspend judgment** at times and to **be adaptive**, but I believe that my maturity and teaching experience came to my aid. The girls sensed my very real interest in their stories and this led to a comradeship during the interviews. I took their lives seriously and I think they were surprised and flattered that their experiences were considered important enough to explore and document. My

insatiable curiosity was another asset as it helped me to persevere through the transcripts, to look for themes and then for linkages. I continue to see new issues and connections whenever I reread the material.

## THE GIRLS

At our first interview, I observed the outward differences in the two friends and wrote in my log. ....K was in a crisp denim outfit, with her long, dark curly hair moussed, careful make-up and wearing new fashionable sandals. D was much more casual with old torn jeans, scuffed earth shoes, a faded maroon scoop necked T-shirt and a mustard coloured blazer that looked old and comfortable. Her light brown hair was pulled back with a scrunchie and she wore no make-up. At first sight they appeared an unlikely pair, but they were obviously close friends. They were comfortable talking to me, perhaps a bit surprised and pleased that someone actually wanted to hear what they had to say. Although they both have spent their entire lives in the same city, they have dramatically different educational histories. In the interviews, they willingly shared their memories and their reasons for choosing to finish their high school education at the center,

K: I got sick of CHS...I'd known them all since grade one and we always did everything together.

K initially explained her motivation for changing from CHS to the centre as that of boredom, and she kept reiterating that she was just no longer interested in belonging to the group of people at her high school and felt she had outgrown them. Her intent in coming to the centre was to declare her independence, to take charge of her own life. She was still going to graduate at the same time as her CHS class since there was never a gap of missed schooling. K summed up her feelings about the traditional school setting:

K: I got bored. I got bored of hanging around the same people all the time; I got bored of doing the same thing every night; I got bored of being

at the same school every day with people that I'd known forever. I just got bored of school. I got bored.

K and D had been friends for two years, since they met in a physical education class during one of D's brief stays at CHS in the fall of 1992. D related her high school experiences in a resigned tone since the past three years are now old history and she has moved on with her life. She had a complicated progression of school changes with several attempts at reentry after periods of dropping out. She is one and a half years older than K and her high school classmates graduated last year.

D: I look at it now as the biggest mistake--the biggest mistake of my life, because if I woulda, like, acted how I should have and been what I should, I wouldn't even be here. I would be in college right now. I could be living on my own. I could be travelling right now. Like, I was supposed to graduate last year..... I could be doing anything right now and I'm still doing my high school!

For all their seeming differences in personality and school history, they have several factors in common in addition to their **commitment to the friendship**. They both currently live at home and this is a stabilizing factor in their lives. The majority of the youth at the centre are struggling to live on their own and dealing with housing problems, parenthood, jobs, the social services or legal tangles while K and D are free to concentrate their time and energy on their studies. They both have parental support and perceive themselves as having had it all along. During this past semester, D continued her part time job at Pizza Hut several evenings a week while K concentrated primarily on school, sometimes staying at the centre entire afternoons and evenings. Yet these seemingly average and ordinary teens opted out of the mainstream of the city's formal education systems, to finish their schooling in an alternative setting. To fully understand the progression of their schooling history, I had to listen to the beginning.

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Although I had planned a certain sequence to my questions I found that the interviews took on a life of their own and our discussions evolved in unexpected directions. The first theme that emerged as they discussed early school memories was that of **an initial liking** for school in the primary grades. Reflections on K's part were that school was simple, easy, routine and that she got good marks, and D says:

D: I cried when I left grade one 'cause I liked my teacher.

They elaborated on these early perceptions by responding to my probe about vivid memories, positive or negative, with stories about favourite and least favourite teachers. Here is where the second theme emerged. I heard them talking about **relationships and classroom climate**, about feelings of acceptance and about only a few teachers taking personal interest in them as individuals. K described a favourite teacher:

K: I liked my grade 6 teacher, Mr. B. He was really nice...He was really funny and, I don't know, he liked me.....He was just nice. He was friendly. He wasn't hard on you or anything, or yelled or anything like that. I don't remember what I did in grade 6, though, what schoolwork I did.

In addition to the theme of **relationships**, K emphasized the fact that content was NOT what students remembered from school. Instead they recalled the **hidden curriculum**, the social behaviours and the rules of the dynamic reality of living in a group situation during the many hours they had to spend in the school environment. D also recalled a teacher because of her personal qualities:

D: I really liked Ms. K-H. She was my, I think, grade 5 teacher....She didn't ever talk down to you, like I'm the teacher, you're the student! I'm above you. She talked to you like a person,

like she'd, you know, talk to you about things that were important to you at that stage in your life, you know, which is good.

They were in agreement on the importance of the teacher's personal interest and support.

K went on to say:

K: That's like, that's like what Mr. B was like. He was more, like, he knew the kids. He knew what they liked, he knew how to talk to them on their level, more so than like I'm in charge here. This is what you're gonna do, and that's that! He was more personal, and more, knew what you wanted, more just, knew you.

These teachers are remembered as unique because of the personal qualities they communicated to their pupils and the **inclusive climate** they created in which each child's interests were acknowledged and the students were treated as unique individuals. Is this so unusual? Unfortunately there is very little written about schooling from the student perspective, but when their opinion is solicited a strongly expressed student view is that "The key factor in the classroom, however, remains the **teacher's personality**." ("The Way Teachers Teach Is, Like, Totally Whacked", 1994). In addition to the personal dimension, these girls' deceptively simple reflections reveal the important truth that children need a **supportive and accepting classroom climate** which allows a level of trust to be established so that learning can take place. It is significant that special teachers are remembered when so much else, particularly content, appeared to have already slipped away. The enthusiasm with which these teachers and that particular school year were called to mind lends weight to the current research on schools and classrooms as learning communities.

I was drawn by this data to search for further information on **classroom relationships** and on the importance of **school community**, areas about which I had only done peripheral reading. The interview transcripts provided signposts showing me which

way to look in published research and theory. As a result, I have discovered books about student reality dating from the 1960's, such as Life in Classrooms by Philip W. Jackson and The Dignity of Youth and Other Atavisms by Edgar Z. Friedenberg, which showed me that my observations are far from original. I was distressed by this realization and the question that if the information was available 30 years ago, why are today's children still caught in similar school circumstances? More recently the leadership theories of Sergiovanni deal with schools as communities and he clearly emphasizes that all other school problems revolve around the theme of relationships. Yet the frustrating reality continues to be that schools are inflexible institutions that are resistant to change and too often unresponsive to individual students' needs. Both K and D were insightful about this in their later reflections about jr. high and high school.

By the upper elementary grades K had changed schools several times, but she remained within the self contained city Catholic system. One result of this was that she got to know most of the future classmates she would later have at the jr. high and high school levels. Her parents had divorced when she was two years old and she lived with her mother and older sister during her elementary school years. In grade six K attended a school with an arts focus, participating in drama, dance and choir. She performed in the storytelling category at the Kiwanis Festival so she apparently was a poised and confident child with good verbal skills. K remembers her elementary school years as tranquil and when asked if she recalled any problems she says:

K: You should talk to my sister...she hated school since grade 4 and had lots of problems and she's still going through them. She's married now and expecting her second baby. I always went along and did what was expected ....like I made good marks in Jr. High , but I never got any recognition for them.....

The sister is only a year older than K and she rarely mentioned her in the interviews

although she was part of her household until high school. She emerges in K's story as causing problems in the mother's home and the reason both sisters moved in with their father during K's grade 8 year.

### JUNIOR HIGH YEARS

K related the disruptions in her life in a neutral tone explaining that her father also lived in the city and was remarried with a new blended family of his own. She spoke fondly of her stepsiblings, so the change had some positive aspects, although on the whole she recalled it as very stressful. The relationship with her father had never been close and she now speaks to him rarely. She was initially very composed when talking about these ongoing family complications, but in a later interview she labeled her family as "*abnormal*" so there were painful areas in her family history that certainly impacted on K in many ways. She continued school at the only Catholic jr. high in town and the next year returned to live with her mother while her sister went to live elsewhere. She maintained her marks during the upheaval but says they slipped during her high school years. She does imply as she talks about her sibling that she was the "good daughter" while her sister got attention and intervention because of her many troublesome behaviours. K recalls:

K: I was really good in St. C. I was like on the honour roll.

K was able to cope and adapt to these stresses and changes in her family situation and this type of **resilience** is mentioned as a necessary trait for school success in recent journals. K seemed to have coping ability in abundance and to be very level headed and confident with the ability to plan ahead and weigh the consequences of her choices. D says about K now:

D: I'm more relaxed and laid back and whatever, and she just gets really worked up and if something makes her mad she lets everybody know, and that's, I think about the biggest difference (between us). She's opinionated and I am too, but she SPEAKS her opinion whenever, yeah!

While K spent her jr. high years in the Catholic system, D attended a public jr. high and had started to test school rules, developing a system for skipping out undetected on Friday afternoons. She also engaged in behaviours that annoyed her teachers, as in this story from Math class during grade eight:

D: Like, I remember Mr. S would always get mad at Me because I'd be up "pissing around" doing whatever, drawing with chalk or whatever.

I: Define "pissing around".

D: Well, I don't know, talking to people or not really doing my work.

D initially blamed the teacher because he called her parents to report her lack of effort and misbehaviors and did not deal with her personally. In retrospect she thinks that if he had been stricter and dealt with her directly, perhaps she would have "worked" in that class. When we talked in a later interview about this particular math class she said it was a special one, called Math Attack, for students who had previously experienced math difficulties. After listening to D describing her own disruptive classroom behaviour, I finally asked her what the rest of the class was like;

D: Oh, it was a bad class.

I: Bad class?

D Yeah! ...that was Math Attack. It was, like a special class ...like an alternative to Math 8.

I: MMmm. So, people who had struggled with math before?

D: Yeah, but there weren't retards in there, just we were all bad kids.

I: Oh, I understand completely!.....Just people for whom Math wasn't their thing.

D: It was a bunch of kids where SCHOOL wasn't their thing. I mean, Sue and Ron were there, and Sonya--oh, we were bad!

D recalled that they were all put out in the hall at various times, and were even sent to the administrators' conference room for "*time outs*". They were also assigned in-school suspensions where they had to sit in the school office and "*be good*". She abruptly dismissed all these attempts as "*stupid*" and does not remember if she passed the course or not. This attempt at **curriculum intervention** with at-risk math students somehow seems to have missed the mark, at least in D's case. It appears to have had the unplanned negative result of clustering these resistant students together, giving them a group identity, which apparently caused multiple problems for the unfortunate math teacher.

Thomas Good and Jere Brophy say that during jr. high, classroom management again becomes a dominant part of the teacher role and there is a change in orientation from pleasing the teacher to impressing peers. The main problem becomes motivating students to behave as they know they are supposed to. (Looking in Classrooms, p.243-4) One observation that occurs to me is that D was getting the message that her **behaviour was the primary concern** of her teachers and any academic progress was of secondary importance. The next scenario reinforces this interpretation:

D: Oh yeah, and there was this other teacher, Mrs. J. She kicked me out of class one time cause, I don't know, this one girl had a bottle of perfume and she was spraying it all over and I walked through it.

I: walked through it in the air?

D: And I walked in and she goes "D, you're giving me a headache. Leave the class until you get a new shirt."

I hated typing, so I'm like, okay, cool!

It is impossible to reconstruct the whole jr. high picture from these incidents but it appears that D's behaviours were part of a general pattern and the message being communicated to D by the teachers was that her presence was so annoying and that it was more convenient for them if she simply was not in class. This type of **pushing out** scenario is described by Robert Kronick and Charles Hargis in Dropouts (p. 9). They make the distinction between invisible and visible school-leavers, with the latter being the ones whose attitude and behaviours communicate clearly that **school is not their place**. D exhibited all the key characteristics already in jr. high with her disruptive behaviour, skipping, difficulties with some academic areas and resistance to organized intervention attempts. Because there seemingly was a group in school which exhibited a similar pattern, they served as each other's peer support group. They labeled themselves as "*bad kids*", and it appears to me that the **group identity gave them a type of status and power** among their classmates. I could hear the enthusiasm in D's voice when she talked about her cohorts in Math Attack and the negative learning environment that they contrived by being placed in the same class. Their behaviours in many ways exhibited a gang mentality and this alone should caution administrators to re-examine categorizing students by ability and or behaviours.

Another theme that appeared in the discussions about jr. high was that of **powerlessness**, how little input students have in their own educational choices. K talked at length about Options in the Catholic jr. high, which were supposedly the flexible part of the subject choices. What actually happened was that after K was registered in Religion, Health and French (labeled as Options but required) there was room for only one personal choice. K finally said that if she could change something in jr. high, she would suggest offering more Options. This organization of subject choices sounds so familiar and normal to my teacher persona that it is tempting to just say "Well, that's jr.

high for you". When attempting to view the situation through a critical pedagogy lens, the picture is one of **no real choice for the student** and, further, there is the mockery of calling the additionally required courses Options. I see this as an issue of **ownership**, or in this case a lack of it, and as a major contributing factor to passive student resistance in reaction to the oppressive school structure and the requirements of the jr. high curriculum.

The public jr. high seemed to offer more subject choices, which D felt were the only enjoyable part of school and made it almost tolerable. I was struck by two additional themes as the two friends talked about their respective jr. high school experiences. The first theme was how **fatalistic** they felt about those years and the environment in which they were compelled to spend them. The second theme was the **lack of engagement** they recall with their schooling experience during that time. At one point D said:

D: I mean, you go to school, you know, every day, and you're with the people, you know, every day.... You're not really old enough to work unless you have a paper route or something. Like, school is your life.... when you get a car, you can like go places, get a job or something.

It was as if jr. high were a rite of passage that must be survived, a daily reality over which they had no control. Certainly no enthusiastic or pleasant memories seemed to be associated with education at that time. I tried to probe and see if they could picture a different reality for jr. high but this is what they answered:

D: Like, you learn your basic things like your Social, Math, English, and Science and then your choices are your options. You're going into Art or Home Ec. or Sewing or special Outdoor Ed. classes and those are your choices. Those are the extras that make school bearable, almost.

I: What could they (teachers) have done to make school more relevant?

K: But what else could they do? I mean, they can't do anything. I mean, you have to learn the stuff; you can't really just change the program.

I: No? Why not?

K: So you can graduate from jr. high, so you can graduate from high school, so that you can graduate from university.

There were no references to learning here, to personal involvement or interest and I consider these statements significant and tragic. We educators with our curricula and disciplines have chopped learning up into separate, unrelated and lifeless bits and then we are surprised and displeased that students see the world this way, as **senseless and fragmented**. K and D perceive the "successful" student role in a traditional school to be one of complying with the system, accumulating these bits of curriculum and progressing through the required steps. Ideally there can be elements of joy and discovery and personal interaction that give this process energy and relevance, but when these are lacking the cruelty stands exposed. Clearly school was not an interesting or relevant place for D beginning with her jr. high years. In her own words, it was **"bearable, almost."** What thinking adult would submit to this **boredom** daily? Yet we expect children to comply and even enjoy their school confinement with its many invisible and not so invisible sanctions which are used to enforce adult expectations.

I mentioned the above points to a graduate student colleague, that the girls did not talk about content and seemed **disengaged** from the school process. She asked if this was perhaps because they were not "successful" in the academics. I reassured her that in fact one of them had been until the end of jr. high, but then when I thought about her question some more, the often repeated "chicken and the egg" dilemma popped into my mind. Were D and K disengaged from academics because they were "poor" at them or "poor" at

academics because they were disengaged from them? Hopefully my explorations will shed some light on that question.

### HIGH SCHOOL: D'S STORY

D had already challenged school rules in jr. high but in high school her behaviour had more serious repercussions and resulted in a **pushout** scenario. She quickly met a slightly older group of students and when I asked her what was different for her at the start of grade 10, she said:

D: The fact that I felt grown up. I was in high school. I was around kids who were above 16, had their own cars, had jobs, like, I don't know. I felt grown up. I felt like I could, I could do whatever I wanted.

D quickly was labeled a discipline problem at the public high school and once the administration had put her in that category, they dealt with her in a punitive manner. No counseling was offered for this defiant girl who dared to drink and smoke up on the school grounds, skipped repeatedly and visibly challenged the rules. She recalled no supportive intervention of any kind, just warnings from the school administration:

D: I had to leave PHS. There wasn't really, well, there was a choice, but I had to leave PHS, that wasn't a choice.

I: So did anybody ever try to counsel you, or work with you?

D: Um, not really. They gave me lots of chances, Just basically saying, "smarten up or you're out of here", which I never took seriously. I had never been kicked out of school before. I didn't think, you know, I thought you'd have to do something really drastic, more drastic than what I had done, I guess, but I didn't really think they would kick me out. They did.

This is the turning point in D's school history. Here is Frost's The Road Not Taken "that made all the difference". This expulsion was the beginning of D's negative three-year cycle of leaving and reentering school which finally ended at the centre in February of 1995. I considered this part of D's story crucial, so I probed further:

I: But there was nothing like a counselor calling you in or anything like that?

D: Ummm. They never made me see, like, the school counselor or anything. Like, I had my own private principal! (laughter)

I: Your own private principal! So, did, what, could anything have been done differently at that point that might have changed things, that might have sort of stopped the cycle?

D: Not unless I changed it for myself, because it really had nothing to do with the school or with their program or with their school. I don't think it did.

This is D's perception of the situation, but the non-disputable fact is that she was asked to leave the school and she transferred to the Catholic high school early in the 2nd semester of her grade 10 year. I see several issues in the above events. Apparently there was NO attempt at a **meaningful adult contact** in the high school, or an effort to establish some type of dialogue with her to try and get to the underlying causes of the behaviour. Ironically there is a much publicized recent Alberta Department of Education initiative, called Stay In--You Win (1991) which is aimed at dropout prevention and even has a module designed specifically for girls, but clearly D's school was not a participant. I think the chain of events puts D in the **category of pushout**, since she was labeled as an undesirable and the school's solution was to get rid of her.

The other issue is that D saw the entire process as **her fault**, and put all the blame

on herself. Certainly the defiant behaviours were hers but that was only one facet of the scenario. Michael Brake put the issues in a broader sociological context when he talked about Canadian youth culture in his book Comparative Youth Culture (1987):

Youth is appropriately rewarded for its commitment to industry, thrift and discipline which promotes these virtues through the school system, without any accompanying oppositional criticism of Canadian society. The opportunity system for youth is taken for granted, and preparation for a "just place in society" is assisted by the nurturing of a supportive family life which loves, disciplines and assists the child. Within this context, with its accompanying mythical scenario, delinquency and deviancy become individualized as a problem. The images of deviancy invoked are those of pathology--a disturbed, maladjusted child who needs guidance toward self-control and self-discipline, or else an incorrigible wastrel who refuses to take advantage of an apparently endless opportunity system, denied in all probability to parents or grandparents. The delinquent becomes constructed as one who has failed the system, rather than vice versa. ( pp. 150-51)

The high school principal in D's case fit Brake's description of the Canadian mind set, with his punitive attitude and dismissal of D as a "**delinquent**". Sadly D also accepted this **stereotyping** and her role as having "failed the system":

I: So you think it was inevitable, like, it had to happen?

D: Oh, it was inevitable. It was me. Like, it had nothing to do with the school--it was my choice. You know what I mean?

D described how there were always "**better things to do**" than school, like going to the mall and the arcade, and hanging out with friends by the school doors smoking and not going to class.

D: I was always doing dumb things, like smoking up with Sue and my other friends. The guys from that group have all dropped out now and I can

see now what they are really like. They haven't changed, and even though one is even married, he still drinks and parties and does stupid things.

D had found a **teen culture** that was compatible with her own interests at that time. I probed to see what D saw as the focus of the group.

I: What was it about it that sort of held the group together?

D: Everybody appreciated the same things.

I: So what specific value things?

D: Values, like not valuing school, valuing drugs and alcohol and partying and, I don't know.

Michael Brake elaborates on the reasons teens choose particular subcultures and describes how their choices serve particular functions:

They offer a culture from which can be selected certain cultural elements such as style, values, ideologies and life style. These can be used to develop an achieved identity outside the ascribed identity offered by work, home or school. (p. 24)

D became a member of a group that did all their activities together, becoming through their social life a support group and in many ways an extended family. She described how her life was with this group:

D: Like, we were always late for school. We liked to hang out in front smoking. We liked bugging other people, we liked going to a house and drinking in the middle of the afternoon, we liked to think up scams on how to get money. We liked to, we all liked to do the same things. You know what I mean?

During the next three years D's life was composed of numerous moves, a succession of

minimum wage jobs and reentry attempts at both the public and Catholic high schools. She had one serious live-in relationship and several other boy friends during this time who influenced her choices. She says she had an impulsive personality and did things without considering the consequences. It seemed that the life D was leading was incompatible with school success and shattered her parents' expectations for her.

I: Mmmm, and what did your parents think about all this?

D: Oh, they weren't happy. They thought I went crazy. They thought I was absolutely insane, like, "What happened to you--you used to be such a good kid?" Like, they used to say that when they were raising both Derek, my brother Derek, he's 16 and me they always thought that to look at the both of us when we were younger, that Derek would be the one who would turn out wild and he hasn't. He's still a good kid.

I: So your term for it is you "turned" yourself. Did you "turn" wild?

D: Well, that's their term for it.

My impression from D's story is that the parents were not the cause, or even a contributing factor to D's school problems, at least not in the stereotypical sense of a dysfunctional home. The media likes to place the teen problem on the shoulders of the family but D's parents persevered in their efforts to help her. They tried to impose consistent rules which she ignored, they arranged for counseling with the Family Centre which D says continued for several years, and they repeatedly let her return home after her other housing arrangements collapsed. I see a strong theme of **parental love and support** for both D and also K.

## HIGH SCHOOL: K'S STORY

K's story had a different texture. She presents a more structured, less changeable personality than D and the circumstances of her transition from jr. high to the high school were more manageable. She explained that the public high school had three feeder jr. highs while the Catholic only had one, so it was the same student population in her classes as during her previous nine years.

K: I knew all the people before I went. It was not like going to a different school for me. It wasn't like I was getting to know other people, or all that. I already knew them. So high school from jr. high wasn't a big thing for me. It was just another school.

I: Another building, but the same people.

K: Yeah, another building, same people.

I: But it's right there physically, right next to PHS. You didn't, you guys didn't mix?

K: Oh, I knew. I knew people from PHS, .....But if you went to CHS, you'd understand. Like, nobody removes themselves from the clique; they all stay together. I mean, it's not like um, like we didn't go out to PHS, maybe, go talk to people that we knew there, but it would be all of us going over there. So I was never really alone, with people that I just met, I was never really joining a new group.

I asked questions and tried to understand the functioning of the different **peer groups** and the expectations they had of their members. Both K and D explained the differences in student-body composition at the two schools. According to them, PHS was bigger and there were all kinds of people there---jocks, skids, preps, creeps and brainers. They agreed that at CHS there were only two groups, the powerful "in" group and then the others who "*don't really matter*". K described the CHS atmosphere and compared it

to the freedom she perceives at the alternative school.

K: Since I knew everyone at CHS, whenever anything happened it would be, like, everybody would know about it. It was so gossipy, you know! And here, I can just do whatever I want, I can be whatever I want, like, it doesn't matter. No one is going to say, "Oh, this is what K is doing now." and have anything to say about it because they just don't. I mean 'cause here you're mixing in with so many different groups of people that it doesn't really matter and no one really cares because they're used to different people.

From my perspective, what K is talking about here appears to be **peer expectations** at CHS and the absence of them at the centre. She is comparing an insular group with one that is diverse and flexible. This quote highlights another component of her life at CHS which was a **lack of privacy**; there was the suffocating intrusiveness of everyone knowing the details of her life. These students had known each other most of their lives so it was not surprising that these social structures developed, but I tried to probe deeper for K's perceptions of them:

I: I'm curious about the groups you talk about there (at CHS). Were they, was it other girls putting pressure on you?

K: It's not pressure; it's just, um, it's not pressure--.

D: They're vain, yeah, they're vain....

K: Yeah! It was more, um, we HAVE to party tonight and we have to, um, they'd criticize stuff--I don't know. If I'd leave them and go to a different group, like say, hang out with other people, all of a sudden something's wrong with ME because I don't hang out with them any more.

I: Is this girls or guys doing this?

K: Oh, all of them. Girls and guys. It's like, I knew, I knew everyone. Like they were all my friends at some point, you know? And when they would see me with other people, it was like I was a traitor or something.

In voice and body language, she appeared very passionate while making the above statements. It seems a pervasive and powerful type of emotional blackmail that these teens were perpetrating on each other, and for the most part it was invisible to the adult observer. It is a type of **silencing**, perhaps, this group pressure to conform, to abide by the norms that the group sets and approves. This **clique** phenomenon is well documented and described in detail in teens' own voices in the recent books No Kidding (1985) by Myrna Kostash and Schoolgirls (1994) by Peggy Orenstein about which I will write later. My own daughters have experienced it and observe that it is pervasive on all school campuses they have attended both in Canada and the U.S.

The following is an excerpt from an Edmonton study of teen-age dropouts, Reluctant Rebels (1988) conducted by Julian Tanner. The quote provides an interesting contrast to K's experiences at the Catholic high school. The female respondent describes the outsider view of **high school cliques** as she talks about her reasons for leaving her affluent Edmonton high school:

Ah, 'cause I wasn't enjoying myself, I wasn't having fun there, I didn't really fit into that kind of group 'cause at "Mac" people were one way or the other. The major people that I knew there were very rich and very full of themselves. If you weren't part of this group and didn't know these people, they wouldn't speak to you. They're all snobs. I was shocked because they were all so snotty.....They judge you by what you wear and how you talk and what your parents do for a living and I felt I didn't have to justify myself to anyone. (p. 86)

As a high school teacher both in Canada and the United States I have often observed the power of cliques and as I was studying the interview transcripts, I felt confident that I

was drawing accurate conclusions. Yet in the third interview, after K and D had read my first draft of this research, K objected to my interpretation:

K: Like, a lot of what you put was like (that I) was pressured by my social group, but that wasn't really it. Like I know lots of the comments that I made were that. It's just because of the questions that you asked, were like, I had to answer like that, you know.

I: I realize that. You know what it's called? It's my bias 'cause that's what I was looking for, so therefore I asked that.

D: I think she can't really be pressured anyway. Like before, like I don't know, she can't really be pressured easily, she's like headstrong to her personal beliefs. Because in there (referring to the 1st draft) she's like, oh yeah, everyone looks the same, they talk the same and that's not, it's not as if they were pressuring her to be like that. She was just sick of it; just sick of everything being the same.

There was obviously some interviewer bias at work here with me looking for evidence of **peer pressure**. Additionally I seemed not to be seeing the subtleties of what they were saying no matter how much I tried to be attuned. I have modified the analysis in this final draft as they suggested but have retained many of the quotes so that readers can draw their own conclusions. However, the girls' words do seem to communicate that the CHS "in" clique had some of the components of a youth sub-culture such as conformity in clothing and speech and limited access, with the group deciding who belongs and who is an outsider.

I can see in this exchange about **peer pressure** how far I am from really grasping the daily reality of the girls' lives, the meanings that they assigned to things and the significance of relationships or in this case, their friendship patterns. While reading

Myrna Kostash's study I had the feeling that she also struggled with the nebulous nature of teen-age girls' lives and views. Her canvas was much broader than mine since she interviewed fifty girls from all over Canada, spent two years doing her research and then used a dozen stories as the core of her book. She has so many insightful vignettes scattered throughout her book that I keep going back to it for a type of companionship, to read the observations of someone who has the same interests as I, the same motivation to keep current with youth and their world. I know those girls in her book, I have taught ones very similar and am pleased that Myrna Kostash has told such stories so vividly.

By comparison, I find myself frustrated by the small scale of my study, yet I will have to be positive about my data and concentrate on what I did hear and discover. I struggle with the effort to not let my own life experiences interfere with my role as a listener and recorder. The arrangement of the girls' reading and commenting on my writing about their perceptions of reality is bringing us through collaboration to a clearer understanding of what was meant. This is a cumbersome and time consuming process but productive and essential.

I found in the transcripts that K herself often brought up the social situation at the Catholic high school. In all the interviews, K consistently referred to her peer group there as boring and superficial:

K: They were just, they were just too phony;  
they were just too fake.

During her grade 11 year, she decided to declare her independence by cutting her ties to her CHS crowd, no longer participating in their activities and socializing mainly with D. She says that her old group tried to include her for awhile and then accepted the fact that she was no longer part of the crowd. I could understand K's frustration with the ingrown social situation and how it would be constantly oppressive, but I still wanted to see if anything else had contributed to her decision to change to the alternative school.

Finally a story came out about her Biology teacher that I think was another motivation for her to leave CHS.

I: So if you had to pick one thing that bothered you the most (about high school), what would you say?

K: I just wanted a change. I mean, I was going to have to take Biology over again. I would have had to repeat Biology with the same teacher, Mr. C. I failed Biology 20 by 3% and it used to be that we had a test every day, but if you asked him anything---. One time there was a question with four parts, and I asked him to help me with one that I did not understand. He said, 'that will be 40 minutes detention for each part of that question I have to help you with'. And Mr. C, like, he didn't like me and I had to take it all over and I just, ooh, I didn't want to do it.

This passage is suffused with themes. I see again both **classroom climate and teacher personality**, but there are several other themes that were part of this scenario and came out later in different parts of the interviews. K had extensive absences in this class; she joked about her number of absences being higher than her mark. As she and D traced the history of their friendship, an unexpected component entered the formula. They both had operations during November, 1993 which caused K to miss several weeks of school and D to drop out again. So **health problems** were an added component to school difficulties at that point.

K: Yeah, and in grade 11, I missed a couple of weeks 'cause I got my feet operated on. That was during Biology, too, and we had a test every day and I was like, SO FAR BEHIND. I didn't really want to stay after school or lunch hours to make up the work and I didn't want to actually go to class and face that I'm failing, eh?

During this discussion K mentioned that the only other class she had failed during her years at CHS was Social 10, which she took during a semester when she had her tonsils removed. Seemingly these missed blocks of class time created a setback with which K had trouble coping, so she compounded the problem by skipping and started a pattern which ended in a failing mark for the course.

School absences due to illness and other causes are usually used to identify at risk students but K seems to have coped in her other classes. Shirley Wells, In At Risk Youth (1990) describes potential dropouts:

Two major visible school-related factors are poor academic achievement and behaviour problems in school. Affective characteristics of students associated with dropping out are feelings of alienation and behaviour problems including absenteeism, truancy and discipline problems. (pp.4&5)

D exhibited all of the above characteristics in her 3-year struggle to finish high school within the traditional school settings. K was also drifting into some of them, mostly skipping and the lost time from the surgery pushed her closer to the at-risk category.

Returning to K's comments about her Biology class, it appears that there were factors on both sides, teacher and student, that contributed to K's failing the course. I got additional insight about the classroom climate when I tried to probe about **gender issues** and the comments returned to this particular teacher. The girls felt that gender was not the crucial thing and tried to explain to me:

K: I don't think it's more of a gender thing,  
I think it is more of whoever is brighter thing.

I: Oh?

K: Do you know what I mean?

D: Well, teacher's pet?

I: So what do the brighter ones do? How do they set themselves apart? Is it brighter we're talking about?

K: Umm, co-operative, always put their hand up, know the answer.

D: On time!

K: Yeah!

I: This isn't bright we're talking about here. This is something other. This is attitude.

D: Conniving is what it is. Ass kissing.

I: All right, but that's what sets them apart. They play the game.

D. Yeah. Well, you know what teachers want. Teachers want a good student that's quiet, that listens, that pays attention, that's on time.....

Again they are highlighting their perception that **classroom behaviour, both of the pupil and teacher** is a key factor in school success. I will discuss research about this later, but here I want to continue with the interview:

K: Yeah, like I remember asking Mr. K. (Biology) what I should do and he made me feel like an idiot, always, for speaking up.

I: But this is the same place where you had been absent a lot. Do you think it was because you had been absent a lot?

K: NO! Because I used to go, like I went like straight for the first couple of months (before her surgery)....and he just made me feel like an idiot.

I: Did he, was it you specifically, or did he treat

everybody like that?

K: No, it was me specifically. Me, and I think he did it to M.J. too. And he's NOT an idiot.

Teachers scapegoating and **silencing** specific students (most often girls in Math and Science classes) is a well-researched and documented classroom phenomenon and K perceived that to have been the case in this class. Her strong negative feelings about the class, and the requirement to repeat it with the same teacher, seem to have been a contributing factor to K's choice of going to the alternative campus.

I was pleased to find corroboration in research about the topic of students abiding by institutional rules and the significance that teachers place on this. Hargis and Kronick in Dropouts quote from another source about the fact that compliant behaviour is valued and rewarded in schools:

In fact, rule following appears to be either more important or a necessary prerequisite to graduation, depending how responses are interpreted. Kauffman (1989) found the following skills critical for success in regular classrooms. In descending order of importance, they are:

1. Follows established classroom rules
2. Listens to teacher instructions
3. Can follow teacher written instructions and directions
4. Complies with teacher commands
5. Does in-class assignments as directed
6. Avoids breaking classroom rules even when encouraged by peer
7. Produces work of acceptable quality given his or her skill level

These above items were rated critical for success by over 51% of secondary school teachers in a study by Kerr and Zigmond (1986). It is noteworthy that the six items rated above quality of work are directly or indirectly related to....rule-following behaviour. (p.92)

This reinforces my observations that the hidden curriculum, as seen from D's and K's perspective, often appears to be given more emphasis than the academic content.

Their schoolwork was not a high priority in either girl's life and the following quotes illustrate their attitude toward high school academics:

D: But when you get to high school, you can work, you can party, you can drive, you can go to the bar, you can do whatever. And school is only a small percent of your---Well, for me it was, a small percent of my life whereas, I don't know, just 'cause I wasn't dedicated to school and she was. .

K: I remember really, actually, I was never really hard core in school. Like, lots of classes came really easy to me, like Math came really easy to me. And if I did my work during class, I'd never have to study at home.

I: Yeah?

K: Like it just, it came easy to me. I didn't really have to try that hard. Like, if I set my mind to do something; I can do it in the time that I'm given. Like most of the stuff that they give you at school, if you do not socialize much with other people, like, you can get half the stuff done during class.

K recalls herself as competent and academically **able** but functioning at a minimal level. She had learned to "play the system" and had accumulated the hidden curriculum strategies to glide through her courses with the minimum of fuss, when she bothered do so.

I: So you found it all very manageable?

K: Yeah, it was REALLY manageable. It was just to actually GO to class, but when I got to class, I got my work done.

I: Yeah, so did you skip a lot? or not?

K: Yeah, I'd skip like, classes I knew I could

get away with skipping, I like classes that weren't that important. Like in typing, I was always ahead of the class, so if I didn't go it wasn't a big deal and my teacher didn't really care. So if I didn't go to that class, it would be OK.

Skipping is an interesting phenomenon and done for a variety of reasons. It is one of those topics that needs to be investigated because it is a symptom, yet in every school that I have encountered, it is dealt with in a punitive manner from a power stance, which is counterproductive and shortsighted. D explains her reasons for skipping:

D: See, with me, I skipped for all the exact, like, opposite reasons. I would skip when I knew I was behind and couldn't catch up. But when I was, like, with the class, and I was actually, you know, working right with them and having all my things caught up, that would make me really happy. Like in English 20. I had English 20 with K last semester. We never hardly skipped that class. And it was like so wicked to get assignments back and see--Oh My!--I could pass them. It made me feel happy, but with Math, I don't like that. I 'd skip Math, like, quite a bit just because I was behind and never had a clue what I was doing, just kinda **stuck in hopelessness.**

Also in D's life there were always "*better things to do*" than school, so she would lose her focus and go off temporarily in another direction, which resulted in her erratic school history. It was during the winter of 93-94 that D distanced herself not only from her family and school but also from her friendship with K. After her appendicitis operation in November, she lived with Ted in Cortland on welfare during most of that winter and was even homeless and on the streets one very cold winter night.

## TRANSITION TO THE CENTRE

This seems to have be the beginning of a reassessment of her life in the context of finally recognizing the long-term consequences of her behaviour. In August D got her job with Pizza Hut and D and K, were both again attending CHS during that fall semester of 1994. By this point K had almost totally disengaged from the academic aspects of school and had developed a pattern of skipping and just getting by, often scrambling to do homework for one class while skipping another:

K: Oh, yeah, like I'd probably pass classes because I'd, sometimes, I'd skip one class and I'd do my homework for the next class during that class, you know.

K recalls that she drifted into skipping for no particular reason and then she would lie to cover her absences and the teachers would accept her excuses:

K: I knew I could give them excuses and they'd believe me, you know.....I'm like, "Oh, I forgot my note" or "My mom called; I have a dentist's appointment", or "I have this really bad ear infection". Oh, I was always good, you know, so ....they would always accept my excuses.

D joked that it was during this time, in a seeming role reversal, that K would try to talk her into skipping while she was again trying to earn some of her credits. She was in grade 11 classes, this was her 4th year in high school and she was two years older than her classmates. K and D had recommitted to their friendship which had lapsed during D's involvement with Ted, and were each other's main friend at CHS during this time.

Then they were both involved in an incident which for me illustrates their cavalier attitude toward traditional school and the lack of connectedness or a feeling of **ownership** for the setting. Perhaps this affair was the catalyst that gave K and D the final

impetus for leaving the CHS campus for the center. They were present when a fire was set in a girl's bathroom and they report that all those involved were charged by the police and had to go to court:

C: I think it started up as just a joke, like, yeah right, neither of us lit the fire. We were there when it happened, but I thought it was a joke.

D: We didn't think it would actually BURN! I mean, with the toilet, ceramics, water? I mean, I didn't think it would actually do damage. I thought that, okay, the toilet paper is gonna burn and the water will get to it---

K: It was just a joke that got too carried away.

I: You were asked to transfer?

C: No, no. They didn't ask us to leave. We just didn't want to be there. They charged us but they didn't ask us to leave.

D: No that's when we decided to transfer here.

It would be interesting to explore this incident in detail, to analyze the student attitudes which would lead to such disregard for property and school rules, to compile the perceptions of everyone involved, including the other girls and the administrators and police. Here again are the elements of a **group dynamic**, whether it be called peer pressure, social influence or the effect of a youth culture or subgroup. This particular incident was only mentioned in the last interview, as an afterthought in explaining the time of transition from CHS to the center. D claims it was "*just a small fire*" and neither of them see it as significant in their choice to leave CHS. I tried to probe further but they shrugged the incident off as if events of this kind were routine in the high school setting, and I do recall several similar happenings in my Ontario high school. Their assessment

that it was a "*joke that got carried away*" rings true to me. The smoke would have triggered a fire alarm, thus an evacuation of the school and the arrival of fire trucks and personnel and eventually administrative disciplinary action would result for everyone involved.

D and K made the decision at the start of 2nd semester to finish their high school requirements together at the centre. They applied to the alternative school and since they were considered transfer students, were quickly admitted and started attending on February 1, 1995. K had already accumulated 81 credits but D only had 49 and the equivalent of three semesters of high school to complete in order to earn a diploma. I asked them how they had reached the decision to come to the new campus.

D: I said we should come here first, right? I was going to come here just 'cause I'd heard a lot of things about it, like you could finish school so much faster and it's just, it's a good school. So I was like, I'm gonna go to the centre 'cause there's a chance for me to get school done faster than I would've. 'Cause if I had still been at CHS, I would've had to be in school for another full year. This second semester, the one that we just finished, and another full year! That's a year and a half and I've done it in like half a year. So, and, I don't know, I wanted K to come with me, and she wanted to come.

I: So how long did it take you to make up your mind?

K: A day!

K had her own different reasons for making the change:

K: Also, I wanted, I kinda wanted to take more classes than I was taking at CHS. I wanted to take more classes, like, to get into university. And I was, basically when I was in CHS, all I was thinking about was my diploma "I need my high school diploma and I need this

class!" and I wasn't really thinking beyond that. So I've got my high school diploma NOW.....so I thought if I could get extra classes in, that would be good.

Their friends tried to talk them out of attending the center, calling it a "*loser and skid school*" and their parents were also opposed:

D: Oh, yeah. They just thought, "It's downtown, they never take attendance there, you're never gonna go, if you don't go (to class) at a school where, you know, teachers call home when you're absent; just what makes you think you can go to a school that doesn't even CARE if you're there?"

This is an important point, the putting of responsibility on students to attend, giving them the chance to be responsible, to be mature. In the traditional schools where I have worked, the structure, scheduling and marking systems took away student **autonomy** entirely and perpetuated a dependency on the part of students. The school handbooks would speak glowingly about student input but usually only the high academic students participate in student council and government or other liaisons with administration.

#### POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE CENTRE

Throughout the interviews, both D and K would spontaneously comment about the positive aspects of attending the centre. Through their observations they highlighted by contrast what was missing for them in the traditional school setting:

##### **On ownership:**

I: But what about getting up in the morning and coming here (to the centre as opposed to a traditional school)

K: Yeah, but also just like being here, going here, making it here every day, being able to

do what I WANT TO DO. Like, knowing that I'm making my own choices, you know what I mean?

**On control of the content and pacing:**

K: I also like how you know what you're doing, you always know what you're doing, you can always ask, I mean, which makes you do better.

**On personal commitment and motivation:**

K: The adjustment was actually coming and doing work when we didn't HAVE to, but once we got into a routine of doing it---

D: I think our routine was come to school, do work, go for coffee, go shopping, and come back, do some work---

K: Yeah, and then go home. I mean we took breaks or whatever, or sometimes we'd just work all day, like just stay here all day ...Oh, yeah. Like I can look at my life and say "This is what I need to do and right now I'm not doing it, so I should better start".

D: It's like, almost, a greater sense of accomplishment. I mean, you know you don't have to, and you're doing it ALL, not because someone is making you---

K: But all on your own.

**On freedom of choice and personal responsibility:**

K: Yeah, if they (the centre students) wanna go, they can go. I mean, if they wanna skip out, they can leave. If they don't wanna go to school today, they can leave. So everyone's here just to do work. I mean, it's not, you're not here to socialize, you're not here to hang out, you're here to do your work and go.

And D says on the same topic later in the same interview:

D: I mean, I'm not here to socialize and to make sure everyone is having fun.....I'm here because I have 49 credits and I was supposed to graduate last year. That's it!....That's all I wanna do. Like, I come every day and I just wanna get my school done. That's it! Like, I don't wanna to make any new friends here or anything, like, I have made new friends here but I'm not concerned with the social aspects any more. I've grown past that.

**On Privacy:**

K: Yeah, you can't have people hovering over you all the time. She, uh, J, that girl that works here, she explained it like "this is supposed to be the students' place, you know? You're supposed to feel comfortable here."

**On stereotyping** the centre students:

K: Yeah, well, when I first heard of the centre, you gotta remember the comments that you got about dropouts, like 'oh, girl! all those juvenile delinquents".

**On the quality of teaching** and support:

D: Teachers are really smart here and **they have time**. it's not like "come see me after class and we can go over the work that you don't understand" or "come see me on your noon hour". It's like, if you need help, they'll help you (immediately).

The themes of **ownership, freedom of choice and personal responsibility** are linked and are crucial factors in the philosophy of the Centre Student Foundation. Their mission statement is:

To provide clients with an opportunity to explore and develop acceptable alternatives for continuing their education and pursuing career goals, by presenting the individuals with an opportunity to address educational, vocational, and social development using a supportive, self-directed model.

Part of the enrollment process at the centre is that students set their own goals and select

a program and combination of courses that is manageable for them, taking into consideration their personal circumstances. The staff of teachers and volunteers are there to facilitate the learning process by providing the materials, which consist of courses from Alberta Distance Learning plus various computer modules, and to help with lessons when asked. Finished modules are marked on site and students work at their own pace. This approach of mastery learning seemed to suit K and D well and their regular attendance and diligent effort moved them through the material quickly. The fact that they had each other's **companionship and support** appears to be a contributing factor to their success, as individualized learning can sometimes become a lonely endeavor. D continued to work afternoons and evenings at Pizza Hut, so K would call her at 7:30 in the mornings to wake her up and encourage her to start the day. They admit to "*bugging*" each other but say:

K: Well, it's different from a teacher. 'Where were you? Why didn't you hand in this assignment? Why are you late? Well, where's your homework?' Yeah, I would always call her (D) up--"Come on, let's go to school!" and she says "Call me up after your shower. I just want to sleep a bit longer".

D: Well, she doesn't seem to understand that I don't get to sleep until late at night (1:00 am) because I work. I can't get to bed at 10:00 p.m. like she does.

The centre setting offers teens a wide range of services under one roof in a bright, spacious facility which is open 12 hours a day. The atmosphere is casual with people coming and going, a variety of conversations, one-on-one tutoring, and computers printing, but there are also quiet areas with people studying and babies sleeping and a drop-in kitchen facility so that students can spend an entire day there comfortably. There is a sense of family and purpose with the students' opinion and ideas honored and

implemented when possible. The very positive ending of the girl's story is that both K and D earned all their credits and graduated this spring. Obviously the centre setting provided things that were lacking in a traditional school. They had set their own goals and achieved them.

### FUTURE GOALS

The theme of **future goals** appeared in several of the interviews and the girls plans became more focused in each subsequent session. The primary goal for both of them was to graduate and get their high school diploma, and it was clearly a very strong one. I wanted to see if they had thought beyond that, so I asked in the first interview:

I: So what, where do you see yourselves, both of you, like, say, in three years, as far as setting a goal?

K: Umm, I have 81 credits right now. I'm only like 19 credits short of graduating. I'll be graduating right on time. So, three years from now, um, probably going to college or something.

I: Okay, well, that's a start. What would you be, say, if you could, where would you go?

K: I'd go anywhere. I don't know, like maybe do travel and tourism.

D: Yeah, we wanna do that. We've been looking at the college pamphlets, like, a couple of weeks ago. A fun job!

K: Get away from this city!

D: Three years from now, I will be done high school and I will NOT be living here. That's all I know.

So it was a topic that D and K had already discussed and they had taken the preliminary

steps to find out about future schooling. This was early in the semester and high school graduation still seemed far away. In the next interview, I asked again:

I: So, since we talked last time about goals and stuff, have you guys sort of figured out what you're gonna do with your lives yet?

D: Yes, we decided that when we are done school, we're gonna get a job in the meantime, and then we're gonna save up money and we're gonna move out. We're gonna work and live on our own for a year and we're gonna save up money for college or university and then we're gonna go book a tour to go and travel. We're both gonna graduate, then we're gonna plan to be in the same place, we're gonna get a job in the same place, and we're gonna get married and live on the opposite sides of the same duplex. And she's gonna be the godmother of my child, and I'll be the godmother of her child!

I: So this is the ideal fantasy!

This was all said with laughter and clear agreement via body language and expression on K's part. I could feel their energy and their commitment to their friendship and the joy they took in actually having a future toward which to plan. There were all kinds of fantasy elements in this scenario but it also had positive and practical components that could be used in planning. They then used me as a resource and asked me questions about travel and the advantages of knowing foreign languages, especially Japanese, for a career in the travel industry. I gave them information and encouragement since certainly learning another language would be an excellent start toward their goal of self-sufficiency.

During the final interview, which was after both had earned their diploma, we returned to the topic of future plans, which had evolved for K into specific actions. She had reached the decision to upgrade so she could go to university.

K: Oh, I'm upgrading right now. I'm taking some 30's classes over the summer and they'll probably carry over 'till about the fall. I'll have to wait to write departmentals in January 'cause I'm taking Biology 30 and Math 30. I've already got Social, once I take my test. I've already got my diploma and I'm gonna upgrade and I think they're gonna let me do it here.

I: So that's a new goal for you--University, a new goal since you came to the centre.

K: Yeah, basically, yeah. Before I would only have expected to maybe get into college. I'm gonna start University in the fall--not this fall, but next fall and take a couple of classes in psychology and take a couple of engineering classes too, for like my first year.

K's confident approach and her feeling of competence are a result of her success in the setting. Earlier in the same interview we had been comparing the alternative setting to the traditional and the changes K perceived in herself during the past semester.

K: Yeah, it's like, I feel more accomplished, I feel like I'm capable of doing a lot more than I felt before when I went to CHS. Like I thought, ohhh, I didn't have any plans for my future, Whereas here I do think that I am capable of going on, you know. And it's actually a realistic dream that seemed so unrealistic before.

This semester allowed her strengths to flourish, as if a significant and necessary ingredient for her success was the **freedom to choose**, to commit to school on her own terms. K described her last semester at CHS, as one of drifting in limbo, disengaged from both the social and academic setting and existing in a state of disaffection. At that point she fit the educational system label of "underachiever", a girl who had been an honour roll student during jr. high but had gradually stopped applying her considerable strengths to any productive academic purpose. This fits with the patterns described in the

survey Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging the Future (1991) which found a dramatic decline in self-esteem as girls progressed through jr. high and high school. This resulted in poor academic performance and resultant loss of confidence in relation to career aspirations.

The change in K had been dramatic. The girl that I interviewed at the centre did not match the K of her CHS stories. I perceive that it took courage to leave this other self behind, to take charge of her life and move forward on a determined path. D was not quite as focused about her plans as K:

D: I will probably, more than likely, work at Pizza Hut full time during the day so I can have my evenings free, and then I'd like to, I don't know, I'd really like to move out.

K: Time to leave the nest, time to feel more independent away from people that.....

D: Needy people

K: Just to be a face in the crowd--that's what, that's what!

Here are the recurring themes of **independence** and **wanting to leave their hometown**, which have appeared throughout their talks of future plans. I respected this desire for privacy and anonymity and prompted them to continue:

I: Somewhere where nobody knows your entire history?

K: Yeah! Exactly, exactly. Where I can walk into a restaurant and honestly say I don't have a clue who anyone in there is and they don't know who I am, you know.

This **desire for privacy** was a continuing theme in K's future plans and had been crystallized through her experiences in the city school system. I see the connection to

Jackson's research of 30 years ago which says that schools offer no privacy and certainly nothing has changed since then. In the name of "helping" students we are even more intrusive as the private and public sectors get blended through social services and various forms of intervention. D is not as confident in the academic areas as K. After hearing K describe her upgrading plans, I said to D:

I: Yeah, and what about you? Do you want to go to college or do you want to try for what she is trying for?

D: (shocked) Psychology and engineering?

I: Well, I don't know. What about that travel thing? (Their previous discussions about the travel industry)

D: I thought it was a good idea and now they don't seem that good any more.

I: What do you enjoy doing?

D: Nothing. Nothing interests me, nothing fascinates me.

I: Maybe you just haven't come across it yet.

D had achieved one major goal and this will certainly give her the confidence in whatever she chooses as her next one. In the concentrated effort of reversing a three year pattern of quitting she is living proof that school re-entry can work in a more flexible setting. I see the summer as a well-earned break from the intensity of the past semester at the centre, a time to reset her goals and contemplate new opportunities. D is still finishing up some courses, so she and K meet at the centre every morning and continue with the study pattern that has worked for them so successfully in the last months. K is very disciplined and puts in entire days.

## INTERPRETATION

My first insight as I read the initial two transcripts was the girls' strong emphasis on **relationships**. Under this umbrella comes school and classroom climate, teacher and peer personalities and power, the issues of ownership, silencing, lack of privacy and even the friendship and companionship of these girls as they provided support to each other during their challenging semester at the centre. I was surprised that this theme was so dominant at what turned out to be the mid-point of the research. At the conclusion of data collection I colour coded my list of "issues" into categories of school and classroom relationships, (2) youth culture, (3) personal autonomy (4) curricular (content) and (5) other, which included references to family, health, and the police. The visual impact as I looked at the list was striking. Categories 1, 2, and 3 dominated with course content becoming significant by its absence.

Based on what these two girls said, **relationships** were the significant factor in their school lives. They are the context within which they remember their early schooling and the criteria by which they judge the success or failure of a certain setting. The teachers, whether remembered as positive or negative, were key figures in these memories. In the interviews they both described additional scenarios with other significant teachers, which I omitted in an effort to keep this project to a manageable size. Always it appeared that they responded to a combination of respect and teacher interest. Another factor was their awareness of whether the material was relevant to them personally and presented in a format that was a good match for their level and pace. Positive learning situations are recalled as unusual, which left me with the conviction that most of the time the classroom and curriculum "fit" was poor. Learning styles immediately come to mind but the interview format did not lend itself to exploring this direction.

A major component under the relationship category is the theme of

**youth culture**, with it being the significant influence in both the girls' lives in jr. high and high school. I had expected this, and in fact was guilty of actively searching for peer relationship information, but I do see it as central to each of their stories. K describes a powerful **clique** during her high school years, which had its tentacles entwined into most aspects of the teens' lives. She eventually chose to disentangle herself, to be her own person, and her descriptions paint a vivid picture of the clique's domination of her high school's social structure. While trying for the final time to clarify her decision to leave that particular social context K said:

K: I just didn't want to belong any more. I didn't care. Like, little things that mattered to me a year ago don't matter to me now. You know, it just didn't matter if I had so many friends, like a lot of friends. I didn't WANT a lot of friends. I'd rather have one close friend that I could actually count on, you know, rather than people that I don't really like anyway.

D's peer group appeared to have more of a gang aspect as they participated in "*scams*" and various other sorts of marginal activities frowned upon by the adult culture. Her friends all disliked school and became her **support group**, albeit a negative one from an adult viewpoint, as she went through various phases of her three year rebellion. The broader theme based on the girls' stories appear to be that peers can be a major influence, for either good or ill. Whether and how much peers influence school performance or participation is an individual matter and varies with the student's age, maturity, motivation level, personality profile and a myriad of other variables. The remark by D as she describes her 8th grade Math Attack cohorts that "school wasn't their thing" illustrates how disengaged her peer group was from the education process already by grade eight while for K the disaffection was more gradual and occurred later.

The theme of **youth culture** is a diverse one and was not intended as a focus of this study

except that it permeates the research and is central to both K's and D's school experiences. Beginning with jr. high, peers became a powerful influence not only in the social (recreational) aspect of their lives but also within their classrooms and the school environment. In striving to see what significance the girls perceive peer influence to have had on them I received two different interpretations. K has maintained throughout that peer pressure was not a factor in her decisions while D's story talks about the subgroup as being central in her life during the time she was alienated from school and that many of her behaviours hinged on what the group decided.

My outsider view of the phenomenon is that the power that peers have is very real and had impact to varying degrees on both girls. K was a strong person and an independent thinker even at 16 and seems to have maintained a balance of self and others, but this takes energy and determination and can be very draining emotionally. So she became tired of the setting and withdrew from it, finally choosing to leave it entirely. D was a keen participant in her group until she matured enough to see its negative impact on her life. Then she also chose to pursue her own path, and together the two friends set new goals and changed their lives. This is still a transition in progress, an exciting time for them as they reach personal goals and set new ones.

Under theme 3, **personal autonomy**, I grouped together the elements of individual choice, decision making, motivation and personal commitment. These positive components appeared almost exclusively in reference to the centre semester and were an intrinsic part of the successful experience there. Clearly these elements were absent in their previous schooling and appear to be what made the difference for the girls as learners in the alternative setting. In addition there is a well documented pattern for adolescent girls that fits K's and D's stories, where they go through a developmental process that involves a loss of confidence and self-esteem, resulting in disengagement from school and loss of aspirations for the future. The admirable component in the story of these two girls is that through a combination of courage and hard work they reversed

this debilitating pattern. I see the following research to be closely connected to the process that K and D experienced during their teen years.

A recent comprehensive poll of 3,000 school children in the United States, sponsored by the A.A.U W. (American Association of University Women) surveyed the interaction of self-esteem, education and career aspirations in adolescent boys and girls in today's society. It examined the students' perception of themselves and their futures, measured the changes in attitude as adolescents grow older, their perceptions of gender roles, and the part that the educational setting plays. Among the key findings of the survey was that as girls and boys grow older, both experience a significant loss of self-esteem in a variety of areas; however, the loss is most dramatic and has long-lasting effect on girls. The report primarily focused on ways in which the education system **inhibits, restricts, diminishes and denies girls' experience**. The resulting document, Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America (1991), was a key motivator for Peggy Orenstein's book School Girls, a one year study of 8th grade girls in two California middle schools. She traced their daily reality through parent and teacher interviews, numerous classroom observations, home visits and many formal and informal talks with the girls themselves. Her findings corroborated the survey's conclusions. I found her descriptions of classroom dynamics and her observations of the very real gender disadvantages that she witnessed very powerful. It is different for everyone, but there is often a general attrition in school performance that seems to happen for girls during the jr. high years and to peak in grades 9 and 10.

Sometimes there is a galvanizing incident which accelerates at-risk behaviour, as in D's case her expulsion from PHS in grade 10, but this was preceded by a series of preliminary steps in jr. high, what the dropout literature calls "at-risk" indicators. K's situation conversely was one of attrition in academic success in high school resulting in **underachievement**, which was reversed when she chose an alternative site and method of delivery. She accomplished the change without the long schooling gaps that D

experienced; yet her final alienation from traditional schooling was equally apparent. It is as if a crucial link were missing in the regular school setting for these girls, as if school attendance were something "other", not relevant or meaningful but a necessary prerequisite for admission to adult Canadian society. Finally at ages 18 and 19, they asserted themselves in a positive way by leaving what for them was not a productive environment.

K and D started to demonstrate their personal autonomy with the decision to leave CHS in mid-year and following that, everything has been **their own choice**, an individual commitment freely given so they have **ownership** of the process. They celebrate the fact that there are no "*stupid*" school rules at the centre that could lead to power struggles with the adults/teachers and that the flexibility of the setting allows them to set their own hours and goals. They essentially are permitted their **dignity**, are treated with respect and allowed the freedom to set their own pace. The curriculum content is the same (Alberta Ministry of Education materials) as in a regular school setting and the grading criteria are clear: "**do your work successfully and you will get your credits!**" The process has been stripped of the **hidden curriculum**, which constitutes a significant part of the mark in a traditional school setting. I think this is a crucial difference because the numerous non-academic components are not important at the centre, whereas they are a major and often unpredictable factor in the formula for school success in a regular school.

For K and D a key component of a productive the centre day was their companionship and D admits to needing the stabilizing influence of working together more than K.

I: So when she (K) was here, you seemed to work--what? Both of you together? Like side by side, or what?

D: We'd sit across the table and do our work. Sit

there and chat for a bit, start doing work again.  
I mean, when we were doing English 30, we were  
both doing it at the same time, like together,  
basically.

I: Oh, yeah, well, that would be good.

D: We'd both read the same story and then we'd  
go over each other's answers, "oh, why did she  
pick this one?" and stuff.

While this type of collaboration was routine at the centre, in a traditional classroom it would be a privilege dispensed by the teacher or only allowed if that particular day's activities were to be group work. This is a small point, perhaps, but symbolic of the basic difference between a teacher-controlled or student-controlled learning process. There is a current trend of innovative teaching which attempts to give the teacher a mentoring role which somewhat softens the absolute power of being the mark giver, pace setter and dispenser of knowledge. Yet this sharing of power has to be real; a teacher cannot relinquish it only to take it back if things don't go his/her way. The honesty of the situation at the centre is what resulted in such strong intrinsic motivation. There was a direct correlation between hard work and passing with no subjective components in the formula such as a hidden curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

I asked the girls what they particularly liked about the school and if there were any highlights. They were very enthusiastic about the outdoor sports program because they got to do special activities such as canoeing, rock climbing, skiing and scuba diving in lieu of regular physical education classes. D described it as "pretty amazing" and said that it was all free for the students. They spoke with respect and affection of B, "Mr. Outdoor Man", who was the organizer of this innovative program as well as on the teaching staff at the centre. It was my observation that the teachers there freely interacted

with the students. There was a rapport unlike that of a traditional classroom.

An activity setting like this course allows the students and teacher to form a bond while both are participating in a sport and since it is something special organized just for them it is a clear signal that they are worthy of care and attention. Creating a strong rapport in an enjoyable group endeavor is a familiar concept and letting such a group of activities count as a physical education credit solves the phys ed dilemma for the centre location and clientele. These are all individual sports as opposed to the team type of activity, which is the traditional offering in a school setting and frequently results in non-participation by non-athletic students. I see this arrangement as symptomatic of what is right about the centre; they have put a new twist on familiar curriculum and engaged the participants into joyful co-operation. The girls had only minor suggestions for improving the facility and services, such as designating a special nursery for the students' babies because sometimes they got too loud. This need is being addressed and a separate room is in the construction stage. They had only positive things to say about the teachers; particularly how patient and accessible they were but suggested that having more of them would be helpful :

K: Just because lots of them, like they're basically English majors. We need Math majors.

But when I asked them if they had ever been seriously tempted during the semester to give it (the centre) up, D answered with a decisive NO! and then went on to explain:

D: It's too, I don't know, it's too much of a good thing to say "it's too hard, I don't wanna go". I mean, you know? Like, if you're motivated--

K: It's stupid to leave when, like, what would you do after that? I mean if I left, what would I do? I mean, why would I give up, though?

D: It's not like it's so hard and they're such hard expectations to live up to and the teachers are so hard on you, and it's not like.....

I: So it was the right level for you? ....You're making it sound so easy, but there are a lot of people who don't make it through. I mean, you did it, but there is a big turnover right here.

D; Well, I think that the people that drop out of the centre are kids who didn't really want to go to school in the first place. Maybe their parents signed them up, or their probation officer or their social worker. This is the ideal setting for kids who want to finish school but can't seem to stay in PHS or CHS or wherever they go.

They are focusing on the essentials here, that they would be foolish if they passed up the opportunity to work in the compatible, supportive setting of the centre, where they can set their own goals, get assistance when needed, work at a comfortable pace and where they are treated with respect as competent people. D makes the point that all this only has meaning for those who commit to it by choice, and if the commitment is missing then the student will drop out.

My conclusion about all this is simple. Through their stories K and D have shown me once again that strength and resilience can challenge stereotypes and that with energy and commitment much can be accomplished. They are pleased but casual and matter-of-fact about their achievements but I see them as very courageous. They chose to follow a "different drummer", to strike out on their own contrary to advice from friends and family. They recognized, perhaps at an intuitive level, that their educational situation was not meeting their needs and fortunately an alternative was available. The city school systems had labeled them "dropout" and "underachiever", in effect putting the blame on the students, but they have proved that under different conditions they can be highly successful learners. What does this say about educational structures and procedures entrenched in our junior and senior high schools? There is clearly a long overdue need to

re-examine the existing education system and change it in significant ways, not just taking the customary Band-Aid approach of temporary superficial improvements. My small study gives life and voice to the success that can be achieved through flexibility and an innovative approach. Since the existing system does not suit 25% of the Canadian high school students, based on national dropout rates, it seems only reasonable that a wide range of alternative strategies could and should be implemented. The education saga of K and D highlights two versions of this poor fit between the system and the students, and every case of disaffection will have its own story. I believe that each student should have a chance to obtain an education and that we as educators are pledged to provide this opportunity and to speak out if we see that this is not happening. If the current systems do not meet the needs of such a large percentage of youth, we are seriously remiss and should acknowledge this by initiating meaningful change. To do this we have to understand **what is** and this is where my research effort would be helpful. Understanding the population the system serves must be an essential component of planning for the future of education.

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