

**LEARNING FREEDOM: REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF  
DISENFRANCHISED STUDENTS**

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## Dedication

This project is dedicated to my husband Erin and daughter Leah who have been very understanding about the amount of my time and attention this project has taken from them. My degree, as well as this project, is owed to them for the support they have both shown me from the start.

It is also dedicated to The Sisterhood, and you know who you are, who can always be counted on to provide exactly what is needed whether it be words of wisdom, comedic relief, or a reality check.

## Abstract

this phenomenological reflective study students in a high school alternative program were invited to talk together about their school experiences. The transcribed text provided an opportunity for reflection on what the experience of school is like for disenfranchised students to help teachers know how to act in pedagogic relation with these students and all students. The students' descriptions were organized around the existentials of lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relation with other. Themes recovered included neglect of basic needs, fixedness in time, segregation and exclusion, and control in relationships. The unifying theme that emerged was freedom and there is discussion about the potential of the institution of school to address physical, spatial, temporal, and relational conditions to develop student capacity for freedom.

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## Preface

*“It is to the reality which mediates men, and to the perception of that reality held by educators and the people, that we must go to find the program content of education” (Freire, 1997, p. 154).*

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## Introduction

~~This is a phenomenological hermeneutic semiotic study.~~ This is an inquiry into my role relative to a particular group of students that I wonder about especially, students who are unsuccessful in the regular school system. While it has aspects that are hermeneutic, phenomenological, and semiotic, it is also pragmatic and critical. Menand (2001) writes that some of the most influential thinkers in American history may have had personal and philosophical differences, but they shared an ideology. The intersection of their ideas was “an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, but are tools – like forks and knives and microchips – that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves” (p. xi). The Swiss army knife that I have assembled, the culmination of my learning over the course of my master’s program, is a design for making sense of the particular situation I am in with these particular students and, potentially, for informing interactions with students in general. It does not faithfully follow the design of any established method but attempts to be explicit about the elements of the designs from which it takes its admittedly provisional form.

### Philosophical Ground

This project proceeds from a particular world view sponsored by the writings of many authors with backgrounds in different disciplines, and non-disciplines. I say *sponsor*, rather than *provide* or *give*, because text does not impart meaning. The text as a whole does not lift mechanically from the page as a ready-made structure to apply to the task of making sense of this or that. Reading is a creative process. It is the dynamic

interaction of the reader with elements of text that have particular meaning to him or to her:

Reading seems, in fact, to be the synthesis of perception and creation... If he is inattentive [the reader] will draw some phrases out of the shadow, but they will appear as random strokes. If he is at his best, he will project beyond the words a synthetic form, each phrase of which there will be no more than a partial function: the 'theme,' the 'subject,' or the 'meaning.' (Sartre, 1965, p. 43)

The reader works from what is encountered in the text to an imaginative projection. This projection can illuminate ideology and reshape reality. Explains Freire: "When I meet some books, I remake my practice theoretically. I become better able to understand the theory inside of my action" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 36).

The framework that has arisen from my interaction with these texts has taken its general shape from the organizing elements of space, body, time, and relation to other. These elements are suggested by van Manen (1997) and recur in the writings of several other authors. Van Manen describes these elements as the four "fundamental existential themes which probably pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings, regardless of their historical, cultural, or social situated-ness" (p. 101). He emphasizes that although these elements are distinguishable, they cannot be separated. In their interaction, these elements embody the subject of "all-inclusive reflection," from which, Heidegger (1982) explains, grows a world-view. An individual may adopt an existing world-view or develop a world-view explicitly and consciously.

A world view is not a matter of theoretical knowledge, either in respect of its

origin or in relation to its use. It is not simply retained in memory like a parcel of cognitive property. Rather it is a matter of a coherent conviction which determines the current affairs of life more or less expressly and directly. A world-view is related in its meaning to the particular contemporary *Dasein* [existence] at any given time. In this relationship to the *Dasein* the world-view is guide to it and a source of strength under pressure. Whether the world-view is determined by superstitions and prejudices or is based purely on scientific knowledge and experience or even, as is usually the case, is a mixture of superstition and knowledge, prejudice and sober reason, it all comes to the same thing. (pp. 5-6)

Whether the term for the unit of cognition used is construct (Kelly, 1955), mental model (Senge, 1990), generative theme (Freire, 1997), paradigm (Covey, 1996), or assumption (Bohm, 1990), the rough definition given by Perkins for either a mental model or mental image fits. It is

a holistic, highly integrated kind of knowledge. It is any unified, overarching mental representation that helps us work with a topic or subject...Mental images...concern very basic things such as the layout of your home or the shape of a story. But mental images can also concern very abstract and sophisticated matters.” (Perkins cited by Nelson, 2001, p. 20)

These distinctions and values held by people or shared by a culture have been used in psychology and cultural studies to understand the knowledge and behaviour produced by those people or culture. They are the cognitive frameworks that we use to make sense of the world; they may be conscious or unconscious; they are the “transparent patterns or templates [sic]” we create and attempt to fit over the world we encounter.

These tentative patterns are what enable humans, according to Kelly (1955), and lower animals too, to chart a course of behaviour, explicitly formulated or implicitly acted out, verbally expressed or utterly inarticulate, consistent with other courses of behaviour or inconsistent with them, intellectually reasoned or vegetatively sensed. (p. 9)

In their interaction they comprise a world-view, a map, that guides our movement through the world.

The world view that is the foundation of this project is a mixture of ideas from many sources organized loosely around the existentials of space, body, time and relation with other.

Lived Space. Spatiality is lived space. Lived space is more difficult to put into words than mathematical space, with its dimensional units, “since the experience of lived space (as lived time, body) is largely pre-verbal; we do not ordinarily reflect on it” (van Manen, 1997, p. 102), but we must if we are to consciously situate ourselves in the world. This is what Freire (1997; 2000) tells us sets humans apart from animals; human consciousness permits us to have a relationship with the world that is beyond the mere contact that animals have with the environment. Reflections on what it means to be in the world need to start from stated assumptions about the nature of reality.

I assume there is reality that exists beyond my imagination. May and Yalom (2000) assert that the realm in which existentialist thinkers operate is purely subjective and leads to the terrifying conclusion that “if it is true that we create our own selves and our own world, then it also means that there is no ground beneath us; there is only an abyss, a void, a nothingness” (p. 284). I choose to distinguish between two modes of

world, both real. There are our constructed worlds, which are our interpretations of the world created individually and collectively, and the world that is the subject of our interpretations, created by nature, that does not depend upon our perceptions of it to *be*. I rely on the existence of a physical truth with the realization that I will only know it representationally.

So the universe is real. And it is integral. That is easy to say and very difficult to conceptualize. I can only imagine it within the context of micro models, mini-systems that grant us a glimmer of understanding of the unimaginable scale of the interconnectedness of the universe:

A cloud masses, the sky darkens, leaves twist upward, and we know that it will rain. We also know that after the storm, the runoff will feed into groundwater miles away, and the sky will grow clear by tomorrow. All these events are distant in time and space, and yet are all connected within the same pattern. Each has an influence on the rest, an influence usually hidden from view. You can only understand the system of a rainstorm by contemplating the whole, not any individual part of the pattern. (Senge, 1990, pp. 6-7)

Kelly's (1955) postulate of cosmic connectedness describes a clockwork universe in which the tapping of his fingers, the action of the keys of his typewriter, and the price of yak milk in Tibet are all interlocked as equally relevant parts of an integral universe with all its parts moving in exact relationship to each another. It is "only within a limited section of the universe, that part we call earth, and that span of time we recognize as our present eon, that two of these seem more closely related to each other than to the third" (p. 6). The systems of compartmentalization that humans have

devised are only temporary supports to make vast contexts seem more manageable.

Lived Body. We are real beings in a real world; the relationship is integral. To consider humans as somehow divorced from their reality is an illogical exercise. We have assigned our skin the role of border between our internal selves and the external environment. *Internal* versus *external* is an arbitrary distinction not fixed in time or space. Kelly (1969) describes the construct of man versus environment as a “somewhat fuzzy notion” (p. 217). Recent paradigms in the ‘hard sciences’ would support this idea. Sylwester (2000; 2003), in *A Biological Brain in the Cultural Classroom*, has taken the cell characteristic of being bounded by a semi-permeable membrane and used it to describe whole organisms, as well as social systems. Matter and messages continuously exchange across the boundary between the organism and the environment. Even our brain, which seems safely sequestered within our skull, bumps up against the outer world. The skin and brain are the first two organs formed in the human embryo and arise from the same embryonic tissue: “one side of the layer develops into our 3-pound brain, and the other into our 6-pound, 20-square-foot mantle of skin that covers our body” and in which our sensory organs are embedded (Sylwester, 2000, p. 107). The skin (read as semi-permeable membrane through which there is an unending, bi-directional flow of atoms, constituting chemical, sound, energy, and light forms) is really the outer layer of the brain. Thus, *intra* and *extra* exist only as ends of a continuum, rather than as absolutes, when considering an organism. The individual and the environment are dynamically interfused.

As there can be no clear demarcation between person and environment, neither can there be deconstruction of the person. The line between what is mental and what is

physical is one that some schools of thought have been willing to make, however. Psychoanalytic theory, for example, accepts the mythologically-based notion of the mind as consisting of disembodied forces housed within a corporeal body. Kelly (1955), a constructivist, considered the conceptualization of these resident conflicting forces an animistic, even demonistic, approach to understanding human beings. Bannister and Fransella (2001) described the psychoanalytic model of person as a “dark cellar where a maiden aunt is locked in mortal combat with a sex-crazed monkey, the whole thing refereed by a rather nervous bank clerk” (p. 1). I prefer the constructivist assumption of existence which invites us to reconsider the body not as a vessel for psychological essences, but as inseparable from the mind in motion: “our mind is intrinsically embodied, in the sense that we do not have a knowledge more than we *are* a knowledge” (Goncalves, 1997, p. xii).

Dewey notes a particular willingness to ascribe a special “metaphysical stature” to the mind and its ideas and beliefs. The invention of the “alleged discipline of epistemology,” to answer the question *how do we know*, makes the natural relationship between the mind and reality problematic (cited by Menand, 2001, p. 360). Menand makes the argument, on behalf of the pragmatists, that no fuss is made about the relationship between, for example, the *hand* and the world. The function of the hand is to help the organism cope with the environment; in situations in which a hand doesn't work, we try something else, such as a foot, a fish-hook, or an editorial. Nobody worries in these situations about a lack of some preordained ‘fit’ – about whether the physical world was or was not made to be manipulated by hands. They just use a hand where a hand will do.

His point is that *mind* and *reality* are labels for “nonexistent entities: they are abstractions from a single, indivisible process” (Menand, 2001, p. 361). Mind, body, and reality are part and parcel. Sylwester’s (2000; 2003) model of integrated bodybrain asks the question, at what point does consciousness become indistinguishable from biology? Kelly gets at this same idea in his discussion of *physiological* versus *psychological* events. He reminds us that terms are labels for human inventions to which the events themselves are not accountable, as does Leguin (1987) in “She Unnames Them”:

Most of them accepted namelessness with the perfect indifference with which they had so long accepted and ignored their names...As for the fish of the sea, their names dispersed from them in silence throughout the oceans like faint, dark, blurs of cuttlefish ink, and drifted off on the currents without a trace...They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier; so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to smell one another’s scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another’s blood or flesh, keep one another warm, that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food. (pp. 194-196)

Darwin explains that the term *species* is “arbitrarily given for the sake of convenience to a set of individuals closely resembling each other...[I]t does not essentially differ from the term variety, which is given to less distinct and more fluctuating forms. The term variety, again, in comparison with mere individual differences, is also applied arbitrarily, and for mere convenience sake” (cited by



Menand, 2001, p. 123). These labels are of no consequence to the things they name, and are only of relative use to us.

Labels or names are signals for us to attend to certain aspects of an event deemed definitive. In his study of the law, Wendell Holmes noted that legal theories, like other theories, are generally categorized according to the single aspect of their subject that they emphasize as essential. Yet, he realized, the law, as with most systems, has no essential aspect (Menand, 2001, p. 339). This seems self-evident but singularity of focus continues to be a flaw in most approaches to the study of anything: events are defined as this or that, and therefore not something else, on the basis of a single feature.

Kelly prompts us to consider multiple aspects of events rather than try to categorize events, for example, as physiological or psychological. Take the concept of red. Kelly (1955) explains how the notion of dichotomous constructs applies to a class concept such as red:

We might point out that, according to one of the prevalent color theories, red is the complement of green. Among the hues it stands out in sharpest contrast to green. But [red] is used in other ways also. When we say that a person has red hair we distinguish it from the non-redness of white, yellow, brown or black. Our language gives no special word for this non-redness, but we have little difficulty in knowing what the contrast to red hair actually is. (p. 63)

The constructivist psychologist applies the unit of construct within a hierarchical system of constructs to this problem. Biology has its version, too. Sylwester (2000) describes arrangements of discrete columnar brain structures that process basic limited cognitive functions:

These incorporate into larger, specialized, widely distributed but highly interconnected areas and systems that collaborate on complex cognitive tasks. For example, our visual system has about 30 separate columnar subsystems that process such visual properties as shape, depth, colour, quantity, and movement. Thus, the subsystem that responds to the colour red processes it on every red object that we see, and the subsystem that responds to circular shapes process balls, CDs, tires, donuts, and so forth. Several of these subsystems will combine to process a single red ball rolling across the table. (Sylwester, 2000, p. 12)

The neurobiologist applies the unit of the columnar neural structure within a complex organization of subsystems and systems to this problem. Red is an event belonging to neither discipline's conceptualization of it, although it is interesting that two individuals 50 years apart in time, and representing different disciplinary backgrounds, have arrived at quite compatible models of a common event.

This is an important idea. Postmodernism casts doubt on the capacity of any one discipline's epistemology to provide the correct and entire truth. Here what began as discussion of body has become indistinguishable from the notion of space: the being is indistinguishable from being in the world. Different species know a portion of the world through their preferred sensory modalities and range of experience. For example, humans may find it easy to accept an elephant's way of knowing the world as a land dwelling mammal, as far removed from the physical and experiential world of its fellow mammal in the sea, the whale. We understand both to be intelligent animals, probably most of us see them as fairly equitably so, and that one's world view is no more or less valid than the other's, but that each is only a partial view that is different from the

others' and different from our own. We understand ants, and bats, and snakes to differ even more greatly in their situational limitations in shared space on this planet. As humans, we start with our already limited access to knowing the world and further reduce it along our discipline-bound channels. Recognizing the arbitrariness of how we do this is liberating. There is comfort in being able to say, as postmodernism allows, that we "know 'something' without claiming to know everything" (Richardson, 1994, p. 517).

Taking a postmodernist view of the person is, then, to consider the person not as the sum of cognitive, affective, physical, behavioural, and other systems, but to consider the possibilities that the properties assigned to each of these realms might not belong there or only there. The work of biologist Seymour Benzer, in what might have been called *natural psychology*, is an example of an inquiry across disciplines changing world views about why we do what we do. "I don't care what you call it," said Benzer, of his research program that was outside of the scope of any existing field of science in its movement from focus on gene to nerve to behaviour, "I've often said that I don't care about disciplines; I care about nondisciplines. What do you care about names?" (Weiner, p. 102).

Anticipation is a single word for a phenomenon that is viewed from the perspectives of many different disciplines. It can be considered philosophically, such as the striving of humanity ever-reaching toward the future. It can be considered biologically, as in the digestive system preparing for food about to be ingested, the possibility that nutrients might be used for this or that, or that harmful toxins may be present. It can be considered psychologically, such as the process of making

behavioural choices based on predictions of future events. Kelly's classification of constructs and the anticipations they facilitate, as *verbal* or *pre-verbal*, is an innovation that transcends the rules and language of these disciplines to a degree.

People are not necessarily articulate about the constructions they place upon the world. Some personal constructions have no verbal handles to grasp and the response to them is speechless impulse. Thus, in studying the psychology of person-the-philosopher, we must take into account sub-verbal patterns of representation and construction (Kelly, 1955, p. 16). The term *non-verbal* might just as easily do as *pre-verbal*, but the choice has real implications for its suggestion of possibilities. I remember, perhaps five years ago, seeing Deepak Chopra introduced on the Oprah Winfrey television show. I was absolutely intrigued by what he had to say and by the simplicity of the idea. He pointed out that, as chemical-electrical events, thoughts were corporeal things and that chemicals and energy, as we all knew, were agents of change in the physical body. He was talking about the potential for thoughts to influence healing, and the potential for these to come to some degree under conscious control. It was the basic idea of the indivisibility of matters mental and medical that struck me and was reconstructed in the intersection of ideas of Kelly and Sylwester.

Kelly's suggestion that humans are best understood with a long view of their centuried progress rather than at any given point, hints at the evolutionary potential for some of what is now pre-verbal to become verbal. Edelman (1992), in his book *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind*, explains that the same natural processes of evolution that shaped the changes in the human species over millions of years also shape the course of development of the neural pathways of each human brain over its

lifetime. As the physical and cognitive development of the species goes, so does the development of the neural pathways of the individual. This progress, by humanity and the maturing individual, is gradual growth from instinctive physical response toward conscious thought and linguistic expression.

As the physical and the cognitive are found to be continuous rather than discrete elements, the system extends to take in behaviour. Despite the efforts of behaviourists to convince us otherwise, behaviour cannot be isolated as distinct from any part of the integral human bodybrain system. Behaviour, Sylwester (2000; 2003) tells us, is “an agent of interaction for messages that transcend the mere organic” (p. 18); Kelly (1969) describes behaviour as a means of investigation, “man’s way of posing a question,” not an end in itself (p. 220). Dewey, summarized by Menand (2001), believed that thinking and behaviour were two terms for a single process, “the process of making our way as best as we can in a universe shot through with contingency” (p. 360). Behaviour is a part of rather than apart from the other elements of a whole person who is greater than the sum of his or her parts.

I have seen the idea of a person as a whole being represented as a *mandala* with each component arranged between spokes extending out from a central circle. While this suggests the inclusion of all the elements, it is a structural rather than an organic way of looking at people and does not capture the messy, dynamic nature of the interplay of the systems. Recall the characterization of the psychoanalytic view of the person as a house with rooms containing the various forces. A reductionist view becomes mechanistic and necessitates the invention of forces to get the whole thing going (Kelly, 1955). As objects do not set themselves into motion, lived space and body

do not stop for dissection.

Lived Time. An appealing idea is that of a universe already and always in motion. Kelly proposes that since the universe is measurable along the dimension of time it necessarily constantly changes with respect to itself. It exists by happening. It is hard, as he points out, to imagine what the world would be like “if it just sat there and did nothing” (1955, p. 7). It is easy to imagine humanity as swept up in this current: each person “contemplates in his own personal way the stream of events upon which he finds himself so swiftly borne” (Kelly, 1955, p. 3). Human progress along this course, observes Kelly, has been toward greater understanding of and control over the world.

Kelly (1955) is clear in his model that this is a continual process of adaptation *toward* greater functioning rather than a linear progression *to* some ideal end. This is a fine but important distinction, one that sends pragmatist thinkers along divergent paths. One of the basic convictions of pragmatism is that the universe is in motion. Darwin’s version of the universe’s movement (adopted by Dewey and James) holds that its evolution is purposeful, with survival as the aim. In this sense, it is teleological. Yet, Pierce claims that Darwin has no teleology because he does not conceive of the movement as directional. Although Pierce accepts that “physical evolution works toward ends in the same way that mental action works toward ends” (cited by Menand, 2001, p. 365), he could not accept that the end, in both cases, is not a matter of divine design. Each new idea, according to his belief, is an inevitable next step toward eventual “epistemological rapport with reality,” as intended by God. An alternate view is that change is the adoption of chance variations that prove to be more helpful (Menand, 2001, p. 367). Whether more truthful or useful answers are sought, questions

are the inspiration carrying humanity on in time.

There are questions posed and resolved both by the individual and collectively. When we look at the sun, we sneeze. When we touch something hot we pull away. These may be thought of as questions that have been asked and answered repeatedly over millions of years, the answer returned the same way so many times that it has been deemed acceptably accurate and encoded within our genetic makeup so that we can go on to bigger questions, the answers to which are less certain. The answers we accept (through the process of biological, cultural, or personal evolution) become the rules by which we live. We participate in the construction of systems and then are both determined by them and free to change them (Kelly, 1955).

Time provides the context within which choices as constructions are made. The “most profound human experiences, such as anxiety, depression, and joy, occur more in the dimension of time than in space” (Beck & Weishaar, 2000, p. 277). Interestingly, the “brain has no specific structure or system to recognize and control time, yet we function within a large number of important cycles, rhythms, and sequences” (Sylwester, 2000, p. 82). Although time proceeds, not as a series of connected events like the cars of a railway train, but in a continuous stream, living things are sensitive to its passing and guide their existence by it. The Swedish naturalist, Carolus Linnaeus, dreamed of creating a botanical clock by which one could tell the time by the opening of the passion flower at noon, the evening primrose at 6:00 in the evening, and so on (Weiner, 1999, p. 103). It is our ability to compare and contrast that grants us the ability to gauge the passing of time, to tell what has been from what is, and what will likely be, in order to benefit from our experiences.

One of the 11 corollaries of Kelly's (1955) *personal construct theory* provides a way to conceptualize our connection to time: "a person anticipates events by construing their replications" (p. 50). Experience cannot be equated with standing in one place and being aware of events going by. More than just perceived, events must be made sense of by the act of comparing and contrasting them with other events. The way we relate an event to another assumes that it is at once like another event from our personal experience and unlike that event in a way which makes it like yet another familiar event in this respect. The construal of an event is according to the similarities and differences we assign them in relation to previous experiences. What will come next will be a replication, in many ways, of previously experienced events, which allows us to anticipate or make predictions about them.

Our anticipations have a tentative quality that comes from the distinction Kelly makes between *replication* and *duplication*. Replication means that another event will come along that will be as a previous one in some way or ways; duplication would be the original event traveling forward through time to happen again exactly as it was. Events never duplicate. Heraclitus states, "You can not step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you" (cited by Kenny, 1984, p. 6). People may have basis for prediction but that is not the same as being able to know what will come. It is not even safe to say one knows what has already happened. When van Manen (1997) describes the past as changing under the pressures and influences of the present he expresses the same principle that Kelly (1955) works from that whatever can be construed can be reconstrued. Constructions of an event are both tentative and temporary.



The event that a person construes is itself a process - just as the living being is a process. It presents itself from the beginning as an unending and undifferentiated process. Only when a human attunes his or her ear to the recurrent themes in the monotonous flow does the universe begin to make sense. Like musicians, humans must phrase experience in order to make sense out of it (Kelly, 1955). Phrasing is an important idea. Sylwester is concerned with phrasing and how it creates symphonies of music from 10 tones, infinite numbers from 10 digits, an English language of 500,000 words from 26 letters representing 45 phonemes, and most miraculously of all, how 20 amino acids give rise to all possible forms of life on earth. Marie Clay, originator of Reading Recovery<sup>TM</sup>, emphasizes “you need a context for a subcomponent in order to derive rules about its probabilities of occurrence” (Clay, 1991, p. 333). In her *Reading Recovery: Guidebook for Teachers in Training*, Clay (1993) emphasizes that it is the phrasing during the reading of the text that supports the reader’s use of meaning.

We can experience events variably as discrete or continuous; segmentation is subjective and relates to comparison and contrast. Our brain responds particularly to high contrast information (Sylwester, 2000, p. 108). The constructs that process information represent sets of continua from points of similarity to points of contrast. A construct that was based only on detecting similarity would represent an “undifferentiated homogeneity” in which one event blended unceremoniously into the next; a construct that only detected contrast would represent a “chaotic particularized heterogeneity” in which every experience was pigeonholed as being completely foreign to the person’s experience thus far. The “former would leave the person engulfed in a sea with no landmarks to relieve the monotony; the latter would confront him with an

interminable series of kaleidoscope changes in which nothing would ever appear familiar” (Kelly, 1955, p. 51). The constructs that we bring to bear on events provide the reference points for our navigation through the world.

Constructs are “for making predictions of things to come, and the world keeps rolling along and revealing these predictions to be either correct or misleading” (Kelly, 1955, p. 14). Reality is construed according to the perceived fit between our anticipations and perceptions and provides the context for the next event that rolls along. This cycle shapes our development. We are designed to seek meaning and will always choose the option that provides the greatest opportunity for making meaning and extending our frameworks for making and organizing meaning. In consistently making what Kelly calls the *elaborative choice*, individuals are the producers of their own development. Systems elaborate through inquiry. The ability to “pose questions to understand ourselves and our world is at the heart of what it means to be human” (Harpaz & Lefstein, 2000, p. 54). Kelly’s book *Theory of Personality* (1955) develops a similar model of person as scientist. Kelly sees the human experience as a lifelong process of experimentation, checking predictions against outcomes in order to ask better questions, the answers to which help one move more easily and freely through the world.

The relationship between the expected and the experienced is bi-directional. Constructs are both generated by and generative of experience. Bohm (1990) describes them as computer programs: “something is happening, which is that assumptions or opinions are like computer programs in people’s minds. And those programs take over against the best of intentions. They produce their own intentions” (p. 6). As those

programs run they become self-fulfilling prophecies. Covey (1996) summarizes this idea in his *See, Do, Get* model in which expectations program actions resulting in predictable outcomes reinforcing the original expectation. Kelly (1955) provides an example of this process at work:

Actually the testing of a construct in terms of its predictive efficiency may turn out to be a somewhat redundant affair. A man construes his neighbour's behavior as hostile. By that he means that his neighbor, given the proper opportunity, will do him harm....The man reasons 'If my neighbor is hostile, he will be eager to know when I get into trouble, when I am ill, or when I am in any way vulnerable. I will watch to see if this isn't so.' The next morning the man meets his neighbor and is greeted with the conventional 'How are you?' Sure enough, the neighbor is doing just what was predicted of a hostile person! (pp. 12-13)

Over time, repeatedly reinforced constructs become well established although they may not be acknowledged. Moreover, deeply embedded human constructs create and sustain systems. Any organization or institution is a complex system, dynamically intermeshed with other systems (Senge, 1990). The school, embedded within the larger system of education and fed from and feeding into the cultural, economic, and other systems at large and specific to that school, is an organization that may be best comprehended by a systems approach. A system is "any perceived whole whose elements 'hang together' because they continually effect each other over time" (Cabron-McCabe, Dutton, Kleiner, Lucas, & Senge, 2000, p. 78). The word *system* has a Greek origin in the verb *sunistanai* which means "to cause to stand together" and implies the active role of a causal agent. One of the organizing elements for the creation

and maintenance of a system structure is the set of perceptions of the people as participants (Cabron-McCabe, et al, 2000).

Lived Relation with Other. Relationality is lived relation with others. This is maintained in the spaces between people, conceptualized in the existentialist term *mitwelt* – literally *with world* – referring to the world with others (May & Yalom, 2000, p. 276). Communication occupies this interpersonal space as people engage in the shared naming of the world of their experience. Holmes’ “conception of experience is that it is not individual and internal but collective and consensual; it is social, not psychological” (Menand, 2001, p. 343). Van Manen (1997) writes that an “intersubjective-lifeworld” is constituted by language. “By learning a language we learn to live in collective realms of learning. This means that language has implications for our experiential possibilities” (p. xiii). He explains that new experiences are made possible by learning other languages through awareness of nuances of meaning that cannot be translated back into the first language. A language is a set of symbols that represent the concepts held in common by the members of a group: a culture only has the ideas that its language will accommodate.

Ideas are transmitted between people, become part of the shared concept pool of a culture, and change over time. Sylwester (2000) describes cultural replication and evolution as analogous to physical reproduction and evolution. The units of cultural transmission and evolution, corresponding to biological genes, are termed *memes* by Dawkins (1989) and Blackmore (1999). The innate human capacity to learn by imitation the cultural behaviour of others, explains Sylwester, gives rise to and sustains memes. He gives as examples of imitation adopting clothing styles, learning to drink

from a cup, relating jokes heard, and learning a language. The root of the word meme originates in the Latin *memor*, which means “mindful” via an Indo-European base meaning “to remember” (Soukhanouv, 1999, p. 1128). Franz Boas, in 1887, stated that the “physiological and psychological state of an organism at a certain moment is a function of its whole history” (cited by Menand, 2001, p. 384). DNA and culture jointly carry the collective memory of humanity.

Menand (2001) writes that “culture is not an individual acquirement; it is the name for a set of products, practices, and perspectives of which individuals can avail themselves (p. 407).” Culture, to use Menand’s analogy, is a “Rubik’s Cube of possibilities” (p. 407). As an individual’s genetic character is a product of a unique combination of a finite set of genes, an individual’s consciousness is a unique construction of memes drawn from the person’s culture or cultures over a lifetime. The working of the Rubik’s Cube is ultimately under the control of the individual but cultural forces, both intentionally and unintentionally applied, influence the pattern. Bowers (1974) describes the process of socialization as the mechanism of cultural transmission.

The common, often tacit, assumptions or shared meanings of a group produce its culture (Bohm, 1990, p. 16). Holmes’ meaning of culture, described by Menand (2001), is synonymous with experience and refers to “everything arising out of the interaction of the human organism with its environment: beliefs, sentiments, customs, values, policies, prejudices – what he called the ‘felt necessities of the time’” (p. 343). Lewis (1971) makes the argument that the poor in industrial capitalist societies shared a set of common characteristics that were both adaptive to their socioeconomic situation and

served to perpetuate their situation. The culture of poverty he describes embodies these characteristics:

living in crowded quarters, a lack of privacy, gregariousness, a high incidence of alcoholism, frequent resort to violence in the settlement of quarrels, frequent use of physical violence in the training of children, wife beating, early initiation into sex, free unions or consensual marriages, a relatively high incidence of the abandonment of wives and children, a trend toward mother-centered families and a much greater knowledge of maternal relatives, the predominance of the nuclear family, a strong predisposition to authoritarianism, and a great emphasis upon family solidarity – an ideal only rarely achieved. Other traits include a strong present time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism based upon the realities of their difficult life situation, a belief in male superiority which reaches its crystallization in *machismo* or the cult of masculinity, a corresponding martyr complex among women, and finally, a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts. (p. 137)

While Lewis' ideas are strongly criticized as elitist and justificationist, they get to the notion that it is not entirely concrete elements (in this case money) that determine the situation of a person or peoples, but human constructs that create and perpetuate social systems.

More recently, Payne (1999) has written on the topic of a culture of poverty. Her research rests on the idea that deeply embedded assumptions separate people of different socio-economic classes and that they find expression as societal norms, or

hidden rules. Payne recognizes the public education system as an institution arising from and sustaining middle-class assumptions. She notes that students who are not successful in this system, including those who typically end up in alternate programs, tend to be working from a different set of mental models, what Freire would call “class knowledge” (1999, p. 26). Payne’s focus is on social adaptation: bringing these hidden constructs to the surface and making them explicit is the key to understanding and, therefore, to freedom of movement up the hierarchy of classes.

Others have explored the potential for education as an agent of cultural transformation rather than social adaptation (Heaney, 2001). Those concerned with the emancipatory aspects of constructivism have explored the liberatory potential of reconstrual of one’s situation (Ismat, 1998). Emancipatory constructivism is rooted in the idea that any group has common thematics that determine its internal interactions and interactions with other systems. This framework is important, not because it allows us to explain or justify a condition or circumstance of a person or people, but because it facilitates movement, is a creative force for change.

Paulo Freire is one of the key figures in the conscientization movement.

Conscientization is an ongoing process toward critical consciousness:

conscientization means breaking through prevailing mythologies to reach new levels of awareness--in particular, awareness of oppression, being an ‘object’ in a world where only ‘subjects’ have power. The process of conscientization involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming a ‘subject’ with other oppressed subjects--that is, becoming part of the process of changing the world. (Heaney, 2001)

Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970, 1997) and *Pedagogy of Hope* (1999), advocates for the achievement of education of disenfranchised people *with* the people as a function of better understanding their own situation and generative themes.

### Purpose of the Project

“To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person” (Kelly, 1955, p. 95).

Disenfranchised students fill school alternative programs. These are students for whom functioning in a traditional school setting is problematic. Placement in an alternate school implies that an alternative is available that is more pedagogically sound for these students, that something will be qualitatively different about the environment, the teaching, or some aspect of the whole experience. But what?

Education is the social system of construction of knowledge. To interact meaningfully within a system requires an understanding of the forces that create and sustain it. These are always the mental models of the people involved in the system (Senge, 1990). The starting point must be inquiry into the students’ experiences with the intention of coming closer to being able to stand with them in their life-world as a jumping off point for learning. Van Manen (1991) contends that,

research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to know the world is profoundly to *be* in the world in a certain way, the act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world. (p. 5)

Van Manen (1997) also insists that the first question to ask is what is this experience like for the student. Bowers (1974) proposes “instead of starting our inquiry



by taking the student's situation for granted, we will begin with the problematic nature of being a student as the central question. Perhaps it is there that we will find some of our best answers" (p. 14). The purpose of this project was to engage selected students, who are to varying degrees disaffected and disengaged from regular education, in description of their school experiences. The greater understanding of what it is to experience school from their perspective provided a basis for reflecting on my role as mediator between the institutional curriculum and the lived curriculum of these students. What makes education problematic for alternative program students needs to be the starting point for program design for these students. At the same time, contrasting the experience of these students with the expectations of the educational system shines a light on dominant, but hidden, assumptions about school and creates an opportunity for pedagogical growth of educators.

Context of the Purpose. The setting for this inquiry is a rural area of northern British Columbia. The central community is a town of approximately 3500 people. The surrounding area includes two First Nations reserve communities. The economy is resource-based with logging, natural-gas extraction, and coal mining directly or indirectly supporting most families. The population is relatively young and transient, although it has stabilized somewhat over the past ten years. In this particular geographical area of the school district there are five small elementary schools and one high school.

The alternative school (AS) that is the focus of this study is a satellite program of the high school. AS provides an alternative to the traditional classroom-based instruction of the high school. Housed separately from the main school, it is in the same

building as the program for students who require intensive behavioural interventions. Over the past three or four years, with as many teacher-administrators, each with his or her own vision, the program has been reinterpreted several times, resulting in some staff perceiving a loss of focus. The documentation of the accreditation process of the high school, produced in June 2001, identified that staff recognized a lack of a clear mandate for the alternative program. Others expressed concern that AS had become an “Indian school” (School Accreditation Summary, p. 75).

AS is a catch-all program for students. The enrolment encompasses students in the non-academic stream, students assuming course overloads to pick up extra credits, still others with scheduling conflicts, and students who have landed there as the result of discipline and attendance issues at the high school, or were turned out of the severe behaviour program having reached the mandatory cutoff age of sixteen. The packaged courses, designed for students to work on at their own paces and to accommodate the interruptions inherent in lives lived in crisis, do not seem to meet the needs of these disparate sub-groups of learners. There is a high rate of non-completion. There is little interaction among students that is related to the curriculum and student-staff interactions are typically transactional, involving distribution and collection of course materials and assignment submission. My role as teacher and vice-principal is to manage this large group of students to maintain order.

Although the purpose and scope of the program has become blurred, there remains some common understanding about the work that might be done with a core of students who the staff agree are truly at-risk. Even without clear criteria for identifying these students, we can all intuitively pick them out. Markers include many of the

following: sporadic attendance, low motivation, non-completion of courses, discipline issues such as directing obscenities at staff, non-compliance, being under the influence of drugs or alcohol at school, and fighting. Workshops on Payne's description of a culture of poverty (1998) seemed to staff to be speaking to our students' situations and, perhaps, provided a framework from which to begin examining our program.

The issues, poverty-related or not, are in the realm of "non-discussables" (Barth, 2001) because they are never part of the discourse when students and their families are present. In the absence of dialogue, assumptions informing the existing program are indirectly drawn, based on general observations *about* the students and their imagined culture viewed through the conceptual lens of Payne's and others' sets of established descriptors. This project arises from the need to understand the students' own lived experience to support more thoughtful teaching practice.

## Methodology

### Introduction to Methodology

Van Manen (1997) distinguishes between method, which is concerned with procedure, and methodology, which speaks to the theory on the basis of which procedural decisions are made. The method of this project follows a discussion of the methodology. This requires some patience on the part of the reader as the foundation is set for a non-traditional structure.

Rigour is a deceptive standard. Its origin is the Latin word *rigidus* which means “stiff” (Skeat, 1993, p. 401). In academia, there is an implied correlation between stiffness, or inflexibility of method, and validity. This goes hand-in-hand with a belief system relying on the existence of an immutable truth out there waiting for discovery. If there are right answers then it must follow that there are right methods; the right methods are the ones that consistently lead to the right answers. This is the problematic justification of rigour.

William James, paraphrased by Menand (2001), challenges the traditional standard of evaluation of how we know what we know as he points out that there is “no non-circular set of criteria for knowing whether a particular belief is true, no appeal to some standard outside the process for coming to the belief itself” (p. 353). James states, “Truth *happens* to an idea...It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of verifying itself” (p. 353). The suggestion is that decision actually precedes deduction. This is why, Menand explains, we are often sure we *are* right before we know *why* we are right. This is counterintuitive to these empiricists who fail to recognize that their method is only an infallible tool in the

service of verification of their positivist epistemology.

This is the danger of reification that Bowers (1994) identifies, that we tend to forget human authorship of the world of human experience and come to apprehend our constructs as facts or natural law (p. 33). Bowers points out the paradox of reification is that humans can feel helpless, that they can't control or alter their circumstances, when in fact most circumstances are only human constructions that they participate in. The confusion of human structures for making sense of reality with reality itself is the intellectual equivalent of pretending to breathe life into paper dolls and then, absorbed in the game, forgetting that the characters are not really subject to the rules implied by personification. Methods are only ideas about how to pose and answer questions. They do not merit status beyond made-up tools for inquiry subject to revision or replacement at any time.

To be conscious that knowledge is not a copy of something that exists outside of its being known, but actually an "instrument or organ of successful action" (Dewey, cited by Menand, 2001, p. 361), allows us to use the concept of epistemology without falling into the trap of reification. Dewey, in speaking of the class bias built into the history of philosophy, reflects the insidiousness of an institution superordinating the methodology of one school of thought over another. Dewey describes the efforts of the dominant leisure class of ancient Greek society to "exalt reflection and speculation at the expense of making and doing – to talk about 'reasoning' as something that transcends the circumstances of the being who reasons," in an attempt to "establish in the interest of similar class preferences, the superiority of one element over the other in a series of false dichotomies" (Menand, 2001, p. 361). Whether the distinction made is

between science and art or between the methods of hard science and human science, it is important to recognize that categorization is an arbitrary and political device.

Gadamer, paraphrased by van Manen (1997), makes the argument that “pre-occupation with method is really anti-thetical to the spirit of human science” (p. 3). On the other hand, “anyone can carve a goose when there are no bones” (Menand, 2001, p. 340). A supporting structure could come from a recovered meaning of rigour. A probable origin of the Latin verb *rigere*, “to be stiff,” is “to be straight” (Skeat, 1993, p. 401). If rigour is taken to mean alignment between epistemology and method then it becomes a more flexible standard that can support a variety of forms of inquiry.

Questions mediate between epistemology and method. How we wonder about the world depends on our existing belief systems. A fundamental belief in objective truth leads to questioning what is consistent, and therefore true, about the universe. Good research, in this case, finds what it is looking for and builds in a way to evaluate findings as positive or negative results. This binary outcome is inappropriate for the consideration of multi-variate and continuous phenomena that constructivist believers encounter in the multi-form universe they are trying to apprehend. Questions of quality are essentially unanswerable through methods directed at quantification. Van Manen (1997) calls for research design as dialogue between question and method.

The methodological skeleton of this project is the articulation of aspects of several approaches. There is a difference between the interaction of aspects of these and an aggregate of these approaches. None of these approaches is adopted in its complete form, and none exists anywhere in pure form. Pragmatism, for example, even as it was being introduced, was taken in many different directions by thinkers who worked from

a basic idea about ideas, interpreting its expression as diversely as democracy and the eugenics movement (Menand, 2001).

The labels here, too, are only names for conceptual tools for meaning-making. They point to constructs, aspects of which are employed in the service of inquiry in this situation. I have attempted to focus on the aspects most helpful in this case with no obligation to commit to pre-packaged ideologies. The *theory of the unique*, that van Manen (1997) ascribes to phenomenology, is recognition of human individuality, an interest in subjects who are not replaceable and methods that are not repeatable. Taking a unique approach does not mean, however, that there are no guiding principles, no familiar markers. The following are the signposts of the process of this project.

Qualitative Research. The superordinate categorization of all the methods incorporated is qualitative research. The origin of qualitative is *qualis*, which means whatness (van Manen, 1997, p. 33). This is research concerned with description rather than measurement.

Human Science. Human science is the “curriculum of being and becoming” (van Manen, 1997, p. 7). In contrast with natural science, which is concerned with explaining things, human science aims at understanding human experience.

Phenomenology. Phenomenology is pure description of experience; the focus is on how one orients to lived experience (van Manen, 1997).

Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the description of experience through text; the focus is on how one interprets the texts of lived experience (van Manen, 1997).

Semiotics. This is an approach based on signs. It is “the study of the signs or systems of signs [and it] concerns the processes by which events, words, behaviours,

and objects carry meaning for the members of a given community and to the content that they convey” (Barley, 1983, p. 394).

Pragmatism. Pragmatism is concern with the practical. The principle of pragmatism is that “the soul and meaning of thought...can never be made to direct itself towards anything but the production of belief...When our thought about an object has found its rest in belief, then our action can firmly and safely begin. Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action” (James, quoted by Menand, 2001, p. 354).

Constructive Alternativism. This is the philosophical position that all of our interpretations of the universe are working theories and subject to change or revision at any time. Constructive alternativism “emphasizes the creative capacity of the living thing to represent the environment, not merely respond to it. Because he can represent his environment, he can place alternative constructions upon it and, indeed, do something about it if it doesn’t suit him” (Kelly, 1955, p. 8).

Personal Construct Theory. This is Kelly’s (1955) psychological theory that humans can be best understood using the model of the human-scientist. The human-scientist poses and tests hypotheses (constructs through which the world is viewed) in an ongoing process toward greater predictive ability and control over personal movement through the world.

Critical Theory. Critical theory “works dialectically, that is by searching out contradictions in social arrangements in which, for example, certain groups are systematically excluded from power or from the free access to information that structures rational debate.” It is also marked by “increased self-consciousness about the role of the critic, and the different social and historical circumstances that interfere with



communication and translation” associated with postmodernism (Blackburn, 1994, p. 89).

### Human Science Framework

These ideas hang together on the frame provided by human scientists. Van Manen (1997) explains that human science has no method, no rules, but has its own rigour in the following structure:

1. phenomena deeply committed to
2. investigating experience as lived not conceptualized
3. reflect on essential themes
4. describe through writing
5. pedagogical orientation
6. parts and whole (p. 30).

Phenomena Deeply Committed To. Van Manen (1997) proposes an orientation to research that is caring. Freire (1997) states that the naming of the world, which is the task of qualitative research, is “an act of creation and re-creation, . . . not possible if it is not infused with love” (p. 151). Van Manen acknowledges that a moral claim, a responsibility to children, is inherent in pedagogical research. The questioning arises, not from detached curiosity, but from deep and abiding interest (“inter-esse, to be or stand in the middle of something”) (van Manen, 1997). He proposes

even minor phenomenological research projects require that we not simply raise a question and possibly soon drop it again, but rather that we ‘live’ this question, that we ‘become’ this question. Is this not the meaning of research: to question something by going back again and again to the things themselves until that

which is put to question begins to reveal something of its essential nature?” (p. 43)

The question this project asks, about my role as an educator of disenfranchised students, is one that I have lived with for some time. As a new teacher I realized a contradiction between my previous experiences as a student, my conception of what school was and should be, and the experiences of many of my students. My wish to work in a meaningful way with these students on the fringe of the system led me into the role of learning assistance teacher and then to an alternate school setting. Students in similar situations, and indeed even some of the very same students, have come up again and again in various classroom settings and in my ongoing reflection about the meaning and implications of not only how, but what and why, we teach students. Each new learning derived from readings, courses, and workshops seems to connect back to how I think about this group of students and my obligation to them.

Investigating Experience As Lived Not Conceptualized. Inquiry in human science does not originate in theory. It does not aim “to explicate meanings specific to particular cultures (ethnography), to certain social groups (sociology), to historical periods (history), to mental types (psychology), or to an individual’s personal life history (biography). Rather, phenomenology attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld” (van Manen, 1997, p. 11). Phenomenological research works from a record of lived experience without an intervening theory determining the focus and as the basis for inclusion or exclusion from an existing category.

The process of this research is the gathering of lived-experience material and

reflection on lived-experience material (van Manen, 1997, p. 63). The material of lived experience is easily accessible; as Freire (1955) points out, the essential themes that generate human experience pervade all speech and action. Any time that a person communicates an experience through art, recorded speech, or writing, an artifact is created for possible reflection on an essential aspect or aspects of human experience. In this study, the artifacts are transcribed student descriptions of school experiences from three group conversations about what school has been like for them.

In recognition of the subjectivity of experience, the veracity of the facts becomes less relevant. The important thing is what the experience was like for that person. With this understanding the experiences related by one person are not more valuable than the experiences of another. In his interviews with people in poverty, conducted in 1861-1862, Mayhew drew attention to the ingrained practice of selective assignment of narrative competence when he did the unprecedented and allowed *the poor* to speak for themselves. Until then, the assumption was that people in poverty required more capable agents to apprehend and convey their situation for them (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Within groups, too, qualification of voice is an issue related to participant selection. Because this research is not culturally-based, there is no need to find archetypical representatives who can speak definitively on behalf of all the members of the category. Any person in the situation under consideration is a valuable contributor.

The invitation was extended to all students in the school to participate in a series of group conversations about their school experiences. The conversations took place during the school day to allow equal access for all students. Ten students chose to participate although they did not all attend all three of the sessions. Students gave

permission for videotaping of their conversations for transcription purposes. They participated with the understanding that their words, their descriptions of their school experiences, would be a sources of reflection with the hope of creating understanding that would inform future practice. The conversations were initiated with open-ended questions about memories of positive and negative school experiences and allowed to proceed as naturally as possible with the participants guiding the flow and direction. The lived-experiences as described by these students are the material of this project.

Reflect on Essential Themes. The task of phenomenological research is to work from text to a construction of “a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. 41). The focus is not on preserving or replicating the individuals’ precise experiences in their entirety but on picking up the common thread of experience that weaves itself through the collective life world. It is

primarily interested in the subjective experiences of our so-called subjects or informants, for the sake of being able to report on how something is seen from their particular view, perspective, or vantage point...[a] deeper goal remains oriented to asking the question of what is the nature of these phenomena as an essentially human experience.” (p. 62)

A common thematic is the cross current that conducts the relationship between individual tracks of experience and permits the creation of shared understanding.

Van Manen (1997) borrows a literary definition for theme: an “element, (motif, formula or device) which occurs frequently in the text” (p. 78). Theme analysis, he explains, is the process of recovering the theme or themes embodied in a text. Kelly and van Manen agree that this is not a mechanical process. Kelly urges the listener to refuse

to be literal-minded, to “close his cerebral dictionary and listen primarily to the subcortical sounds and themes that run through [a person’s] talk” (Kelly, 1969, p. 229). Kelly is talking of the need for a therapist to attend to the themes linking a client’s narrative episodes, but the same applies to making sense of experiences described by different people. Although the specific content of personal histories varies, there are themes that persist. These themes give “control and order to our research and writing” as they provide the framework, the “structures of experience” from which arise our questions of what it is to be in the world, in this case to be in our relationships with students (van Manen, 1997, p. 79).

There is no singular way to recover a theme from a text. Some researchers rely on intuition to find theme in an unbroken reading of a text. Bottella, Figueras, Herrero, and Pacheco (1997) find this approach too impressionistic and have devised a highly formalized concept structure that guides textual analysis of personal (journal, autobiographical, and other self-narrative) writing. There are also computer programs that code and sort text by predetermined criteria into thematic categories. Equally as dangerous, warns Riessman (1993), is to read a narrative simply for content and to read it as evidence of an existing theory.

The structure for looking at theme that van Manen (1997) proposes is not a “rule-bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning” (p. 79). He provides three approaches for isolating thematic statements in a given text: 1) the *wholistic or sententious approach* attends to the whole text and attempts to capture its fundamental meaning and express it in a phrase; 2) the *selective reading approach* is repeated viewing or reading of text noting and highlighting particular statements that seem revealing of the essence

of the phenomena; 3) the *detailed reading approach* looks at every sentence for what it reveals about the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997, p. 94).

The reflection in this project took its shape from a combination of a wholistic and a selective approach. The videotaped sessions were viewed in their entirety several times and recurring topics and themes that seem central to the experiences of the students were noted. Then the videotapes were reviewed and sections selected as speaking to these topics were transcribed for reflection on their meaning. As van Manen (1997) points out, some pieces of text are richer than others; the use of these two strategies allows attention to be given both to key passages in which ideas reside in several connected sentences or phrases and the spaces between them, as well as words or phrases that stand more independently with the meanings they hold.

In addition to the patterns in content, the structure of the language used is itself worth considering. Language is a resource for accessing existing ideas and creating new ones; thought-language is the medium through which human experience passes into consciousness. It follows that a person who “has a restricted language experience” may be “unable to achieve a higher level of himself and his society” (Bowers, 1974, p. 35). The organizational patterns of language are an expression of the organizational system used to produce it. “Neither language nor thought can exist without a structure to which they refer” (Freire, 1997, p. 154). The syntax and vocabulary of the text is the vehicle for the content and, therefore, is an element of the reflection on the text of lived experience.

Describe Through Writing. Once the landscape of the material is made navigable by sketching the most prominent landmarks onto a rough map, it can be revisited and a

more detailed mapping can begin. The reflective process of this project was fundamentally, hermeneutic phenomenology, a writing activity. Reflective writing is a similar process to cartography in that the exploration and the record are part of a cycle of discovery: *to map* and *the map* are in dynamic partnership. “To write means to create signifying relations – and the pattern of meaningful relations condense into a discursive whole which we may call ‘theory’. To write/theorize is to bring signifying relations to language, into text” (van Manen, 1997, p. 132). The charted relationships may be used to guide movement through the life-world.

Several frameworks, including Garmston and Costa’s (2002) Cognitive Coaching™ Reflecting Map, Lipton and Wellman’s (2002) Collaborative Learning Cycle, and Nelson’s focused conversation (2001), can represent this meaning-making process. Thinking in each of these approaches is mediated by dialogue with another or others structured by a pattern of common elements. Mediative questions guide the thinker to thought processes that move him or her from an encounter with the external world, to reflection on inner assumptions and values, to a synthesis of the new and previous experience and, finally, to a conclusion that will inform subsequent encounters with the external world. This is the same process as phenomenological writing that van Manen (1997) describes when he says “writing distances us from the life-world, yet it also draws us more closely to the life-world” (p. 127).

Focused conversation (Nelson, 2001) was the framework borrowed for this project. Its origin is in the art form conversation developed in the 1950s to help students respond to images reflectively and to create their own images. The approach was influenced by the Imaginal Education movement of the 1960s that focused on the

relationship between internal mental images and behaviour and the potential to change behaviour by changing images. A central idea is that the messages we receive from the world interact with inner values and influence our actions (Nelson, 2001).

This interaction of external messages and internally held values takes place in the space created by a framework of open-ended questions. The structure of this question set is crafted to support thinking that might not otherwise happen but not determine its outcome. It is “not always clear at the beginning” says Reissman (1993) in *Narrative Analysis*, “what features of speech will prove to be essential. I discourage students from tightly specifying a question that they will answer with data from narrative accounts because analytical induction, by definition, causes questions to change and new ones to emerge” (p. 60). While there needs to be a vessel for inquiry the “cup has to be empty to hold something” (Bohm, 1990, p. 11).

This openness to alternative meanings is what defines dialogue. *Logos*, the root of dialogue, is the derivation of *the word*, or the *meaning of the word*. The prefix *dia*, Bohm (1990) tells us, means ‘through’ rather than two. A dialogue is not necessarily a paired activity but a process through which meaning flows. Even “one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of dialogue is present” (p. 1). The dialogical form proposed by Freire (1972), Bohm (1990), Lipton and Wellman (2002) and van Manen (1997) is triangular. It is the process of meaning making happening in the field spanning two people, or groups of people, and the third point or event they are engaged in the shared naming of.

The writing process is the relationship between reader, writer, and subject (van Manen, 1997, p. 25) and it is this “conversational relation in which we transcend



ourselves” and produce new understanding (p. 104). The writing process that van Manen describes is intersubjective. It needs another (e.g. reader) engaged in dialogic relation for anything new to be created. An audience, which writing presumes, sets up a dynamic for change. Van Manen (1997) illustrates this with the example of Sartre’s *The Look*, in which the experience of viewing someone through a keyhole completely transforms when the watched turns an eye to the watcher. The transformation is from “unreflective consciousness” to seeing oneself “as an object for the other” (p. 25). The reader completes the dialogic relationship that makes writing different from purely internal thinking, adding a third point and the opportunity to move beyond ideas as they already exist within the individual.

Although there is no standard form for narrative discussion, it is the primary form for presenting and reporting findings in qualitative research (Cresswell, 2002, p. 275-276). The form the discussion took in this project was a focused conversation (Nelson, 2001) design and the medium is writing. The three points that comprised the primary dialogical triad in this case were the writer and the authors of the literature referenced in this project mediated by the lived experiences of the students. (A second dialogical relationship exists between the writer and the anticipated reader mediated by the text). The purpose of the discussion-as-writing-process was pedagogical praxis, the mediation of reflection and action: “pedagogy requires a way with language in order to allow the research process of textual reflection to contribute to one’s pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact” (van Manen, 1997, p. 2).

Pedagogical Orientation. The result of human science research is a “critical pedagogical competence: knowing how to act “ (van Manen, 1997, p. 8). In a turn of

the cycle of human science research, reflection on themes explicated from text of lived experience leads to essential understandings to inform future action. Shutz, cited by Greene (1997), gets at the idea that recovered themes are not ends but tools for developing practice: “what makes the theme to be a theme is determined by motivationally relevant interest-situations and spheres of problems. The theme which thus has become relevant has now, however, become a problem to which a solution, practical, theoretical, or emotional must be given” (p. 145). Van Manen (1997) clearly defines this form of inquiry in terms of its “service of the mundane practice of pedagogy” (p. 12).

This practical purpose of phenomenological research seems at odds with van Manen’s assertion that phenomenological questions are meaning questions, not problem solving (van Manen, 1997, p. 23). However, the two aspects are reconciled in an understanding of the interaction of three processes: reflection in action, reflection on action, and reflection on essential meanings. Behavioural choices are made in anticipation of events to be experienced. When the experience is as expected, the behavioural choice is validated and through repetition, becomes routinized; when the experience is unexpected in some way, decisions about how to behave in light of the discrepancy must be made in the moment, what Schön (1987) calls *reflection in action*. *Reflection on action* is the naming and consideration of the appropriateness of past behaviour. Schön’s example is that of Monday morning quarterbacking by the quarterback himself, the process by which present reflection on past reflection in action may lead to change in future action. This cycle is the testing and adjusting of behaviour based on the perceived fit between mental models and experience (Kelly, 1955; Schön,

1987). The process of phenomenological inquiry articulates with this cycle at the level of understanding of what a given experience is like.

Phenomenological inquiry as a form does not prescribe action but action, personal or collective, may be engaged in on the basis of the thoughtfulness sponsored by phenomenological research (van Manen, 1997, p. 154). As Senge (1990) recommends, the application of the lever for change is most effective at the level of mental models that drive decisions about action than at any point in the procedure/action plan itself. “So phenomenology,” explains van Manen (1997), “does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (p. 9).

From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching – questioning – theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully of it, or better, to *become* the world. (van Manen, 1997, p. 5)

The difference between research for the purpose of informing and prescribing practice is illustrated by the Carver (2003) governance model. Governance is a function distinct from management: the former provides a broad framework of understanding, a set of guiding principles, a constitution, while the latter makes the day-to-day decisions, creates and implements the procedural manual. The theory generated by human research represents the understandings that we bring to the planning process rather than

the action plan itself.

This project has not resulted in a blueprint for working with alternate school students in general, or even these alternate school students; however, it has brought me closer to an understanding of the situation I am a part of, and as a result, will influence my future action.

Parts and Whole. Pedagogical inquiry with a human science approach involves looking back to lived experience attending to both the parts and the whole. The “question, ‘Did I do that right?’ forces us to come to terms with the *particular* (this child, this situation, this action) under the guidance of our understanding of the *universal* (what is the meaning of pedagogy – parenting, teaching – in this?)” (van Manen,, 1997, p. 79).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is “a philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the *logos* of *other*, the *whole*, the *communal*, or the *social* (van Manen, 1997, p. 7). This is the complementary process to writing literature in which universal themes as problems are encapsulated in characters’ stories to be recovered by the reader. In the foreward to her novel *The Bluest Eye*, author Toni Morrison (2000) says this of her character: “as singular as Pecola’s life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls” (p. 210). People, fictional or actual, “become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives. These private constructions typically mesh with a community of life stories, ‘deep structures’ about the nature of life itself” (Reissman, 1993, p. 2). Phenomenology is neither mere particularity nor sheer universality; it is oriented to the greater pedagogic good yet

sensitive to the uniqueness of the individual (van Manen, 1997, p. 23).

In this project, common themes were understood to create the patterns found in the students' descriptions. In recovering these themes, I found threads that could be traced into the larger pattern of the social fabric. The purpose of reflection on these themes was to gain insight into both what was integral to the shared situation of these students and what was universal about that experience. This inquiry focused on part and whole, with and within: the intent was to know better how to interact with a specific community of students within a larger system of education and pedagogical understanding.

#### Summary of Method

This inquiry worked from text of lived experience (what ten self-selected secondary alternate school students say about their school experiences) toward greater pedagogical understanding, getting closer to what is common to all human experience that would help educators know how to act in relationship with these students. The text was derived from viewing, reviewing, and partial transcription of three videotaped student group conversations that I facilitated with initial questions and occasional prompting for expansion or clarification of student statements. A focused conversation (Nelson, 2001) structure guided reflection on this material: a set of objective, reflective, interpretive, and decisional questions framed a dialogue between myself and a key group of authors (including Freire, Payne, Sylwester, and Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Brockern) mediated by the text of lived experience provided by the students. The dialogue happened by being written, creating meaning from the common threads of the literature and the lived experience descriptions of the students, within the conceptual

framework of the existentials of time, space, body, and relation. The result was insight about what it was in the experiences related by these students that could speak to pedagogy and inform my future actions as a teacher.

The method of inquiry of this project brought a tool, the focused conversation (Nelson, 2001), to the task of reflection on themes recovered from text. This kind of scaffold, incorporating deliberate attention to what is observable, personal, and revelational in text of lived experience to inform relationships with students, is outside the usual method of phenomenology but true to the intent. Reaching what in a focused conversation is the decisional level, contemplating implications for future action, goes beyond where phenomenological inquiry generally stops. However, informed action is the anticipated outcome of human science research. My underlying interest in social reform is an acknowledged bias of this project that is not an element of human science, but has developed through my reflection on pedagogical experience. The method was a blended approach with phenomenological, critical, and pragmatic aspects.

The format for presentation begins with a brief introduction to the student participants and an overview of the focused conversation guide. The findings follow, organized around the concepts of space, time, body, and relation with other. Discussion around the general language patterns and on the content of the student descriptions related to each existential follows and, finally, there is reflection on the process of the project itself and implications for future action in the conclusion.

### The Student Participants

These general profiles of the student participants give a broad context for the analysis and discussion that follows. Alasuutari (1995) describes qualitative material as

being a part *of* the world that is being studied rather than a set of measurements *about* that world. The important thing to know, he warns, is that one must know from what corner of the world that piece has been broken off and that the learning is not generalized too freely to the world beyond that corner.

Jamie is a seventeen-year-old girl who has attended AS on and off again since grade nine. She chose to come to AS rather than conform to the expectations of her classroom program. She is a First Nations student who lives off-reserve in a trailer with her older brother.

Ed is a seventeen-year-old boy who has taken courses at AS toward his graduation program. He has lived alternately with his mother in another town and with his father living in a bus here in this community. He was within a few weeks of graduation when the discussions documented in this project took place.

Mike is also seventeen. He lives with his younger sister with his mother's ex-common-law husband who is not biologically connected to either child. He was referred to AS in grade ten to complete courses he was struggling with in the regular classroom and has continued to take some of his courses at AS. He graduated on a non-academic program shortly after the dialogue sessions for this project were completed.

David is seventeen. He is a First Nations student who lives with both his parents and two siblings. He has been in both the regular high school and in a program connected with AS that is for students who require behavioural support in a small group setting. He came to AS this year to begin work on his graduation program.

Brent lives with his biological father, his step-mother, and two siblings. He lives approximately thirty kilometers from town. He is eighteen-years old and is working on

the first year of his graduation program at AS.

John is seventeen-years old. He currently lives with his father and step-mother. He spent part of this school year in another town living with his mother. His high school career has been disjointed, including time in a severe behaviour program, work at AS, and remedial courses delivered by the local college. He plans to return to AS next year to work toward graduation.

Chris is eighteen-years old. He lives with his mother and sister. He works at more than one part-time job throughout the school year. Most of his program is at AS.

Jennifer lives with her boyfriend in an apartment near the school. She is sixteen-years old. She is taking a few courses at AS that she did not complete at the high school last year.

Paul is seventeen-years old. He lives with his both his parents and his two brothers. He is taking a few courses at AS toward a non-academic graduation program and entry into a trades program.

Cody is seventeen-years old. He is a First Nations student who lives on one of the nearby reserve communities with his mother and extended family. This year has been the first complete year of schooling he has attended since he was in the primary grades.

#### Focused Conversation Design

The following focused conversation plan guided the written reflection on the text of lived experience provided by the students. The questions at the *objective* level aimed at surveying the material and identifying what was there to work from. At the *reflective* level the questions prompted the making of connections between the text and personal experience, familiar theory, and interest to establish points of focus, themes to be



explored. The questions at the *interpretive* level led to interpretation of some of the generative themes of these students' school experiences, construal of essential understandings about the experience of schooling in general, and consideration of the particular relevance of these understandings to these students' situations. The questions at the *decisional* level contemplated the implications for future practice. Although the written record of the reflection was not formatted in the question-by-question order of the guide, this cycle of inquiry is engaged in relative to each of the four existentials of space, time, body, and relation with other.

Questions at the Objective Level.

- What is recurrent in the descriptions of students' school experiences?
- What references are made to the experiences of body, space, time, and relation with other?

Questions at the Reflective Level.

- What is surprising about what the students say or do not say?
- What connections do I make with my personal experiences as a teacher?
- What connections do I make with educational literature I have read?

Questions at the Interpretive Level.

- What is contradictory about the experience of these students and the assumptions of educators in the school system?
- What are the essential understandings that these contradictions point to?
- What are the implications of these understandings for working with these students? With all students?

Questions at the Decisional Level.

- How will my relationships with students be influenced by this understanding?
- How will my practice be informed by this knowledge?

## Findings

### Lived Body

As the students talked they made several direct and indirect references to how they experienced the world from a physical perspective. They talked of being hungry, tired, and having their physical needs ignored or attempted to be brought under the control of adults in the school. Their feelings about these conditions and ideas about how they should be addressed were clearly expressed:

*“Having breakfast helps you have good day.”*

*“They say that when you don’t eat breakfast your concentration is all screwed up. That’s so true. When you’re hungry you’re screwed up.”*

*“We can’t learn when we’re hungry. Like in the morning if I haven’t eaten breakfast it’s all I can think about. When I’m hungry I need to eat now and that’s the only thing on my mind.”*

*“You’re brain dead when you are out of juice. You got to eat when you got to eat.”*

*“When you’re hungry you don’t work. You can’t. You just sit there and wait for the bell, wait for the bell. You’re just suffering and then a teacher comes along and nags you to work. I just want to say ‘Don’t fucking talk to me! I’m fucking hungry.’”*

Other text revealed expectations of adult recognition and intervention and resentment over failure of school staff to live up to these expectations. The school, an institution with resources, should, these students asserted, provide for this basic need:

*“The school should feed us breakfast, man.”*

*“Yeah. You need to eat.”*

*“Kids should be able to get food at school.”*

*“We need food at school and kids shouldn’t have to pay for it.”*

*“I think it’s bullshit that they shut off the vending machines during class time. Just because some kids, like, they rip off the machines. It’s not all the machines that you can reach up inside but they shut them all off. Besides, there’s kids that depend on those machines. Why the hell would they shut them off! They don’t always have money but they’re hungry. I mean, if a kid’s hungry he should be able to have food.”*

*“Yeah, like sometimes I used to go to the cafeteria and I’d say ‘Hey can I have something to eat?’ and they’d say ‘Get lost,’ if I didn’t have money. I mean, you’re here to teach kids but yet you don’t care. That’s not right.”*

*“Food is a big issue. Especially with this tariff, you know soft wood lumber. You’d be surprised, that the adults don’t really think of the kids. The kids’d be . . . like my parents are having a hard time with money so I’d better stop asking for money. I don’t need it anymore and even if I’m hungry I won’t ask for money ‘cause they’re broke, right? A lot of kids do that. And the parents don’t even notice but it’s just the kid who doesn’t want to worry his parents. And you go to school and ask, ‘Can I have a hotdog’ or whatever and the adults say, ‘Gimme a dollar,’ but you don’t have it . . . ”*

Two students described different experiences of the use of food as a reward for work completion in one program. The first student offered the following: *“I like to hear, ‘Right on [student name]. You’re so good. Right on.’ It’s like ‘Okay, everyone else at the table, did you hear that?’ I also like it when I get food. Like pizza or a pop.”*

The second student described the experience of being denied this same reward:

*“Like those work contracts. They actually work for a while, but then if you don't get everything, like every last little thing done and they don't give you your pizza it's like 'Fuck you!' and I don't want to do them anymore. When you try, try, try, and you still couldn't do it. I mean, they say, 'Well you can get it next week' but who can wait until next week for a piece of fucking pizza when you are hungry now?”*

Students spoke of asking for help. The responses of the adults in the school were interpreted as selfish and uncaring in the student conversations.

*“When you see those kids walking down the hall bumming a quarter it's obvious they're hungry. The teachers should know.”*

*“And when they ask someone for a quarter and they say 'No.' That's just selfish.”*

*“Yeah, but how do you know that's not their last money for their food?”*

*“Yeah, but a lot of people do lie. You'll ask them for a quarter and they'll say, 'No. I don't have any money,' and then you see them breaking a five-dollar bill later. It's like, 'And you couldn't give me a fucking quarter?’”*

*“Some teachers will give you a pizza coupon or something if you tell them you are hungry. Others just say, 'bring a lunch.’”*

*“You know when I tell you I'm hungry and you give me a lunch slip just because I need it and I'll be like 'Great. I'll pay you back when I can.’”*

*“But some teachers don't care. Their kids aren't hungry!”*

Anger was also the response to restrictions placed by those in authority on student rights to exercise choice about meeting other physical needs:

*“They need to let you go and have smoke when you need to. I hate it when I really need a nic stick and a teacher stops me and tries to tell me I can’t. It really sets me off. It’s like ‘Look, you don’t understand. I need to go and have a smoke now’!”*

*“Oh and another thing. When you are over at the high school in class and you have to like go to the washroom. They’re like ‘No you can’t.’ If you go anyway then the teachers are chasing you down the hallway.”*

*“Some teachers say you have to have a doctor’s note to go to the washroom during class time. What the hell is that?”*

*“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard in my life. Telling you you can’t go to the washroom. I mean, come on! To have a teacher say ‘You can’t go to the washroom.’ I don’t care if I only have to go a little bit. If they tell me I can’t I’m going to go anyway! It’s like ‘Fuck you! You can’t control me.’ No one can control me.”*

*“They should treat kids their age. Not like friggen little babies. When I want to go to the washroom, I want to go to the washroom. Like, Fuck, man!”*

### Lived Time

In looking for student references to the experience of time I looked for what these students said about how time was passed, how time was measured, and how these students related to the future.

Some students described the reason for, the future outcome of, attending school as finishing:

*“I choose to go to school. I don’t have to go to school. No one makes me. I just want to come to school. I might as well come because I get bored at home. I don’t care about college and stuff. I just want to finish high school.”*

*“I just want to finish, to be done so I don’t have to do it anymore.”*

*“And, like these guys said, I want to get it over with. Get it done.”*

A few students spoke of instrumental reasons for going to school:

*“I get up in the morning and come to school because my mom says she never made enough of herself. She says she had to go back and get upgrading or something like that because, to get where she is now, to have a job. If she hadn’t of gone back and gotten what she needed to then she wouldn’t be where she is now. And I want to be better than that.”*

One student said he came to school *“to get it done. Because I have to. So I can get further than my dad did.”* Another stated both an immediate and a future incentive for coming to school:

*“The reason I get up in the morning and come to school is my mom and dad won’t let me stay at home if I’m not in school. The other reason is I want to finish school so I can go to college so I can have a chance to play in the NBA. That’s why I go to school.”*

The student participants said very little about what they saw themselves doing after high school. The direct question of what were their plans was met first with silence and then, after a moment, with brief vague answers:

*“Graduate and then work.”*

*“I’ll work. When I’m old I might be a private contractor. . . get someone else to do the work for me. I guess.”*

*“I’ll work doing something.”*

*“I don’t know. Working I guess.”*

*“I am going to have my own business . . . . [asked for clarification about kind of business]. . . I don’t know what kind but, um, like [name] you know he gets all those grants and stuff. Something like that.”*

*“I want to be a photographer. Maybe. I don’t know.”*

In other parts of their conversations students acknowledged their lack of direction and the issues around having no vision to work toward:

*“They [teachers] talk about stuff like choices every day with the kids who know where they are going, know what they want to do. They help them. You know, they hook them up with colleges and all that shit. They find them a job or something. You know, help them. It’s the people who know somebody who get the help.”*

*“They [students who don’t know what they want] don’t get any help.”*

*“The problem is that the people who don’t know what they want won’t come out and say, ‘Hey. I don’t know what I want or what I am good at. I’m a fucking retard. Help me.’ They don’t say anything. The ones that need the help won’t ask for it.”*

They also admitted needing help with goals and being reluctant to ask for it, expecting teachers to offer it freely:

*“They [teachers] should be spending time with people finding out what they’re good at, what they want.”*

*“Yeah. They get paid to do that. They should do it.”*

*“They should spend the time. Even like this, just talking with us. Finding out. If they would spend the time to do this they would know the kids, what they want,*



*and could help them for the future. Instead they just help the ones that know what they want to do. It's like, 'Well, you have no idea so screw you guys.'*"

Students talked about the irrelevance of the curriculum to their own lives:

*"Like sometimes there's workshops or things, you know stuff we get to go to that could be good. Everybody's listening and you start to get ideas and then the teachers never mention it. It's just over. Gone. What's the point in that? After a workshop you should be able to sit and discuss it in class. When you try and mention it they're just like, 'That's something else, not what we do here. That's something outside of school, nothing to do with class.'"*

They went on to talk about what they believed they needed to know and what they did not:

*"Like ninety-eight percent of what I learn [at school] now I don't need to know. Like in math, I learned how to add and subtract in elementary school. I use that right now. Plus and minus. That's good enough. At work I can figure out how much money am I getting? That's all most people need their math for. How much am I going to get? How much does that cost?"*

*"You need to be able to do more than add and subtract. You have to be able to figure out your GST and stuff too. You got all these bills coming in and then you get your cheque and you gotta divide it all up. Make sure you got it all covered."*

*"What's this A plus B times C. When the fuck does that come in handy?"*

*"You do need math but not all this friggen alphabet math bull shit. You need to know how to plus and minus and divide, and like English too. If you know how to write and spell, spell good enough, write good enough. That's it. Not all that poetry stuff."*

*Making you do that is just bullshit. When are you ever going to use it? 'You thou ought not do that inside my house!'"*

*"But you have to think there are a lot of people in this school who can't read and write very well."*

*"Okay, but once you can, good enough, the ones that can, they should leave you alone. I mean, I'm not a very good writer but I can do it good enough. It doesn't have to be perfect."*

When asked what it was that they needed to know how to read and write well enough to do students offered the following:

*"Resumes."*

*"Writing letters"*

*"Memos."*

*"Yeah right like you'll ever need to write a memo! Who the fuck are you going to write a memo to?" (laughter)*

*"Reading, you know, you need your basics. You need to be able to read stuff at work. Basic stuff."*

*"You need to be able to read signs, the newspaper. If you have the basic reading skills, you can teach yourself if you want to just by reading more and more.*

*That's if you ever need to. That's all you need is the basics. Everything else is shit. It's just shit! You learn all the basics, like reading in grade one, two, three, four, maybe five and six. The last time I really used my brain at school was grade six and maybe seven. That's the last time they taught me anything I would really need. The basics. Since then it's just like, 'What now? What's this? I don't ever*

*need this.' You sometimes hear kids say, 'Oh. You might need to know it some day.' What the fuck for? You're not ever going to use this shit."*

*"I think most of the stuff you really needed to learn was definitely covered by grade nine or ten. After that it's just for the smart people who are going on in school."*

The students recognized the usefulness of a high school diploma in obtaining employment:

*"Anyone you talk to, they'll tell you, you can't get anywhere without a high school diploma. You go and apply for a job and they'll look at you and say, 'Well, your first job was high school and you didn't finish that. How are you going to do this one?'"*

*"You need a work ethic before you finish high school because you have to get a job when you get out because you have to support yourself. Some people's parents will, right now, as soon as you graduate, say, 'See ya!' You know, you need to pay rent and stuff. Buy food. Pay for clothes and shit."*

*"Well, it's like this: first you do your school work and then you graduate and go on to another kind of work. You go from one type of work to another type of work."*

The students made reference to pressure to conform to school modes of measurement and management of time.

*"Like the other day. Remember? Like you made it just about to the end of so and so's class and we were out in the hallway like two minutes before the bell. The teacher comes out and gives us shit."*

*“You should be able to do what you want to do. Like, if you are done your work you should be able to leave. Not have to sit there with your thumb up your ass waiting for some magic bell to tell you can leave.”*

Several students described the week as organized around the weekend.

*“ I like Monday. I just get up Monday morning and go to school after the weekend.”*

*“Yeah and hear all the gossip!”*

*“ I get up in the morning on Monday after the weekend and I go school and everyone’s saying like ‘Did you hear about what happened on the weekend?’ talking about parties and stuff that happened. ‘Do you remember what you did?’ Stuff like that”.*

*“ That’s [Monday] when I usually catch up on my sleep.”*

*“Oh Yeah!”*

*“We’re really tired!”*

*“Why do you think we are so quiet?”*

*“Monday is the day you really don’t want to go to school. You just want to sleep!”*

*“Monday is the first day off the weekend. It’s like you know you have to be here all week and it is a long time until the weekend again and you are so tired.”*

*“And you know it’s only the first day and you have four more to go until Friday.”*

*“I like Tuesdays. It’s a good day because it’s Toonie Tuesday and we all go to KFC for lunch.”*

*“Thursday is a good day because it’s only one day away from Friday. Friday is so close you can almost touch it!”*

*“Thursday you work because you want to get something done before the weekend . . . if you are going to do any work or any homework.”*

*“Friday is like skip, skip, skip, skip. Friday is planning day for the weekend.”*

*“Kids skip on Friday because everyone is getting ready. You are at home or your friend’s place getting cleaned up. If you go to school you are finding people to make plans, figure out if you are staying in town, where everyone is going to meet. . .”*

*“I don’t usually see Saturday. ‘Saturnight’, yeah, but not Saturday. You sleep wherever you are crashed if you are at a friend’s place or go home and sleep and then start again for the next night.”*

*“Sunday is sleep day.”*

*“Sunday is sleep day. Family day. You stay home with your family after you have all been wherever all weekend. Everyone just relaxes.”*

The students speak of the sameness of the weekly routine:

*“Every Friday someone comes up to you and says, ‘Where’s the party?’ and you say, ‘I don’t know. Where’s the party?’ And you all end up at the same place doing the same thing.”*

*“It’s just like the same show every night.”*

*“I thought it was fun at first, you know when you first start going out on the weekends and getting drunk, but then it’s the same thing, the same thing every weekend.”*

*“Everyone does the same thing every weekend. It used to be really fun and now it’s just what you do.”*

The response to one student’s complaint that *“every weekend you are drinking the same thing, with the same losers, at the same place”* was uncontested resignation:

*“Yeah, but what else are you supposed to do?”*

Money was discussed as a factor: *“If you got cash there are things to do. Here, with our parents all broke-ass it’s all the same,”* explained a student, yet other statements contradicted this direct causal link between personal finances and the choice to party or not party on the weekend: *“Seriously. You can go out with no fucking money, no smokes, nothing and you can get high no problem. You’ll go home just fucking smashed.”* A third student agreed saying, *“I think when I go out with no money I won’t be able to get anything, but you do.”*

Drug and alcohol use was graphically described: *“You guys think we have it all easy. All you got to do is go to school. Well it isn’t like that. We see it all.”*

Another student described a common experience for him:

*“You go to a party and you’re talking to somebody and all of a sudden you look up and everyone’s gone. Where the fuck did everyone go? So you go and look in another room and there’s everyone just fucking sitting there cracking right out. There could be forty people packed in one little room cracking out. You wouldn’t believe how many crack heads there are in this town.”*

Another student confirmed the description:

*“I’ve seen that so many times at parties. Everyone is sitting on the bed on the floor. There’s several pipes going around. Some fucking squaw is getting bent*

*over the bed or in the corner and people don't even care. You take the dirtiest grossest movies, like Kids. Have you seen that one? Well, take the really hard core movies where things are really intense and that's what it's like. That's a typical weekend in [name of town]. Haven't you ever seen them shooting up in the gazebo? I was working for my dad cleaning out the town septic system, snaking the lines, and you wouldn't believe how many needles we found."*

Others went on to describe persistent pressure to become increasingly involved in drugs and alcohol.

*"We get it all pushed at us. 'Here try this. Here try that'. It's everywhere."*

*"You go to a party and you go to use the bathroom and someone will be in there and ask you, 'Hey man. Do you want to do some crack?' You say, 'No man. I don't do that.' You'll see that same guy twenty minutes later and he'll ask you again, 'Hey, man, want to do some crack?' And you'll be like, 'Fuck, man, leave me alone!' Next time you see him, again, 'Do you want some crack? Let's do some crack. . .'"*

*"It's not as easy as just choice. You can get a guy to do stuff he wouldn't do, easily. All you have to do is get him drunk and you can get him to try the next thing. He can drink lots but never want to do weed and you can get him totally plastered and say, 'Hey, let's smoke some weed,' and he'll be, 'Yeah. Yeah. I want to smoke a joint.'"*

*"Yeah. That's how it works pretty much."*

Students talked about the difficulty associated with making changes. They referred to cycles and routines as having multiple aspects.

*“When you want it to change you have to break the cycle. It’s hard when all your friends are doing the same thing. Some people want to change but it’s like a junky, a total crack-head. He wants to change but it takes time and he can’t take it and he looks around and all his friends are still doing it so he does what he knows. Back to his routine. The same thing. You have to leave if you want it to change.”*

Students established a link between change and location:

*“It’s all the same until you leave.”*

*“When you leave”* (several students together)

*“When people graduate in [name of town] they mostly leave.”*

*“They are supposed to leave and find jobs. That’s what you are supposed to do.”*

*“It’s like you know it’s shitty here and when you get enough money you hit the road.”*

*“Yeah when you get money and a car you fucking leave.”*

*“But everyone tells you, ‘Come back,’ so you do.”*

*“Yeah. Everyone comes back.”*

*“It’s because they want the same routine. It’s what they’re used to. They’re used to the same thing every week, every weekend.”*

### Lived Space

Students made reference to many spatial elements of their experience. The greatest range of space students directly described was their own town and this student identified it as the necessary scope of school curriculum: *“They should have classes*



*that teach you to live in the world. I think school should teach you how to survive in the actual [name of town] world that we live in."*

Students spoke of having nowhere to go since the closure of a drop-in program that operated out of an arcade:

*"It's [name of town]. There's nothing to do."*

*"I think they should open up that fucking youth thing they had. They said they couldn't open it because people were skipping school to hang out there. They could open it at 3:00."*

*"It was like an arcade thing. They had Nintendo, pool tables, boxing gloves, ping pong."*

*"It was cool."*

*"It was all for free."*

*"It was good. You had somewhere to go."*

*"When the center thing was open in the summer it was good. It was open until 3:00 in the morning. It doesn't matter if you are drunk or high. That's okay. That's your problem. You got free stuff to do and tunes playing. They shut it down when school started."*

Students describe feeling unwelcome in public spaces:

*"There's nowhere to meet up after school."*

*"A lot of people go to the gazebo to play hacky and stuff."*

*"Yeah the last time we were there playing hacky the cops pulled up and were watching us like they thought we were smoking dope or something. So we just left."*

Another student describes the result of dislocation and boredom:

*“You’re uptown and your drinking what do you do? You’re all restless. What do you do? Okay, so you wander around and then what do you do? You break shit. And then you get bored and you wander around looking for more shit to break.”*

A student provided a single reference to feeling welcome in the school space:  
*“Like [staff name]. She says stuff like, ‘Oh, I’m so proud of you because you came to school.’ That makes you want to come to school doesn’t it? Like someone actually wants me here.”*

Students described the school as a place where adults made rather than invited them to attend: *“That’s funny eh? They say they aren’t going to chase you. When they come and talk to you in grade seven about going to the high school for grade eight, they tell you that no one is going to chase you around anymore. Yeah right! They just follow you and nag you all the time!”* [laughter from group].

*“Yeah you just have to show up on your own. Right! They make you go to class!”*

*“Yeah. First time I skipped in grade eight they came after me. Me and [student name] were skipping out. We hadn’t even been to school yet. We were just hanging out downtown. We decided to go to [student name]’s house to play Playstation. We were just playing and then the phone rang. I was like, ‘Don’t answer it. We’re not supposed to be here.’ A few minutes later, who pulls up? [principal’s name], my dad, [student name]’s dad and his step-mom. A whole friggen crowd of people! We were like, ‘Oh No!’ We just jumped off the balcony and started running. We ran through like three feet of snow. Our dads were chasing us. My dad’s yelling, ‘You just get your fucking ass to school NOW!’ We*

*ran as fast as we could. We thought they were going to kill us! [student name]'s just like, 'That's your dad? Holy shit!' We ran to school and went straight into class. We were like twenty minutes late. The teacher asked us where we were. We just said 'Nowhere!'" [laughter]*

*"I remember the day my mom and sister left. They went to [another city]. My dad said, 'You make sure you go to class today.' He was pissed off that my sister was missing a bunch of classes. So anyway, me and [student name] we went uptown and we were walking around and we were walking around and we get to under the bridge. My dad saw us. My dad has his Ford. He went right under the bridge with his truck to cut us off. I was never so scared in my life. [student name] ran! I knew if I ran he would have run me over so I stopped. It was that bridge by the rental place and he drove right under there with the Ford. I couldn't believe it. He was like, 'You come back right now!' I got in the truck and he drove right back up the side. [student name] was so scared I didn't even see him like a day and a half. Ask him about it! He was so scared. We both were. We look up and there's my dad coming down the hill at us!" [laughter].*

Students describe restrictions placed on their movement within the school:

*"If they had a good excuse . . . like when the lockers were being searched and we couldn't go in the hall that was fine. When the drug dog was there. That's all right. But when the reason is just, 'Because,' or, 'No,' then it's like, 'Fuck you!'"*

*"They're just power tripping about all the really small shit. The tiniest stupidest little things. They don't make any sense."*

*“They should give you a reason. Like when you don’t have your homework done or you’re late they always want a reason. But when we can’t go to the washroom or be in the hallways it’s just, ‘No!’”*

*“I have good reason to be in the halls. They’re [other students] just wandering. How is that my fault?”*

*“Seriously, every time I go out of the room I see the exact same people out in the hallways. The same teachers, too. They are supposed to be teaching not be out in the halls.”*

These students, when asked to share how they came to be there, defined the space of AS as a dumping ground for students not wanted in other classrooms:

*“I swore at too many teachers.” [laughter]*

*“They just put me there.”*

*“I don’t know. No, actually I was in Math 10A in [name of town] ‘cause I wasn’t very smart and I couldn’t keep up with my class so I went into 10A there and uh, when I came here I had to still take 10A and it was in AS . . . along with Earth Science so I just got sent there. The courses I had to take you can only take through AS.”*

*“I just skipped class all the time, stuff like that. You know, I just lost all my classes. That was last year . . . when I was in grade 11 for the first time [laughter].”*

*“I got to AS because I broke my leg and was out of school for three months and it all started because of [teacher name]– dirty old whore! [laughter]. Well she is! [laughter]. I was in Math 11A at the high school. Right? And I couldn’t get*

*caught up because I needed her help and she, well she did give a little bit of help but I just couldn't get the hang of it. Like, I was doing pretty good before I broke my leg. Well, not very good, but I had a 'C'. When I came to the stuff that I didn't know what I was doing with, she just wouldn't help me get caught up and keep up the new stuff everyone else was doing. So while I was trying to get up on that English started going downhill, and then I was trying to get caught up on that and Science started going downhill. Finally they all just basically gave up on me. They said, 'You're going to AS.' I tried to fight it. I didn't want to go to AS."*

*"I failed all my courses in grade 8. I failed everything except P.E. so they sent me to AS."*

*"I just didn't get along with the teachers. I swore at them and stuff. I got sent to AS right at the start and I've just been there ever since."*

*"I had to fight for two and a half years to get any classes back at the high school. This year I got Foods and Communication but none of the other teachers would take me."*

One student described his experience of the physical arrangement of a classroom:

*"Now at [school name], there's a good example. At [school name] there were smart kids and then there wasn't-so-smart kids at [school name]. The smart kids, there was a group, and they all sat at their little table. There was another little table of not as smart kids, and then there was mine and [student name]'s table. The kids at the smart table got all the help. They got shown what to do and helped and we got worksheets of easy work and left to just do them. We were thrown a*

*piece of paper in front of our faces and told to just do it. I never got math. I never learned barely how to times two by two for Christ's sake!"*

Access to preferred space was heatedly discussed by several students who joined in after one shared an experience he had in a local business:

*"That's like when I was at Subway the other day. These two people, these two ladies were standing there and they were upper class. They were rich and shit. They had money to spend. So they go up there and order their food. And the chick who works there goes, 'To stay or to go?' and they said, 'To stay,' or whatever. So they got their food on a tray to stay. When it's my turn they don't ask me shit about staying or going. They just hand me my stuff in a bag and say, 'Have a nice day!' It's just because I'm lower class they don't even want me in their fucking store!"*

*"They usually ask me."*

*"Of fucking course they do! Who are your family? Have you seen your fucking house? I fucking live on a bus! Of course they ask you! I thought if you wanted to stay you just take it out of the bag and eat it!"*

*"They're supposed to ask you and give you a tray if you want to stay. They are supposed to fucking ask you!"*

*"Really! So next time you're in there. . ."*

*"Just stand there and like wait for them to have to give you a tray."*

*"I'll just – next time they give me a bag I'll just be, 'What's the problem bitch? Ask me if I want to stay or to go. Take it out of the fucking bag and do it all over again. No, I don't want that one now. Start all over!'"* [laughter]

*“I’ll be like, ‘Say it! Ask me!’”*

### Lived Relation with Other

Students revealed aspects of their experience of relationality in their references to interactions with peers, school staff, and others and also in their direct descriptions of the nature of the relationships they have. Several times students made statements about the importance of having friends in the same class:

*“As much as I don’t like the environment, the boringness, I like to be around the people, my friends.”*

*“Yeah. When you walk in and you don’t see anyone you know and you think, ‘Pffffff’ I don’t want to be here all by myself with no one to talk to!’ If I go to class and none of my friends are there I usually just leave.”*

*“Yeah. I hate being in a class with a bunch of fucking preps. It’s way better when your friends are there.”*

*“I hate those days when none of your friends were there. Like in grade eight when they split up everyone. I didn’t know anyone. That wasn’t the right thing to do ‘cause we were scared without any of our friends. We were used to being with the kids we went to school with all our life. I wouldn’t go to the classes where none of my friends are.”*

*“Yeah. They try and do that to you in grade eight. Move everyone around so you’re not together. That’s not right.”*

*“No shit.”*

*“In my core class there was like one person I knew. We weren’t even friends. I just knew that person. One person.”*

*“How would you like to have only four of you [First Nations students] in a whole class?”*

*“What do you mean? There are more natives than white people in school.”*

*“Yeah but they’re all at AS mostly.” [agreement by several].*

The limiting, as well as the supportive, functions of peer groups were discussed as students talked about being held back by their friends:

*“It’s because it’s a small town. You know everyone here. You grew up with them, went to school with them, partied with them every weekend. When they all say, ‘Don’t go, blah, blah, blah,’ then you don’t want to leave.”*

*“And if you do go, you’ll be back.”*

*“I want to leave but I don’t want to leave by myself. . . everyone I have known all my life. I’m scared to go all by myself.”*

*“Everyone has to keep everyone else down.”*

*“Yeah so they feel better because they’re not alone.”*

*“Yeah. Everybody has to drag everyone else down. You know you are at the bottom of the pit and you want everyone else to stay down there with you. Like everyone’s talking and you hear someone say, ‘One of these days I’m going to leave [name of town] and it will be so great,’ and then it is getting close, like, ‘Man I’m almost out of here!’ and someone else says, ‘You shouldn’t go man. You should stay here. We’ll all miss you.’ Drag you back down.”*

*“Like when you are going to class and your friends say, ‘Where are you going?’ and you say, ‘I’m going to class,’ and your friends all say, ‘Why are you such a pussy? Why are you going to class? Come on. Let’s go smoke some dope or*



*something.' They call you down if you try and do something that is good for you because they don't want to be by themselves smoking dope and you not. They gotta fuck it up for you, too."*

Reasons for this pattern of behaviour were offered:

*"So they don't have to go do whatever by themselves."*

*"It's more or less so you don't get ahead of them. They keep everyone the same. Pull them down."*

*"Everyone you know wants to feel like they're the best. When someone comes up to them and shows them something they can't do, or they just know they can't do it. They get jealous and it's like 'Fuck you' and they screw it up if they can."*

Students identified their socio-economic status relative to others in the community and some of the implications of that status:

*"Look at the people who get held down. There are definitely people who are kept down in this town."*

*"See, [student name] here. His family is upper class. If you ever go their house, this house, it's fucking enormous. And then say you go to my house, or [student name]'s, or [student name]'s, or [student name]'s house and it's like an average house."*

*"Dude! How is my house average? I live in a bus! How is that average?"*

*"Well, certain people like to live in a bus."*

*"Well I don't!"*

*"Well anyways, upper class people think because they have a nice house and shit they have all these rights and we don't. They have all the things they want."*

*“What I mean is, like, if I go into [store name] and say I need something. I go in there and go, ‘Okay my dad is so and so, right, can I pay for this next week?’ The answer is, ‘No.’ If [student name] goes into any store in town he could probably get whatever he needs and they will let his parents pay later. ‘Oh yeah, fucking fly at her! No problem!’ Am I right?”*

*“Yeah well, some places.”*

*“It’s the same thing with school. It’s the same everywhere. You can’t say they don’t [do it]. Some fucking scrub will go into a car dealership and they will try and tell him he can’t afford that kind of car, until he pulls out cash and then they are all different. They want to help him then.”*

*“Say if there’s me and I’m working, and I go to get up to get a drink or go to the washroom, like I sometimes do. The teacher’d be all, ‘Where are you going? No. Sit back down and do your work.’ And with someone who’s smarter they’d be like, ‘Oh, yes. Go right ahead.’ They can get up and leave no questions asked.”*

These students talked about getting a lower class of education from teachers who did not want to deal with them:

*“If you have two kids with their hands up and one is lower class and one is upper class. The teacher always helps the upper class kid first. He gets more respect. Then when they get to you they usually just give you the answer because they don’t want to have to stay there, spend any time with you.”*

*“Yeah, they’re like, ‘This one’s this one, this one’s this one . . .’ and so on. They just want to not be there. You knew you could do that with different teachers.”*

*“Yeah, remember when you got mad at [student name] and me conning those new teachers into doing our work for us? You came by and just stopped and asked that one lady what she was doing. That was funny! [laughter] And then you said we could do it ourselves.”*

*“We can get away with it with some people because they don’t want to deal with us.”*

*“My elementary school, [school name], was bullshit. Those fucking teachers shouldn’t even be there. They’re fucking idiots! All of them! They never taught us all the stuff you guys learned. Those teachers should never been there. They’d give you worksheets and eventually they’d just give you the answers. Those teachers fucking sucked!”*

*“I went there and that’s what they’d do. They’d give you these big ass work sheets and you’d just sit there and eventually they’d put the answers on the board. They didn’t teach you. That’s how they did it.”*

*“Yeah. Lot’s of teachers gave up on us.”*

*“Yeah. I remember that. I never got math because no one ever explained it to me so I could get it. I just kept getting easy stuff that I could do by myself while they all went on.”*

These students said they believed teachers favoured the capable students and were reluctant to ask for help:

*“The teachers definitely favour the smart kids. They help the smart kids.”*

*“They don’t help [us].”*

*“They don’t want to ask because they don’t want people talking about them. I mean you tell someone something and a half a fucking hour later everyone’s talking about it. “*

*“People don’t want to come out and ask for help because other people will find out and you’ll get picked on, look fucking stupid.”*

*“There are a lot of people who are too scared to ask.”*

*“I was the same way. I wouldn’t ask a teacher for help. I mean, if you’re sitting at a table with people who are working, who know what they are doing there’s no way I would say I needed help. There’s no fucking way I would admit it. That’s why I never asked for help. Oh, I could care less now, but when I was younger. . .”*

When asked what they suggested teachers do to help reluctant students, one offered the following advice: *“First of all, don’t spend so much time with those smart kids. They don’t need it. We need it. Put the helper [support staff] with the smart kids and then the teacher go sit with the cocky kids.”*

Students shared high expectations for teacher intervention and support despite students’ difficult behaviour.

*“Back to the group thing, the smart kids and the not-smart kids, the kids who tell the teacher to ‘Fuck off’ do that because they are confused.”*

*“They get stressed and it comes out. The smart kids who get it are sitting there saying ‘Oh, I get It,’ and you’re sitting there thinking, ‘Well I fucking don’t!’”*

*“Maybe if they took the time to help everybody. Not just some people. The people who aren’t getting help eventually just say ‘Fuck it.’”*

*“They help the smart kids who aren’t trying to look down your dress or swear at you or put tacks on your chair. They like to help the nice, polite, smart kids.”*

*“But we weren’t like that. We were trying to learn. Well okay, we might have harassed the teacher quite a bit and shit but we still have to learn and they shouldn’t give up on us.”*

*“But if you can see their point, too . . . . If you were a teacher would you rather go and sit at a table where they are going to call you down and be rude to you or where they want your help and listen to you? Teachers are human, too. Who would you rather go to? Obviously they don’t want to learn.”*

*“Not necessarily. Sometimes they are just frustrated. They get mad when they don’t get it and no one is helping them. The teachers should know. They get paid. That’s what they get paid for.”*

As well, they recognized that there were rewards and punishments for certain kinds of behaviour. Teacher assistance was seen as a commodity that students must barter for with their behaviour:

*“Just because they act more civilized, they get more help. If you act civilized you get more things.”*

*“How many of us in this room are labeled as trouble makers?”* [All hands go up]

*“That means that there are teachers who despise us.”*

*“There are certain teachers that, if you have your hand up, they can look at you and they’re thinking, ‘Fuck that. I ain’t going over to that kid’. They can ignore you all class.”*

*“Yeah. The kids who are sitting there, ‘Hey bitch!’”*

*“Like [teacher name]. If I was being an asshole in class she would not help me whatsoever.”*

Subsequent sections of text demonstrated that students were aware of the difficulty teachers face in dealing with students who lashed out but believed they should be prepared to deal with it anyway.

*“But the teachers should be able to tolerate that.”*

*“How many years do they go to school before they become teachers? That’s part of it. They should know. They are getting paid to help us. We’re not getting paid. That’s the difference.”*

*“Like say that there are kids who fuck around in class but then they like, need help, they should still get it. They’re asking for it now. He’s asking for help. He wants to get help. He should get it.”*

*“That’s their job. I think that’s what their job description is. If a kid asks for help they should help them.”*

*“Like all those teachers who say, ‘If you were at a job right now, you’d be fired!’ Well, they should do their fucking job!”*

One student asked, *“So the teachers are just superhumans? They should put up with everyone’s shit?”*

*“Well no. But they should still help you. They shouldn’t just give up on you because you say stuff.”*

*“Yeah. But they’re all human beings, too. They got feelings too. When some little kid is sitting there calling them a bitch and stuff of course you are going to get angry and not want to help the little bastard.”*

Students named laughing and ignoring as responses to perceived teacher attempts to exert unreasonable control:

*“She’s a bitch. One time, when I was on crutches and just hobbling down the hallway. She said something to me. I forget what. Probably that I wasn’t supposed to be there or something. I just said, ‘Oh really?’ She got all mad and said, ‘Go to the office.’ I was just like, ‘See ya bitch,’ and kept on hobbling away. I wasn’t going to listen to her. We made her cry lots of times.”*

*“Yeah. ‘Cause she was such a bitch. I remember one time. Me and [student name] were in the library. We were sitting at the table there, just laughing so hard, and she turned around and we just kept on laughing. Finally she just yells, ‘Will everybody shut up!’ She did! She couldn’t handle pressure and she was always trying to be in control but she couldn’t. That’s why she shouldn’t be a teacher – she doesn’t know how to handle kids. Anyways, she walks out and she’s just bawling! And then she comes back in and screams, ‘Come with me to the office!’ She comes with us and then tells us to sit down. I say, ‘Wait,’ and she screams, ‘I said sit down!’ So we just got up and walked out. ‘See ya!’ We would always do that to her. Just walk away. Sometimes she would follow us. Remember the one time she followed us nearly to [store name]? She was just yelling at us!”*  
 [laughter from group].

Students expressed hatred toward the teachers they had earlier described as particularly controlling:

*"I hate [teacher name].*

*"Yeah. [teacher name] is the worst teacher!"*

*"[Teacher name] was the worst teacher ever! As soon as I ever see her again, if she comes back here, I'm going to punch her in the face. I fucking hate that dirty old whore! And her husband too!"*

Control was linked by one student to self-esteem:

*"Yeah. Teachers like to be in control. They want to control everything. Everyone wants to feel like they are control of stuff but you know, it's like you can't control shit because you are shit."*

These students described their typical responses to this perceived threat of abuse of power:

*"They can control you to an extent but then they go over the line. That's when you retaliate and get suspended."*

*"My class was great! We drove our teacher crazy. She was like, 'I can't take this anymore!' Remember when [student name] put Exlax in her coffee? And remember [teacher name]? She threw her books on the desk and screamed at us. Then she picked up her keys and walked out. She just left! [laughter] Then didn't she take a year off? No? She just worked half days after that? Or something."*

*"Remember [teacher name]'s class? He threw a piece of wood at me, the psycho bastard!"*



*“He was a perv. It could be hundred degrees in there and I would wear a sweater. If you wore a tank top or something he was always looking down your shirt, or trying to.”*

*“Yeah. He was always checking out the girls. He was gross.”*

*“He hit a kid in my class in the head with a hunk of wood. Gave the fucking guy a concussion nearly. He was a fucking psycho, but really, any teacher will snap. Look at the sub we had that time. He was subbing for our class and we didn’t have enough text books to go around and he was [imitating teacher with monotone slow speech] ‘All right, well then you’ll just have to share with a partner.’ And a girl kept saying she wanted her own book, ‘I don’t want to share.’ On and on like that. She wouldn’t shut up. He kept going, ‘Very well then, we’ll just see how it goes,’ like that. Finally he just snapped. I mean this guy is like a rock, you can’t crack him, and he just lost it. All of a sudden he’s like, ‘All right! If you want a book you fat bitch, then have one. Here’s your book!’ and he chucked it right at her, just missed her head. That was wild.”*

*“That’s like [teacher name]. When he subbed in our class I was just picking at him until he turned around and just yelled at me, ‘Fuck off!’”*

*“That guy threw chalk and broke rulers on desks and shit. He’s fucking crazy.”*

[facilitator prompt: “So what is the game that’s being played here?”]

*“It’s like, you want to give me an ‘F’, I’ll drive you fucking insane.”*

*“It’s like the kids don’t want to be there and they’re miserable, so they want to make everyone else around them miserable.”*

Students also talked about the use of force and violence in the home as a method of control:

*“I just sit there and he [dad] screams and screams at me and he does this [leans forward with hand extended] and I just flinch figuring he’s going to hit me and that just gets him more mad. He’s like, ‘Do you fucking think I’m going to hit you! You think I’m that kind of dad!’ and then later on he’s like, ‘Get out of my sight, just go. You know you’re moving. I’m sending you to live with your mom.’ And then three hours later they realize what a dink they are and say, ‘Oh. I’m sorry for the way I acted.’ That’s the way my dad does it anyway.”*

*“Well sort of. It’s different now. I mean when you are younger, like five to ten, you are scared of your mom. You’re not intimidated by your dad yet because you don’t really know what intimidation is yet. It hasn’t happened. And then you get older you start noticing that your dad is mean. When you are younger it is your mom who deals with you and then when you get older and bigger and cockier you see how she can’t really do nothing but your dad, your dad is in your face now. He even just moves, when he is mad, and I’m ready to run.”*

*“What for? You’re a big guy. You’re friggen’ huge. You got nothing to be scared of.”*

*“Then you don’t know my dad! My dad may be smaller than me but he’s fucking mean.”*

*“When my dad gets mad you just run.”*

*“And then you let him cool off before you come back.”*

*“When my dad gets up out his chair the only thing you can do is grab the closest thing to you, anything you can get your hands on, to throw in the way as you get the hell out of there. The best thing you can do is stay away for a few days and then knock on the door and if he’s still mad you stay away a while longer.”*

A few male students talked about a difference in approach to situations and relationships that they attributed to gender:

*“It was more like, you know, kind of a professional attitude there. They didn’t even care. I don’t know. It was different. . . maybe . . . I don’t mean to sound sexist but this school is different because it is run by women.”*

*“Yeah!”*

*“But that’s better!”*

*“Yeah, and that is better. It settles things down a lot. Haven’t you noticed there’s hardly any fights anymore? We know you are going to jump in. It’s pretty bad when you are scrapping and some little tiny lady jumps in and breaks you up. What are you going to do? You can’t hurt her or anything! One time I was fighting in my school in [name of town] and we were down on the ground, and the principal came up and grabbed my arm and I just smacked his face into the ground and kept going. If that was you or [teacher name] I would have stopped – ‘Okay, I’m done now.’ But just the fact that he was a guy was enough to, you know, set me off.”*

*“When another guy, even a teacher, tries to pull you off you get, you know, intimidated or something. It’s like, you know, I don’t care if you are a teacher or not I’ll break your face too if I can. Like that day when [teacher name] slammed*

*his hands down on my desk. That was it! It was like right away – I was ready to fight him. I was like ‘Fuck you!’ If it had been you or [teacher name] I would have just left or something and talked to you later.”*

*“Yeah, male teachers will try to intimidate you. You know. It’s just human nature. Like we have to feel dominant. Not many people realize it but even just hanging out buddy to buddy we have to have our dominance, you know. We call each other names and do stuff to sort it out.”*

*“What you think depends on what you’re used to. If you grew up around chicks you are used to talking to them. . . Like, it is hard though when you grow up around just men, say. Growing up in redneck country shooting at things, with your dad really anti-female. You know, saying shit like, ‘Women suck. They’re evil and they will fuck you around whenever they can.’”*

*“Yeah. That sounds like my dad.”*

*“Mine, too!”*

*“But you can talk to them [women] easier. Like when last year [student name] said she was fucking pregnant with my baby. I didn’t want to talk to no male teacher. They wouldn’t have helped, probably just called my mom. I talked to [staff name] and she gave me a hug and said it would be all right.”*

*“See. I find it easier to talk to women because they will sit down and actually listen to you. Mostly guys will not really listen to you, or maybe listen to you and then make fun of you afterwards.”*

Students talked about the balance between teacher control and student choice:

*“Teachers are like, ‘My way or fuck it.’ It’s their way or you’re not welcome in their class. They don’t want you to have any choices except their way. So how can they fucking help us with choices?”*

*“Like [teacher name]. He would do that all the time. He’d just pretend to listen to you. Like he’d say, ‘Okay. I’m going to give you a chance to explain yourself,’ and then he’d go, ‘Hm hmm, hm hmmm,’ and he’d usually be eating or drinking water, and then he’d go, ‘This is what is going to happen to you,’ and you’d go, ‘No. No. Please just listen to me,’ and he’d say, ‘Okay. I’ll listen to you,’ and right after he’d say, ‘I’m going to do this, this, and this,’ – the exact same thing he said the first time. I remember this one time I had a conflict with him. I was looking at somebody’s knife and I got caught with it. He said he was going to call the police. He eventually did let me go but I was bawling. I was in fear for my life. I thought my dad was going to find out and kill me. I thought I was going to get my ass kicked. The same kind of thing happened with [vice-principal] but it was completely different. I had a pocket knife or something at school. She listened to me. She said, ‘Don’t ever bring something like that here.’ She talked me through it and said this is what would happen and everything. She explained it all to me and, like, I never brought anything like that here again since then. I got it.”*

## Reflection on Findings

### Patterns of Language

The collective text of lived experience that was generated by this group of students in this situation could be described as a disorderly stream of commentary about various aspects of school life and life outside of school, often expressed with anger or humour. The syntax and vocabulary of the text was often rudimentary and contained a significant amount of profanity. While the potential for probing to elicit more complete descriptions is discussed in the later section of reflection on process, the text taken as is, like any artifact of lived experience, according to Freire (1997) and van Manen (1997), can reveal something of the experiential world of its originator.

The patterns of speech generated by these students were characteristic of those Payne (1998) associates with a culture of poverty. The language system she describes has a casual register which typically uses a vocabulary of 400 to 800 words, general rather than specific word choice, reliance on non-verbal assists, and incomplete sentence syntax that contrasts with the formal register of the educational and middle class work settings with its standard of complete sentence use and specific word choice. The shapes of casual and formal discourse also differ: the first is circular, going around and around before arriving at the point whereas the second gets directly to the intended point. Story structure in casual register is episodic, emphasizes characterization and emotional content, and invites audience participation, while stories related in formal register are organized along linear plotlines and focused on causal linkages between events. Payne's model provides useful markers for recognizing differences between the modes of communication of the student participants and the educational system.

The casual register of these students' language is not so important in terms of the class descriptor Payne attaches to it, but because of potential cognitive and value differences it may point to. One implication is that the degree of complexity of the language infrastructure was a factor limiting cognition. Bowers proposes it "is difficult to decode complex messages if one possesses only a simple speech pattern" (Bowers, 1974, p. 66). The linguistic differences also imply value differences. Formal communication, structured primarily for the conveyance of information, is more task-driven than casual communication, organized to provide opportunities for social interaction, which is relationship-centred, according to Payne. The discrepancies between the grammar of the personal text presented in this project and institutional language pointed to different orientations to the common experience of schooling.

Another general feature of the text was that some of the content seemed to be only peripherally related, if at all, to school experience. This material was included because it was what was offered by the students in response to invitations to talk about school experiences and, so, was connected for the student participants. Kelly (1955) recognizes that details of events are situational but the themes or underlying assumptions that shape a person's experience of events are more persistent. Bowers (1974) advocates a systems approach that considers a range of interrelated elements: "in taking seriously the questions related to how education shapes the student's consciousness, one must also explore the other dimensions of the student's existence that are so often ignored as being unrelated to education" (p. 3). Juxtaposition of students' experiences in terms of body, space, time, and relationality in school and

other contexts often reveal, by parallel or contrast, taken for granted aspects of education.

### Lived Body

I was unprepared to have themes of food and hunger recur as they did throughout the three conversations. I was very aware of the problem in the elementary schools. At the secondary level I had assumed that it would be less prevalent with students old enough to prepare their own food, and seeming to have money for brand name clothing, cigarettes and the pop machine. I knew there were students, including a few who supported themselves, for whom food was an issue, and with whom that the school was involved. But the number of students who talked about hunger was unexpected.

In contrast, the books I refer to throughout this project, on the implications of poverty, reconciling biological and cultural factors, and building resiliency in youth at risk include few references to hunger or food. The amelioration of the concrete situations of people are not the focus of these writings that deal instead with the thinking and structures that give rise to and arise from these situations. The physical condition of hunger may just be recognized as too concrete, the implications for education too obvious, to be discussed in the scope of hidden and taken-for-granted practice. Whatever the reason, the educational implications of hunger are only alluded to in these writings.

These writings did discuss the activation of the body/brain's attentional system as necessary for learning: "all cognitive activity is dependent on the initial activation of our integrated sensory/emotional/attentional system. It's biologically impossible to learn something if we're not attending to it, and we don't attend to things that aren't



emotionally meaningful to us” (Sylwester, 2003, p. 37). It is not much of a leap to imagine the physical and affective imperative of hunger overriding the less compelling stimulus of the classroom curriculum. Security, presumed to include food security, is noted by Sylwester (2003) as a necessary condition for getting beyond relatively primitive brain function occupied with survival and on to higher-order reasoning and learning. The students’ comments reflect cognizance of the impact of hunger on their ability to function.

The last student description of hunger provided a succinct but powerful account of the experience of being hungry at school. The description and the etymology of the word *hunger* are compatible. The word *hunger* can be traced backed to the Sanskrit “*kuflich*, to contract, so that hunger denotes the feeling of being shrunk together” (Skeat, 1993, p. 212). A resulting image is of a student with his capacity for purposeful thought or action constricted by hunger, the student tightening into a ball of suffering and frustration as the clock creeps toward dismissal time. I think back to the times I have dealt with outbursts by students approached by staff with seemingly reasonable benign requests and wonder how many “f--- you’s” were actually “I’m hungry’s.”

The students’ remarks seemed to draw no connection between need and means. The need for food is a given; money is something one might or might not have. What has one to do with the other? The economics of food distribution appeared to elude them. And, perhaps, they have a point. A resolution passed by the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations in 2001 “reaffirms that hunger constitutes an outrage and a violation of human dignity and, therefore, requires the adoption of urgent measures at the national, regional and international levels for its elimination.” It “also

reaffirms the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger so as to be able fully to develop and maintain their physical and mental capacities” (Commission on Human Rights, 2001). The United Nations does not distinguish between the rights of people with currency in hand and those of people without. It became interesting to me that the services provided by a school would be apportioned according to these criteria.

The school does have some mechanisms for students to obtain food without money. The two different descriptions of food as a reward for work completion in one program revealed the surface rationale and the hidden message of this practice. The first student seems pleased with the system. The awarding of food was construed in this case as a positive reinforcement for academic achievement, a welcome form of praise. Costa and Garmston (2002) warn of the insidious side of praise, that it is antithetical to building trust. “Praise communicates a value judgment about the other person or the person’s performance. It infers an unconscious entitlement to evaluate another” (p. 101). If one can give praise one can withhold it, or make a negative judgment, as in the second student’s experience of failing to earn the same reward. In this case, despite the United Nations Commission on Human Rights pronouncement that “food should not be used as an instrument of political or economic pressure” (Commission on Human Rights, 2001), food was being used as leverage for compliance with school expectations for work production. Reframing this practice from the perspective of a hungry child transforms an accepted practice into a cruel method of manipulation.

If the adults in the school were aware that the students are hungry, and the following text suggests that students believed they were, then the hostility over inaction or coercive action is understandable. Payne's (1998) comparison of class values provides a lens for looking at the difference between student expectations and experiences around sharing food and money. Payne describes middle-class and school values, as placing a high emphasis on self-sufficiency in meeting one's needs through work and management of resources, while a hidden rule of poverty is that money and goods are to be shared. The latter, Payne explains, is a natural extension of the belief that one never gets ahead so money is best immediately spent or shared. I realized the aptness of this interpretation as I read her analysis and recollections of similar student behaviour I had witnessed rushed forth. I recalled new items of clothing circulating among family members and friends, students passing out their lunch contents to the others at their table, Discmans and music CD's freely given up for loan, and students giving away or sharing their last cigarettes. Later I was interested to read two of the same examples provided by Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Brockern (2002) as demonstration of the value of generosity in Native cultures:

A high-school boy will spend his last coins in buying a package of cigarettes, walk into a crowded recreation room, take one cigarette for himself and pass out the rest to the eager hands around him.

Another high-school boy will receive a new coat in the mail and wear it proudly to the next school dance. For the next three months the same coat will appear on cousins and friends at the weekly dances, and it may be several months before the original owner wears his new coat again. (p. 58)

The beliefs around possessions that are ascribed to Native cultures and cultures of poverty, and flowed through the text these students generated, set students up to be disappointed when they encounter the dominant values at play in the school system.

Different beliefs about the appropriateness of sharing and expectations about sharing reflect differences in how people regard their relationships with others. The root of the word generosity is the Latin *genus* meaning kin (Skeat, 1993, p. 173). So to be generous is to treat others as though they are kin. The following passage, referring to *children* rather than *my* children or *our* children as the meaning of life, and assigning the role of caregiver to *someone* rather than to *a parent* or *parents*, speaks to a less formalized view of relationships and a broader view of kinship.

The power of caring in Native cultures is summarized in a story shared with us by Eddie Bellerose, a Cree elder from Alberta, Canada. “In a conversation with his aging grandfather, he posed a question, ‘Grandfather, what is the purpose of life?’ After a long time in thought, the old man looked up and said, ‘Grandson, children are the purpose of life. We were once children and someone cared for us, and now it is our time to care’” (Brendtro, Brokenleg & van Bockern, 2002, p. 59)

The completion of a turn of this cycle is that those children will eventually oversee the care of the adults in their old age. “We are literally abandoning the persons whom we will ask to support us in retirement” (Brendtro, Brokenleg & van Bockern, 2002, p. 5). An early variation of the root of the word abandon is the Danish *bande* which means *to curse* (Skeat, 1993, p. 28). By failing to demonstrate the generosity Brendtro et al, call for we are cursing our next generation in both senses of the word,

causing or invoking unhappiness or harm and directing obscene and derisive messages at them communicating clearly that they are unworthy, unloved.

I recall conversations, in the staff room of an elementary school where I worked, about my keeping a cupboard of food for students to access on an as-needs basis. It was the opinion of more than one staff member that providing food for children who were hungry only served to let parents off the hook. Parents, the argument went, always had money for cigarettes and bingo, and would be encouraged to continue to spend it that way if others did their job for them and supplied food to their children.

Depersonalization is the process by which the formalized relationships of an institution cast people into structured roles that encourage separation from the human aspects of the situation. The role of the teacher is not to meet the nutritional needs of students; that is the role of the parents. How else could an adult justify doing nothing to intervene on the behalf of a child suffering from hunger? To advocate letting a group of human beings, an especially vulnerable group, suffer in order to teach a lesson to another group is inhuman. It can only happen when school has become an “impersonal bureaucracy” where “students and teachers do not relate to each other as whole persons but in narrow circumscribed roles” (Brendtro, Brokenleg & van Brockern, 2002, p. 13).

In *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* it is suggested that schools look beyond the narrowest interpretations of their role and interact with students as whole people, whole people who will sometimes have parents without sufficient skills and resources to meet their needs. This text reminds the reader that historically it has been the tribe rather than the nuclear family that has been the unit to ensure the survival of the culture, stepping in to “nourish the new generation” when children were orphaned or their biological

parents were “too immature or irresponsible” (Brendtro, Brokenleg & van Brockern, 2002, p. 12). As the only institution to have daily and sustained contact with children, schools, suggest the authors, are most suited to play a leadership role in assuming these “tribal” responsibilities with other sectors of the community.

Van Manen (1997) says that school, as a “cultural-political institution” needs to come to terms with its *in loco parentis* responsibilities (p. 6). While many in education and the community focus on the intellectual, and to a lesser degree emotional, developmental function of school, van Manen points out that parenting and teaching share a fundamental pedagogical purpose: “the human charge of protecting and teaching the young to live in this world and to take responsibility for themselves, for others, and for the continuance and welfare of the world” (1997, p. 7). While the school decides its level of commitment to this responsibility, the text generated by these student participants around hunger indicated that they had already decided that this was the school’s role. Their expectation must be addressed somehow or continue to be a source of anger and distrust.

Anger was also the response to other restrictions placed by those in authority on student rights to exercise choice about meeting physical needs. The intensity of these reactions is not typical of students in general but is not unusual for the students who end up in alternative programs. A student who might come to school already tuned, by an insecure outside environment, to a state of physical vigilance may be expected to make a physically and emotionally charged response to a perceived problem. The “reflexive problem solving systems” (fight or flee mechanisms), that Sylwester (2003) describes as necessary for survival in dangerous situations but inappropriate for most classroom

situations, can run continuously in some people (pp. 56-57). Understanding this can allow teachers to make choices about how outbursts are handled. As one respondent suggested:

*Why do teachers get so bent out of shape just over a little bit of swearing? That's why some people like you. If we get mad and swear you usually say something like, 'Just calm down. Maybe go outside for a bit.' Something like that. Other people are like, 'Leave!' right away. Sometimes you can't help it. We have stresses, too. And we don't get to go to stress classes like they [teachers] do.*

The implication for instruction is that students need to be taught how to monitor and control these integrated physical-emotional systems, to manage stress so that they can function in a structured setting.

An alternative interpretation, once written to me by a professor in response to something I had submitted, is that “just because you are paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you.” Just because a student's sensitivity to threat is problematic in some settings doesn't mean it isn't accurate. What if, rather than coming to school with a dysfunctional nervous system, these students bring a different sensibility capable of perceiving what is imperceptible to members of dominant culture? Looked at from this perspective it is possible to imagine some extreme responses as scaled appropriately to the transgression.

Students described the manipulation of their physical liberties as condescending. To be restricted as they described is to be treated as though one is of a lower status or age, to be degraded. My belief is that teachers do not consciously design their practice to bring about student degradation and humiliation but I suspect few have considered

how their rules and routines demean students. The apparent gains in efficiency and order may come at the cost of student self-esteem and regard for authority. There may be a level of threat inherent in school rules and routines to which certain students are more attuned.

Adults expect to be respected but often do not extend the same to students. Brendtro et al, (2002) name the ignoring of student requests for washroom breaks as an example of disrespectful behaviour that is subtle, where “adults may actually believe they are acting in the best interest of the child, but there is a quality of paternalism that borders on oppression” (p. 84). While many teachers expect students to confine their breaks to scheduled times in the name of classroom efficiency it is interesting that they do not treat their colleagues that way. At educational conferences and workshops there is typically an announcement made at the beginning of a session inviting participants to take care of their physical comfort, directing them to where the refreshment service is set up and pointing out where washrooms are located. The expectation is that as adults we will govern ourselves appropriately and indeed, I have no memories of having my learning disrupted at one of these events by someone accessing the coffee pot or washroom.

Most teachers would be genuinely offended to have an instructor or presenter order them to refrain from whatever movement or measure they believed was reasonable to maintain personal well being and comfort. I have a few recollections of being in an audience when there was a shared sense that the speaker or instructor was in some way trying to exert a measure of control, by a look, an aside, or a direct request in reference to the autonomy of the individual members or audience in total. In these



instances the collective annoyance was palpable and in some cases circulated throughout the rest of the day or conference as comments about the arrogance or rudeness of the presenter. What would be generally unacceptable treatment of teachers engaged in professional development or coursework is standard practice for many educators working with children and youth in classrooms.

### Lived Time

The aggregation of text relating to time from the three conversations points to a different temporal accord than that predicated by the education system. The students described marking time by weekends and parties, and the irrelevancy of the high school curriculum to their own futures. These were predictable topics for a conversation with high school students. They are not, however, countered by specific goals and plans or positive talk about the future that would mark them as examples of stereotypical teenage attitude incidental to an overall life plan. The content of these student descriptions was particularly poignant because of such omissions.

People's motives for doing something imply what they predict the outcome will be, how they relate to the future. Students' reasons for getting up in the morning and coming to school say something about what they expect of their educations, of the future their education is preparing them for. Some of the responses in this study indicated that these students did not expect much. The choice to go to school in many cases seemed based on ambivalence about presently relevant options rather than any long-term goal. A goal, to finish, was stated but it didn't seem compelling. Rather it seemed that these students were only going through the motions. School was just what you did when you did not have anything else to do. When a goal was named it was

really a *non-goal* focused on what one was trying to get away from rather than trying to get to. To finish school was less about being able to start something else than about being able to stop doing something. To be done was the thing.

A few responses indicated a forward momentum toward the goal of school completion for an anticipated result. The goal for many was to get further along than their parents had but to where specifically was still not clear. No academic goals were named. Meeting others' conditions in order to access or maintain opportunities was the purpose many of these students had for schooling. An education was not the point.

The goal of graduation for graduation's sake was a common aspect of these descriptions. The lack of real plans beyond that point elevated graduation to a more important event than it might be otherwise. A mother of a grade-twelve student remarked to me during grad preparations that a number of the graduating class found it annoying that certain students' (read *Native* students or *alternative school* students) parents celebrated at graduation quite disproportionately to the effort their children put forth over the last dozen or so years to acquire the bare minimum number of credits for a token diploma. The graduation milestone signifies a beginning for some students and an ending for others. Graduation - if students are not looking forward to a continued progression of achievement, if this is not the first of many anticipated celebrations but perhaps the last - takes on a different significance.

Many respondents expressed an understanding that there would be some kind of transition to the work world following high school but few details indicated what that might look like or how it might happen. Invitations to say more about plans for the future received no follow up. Freire (1997) speaks of hopelessness as "a form of

silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it” (p. 152) and of silence as a “structure of mutism in the face of overwhelming force of the limit-situations” (p. 155). Their apparent reluctance to talk directly about their lives after high school was more likely an expression of discouragement than disregard for the future.

Although these students allowed that they needed help they remained silent rather than risk losing face. To ask for help was to be vulnerable. These students said teachers should find out what students know and are good at. The role of the teacher is, Freire (1990) agrees, to find out, and help students find out, what students know and might want to know, as a basis for curriculum choice.

In order for one to know, its just necessary to be alive, then people know. The question is to know what they know and how they know, to learn to teach them things which they don't know and they want to know. The question is to know whether my knowledge is necessary because sometimes it is not necessary.

Sometimes it is necessary but the need is not perceived by the people. Then one of the tasks of the educator is also to provoke the *discovering* of need for knowing and to never impose the knowledge whose need was not yet perceived (Freire & Horton, p. 66)

Because school curriculum is generally derived from sources far removed from the students and is relatively fixed it had no perceived relevance to many students in this study. They did not believe their teachers pursued opportunities for making meaningful connections. For these students relevancy was tied to time. What they said they needed was what would be of use presently or in the imagined future. People perceive the need for new knowledge only if they can imagine a new reality where that

knowledge will be of use. The more limited and concrete the imagined future of these students, the more limited and concrete their perceived required knowledge set.

What students say about what they need to know says a great deal about the futures they envision for themselves. These students said they would need little knowledge beyond what is gained from an elementary school education. The curriculum they described was a core of consumer math and functional literacy (reading environmental text such as signs and packaging, and completing forms) in preparation for living paycheck to paycheck in entry-level jobs. The lack of emphasis on the factual or conceptual knowledge of traditional academic disciplines demonstrates their perceived irrelevance to the futures of these students. These students, by opting out or minimally participating in these other areas, are self-selecting a limited and limiting curriculum.

Some authors would construe this situation differently. Rather than a strictly self-imposed limit situation, this might be acceptance of a curriculum that is imposed but unacknowledged by the school system. McCutcheon (1997) writes that concurrent with the “publicly-advertised fare of the schools” runs a second curriculum that is unintended but “transmitted through the everyday, normal goings-on in schools” (p. 188). The content of this hidden curriculum is the values and messages, indirectly conveyed by the policies, environment, instructional methods, and materials of the school, including “the development of a work ethic” (p. 189). Perhaps it is this curriculum they are reacting to.

While McCutcheon defines the conveyance of the covert curriculum very clearly as unintended, Bowers (1974) provides evidence that this is the real curriculum of the

school system. He points out that “students are often dropped from school for exhibiting behaviour that challenges the routines of the school; they are seldom dropped, on the other hand, because they lack the intellectual ability to deal with the academic curriculum” (p. 62). Instead of the true purpose of schooling, the academic curriculum is actually the means for teaching the covert curriculum. Bowers stipulates the irrelevance of the overt curriculum as necessary for the inculcation of obedience, docility, and self-alienation in the up-and-coming workforce. The ability to complete personally meaningless tasks, Bowers says, demonstrates that the student “has accepted his [or her] own self-alienation as a mode of being” and will be able to carry out such tasks day after day in the workplace (p. 63). Bowers (1974) writes that

except for the most autonomous, most students learn this lesson early in the first grades before they are intellectually mature enough to understand that concomitantly they are also learning not to take their own values, feelings, or thoughts seriously in determining what is worthwhile to learn. (p. 63)

If a student rejects this lesson, then there is no point to continuing in school.

So what of these students who seemed to understand intuitively how the system works? These students said that they had already learned the pieces of the academic curriculum that they wanted and that the rest was irrelevant. They were explicit in their understanding that the real point was to obtain a piece of paper, a diploma, certifying readiness for work.

The insight that these students had into the school curriculum hinted at greater competence than they were generally given credit for having. Novak (1970) raises the possibility that failure to conform can signal deficiency, or strength:

When a young person is being initiated into society, existing norms determine what is to be considered real and what is to be annihilated by silence and disregard. The good, docile student accepts the norms; the recalcitrant student may lack the intelligence – or have too much; may lack maturity – or insist on being his own man (p. 94). Brendtro et al (2002), referring to the work of Lozanov on suggestibility, say that the brain “often acts in courageous ways, challenging and refusing to accept that which it determines to be useless or pointless” (p. 97). This alternative perspective on non-conforming students shifts the question from how to adjust the students to the norms to what is the rationale for these norms?

The students made reference to pressure to conform to school modes of measurement and management of time. Recall the student reference to two disputed minutes as time remaining before the bell rather than time remaining in the lesson. The implication was that the work of the period was done and students were expected to wait out the bell under the supervision of the teacher rather than take the time as their own to spend elsewhere. This was an example of control not exerted for any direct benefit to academic learning but to compliance to routine and teacher authority over the issue of time use. Bowers (1974) writes “learning to live in accordance with the dictates of the clock is a primary example [of the covert curriculum]” (p. 63). He warns that by allowing the clock rather than the intellectual interests or emotional mood of the student to determine how long the period of involvement with a subject will be, the school teaches the student that he cannot control his own pace. In effect, the student is being conditioned to accept a state of powerlessness similar to that experienced by the worker who stands in front of the machine until released by the clock.

The student who provided sardonic commentary on the artificiality of the divisions of the day and the use of the bell as a restraint expressed the notion that dependency on the clock as an external locus of control is something not everyone was interested in. Different emphasis on clocked time versus subjective time is another difference between the school system and the descriptions of lived experience of these students. Sylwester (2003) notes “time can exist as an objective chronological sequence of clock ticks and calendar dates, or it can be subjectively flexible (how long it takes a red light to change or a boring activity to end) . . . School time is about schedules, lesson lengths, grade sequences, due dates, waiting, and much more” (pp. 102-103). The experience of time these students describe is not ordered the same way. It is time segmented by immediate concerns, such as food and sleep, and “the weekend.”

There was no mention of time use directed outside the closed loop of weekend-to-weekend existence. This was not the standard set by the school which promotes the dominant view of time as a “cultural commodity” (Sylwester, 2003, p. 102), teaching students that “time is linear and can be judged as to whether it has been properly spent” (Bowers, 1974, p. 15). Properly spent time is invested in future achievement. These students did not describe using time to any anticipated advantage. In fact, time did not seem to advance at all in their descriptions.

The weekend parties appeared to punctuate otherwise undifferentiated time. A function of parties and the orientation to time that it represents, is shared by Upchurch (1996):

The parties were fun, with everyone laughing. And despite all the violence, I never felt that any of them were bad people. I never felt afraid of them. What I did

feel, though, even at the age of three, four, or five, was a kind of emptiness that shadowed the stretches between the parties. Later I figured out that they felt it too and partied so hard to avoid its stark reality.” (p. 56)

For the students in this study, the purpose of weekend parties was not celebration of time well spent or earned, but relief from time endured during the rest of the week. The students described the transformation of the party as the event providing relief from routine into the party as part of the routine. The sameness of the experience of time was the theme of these pieces of text. The events and their sequence were unremarkable. Living out time was tiresome.

Time was also seen as inexorable. The inability to conceive of a different way was more of a limiting factor than any actual circumstance. Kelly (n.d.) writes about the relationship between circumstance and destiny:

But to believe that man is the author of his destiny is not to deny that he may be tragically limited by circumstances. I saw too many unfortunate youngsters, some of them literally starving in that depression-ridden dust bowl, for me not to be aware of their tragic limitations. Clearly there were many things they might have liked to do that circumstances would not permit. But, nevertheless, this is not to say that they were victims of circumstances. However there was much denied them there was still an infinity of possibilities open to them. The task was to generate the imagination needed to envision those possibilities. (p. 1)

Failing to differentiate between factors for consideration and determining factors imposes artificial boundaries. Money, as explained by one student, was the limiting factor of choice about how to spend time. Yet, other statements contradicted this direct



causal link between personal finances and the choice to party or not party on the weekend. The net availability of drugs and alcohol demonstrated the irrelevance of having or not having money as a factor in choosing to spend time this way. The fact that a student registered surprise at obtaining drugs and alcohol without money suggests a contrast with a familiar experience of spending money to get drugs and alcohol. According to the student descriptions, people who do have money, and someone must for there to be a party with drugs and alcohol, make the same decision as the ones who are broke. This use of resources to support this use of time is a personal as well as a collective choice, but not a given.

Choices are made within the range of options permitted by the construction system of the chooser (Kelly, 1955). The choices around living in time - and the concomitant conditions of space, body, and relation with other - are determined largely by beliefs about the future. When those beliefs are grounded in hopelessness the options seem few. The priorities the students communicated were a predictable outcome of a faithless orientation to the future. In fact, far from unique, they are mirrored in the following narrative by Alexie (1996):

“Goddamn it, Thomas,” Junior yelled. “How come your fridge is always f----- empty?” Thomas walked over to the refrigerator, saw it was empty, and then sat down inside. Everybody in the kitchen laughed their asses off. It was the second-largest party in the reservation history and Thomas Builds-the Fire was the host. He was the host because he was the one buying the beer. And he was buying all the beer because he had just got a ton of money from Washington Power. (p. 12)

Choices that seem irrational make sense from the frame of reference of the chooser.

The frame of reference these students worked from included prevalence of drug and alcohol use so strong as to be the norm. There was a sense of inevitability of drug and alcohol use that they wanted teachers to also understand. The message seemed to be that teachers were naïve, failed to see the signs of the drug scene that students were immersed in, and needed to be informed about what students face. The graphic description seemed intended to shock, to emphasize the difference in the environments of school and the street to adults whose only exposure to such experiences may be through movies.

Ultimately, there was no choice according to these students. Their attitude about drugs was another example of capitulation to an existence perceived to be out of their control. Learned helplessness, developed in response to an insecure environment (Sylwester, 2003), detaches students from expectations and intentions that anchor them in temporal aspects of reality. Drug use is just another mode of unreality.

Millions of children are not safe physically, educationally, economically, or spiritually . . . . The poor black youths who shoot up drugs on the street and the rich white youths who do the same thing in their mansions share a common disconnectedness from any hope or purpose (Marian Wright Edelman quoted by Brendtro, et al, 2002, p. 34)

Factors named by these students as perpetuating destructive routines included habit, place, and others. Interestingly these elements are found in the original meanings and roots of the word *routine*. Routine is related to the French word *rote* for “repetition” and the Middle English *bi rote* for “with repetition, by heart.” The Old

French word *route* has multiple meanings including “a way, a beaten path,” “usual course,” or “rut”. As well as the habitual and locational meanings these encompass, there is a social implication in the French-Latin *rout* meaning “a rowt, herd, troop, or crowd.” A final meaning is surprising in its reflection of the emotive theme of the students’ talk about routine and change: *rout* also means “defeat” and relates to “broken” (as a path broken in the woods) (Skeat, 1993, pp. 409-410).

The students seemed especially defeated in their agreement that change was hopeless from where they were. The defeat these students experienced relative to time was intermeshed with the defeat associated with place to the point that they were considered one and the same. Change was believed to be dependent on relocation.

At times these participants started to get at the connection between time and place but did not seem to grasp clearly the relationship. A change in place does not necessarily translate into a change in how they will approach time. Just as the intended diversion of weekend parties becomes part of the routine, so will the backdrop of a new place or town become incorporated into another cycle of sameness. It is time perceived as static and homogenous that finds these students “imprisoned within a permanent ‘today’” according to Freire (2000); it is the “‘weight’ of apparently limitless time” that hinders people from “reaching that consciousness of temporality” (pp. 3-4).

Consciousness of one’s relationship with time, recognizing that one is an active participant making decisions about segmentation of time and acting in and on time, is one of the keys to freer movement through time for these students.

### Lived Space

Two facets of the concept of space set out by Sylwester (2003) are the area making up the range of an organism and the organization of space within that area. There are personal and cultural differences in how these aspects are conceptualized and lived. Payne (1998) discusses class differences in scope of world view. She notes that the view of the world held by members of the upper class tends to be global, while the middle class view is generally a national perspective. This reflects the scope of things a person perceives he or she has some degree of control over and the larger scope of things he or she is affected by, what Covey (1996) names as the circle of influence and surrounding circle of concern. This range reflects degrees of abstraction, from focus on immediate concrete surroundings to theoretical connectedness, as well as degrees of mobility, from access to the neighbourhood to world travel. The following simple student statement suggested that the range these students perceived was limited: *“They should have classes that teach you to live in the world. I think school should teach you how to survive in the actual [name of town] world that we live in.”* These students went on to describe experiencing this limited space in terms of displacement, confinement, and marginalization.

When the participants talked about having “nothing to do” the problem was quickly clarified as having “no place to go.” Students described an arcade and pool hall as providing them with a place to be and also their dislocation with its closure. Students felt unwelcome in public spaces and wandered about as a result. Not having anywhere where they were welcome was to be adrift. A student described the restlessness that came from being displaced and how it may be enacted as random destruction of property.

This is consistent with Sylwester's (2003) account of youth without the sense of spatial ownership:

Personal space is so important to us that many secondary students . . . find a place where they can regularly hang out when they are not in class. They may join the school newspaper staff or some activity that has a room they can go to, frequent the library (often seen sitting at the same table), and/or congregate by their cars in the parking lot or across the street at a convenience store.

The dispossessed in the student body have located no space where they feel a sense of ownership. Is it a surprise that many feel alienated, drop out, and join with friends to claim ownership of a hang-out space, often in the centre of the city (and usually to the intense irritation of nearby businesses)? (p. 89)

Having found no place to claim, these students wandered and, as Sylwester predicts, vandalized space that they identified no ownership of or connection to.

A challenge for the school then, is to provide an environment that these students can take spatial ownership of, to establish school as a place students experience as welcoming. With no other available space competing for the presence of these students, it should be easy to attract them to a space with a simple but sincere gesture, as one student described making her want to come to school, to let them know they are wanted here. The school environment does not signal that it welcomes students, especially these students. Brendtro et al (2002) assess the typical school as an inhospitable place. As schooling is mandatory for students under a certain age, schools rely on coercion rather than invitation to maintain attendance. This was certainly the case the student participants made.

It was fear that forced these students to attend school. The image that these vignettes projected was of school as a maximum-security prison with a guarded perimeter and an armed force to recapture escapees. Students described themselves as detainees within the school as well, where the monitoring and enforcement of hallway restrictions was seen as arbitrary and unnecessary regulation of their freedom of movement.

Sylwester (2003) draws an analogy between the classroom as bounded space and the cell bounded by a semi-permeable membrane. The leaky walls of the classroom (perforated by doors, windows, public address systems, television, computer screens, and other openings to and from the external world) define the class space and perform the same regulatory function as the cell wall, to control the movement of material in and out of the space. "While students describe experiencing the barriers erected to keep them in the classroom they also describe experiencing being barred from entering classrooms. Just as important as retaining things, a function of the cell membrane is to 'keep out unwanted things'" (p. 90). In this case, it was difficult students who were unwanted.

The student descriptions of being dispatched to the alternative school for various shortcomings and sins, in light of Sylwester's cell metaphor, invoked the image of waste material being excreted from a cell. It was an unpleasant analogy but so, say the students, was the experience unpleasant. "In America they have begun to talk of troubled children as 'throw-away' children. Who can be less fortunate than those who are thrown away?" (Thom Garfat, quoted by Brendtro, et al, 2002, p. 15). Whether or not their teachers intended for them to feel discarded does not change the perception of these students that they have been thrown away.

The overt segregation, the placement of these students in another school, was only one end of a continuum of segregation they had experienced during their school lives.

The student who spoke of being seated at a table with the other “*not-so-smart kids*” described a more subtle form of isolation created by the arrangement of students within the classroom space. This student outlined a personal map of his remembered classroom where the physical layout of the room mirrored the academic hierarchy: at least three groups of progressively weaker students were placed progressively further away from the locus of instruction.

Isabel, a fifteen-year-old student describing racially/economically segregated neighbourhoods, could be just as easily describing the marginalization that occurs in the classroom: “It’s not like being in a jail,” she says. “It’s more like being ‘hidden.’ It’s as if you have been put in a garage where, if they don’t have room for something but aren’t sure if they should throw it out, they put it where they don’t need to think of it again” (DeVol, Payne, & Smith, 2001, p. 263).

Sylwester (2003) recommends looking for “spatial curiosities that often pass us by unless we tune in to their possibilities.” The “location of a table or a student in a classroom may or may not be important,” he says, but “location is often quite important to the success of living things in highly competitive settings” (pp. 84-85).

A spatial curiosity emerged during the conversations that drew the attention of several students, conversely, to the importance of *success* to the *location* of living things. The passage about the experience of being invited or not being invited to eat in at a local food establishment was the one that stood out most prominently from the entire body of text generated by these student conversations. The first student, in

sharing his realization of the meaning of a taken-for-granted event, sparked reconstrual of that event by several other students, including four who joined in heated dialogue about it. These students generated a new shared consciousness about their experience of access to a given space based on social status. Spatiality in this context is closely connected to relationality.

### Lived Relation with Other

Relationship is a central theme of the key pieces of writing mediating the reflection on text of lived experience of this project. A dialogical relationship is an *a priori* condition of authentic education stipulates Freire (1997; 1999; 2000). Brendtro et al.'s *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (2002) promotes a holistic Native American relationship model. Sylwester's (2003) classroom management approach is predicated on a collaborative relationship between teachers and students. The cornerstone of Payne's (1998) set of strategies for working with students from a culture of poverty is building relationships: she quotes Dr. James Corner who asserts that "no significant learning occurs without a significant relationship" (p. 18).

The premise of the comments the students made about the class make up is that the presence or absence of friends is a very important feature of any given class. I expected high school students to value peer relationships; friends may make the class the more enjoyable. I did not expect friends to be the determining factor in whether or not a class should be attended. Payne describes an elevated status of relationships in a culture of poverty because one "only has people upon which to rely, and those relationships are important to survival" (p. 68). Students talked about peer relationships as a source of security.



The belief these students have in a deliberate attempt by the school to separate close peer groups is well founded. Splitting up groups of students who adults feel have been together too long or are too comfortable with one another is a well established practice, particularly in elementary school and in grade eight where core classes are together for much of the day. The rationale for mixing incoming students from the various feeder schools, to provide an opportunity for building new relationships, is acceptable but the result is questionable if it produces the insecurity described by these students. The other motivation for teachers to remix groups of students is to separate the difficult students so that they will not feed off each other's behaviour. To have potentially fewer discipline problems may not be sufficient reason to remove the support system from someone who is already poorly adjusted to school. The implication is that decisions about groupings need to be made with a degree of understanding about the importance of peer relationships for some students.

The security students describe deriving from peer groups is, in other parts of the conversations, interpreted as dependency. The relationships that anchor students in some situations can drag them down in others. Students described some close relationships as a barrier to moving on. Payne (1998) explains that a proprietary quality to relationships can develop when people are what one has to call his or her own. When someone leaves or moves on in some way they are lost to their family and friends. There is much "fear and comment about leaving the peer group and 'getting above one's raisings'" (1998, p. 69). Barbara Kingsolver (1993), in the novel *Pigs in Heaven*, writes about one character who admonishes another: "'You turned loose of family,' she says, 'I have to turn my back on you.' . . . 'There's a hundred ways to love

someone,' her voice tells Cash. 'All that really matters is that you stay here in the same room'" (pp.122-123).

The pull of this expectation to stay with one's family and friends figuratively and literally is strongly felt by these students. Even when students recognized that the connection was maintained at the expense of the success of others, it was preserved. A story was related to me by a local First Nations woman to describe a tendency she saw in her community for individuals achieving success to be thwarted by others around them: two men, one of them Native, the other a white man, were walking up the hill from the beach where they had been catching crabs. Each carried a bucket full of the crabs he had caught. The white man noticed that the other man had no lid on his crab bucket and asked him, "Aren't you worried about the crabs getting out?" The other man replied, "No. These are Indian crabs. If one of them tries to climb up the others will grab him and pull him back down." And sure enough when they reached the top of the hill all the crabs were still in the bottom of the bucket.

This pattern of relation to others and their success was not necessarily a feature of Native or poverty culture. Not all the students are of aboriginal ancestry; neither are they all from impoverished backgrounds. Brendtro et al (2002) deny this is a Native tradition: "We never disliked the boy who did better than the others. On the contrary, we praised him. All through our society, the individual who excelled was praised and honoured." The difference they identify is that success was a collectively held source of strength (p. 50). This is a different context than a culture of discouragement where success is not a way of life but a way out and the receiving culture is based on a scarcity model (Bowers, 1974) of competition for the sake of division of resources

rather than increasing shared resources. The students themselves described this phenomenon as a function of discouragement.

An important rule for leaving the culture of poverty is that “to move from poverty to middle class or from middle class to wealth, one must trade off some relationships for achievement at least for a period of time. To do this, one needs emotional resources and stamina” (Payne, 1998, p. 85). What seems to teachers to be a lack of motivation in a student may be loyalty, guilt, lack of resolve to go it alone, or reluctance to risk the loss of relationship when failure is expected anyway.

This dynamic was something I had not considered before reading Payne’s work. Having attended a high school collegiate institute where the norm was academic achievement I had difficulty conceptualizing how success could be negatively construed. I wrestled with this notion for a while. My first reaction was a judgment that this was an unhealthy co-dependency situation that teachers needed to help students overcome. Even as I thought about how schools might best equip students to transcend their culture I knew that this was an objectification of students and their families. The rejoinder to this was that maybe this value difference should be honoured as a higher moral standard of humanism over consumerism. This theoretical debate found tentative resolution in reflection on the lived experience described by the students. Their descriptions of being pulled down exude hopelessness. Hopelessness is a dehumanizing condition and as so is unacceptable (Freire, 1997). The situation, created and sustained by inhumane constructs of the people in the situation, and the greater system it is operating within, cannot be solved by any one person. The problem is socially created and so must be resolved in a social process.

This is just the sort of *non-discussable* issue Barth (2001) argues should be put on the table. Openly acknowledged and made the object of dialogue with students, parents, and teachers this issue can be reframed by the subjects of cultures understood by their members and the members of interdependent cultures. This is perhaps an uncomfortable thing to begin, certainly a slow process, but the naming of the world must be understood as an on-going negotiation of a changing reality. Opportunities for seeking, as Covey (1996) summarizes it, first to understand, and also being transparent about one's own guiding constructions, present themselves any time teachers interact with students and with their families.

Situations are the intersecting sets of several systems. Students who described being pulled down by people close to them also described being pushed down by the greater community. The students had a particular view of the class structure in their community and their place in it.

The same class structure these students saw operating in the community they saw in the classroom, too. Students with higher status were perceived to have more rights and privileges. There is probably some truth to this. As Payne illustrates, a characteristic of dominant middle-class culture, which the public school system is built upon, is a belief in earned privileges. The students who are perceived to be the most cooperative and competent will be entrusted with the responsibilities and freedom they are assumed to have demonstrated they have the ability and the right to handle. The premise of democratic society is that the same basic rights and freedoms are to be extended to all. Several decisions made by educators on a daily basis when consciously addressed become difficult philosophical distinctions. Which are basic rights and which

are somehow special or superfluous? What are the specific criteria used to distribute these increments of freedom? Who decides? What opportunities do students have to participate in decisions around the extension of freedoms? What opportunities do they have to demonstrate mastery of these standards? To develop it?

According to the students in this study, students with more status also seemed to be afforded a different quality of education. These students differentiated between giving answers and teaching, between a handout and hand up. Giving someone a hand up is a deliberate act of caring, requires personal contact, and presumes faith in the other's ability to stand once raised up. A handout can be dropped into a cup as one hurries by without making any commitment to or even, perhaps, seeing the other as a person. The experience of being appeased with token interactions is to be negated as a person. Without scholarship (academic ability and the concomitant work habits), students felt they had no educational currency with which to secure the services of the teachers. These students described receiving a second-class education from teachers who avoided interacting with them.

The students admitted reluctance to ask for the help they needed. To ask for help, as discussed earlier, is to be vulnerable. These students met the risk of vulnerability, as any other threat, with either a flight or fight or freeze response. These students demonstrated considerable insight into the relationships they are engaged in within the classroom and what it might take to change the dynamic.

The students' suggestion that teachers work most directly with struggling students is the precise message that the association I belonged to as a learning assistance teacher tried to convey to classroom teachers. It seemed illogical that the students who were the

hardest to teach should primarily work with the least trained staff (support staff or aides) while the easiest to teach students spent most time with the most highly qualified staff (teachers). As Brendtro et al caution, “If teachers are only drawn to the brightest students, those who are undistinguished may become the forgotten half” (2002, p. 78).

Although they have not typically articulated their experience to their teachers, the students were sensitive to the injustices they suffer at the hands of the educational system. They understood the dynamic that was operating but felt helpless to break the pattern. They looked to teachers as the ones to intervene in the cycle of frustration and acting out. Despite these students’ admitted poor behaviour, they expected that teachers would rise above the initial urge to respond in kind. Redl (quoted by Brendtro, et al, 2002) attacks the idea that some children are so bad as to not deserve positive attention:

The children must get plenty of love and affection whether they deserve it or not . . . Gratifying life situations cannot be made the bargaining tools of educational or even therapeutic motivation, but must be kept tax-free as minimal parts of the youngster’s diet, irrespective of the problems of deservedness. (p. 78)

Although difficult children are, by definition, difficult to teach, the “crowning point of education is to convince a child of our fervent love even as we are criticizing him,” wrote Swiss educator Pestalozzi more than two hundred years ago (Brendtro, et al, 2002, p. 16). Unconditional positive regard is not the same as approval of all the behaviours a person displays. The justification that some students don’t deserve to be taught until they know how to act is illogical. Withholding opportunities for learning from the students who clearly have the most to learn is unethical.

That our approach to children is causing them to react in ways so distasteful to us that we avoid further contact with them is disturbing. Menninger describes the lives of “mistreated, abandoned, rejected, wounded children” as “flowers of evil” (Brendtro et al, 2002, p. 9). Interestingly, Sylwester (2003) uses the metaphor of cauliflower to illustrate several points germane to the consideration of this issue. The cauliflower plant produces low levels of toxin that cause discomfort and difficulty with digestion to discourage animals from devouring it (p. 94). Students develop distasteful veneers as “protective barriers learned in prior encounters with threatening persons” (Brendtro et al, 2002, p. 9) to protect themselves from the rejection they expect from adults in the school system.

The toxins cauliflower produce are also harmful to plant tissue so the plant must sacrifice rapid growth for protection. The student, too, must choose to direct attention and energy to either defensive functions or learning. What is a matter of evolutionary choice for the cauliflower species can come under the conscious control of the individual human. If teachers choose the role of mediator rather than authority figure they can point to the behaviour and examine it with the student instead of reacting to it. The student can choose, if he or she wishes, to risk redirecting the energy toward growth. Brendtro et al urge teachers not to wait for students to “warm up to the adult” but turn moments of crisis into opportunities for learning.

It is the responsibility of the adult to do what is in the best interest of the child. Another cauliflower analogy illustrates this point, too. Organisms have different levels of susceptibility to these plant toxins; mature humans, for example, should be able to easily tolerate the toxins in cauliflower while they are more distressing to children

(Sylwester, 2003, pp. 94-95) Adults should, as these students expect, be the ones to demonstrate tolerance.

There is also a tension between what is pleasant and what is worth putting up with some discomfort for because it is beneficial. The nutritional value of cauliflower must be weighed against the strong odour and sharp taste that are potentially obnoxious to children. Sylwester wonders whether, in the case of cauliflower or behaviour, it is most appropriate to mask the taste with sauces, force feed, or leave it to student choice to eat it or not.

Do children who dislike such vegetables have a lower tolerance for the toxins than children who like vegetables? Can continually forcing children to eat something that nauseates them result in strong negative adult responses, such as the celebrated comment of former president George H. Bush that when he was a child he was forced to eat broccoli and he hated it and as president of the United States he revealed in his power to refuse to serve broccoli in the White House?

(2003, p. 95)

Power exerted on others is often resisted, especially when the result is perceived to be toxic. Brendtro, et al (2002) ask teachers to consider the following question: "If what we are doing for children is so good for them, why do they fight us so much?" (p. 104).

Students in this study described ways they fought what they considered unreasonable levels of control imposed by teachers. Students said they used the simple strategies of ignoring and laughing, to subvert a teacher's control over them by causing her to lose control of herself. Laughing at punishment is a common way students try to



save face (DeVol, Payne, & Smith, 2001, p. 125). Their behaviours are defense against a perceived threat.

Teachers using intimidation to gain control threaten students' self-respect. The following story demonstrates how one teacher used a show of force to intimidate his students into submission:

On my first day on the job, I was told by a veteran teacher that I could do myself a real favor by putting the 'fear of God' into my sixth-grade students. He proceeded to explain just how I could do that. Before the students arrived, I should place the wastepaper basket right in the middle of the doorway. After the students found their seats, I should make a grand entrance by asking in a thundering voice, 'Who in the hell put the wastepaper basket in the middle of the room?' If it had been moved, he said I should simply rephrase the question, 'Who in the hell moved my wastepaper basket?' No matter the location of the basket, the veteran teacher explained that the basket should be sent crashing across the room with a hard kick. (Brendtro et al, 2002, p. 96)

Control without a specific context or purpose, except clarity about who has the power in the room, to let everyone know who is the boss, is something many teachers believe is important although most advertise their control in less dramatic ways.

These students said they reserved hatred for the teachers who tried to exert the most control over them. The hatred students directed toward these teachers is not uncommon for people who feel victimized by others with positional power when they themselves have none:

If someone were to devise a machine that could measure hatred – a Hatenometer – I'd bet all my wooden nickels that more hatred exists between bosses and employees than between blacks and whites . . . . Of all the hating I've done in my life – and I've done my share – ninety-nine percent of it was directed at rich white people, most of them my bosses . . . . I had had no CONTROL over anyone else's life, and mastery of my *own* was compromised by the need to work a full-time job. (Jim Goad quoted by DeVol et al, 2001, p. 64)

The students shared extreme examples of abuse of power over students<sup>1</sup>. More often the disrespect teachers show students is subtle, a “quality of paternalism that borders on oppression.” This practice of “infantilizing or dehumanizing the very persons they are pledged to serve” is often an unconscious one, but even if the teachers are not aware of their disrespectful behaviour students certainly are (Brendtro et al, 2002, pp. 84-85).

With some students it triggers a cycle of conflict. Even teachers who do not initiate it can become engaged, caught in the trap of responding to hostile behaviour originating elsewhere, reinforcing negative student expectations of teacher behaviour and modeling the maladaptive behaviour of the students (ibid, p. 79). Within this cycle

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<sup>1</sup> Even though verity of detail is not terribly important when one is looking at the themes of perceived experience, I did receive adult confirmation that each of these specific events was dealt with and did happen as the students described.

of conflict there is cognitive downshifting by both parties who, faced with the threat of potentially escalating aggressive behaviour, prepare for defensive or offensive action (ibid, p. 96).

This cycle is meshed with the system of rewards and punishment that prevails in our schools (Bowers, 1974; Brendtro et al, 2002). The scale of positive and negative reinforcements can't possibly match building levels of expectation and tolerance. Phillips (2002) asks teachers to think about what to do when rewards and punishment no longer work. If that is the primary strategy it is bound to fail because there are many students who alternately experience indulgence and violence in the home or community (as described by these students) to a degree that the school cannot aspire to.

The students themselves advocated a non-threatening approach, interestingly associated by some with a female model of relationship, to problem situations. The stereotypical gender characterizations these students make are very much like the roles Payne (1998) describes as typical of a culture of poverty: males are supposed to be lovers and fighters and the female role is the caretaker and nurturer. The challenge for the schools is help students separate these characteristics from gender so that they can be explored for their potential use by any person in a variety of situations. Brendtro et al (2002) note the tendency for prosocial or helpful behaviours to have negative labels, such as *sissy*, in the language of anti-social youth. Relabeling negative or hurtful behaviours that are considered cool or macho within the sub culture with terms that reflect the immature or foolish aspects of the behaviours can deromanticize them; conversely, positive behaviours can be relabeled for the strength, intelligence, or attractiveness they convey (Brendtro et al, 2002, p. 114). The students recognize the

value of these behaviours when they are at the receiving end of them in certain situations and can, through the reconstrual that comes with renaming, try them out in expanded and different applications.

These students did not see teachers as expanding student capacity for choice when they were perceived as unwilling to recognize the right of students to make choices. The student who juxtaposed two experiences of disciplinary meetings about the same behaviour demonstrated the different outcomes of attempts to control and attempts to empower. The first experience was of feeling patronized and threatened and was clearly unsuccessful in producing a change in behaviour because there was a second incident. In this second case the student described being an active participant in a process of movement or change. The information about the consequences of choices was developed by the student into an understanding that influenced his future behaviour. Teachers who fail to recognize the rights of students as co-creators of reality often fall into the role, (along with parents, psychiatrists) as “enforcers of reality” (Novak, 1970, p. 94). The school is an institution that does not tolerate alternate points of view, other ways of seeing reality (Bowers, 1974, pp. 62-63), so engagement in dialogue with students, an open and collaborative act of creation, is not often part of the program of discipline and instruction.

The lived experience descriptions shared by these students reframed habitual interactions to reveal what is hidden in the routine about the way we relate to one another. What these students each noticed about their relationships coalesced into a picture of the role of relation in education. The common theme of the experiences in relation with other described by students was *control*. In all the relationships they

related as problematic there was an attempt to overpower, to objectify people as possessions or products. Hierarchical arrangements, punishment and rewards (physical and emotional), and labels were all tools pressed into service by schools, family, peers, and community members to force conformity with the various, often competing, views of reality that they held. The few examples of relational behaviour that they experienced positively were ones where their own constructions of reality were honoured or nurtured.

## Conclusion

The work of this project has been the process of sifting through texts of lived experience using a guiding set of questions as the pan for separating the theme from the details of the events, and the theories of a small group of authors from different disciplinary backgrounds to identify what was found. Commitment to this process, new to me, of working without a thesis and without a goal of finding any particular conclusion, required faith that something of pedagogical value would indeed emerge. With only theoretical evidence that it would yield any results, successive cycles of segmenting texts of lived experience, holding the pieces up to each other, to other written work, to my own memories and reactions, and arranging and rearranging them looking for patterns, was difficult work. Writing as the act of turning the pan, of seeing the patterns emerge in the swirling suspension, rather than writing as a historical account of what was found, was a dicey proposition. This task was begun and dropped many times before I managed to persist long enough for themes and, eventually, a unifying theme to emerge.

The descriptions of the lived experience of these alternative school students revealed some common themes. The shared experience of being a corporeal being in school was being restricted and manipulated. Students looking to teachers to help them meet their most basic physical needs generally had these needs ignored or exploited to control their behaviour. Students expressed anger and disappointment in teachers for letting them down. The difference between the value these students and the institution of school place on possessions was evident; these students believed food and money were to be shared and consumed when they were available and were outraged by the

expression of the dominant values of the school of self-sufficiency and accumulation of resources by individuals. The lack of concern by the school staff for basic human rights was highlighted by the experiences of these students.

The common theme of students' experiences of time was 'stuckness'. Students' descriptions were centred on the present. Students seemed suspended in the moment rather than in motion toward an anticipated future. The weight of time upon these students, who perceived no personal control over the future, was palpable. In the school system where time is an instrumental commodity these students had no currency. Hopelessness and helplessness defined the temporal experience of these students.

Students experienced space as segregated and controlled. Boundaries between spaces were seen as guarded so that they felt alternately imprisoned and excluded. These students felt school use of space was contrived to separate students according to status afforded them on the basis of socio-economic and academic capital. Freedom of access and movement in space was an earned rather than a universal right in the school system.

Nearly all the relationships these students described were objectified. Most often the students were the objects of someone else's attempt to control them. A range from subtle to brutal physical and emotional reinforcements were said to be used by peers, families, and teachers to bully students into dependent and normalized ways of behaving. The stress of constant preparedness for battles for control appears to have stunted their development of mature ways of being in the world.

A unifying theme of the experiences of all of these students, across the existentials of body, space, time, and other, was eventually revealed. Well into the

writing a particular passage suddenly seemed integral to the reflection on each of the existentials and to their interaction in schooling. A passage written by Paulo Freire (in Horton & Freire, 1990) about the nature of authority in education pointed to a unifying theme of the understandings derived from the reflection on the text of student experience mediated by the theories of Freire, Bowers, Sylwester, Payne, and Brendtro et al.

I also discovered another thing that was important to me afterward, that I had authority but I was not authoritarian. I remember that not even one of the students ever left the classroom without telling me or asking me in a very respectful, polite way every time. I began to understand at a very young age that on one hand the teacher as a teacher is not the student as the student is not the teacher. I began to perceive that they are different but not necessarily antagonistic. The difference is precisely that the teacher has to teach, to experience, to *demonstrate*, authority and the student has to experience freedom in relation to the teacher's authority. I began to see that the authority of the teacher is absolutely necessary for the development of the freedom of the students, but if the authority of the teacher goes beyond the limits authority has to have in relation to the students' freedom, then we no longer have authority. We no longer have a freedom. We have *authoritarianism*. (pp. 61-62)

I read this passage well into the writing work of this project and knew that it fit with what the students were saying, and my crystallizing understanding, but I couldn't seem to decide where it best fit. I first put it in the section of the physical experience of being a student. It seemed the logical conclusion to how teachers, in their efforts to



control the learning environment, make students endure physical conditions that adults would not tolerate. I could have used it to explain the students descriptions of how the space of school is controlled. Time is such an important construct in my framework of understanding that I thought the best link must be to the liberatory aspects of temporality. I recognized that the passage, skimmed over several times previously and only becoming meaningful when I was working on the section on relationality, must belong there. I made false starts at rewriting each section around this passage and eventually realized the common thread of what I was getting from the students descriptions in each of the four existentials was *freedom*.

Freire captures the essence of the relationship between education and freedom. It is not, he expresses, a matter of authority *or* freedom, but authority *for* freedom. Failure to see this distinction is the key to the struggle I have had with this issue since I started teaching. I had always been told that these students, the ones who just don't fit in the regular system, are kids who have too much freedom and don't know what it is to live within rules. These kids don't, it turns out, follow the rules. They do not, however, have freedom if it includes freedom from hunger and suffering, and freedom of access to public spaces, a good education, and participation in decisions about their future.

Schooling grants freedom of movement within the realm of normalized reality to those students who successfully adapt to the dominant view of the world that school promotes. Students who do not share the dominant values are not aware of the hidden beliefs and rules that allow others to move easily in the agreed-upon-by-majority world. Payne et al (2001) theorize schooling that is explicit about these hidden constructs can bridge the world of the student and the world of dominant society, increasing freedom.

It is however, only freedom within a reified segment of reality. Kelly (1955) asserts that choice is an illusion if the option set is another's or others'. When

social determinism is seen as a modality of consciousness, it is then possible to entertain the hope that the socialization process, at least as it is carried on in public schools, can be changed sufficiently so that the student can acquire a conscious view of reality where he begins to experience himself as a co-producer of that reality. (Bowers, 1974, p. 35)

The change required is a shift from an adaptation model to a model of integration.

Integration "results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality" (Freire, 2000, p. 4).

School is a social system with the potential to develop the capacity for freedom. Ironically, the curriculum for freedom is structure. I was always told that what these "difficult kids" needed was structure and, in a sense, this is true. All students need a supportive structure for the development of freedom, which is far from needing to have reality structured for them. Rather than an absence of structure, which is really neglect, Brendtro et al (2002) interpret and promote Coopersmith's vision of structure:

Children need autonomy within a structure. Adults who give freedom without guidance are sending youth on a journey without a map. Adults must set clear and consistent expectations so that the young person can successfully navigate life's challenges. Adults do not become preoccupied with control, but focus their efforts on mapping out the structure and values. The youth is thus given a safe environment in which to develop independence, while adults still exert a major influence. (p. 107)

The influence adults in the educational system must exert is over the physical, spatial, temporal, and relational conditions that contribute to a total school environment conducive to “systematic examination of those cultural assumptions and myths that shape their consciousness and, thus, the parameters within their freedom will be expressed as adults” (Bowers, 1974, p. 9). The school’s role is the creation and maintenance of a depoliticized and supportive structure for students to examine relationships with body, space, time, and other, and explore reconstructions of those relationships. When the workings of these relationships are openly acknowledged, made accessible, and recognized as changeable in the service of human development, students can make informed choices about how they will live their lives. Freedom to make choices is dependent not only on having permission to make them but the efficacy, knowledge, and imagination to recognize, evaluate, and create options.

The sufficient conditions for participation in such a process of education will vary by student and change over time. All students are unique beings in a unique situation and will require different supports to develop their potentials. There is no model for an ideal educational facility that will work for all students. In fact, Miles Horton, the founder of Highlander Folk School (a major force in the American labour and civil rights movements), cautions against expanding programs beyond their original locations and scope because learning is so contextual. A flexible program informed by the phenomenology of the students will not look the same in different settings and will evolve over time.

There are a few conclusions relative to each of the existentials of lived body, lived time, lived space, and lived relation with other that I will take away from this study.

Looking at teacher practice through the lens of student-as-physical-being experiencing that practice transforms our actions. Although students are not necessarily articulate about their needs, many are deprived of basic necessities and looking to teachers to help them. This asks teachers to look first at the possibility that problematic behaviour might be arising from very concrete situations originating outside of school but needing to be resolved before learning can begin. It is untenable, then, that teachers can fulfill their most narrowly defined obligations by remaining in narrowly defined roles. It also calls for awareness of the conditions schools place on granting basic rights of health and freedom to students. While neither the students' experiences or the contradictions they reveal point to a correct method of classroom management they do call for conscious and public consideration of the balance of freedoms and restrictions in schools. When management decisions are made the instrumental value of restrictions placed for educative purposes needs to be weighed against the inherent value of freedom.

Recognizing that these students have a problematic temporality, educators must resist the temptation to try and bring them into line with the system, to normalize students to the temporal regime of the school space. As Payne (1997) cautions about working with students from a culture of poverty, the challenge is not to jump to a middle-class solution. A pedagogical shift is necessary to move away from socializing students into a dominant model of time and toward development of school and student capacity for temporalizing the school space. Pierre Furter summarizes an important understanding for teachers and their students to have:

The goal will no longer be to eliminate the risks of temporality by clutching to guaranteed space, but to temporalize space. . . . The universe is revealed to me not

as a space, imposing a massive presence to which I can but adapt, but as a scope, a domain which takes shape as I act upon it. (quoted by Freire, 1997, p. 152)

The goal of demythologizing the world toward the empowerment of students is one of Freire's "highly theoretical ideas" that Bowers (1974) questions can readily "be applied to the education of the youth living in a technocracy such as ours" (p. 11). Sylwester (2003) supplies a conceptual framework for accomplishing the abstract goal of temporalizing educational space. He proposes three categories of time use that students can be taught to recognize, and allowed to experiment with, in the classroom as laboratory:

1. Some of our lifetime is prescribed by societal needs, such as to be a productive citizen, and so our job demands our attendance during certain time blocks.
2. Some of our time is prescribed by human conditions such as to care for our own bodily needs and to come to the aid of an injured person.
3. Some of our time is devoted to personal interests, such as hobbies, mass media, and recreation. (Sylwester, 2003, p. 112)

Sylwester (2003) invites teachers to join students in shared exploration of human/time concepts such as lifespan, time allocations during a school year, and time allocations throughout the day, by creating and testing collaborative solutions to time use in the classroom community (p. 104).

Reflecting on the themes of the lived experience of time of students at risk leads to examination of the institutional conception of time they oppose; it generates understanding of sources of conflicting expectations of time measurement and

management. Examining alternative metaphors for time, including time as a commodity and time as a burden, is a reminder of reality as multiform. The resolution of this reflection on the existential of time is a commitment to attend to the development of student consciousness of temporality by openly and flexibly addressing time in the classroom.

A burst of dialogue about the students' experience of space, specifically being denied access to the public space of the fast-food restaurant, was the most exciting part of the student conversations. It was exciting to me not only because it reveals a hidden practice that might be mirrored in my classroom or other classrooms, but because it represented authentic learning. This was freshly born consciousness about the experience of space created by students in the act of dialogue.

In their collective reframing of a shared experience these students were empowered for future action. The potential of dialogue around student experiences, not as accidental and isolated interactions, but as encouraged and supported practice in schools, is awesome. A teacher who wished to develop student situatedness in time, space, body, and relation with other, might not scold students for discussing non-curricular matters but explore connections to curricular issues. Teachers can ask students to consider how many other ways are they disinvited from places? What are historical examples of disenfranchised people? How does this relate to constitutional rights in Canada? What are possible responses to this situation and their likely consequences? What adaptations do various plants have for attracting some creatures and repelling others? . . .

The spatial dimension of schooling is experienced differently by students who are marginalized than by members of the dominant culture of the institution. While all students might, at times, feel imprisoned or excluded due to some aspect of the school environment, there are some who perceive the space only in those ways. Bruce Wellman (2003) used the children's picture book *Zoom* to show how an image changes as one refocuses to gradually take in a larger picture. It is at the edges, he emphasized, where one must look at data to see the emerging pattern and meaning.

School is perhaps more recognized as a place than as an experience of time but there are many aspects of space that are unacknowledged. The politics of the boundaries schools use to define places for students, and certain students, to be or not be, need to be continually surveyed to ensure that they are democratic in intent and enactment. Sylwester (2003) proposes that space is one of the easiest classroom elements for teachers to experiment with. It has concrete matter to it that can be easily observed, arranged, and rearranged. The opportunities that school provides for students to consciously explore and configure their space will influence their range of spatial freedom in the greater world and in their future lives.

Schools have an obligation to build relationships purposefully that serve student development instead of institutional efficiency and teacher ease. The entire bias toward conservation rather than distribution of control needs to change. Brendtro et al (2002) propose that even if coercive techniques are able to be used successfully to manage behaviour in the short term, the use of rewards and punishments is destructive, ultimately weakening children. The use of force creates a no-win situation. Teachers, especially teachers working with these students, need to disengage from patterns of use

of force if they are to have any meaningful impact on students' ways of relating to others.

The resolution of this inquiry is the clarified purpose that comes from greater insight into the phenomenology of the student. A renewed vision of schooling is the creation of the process rather than a plan for the achievement of this vision. Sylwester (2003) warns teachers to be careful not to seek immediate practical applications for new ideas but to observe, explore, nurture the ideas. Implementation of new knowledge, to the human scientist (Kelly, 1955) and in human sciences (van Manen, 1997) informs action rather than prescribes action. This project is a distinguishable from but inseparable piece of the work I do with students and the ongoing process of reflection on my role as an educator of students at risk and all students with whom I have the opportunity of creating the world.



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