A Case Study of the School of Outliers for At-Risk Students in Québec

Taïsha Hampden

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Educational Studies) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Québec, Canada

March 2011

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Taïsha Hampden

Entitled: A Case Study of the School of Outliers for At-Risk
                             Students in Québec

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Educational Studies)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with
respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

                             Miranda D'Amico_____Chair

                             David Waddington_____Examiner

                             Ayaz Naseem_____Examiner

                             Arpi Hamalian_____Supervisor

Approved by   Richard Schmid_____
                             Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

March 29th, 2011   Brian Lewis_____
                             Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

A Case Study of the School of Outliers for At-Risk Students in Québec

Taïsha Hampden

This thesis presents the results of a case study based on the School of Outliers, an alternative school in Québec established for at-risk students at the high school level. The author has been a student of the School of Outliers and currently teaches at the same school. Based on a self-study and personal narrative, questions were developed for guided journal writing for a group of eight graduates from the same school who volunteered to participate in the study. Two of the participants also agreed to be interviewed to further examine the issues identified in their journal entries.

Analysis of the data generated through the collection of the narratives and interviews produced a few themes that are important to keep in mind in helping at-risk students who have distanced themselves from the school culture. The two most important themes for the engagement process are teacher-student connection and raising critical consciousness. Of course not all students benefit to the same extent from their experience at the school. If we are to understand and engage in dialogue regarding the experience of at-risk students, we must acknowledge all facets of their experience. The role of teacher-student connection in developing critical consciousness in at-risk students can only achieve so much. The power of this connection battles against a myriad of factors lying in wait for at-risk students after the bell rings at the end of each school day. This study is a step towards a better understanding of the lived experience of at-risk students.

Acknowledgements

Sydney Harris, American Journalist, once said that "the whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows." I would like to thank my husband and three children for always being a reflection of love and for giving me the support to open as many 'windows' and 'doors' in my life. Lisa McGregor, for reminding me of the purpose in being and to my mother: thank you.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Education and its Reforms

Introduction

This study is an exploration of the phenomenon of at-risk students at the secondary level in Québec's high schools. This is an important issue to examine due to the increasing number of at-risk students leaving high school before they achieve certification. Unprepared citizens, who are not adequately educated to handle the challenges of this fast-paced world, have a direct impact on society. Undeveloped human potential, heightened risk of criminal activity, increased cost to social services and a decreased tax base are often listed as the personal, social and economic costs of at-risk students who may also become "early school leavers." This study focuses on examining one critical element of student success for at-risk students: that of teacher-student connection.

At-risk students are defined as students demonstrating negative school behaviours such as chronic tardy arrivals, skipping classes, high absenteeism, negligent work habits (i.e. materials not ready, outstanding homework, incomplete classwork, etc.), dysfunctional behaviour (i.e. mood swings, conduct disorders, oppositional defiance, etc.) and delinquent behaviour (i.e. substance use, criminal activity, etc.). It is apparent that any combination of these behaviours impedes students' academic progress, school success and the development of responsible citizenship. These indicators of at-risk behaviours develop over long periods of time varying in intensity, frequency and causation with direct negative impacts on students' lives.

Since the 1980s, alternative education has evolved as a possible answer to the questions facing at-risk students and educators. Both parties needed to understand the point which tips at-risk students to emerge as challenges to the mainstream system. They also needed to examine how at-risk students disengage from mainstream learning. Furthermore, educators had to distinguish how at-risk students can be maintained within the educational system. They had to develop alternative methods to connect at-risk students to their learning processes.

Alternative educators working within such schools have understood the impact these students have on classroom practice, pedagogy and societal standards. One particular alternative school is the School of Outliers. Since 1981, it has offered at-risk students a chance to address their academic, behavioural and attitudinal challenges.

Based on the narratives of graduates from the School of Outliers, this study has focused on the teacher-student connection. The data on which this thesis is based are collected from student journals of the graduates of the School of Outliers and interviews, revealing information often hidden in the classroom and stories which help explain the process of the creation of at-risk students. In addition, a personal ethnographic narrative of the author as a student and a self-study as an educator/practitioner in an alternative school provide another perspective of at-risk students. Through these sources of student journals, student interviews, student ethnography and teacher self-study, recommendations and guidelines emerge to better respond to the ever-changing needs of at-risk students, the schools and the educators who serve them.

In this chapter, I present the historical conditions which continue to influence today's mainstream educational institutions and the reforms which are inspired by and support the business-model. Further, I provide a literature review of three theories relevant to the examination of teacher-student connections with students at-risk.

The Roots of Modern Education

Taylorism or Scientific Management was proposed by Frederick Taylor in 1911. Taylor developed mass production methods for the manufacturing industry. Taylor felt that any process could be broken down into specialized repetitive tasks. Thus, education could also be viewed as a system of learning utilizing rote memorization, repetitive actions and a banking educational model. Education received so much criticism throughout 1912 that administrators were forced to adopt Taylor's 'system of efficiency' even though such a model did not reflect the needs of the educational system at the time (Callahan, 1962). The impact of such an educational model, however, has influenced the manner in which we continue to define, assess and manage educational institutions.

From the Québec Ministry of Education, Sports and Leisure (MELS) to school boards to administrators to teachers, the business model in mainstream education is engrained in educational practices. It has created the need for haste, quantitative assessments and productivity in today's classrooms. This approach has also glossed over the importance of social language (Gladwell, 2008) and the transmission of cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1988) and political underpinnings of society (Freire, 2006). Further, it has greatly defined our notion of academic success. So desperate are we to obtain "success" and strong results, we continue to perpetuate Taylor's ideals.

According to Arian Campo-Flores' article (2010), *A New High Bar For School Reform In Florida*, the need for academic achievement and success in the United States has become so crucial to its future economic prosperity that the long-standing notion of tenure and seniority are being challenged by the senate. They are now making Florida evaluate its teachers by performance review and test scores. It would be "the first state to abolish tenure and replace seniority" (Campo-Flores, 2010, par. 2).

Historically, such tactics stem from the "payment-by-results" practices implemented in Britain in the 1860s (Welch, 1998). These practices fully placed accountability and efficiency on educators to ensure that students achieved the established standards. Unfortunately, these tactics and practices not only fail to acknowledge the need for additional resources, they do not address the support educators require to attain and maintain these standards. Following this trend, in 1911, according to Callahan (1962), schools had to "…provide evidence of their contribution to society or have their budgets cut" (p. 47). These strategies are still used today encouraging educators to adhere to the standards of efficiency Taylor advocated equating high school success solely with the acquisition of a secondary school leaving diploma.

Surprisingly, the issues schools faced in the 1900s and today are shockingly similar in relation to educational programs, budget restrictions, classroom ratio and teacher roles. For example, in 1909, schools encouraged vocational education to ensure better trained clerks and factory workers. However, classrooms were overcrowded and many students got lost. The increased rate of early school leavers was too costly to support and the cost of educating repeaters was too high. The similarities ring true in present day. Vocational education is still promoted to address the lack of qualified

workers as well as to help absorb the number of early school leavers. As in the past, classrooms still remain overcrowded. The cost of educating repeaters is still high. The rate of early school leavers is still problematic. Yet even with all of this, we still continue to implement a business-minded educational system, all the while expecting different results.

The main challenge faced by Taylorism in the 1900s was based on transforming education into a business model. This "cut-and-paste" approach was and continues to remain inept in creating an educational system designed to nurture student achievement and success. In addition, encouraging vocational education should not be the panacea nor should it reduce the value and need for a classical, liberal education. As Callahan explained, what was considered 'an education' was being provided with every detail, every thought and every action predetermined and calculated to achieve student success. An educational plan is not "an instruction card which describes, in minute detail not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it" (Callahan, 1962, p.31). Limiting students solely to vocational training or work-study programs serves only to "dumb-down" the educational system and reduce problem-solving skills thus creating blind followers and few leaders. This is not to say that there is no value nor need for vocational education. Rather, it is quite the contrary. It serves its purpose to help ensure educational options for certain students. However, we must be clear on the outcome we seek. Today's results continue to reflect the systemic implementation of 'efficiency' over humanity, of school rankings over student achievements, of global learning over individual growth.

Educational Reforms in Québec

Despite numerous governmental interventions to address the needs of early school leavers, Québec continues to have one of the highest rates of early school leavers in Canada. Since the 1990s, Québec's rate stands at 18.4% with 22.6% of males and 14.3% of females leaving school prior to certification (Ministry of Education, Sports and Leisure [MELS], 2010). The impact of these rates on the economic and social realms of Québec society is detrimental to the success and promotion of Québec on a local and global scale.

In spite of reforms and educational policies aimed at decreasing the rate of early school leavers, schools continue to be affected by this loss of human potential. Students, on a daily basis, are subject to a variety of circumstances that can create a shift in attitude or commitment to their learning.

In the past decade, the MELS developed a strategy called Educational Projects and School Success Plans under Bill 124 of the Education Act. This notion adopted in December 2002 aimed to reinforce the accountability of schools in fulfilling their mandates (Québec Provincial Association of Teachers [QPAT], 2003). Simply stated, school educational projects focus on "what a school is and what it does". School success plans define "how schools do what they do." The Management and Educational Success Agreement (MESA) serves to tie school expectations with academic goals, board standards and the MELS thus fostering a deeper partnership. Through these initiatives, schools develop clear strategies to ensure student retention and school success.

Over the past decade, Québec has implemented various educational reforms, created a renewed curriculum, altered subject-time allocation, modified high school

certification requirements, changed report card evaluation and presented different student assessments.

Recently, in addition to these educational reforms, the government initiated another plan entitled the 13 Paths to Success (MELS, 2009) to increase student retention and engagement. Strategies such as promoting a 'stay-in-school' philosophy, outlining clear targets for defining school success rates, offering resources for disadvantaged areas, lowering teacher-student ratios and greater access to vocational training are well-intentioned, but limited in applicability, implementation and significance. These measures do not explore the underlying reasons that lead students to abandon their educational options.

Despite attempts at enriching school experiences, we continue to struggle with establishing a pedagogy which reaches all students, inspires them to aim for their own personal greatness and become active contributing citizens.

Literature Review

Critical pedagogy. If schools are the catalysts for change in the lives of at-risk students, we must grasp the need of both personal and interpersonal engagement in the classroom through the use of the teacher-student connection. Such a connection can be created, nurtured, enhanced and supported through the key elements of Freire's (2006) critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy stems from progressivism, a democratic pedagogy developed during the late nineteenth century which emphasizes student-centered learning and participation in democratic life. It is a form of teaching which allows for the authentic

presence of both student and teacher. It calls upon the histories of both individuals to be voiced and heard. It recognizes the significance of the subjective experience and how said experiences create, shape and form the dynamics between teacher and student. It sets the ground rules for reflection, recognition and acknowledgement of issues both individually and collectively. It develops an awareness of the political structure of the educational relationship between teacher and student and nurtures critical consciousness.

Furthermore, critical pedagogy is a process of building, "an eminently political discourse and practice" (Giroux, 1996, p. 11), where both student and teacher act as agents of change accommodating each other's personal history and subjective experiences. This type of approach in educating at-risk students is central in addressing their marginalized positionality. This method of teaching recognizes the individual partisanships through dialogue (Weiler, 1988) and emphasizes how social realities are formed, maintained and altered.

Essentially, critical pedagogy is a practice that uses dialogue, awareness and praxis to empower both teacher and student to engage in action for social change. It addresses power and how it is distributed. It encourages students to develop an awareness of their own positionality. It calls upon students to further examine their relation to social ills through problem-posing, dialogue and reflection.

Conscientization. Freire (2006) defines conscientização (conscientization) as the "…deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence" (p. 109). Essentially, conscientization or critical consciousness defines a process where those who are oppressed by their conditions begin a process of emergence, intervention and

transformation (Freire, 2006). Conscientization occurs in three stages: intransitive thought, semi-transitive and critical transformative praxis.

According to Freire (2006), intransitive thought is seen as the primary stage required in cultivating critical consciousness. Let us apply this to the situation of at-risk students. At this basic level, at-risk students live as though they have no control over their own lives (fatalistic stage). Intransitive thought is seen as a resigned stage of consciousness. At-risk students are aware of the unfavourable conditions they live and adopt a defeatist, passive approach to their challenges. Second, the semi-transitive phase brings about an awareness of the possibilities for change. At-risk students can only address 'isolated' issues and fail to recognize the larger system at hand. Finally, critical transitive thinking exemplifies the highest level of thought and action (praxis). In this stage of critical consciousness, at-risk students may be capable of addressing the larger, global issues relevant to their personal, political and social struggles. Furthermore, they will feel empowered enough to act and resist the oppressive elements that once were supportable.

Through the development of critical consciousness, at-risk students are able to produce solutions to relevant problems. Such problem-solving emerges from their struggle to make sense of their environment. It is only through reflection and action that a critical analysis on both a micro and macro scale can be achieved. In order to assist at-risk students in the development of critical consciousness, educators must become aware of their own beliefs and biases. Therefore, reflection is a continuous, dynamic process that must be regularly practiced in order to maintain and gain further clarity regarding issues of injustice in and out of the classroom.

According to Gramsci (1971), social change could not be limited to consciousness raising nor critical dialogue. Critical thinking must lead to transformation. He recognizes the starting point of critical consciousness as acknowledging who we really are (Gramsci, 1971). It is by addressing who we are that we can create a counter-resistance which challenges and confronts existing oppressing social relations. Therefore, it is not sufficient for at-risk students to engage in dialogue. At-risk students must grasp the underpinnings of their social and educational circumstances. In order for at-risk students to reach a level of awareness which challenges their existing structure, they must first address the ways in which they have contested their conditions. The teacher-student connection is invaluable in helping at-risk students move through this process of conscientization.

Resistance. Giroux (1983), in his theory of resistance, explains that discord often serves as the trigger for transforming the self and society. He stresses that individuals, singularly or as part of the collective, are equipped to challenge, question and mould their social conditions. Resistance, as Giroux defines (1983), is behaviour which challenges the rudiments of the political power structure. Acts of resistance can be blatant or resigned in nature. They are not limited to the main power structure nor the reproduction of the current societal conditions. Therefore, an ability to effectively critique and act against the status quo, on both a personal and political level, can lead at-risk students to a deeper awareness of their circumstances. Resistance can only be designated as such when it aids in the transformation and expansion of consciousness. Resistance can only be characterised if at-risk students begin to see themselves as 'agents of change' and become adept at altering their 'lived' experiences.

Key to at-risk students recognizing their status as 'students on the margins,' is the acceptance of their conditions as problematic. Grasping the differences between mainstream and marginalized groups is essential. This understanding influences the readiness of the marginalized to effectively resist the imposed circumstances in which they struggle to inhabit and simultaneously contest. The true challenge lies in transforming their contestations into agency. In order to fully comprehend Giroux's theory on resistance, we must also define the distinct parallels between opposition and resistance.

Adolescence is marred with struggles for self-governance and a search for individuality. Resistant or oppositional behaviour moves beyond 'typical' adolescent conduct. When at-risk students demonstrate oppositional behaviour, Giroux (1983) explains that such behaviour only appears to challenge the social order, yet in time it will merge with the present system. However, resistant acts are different. They demonstrate an awareness and understanding of current social conditions. Such understanding can then lead to personal transformation. In developing awareness, at risk students begin to understand the issues which contribute to their own conditions. It is by deconstructing these issues, on a personal and global context, that they move towards resistance and self-transformation.

Giroux (1983) states that human beings are active agents with the ability to question, challenge and redefine their social conditions. Most often, discordance is the spark that lights the fire for challenging social circumstances and transforming the relationships between power, ideology and culture within the individual. Therefore,

resistance is not simply the rejection of a dominant value nor is it limited to the awareness of a problem, but rather is an action taken which can lead to awareness.

Resistant behaviour contains three basic components: awareness, social reflection and freedom. Each stage in resistance serves to bring about awareness and critical consciousness in order to effectively address the social discontent. By actively partaking in the negotiation and transformation of the social fabric, at-risk students are not passive recipients of the dominance and its oppressive elements. At-risk students are able to see the empowering effects of being active agents. As Weiler explains in *Women Teaching for Change* (1988) it is through active analysis of imposed structural determinants that the subordinate group "can create alternative cultural and political institutions to establish their own understanding of oppression in order to oppose and change it" (P.13). This active practice can be empowering for at-risk students who have been further marginalized and often, disenfranchised due to the pre-existing structure.

Gramsci furthers the analysis of resistance with his theory of thought and action (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci states that the resistant nature of the subordinate group challenges the political structure and ideology. However, as the political elite become aware of said resistance to their values they "...struggle to re-impose the hegemony (which is) in constant danger of being resisted and contested by subordinate classes" (Weiler, 1988, p. 14). Thus resistance must be a dynamic and reflective practice among subordinate groups.

Resistance is an essential tool towards creating personal and social change. However, it can only be activated once at-risk students gain critical consciousness of the

elements that limit their participation within a supposedly democratic society. Teacher-student connections provide support to students who are uncertain of how to move from resistor to active agent.

Having reviewed the literature relevant to the study of at-risk students, I shall present, in chapter two, the methodology adopted for this study, a description of the School of Outliers, my story and teacher self-study. These multiple approaches shed further light on the impact of strong teacher-student bonds and the development of critical consciousness.

Chapter II

The School of Outliers

As a former student, Administrative Assistant and Behaviour Technician, my involvement with the School of Outliers has been extensive. My role as teacher at the School of Outliers for the past five years provides insight into the experience of at-risk students and school culture from both a personal and professional perspective. It is important to include my connections within this study without ignoring the potential pitfalls and benefits such links can create. Since this study involves multiple perspectives, several types of data are used. The telling of my story as a student and all the related experiences is shared and assessed. Further, I conduct a teacher self-study which examines my practice. Finally, a case study of the school is presented. Focusing on a single research site allows for a thorough description and analysis of the organizational culture. Case studies shed light on the process of a specific area of the organization. However, it is important to acknowledge, as Bogden and Biklen (2007) state, that "detaching a piece to study distorts, but the researcher attempts to choose a piece that is a naturally existing unit" (p. 61). By understanding its culture, we grasp the elements that provide respite to those who struggle with the reality of their lives and who seek to salvage their academic distress.

In this chapter, the methodology used in this study is discussed. Further, site and participant selections are reviewed. Following a description of the School of Outliers, my personal story and a self-study are presented.

Qualitative Inquiry

Leedy and Ormrod (2005) define qualitative inquiry as "…typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants' point of view" (p. 95). It is this intimate 'knowing' that encourages student-teacher relations. Eisner (1998) in his book *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice,* states that, "schooling needs to be 'known' in the Old Testament biblical sense: by direct, intimate contact" (p. 11). The use of a qualitative approach to this study is essential in exploring a particular school culture from the vantage point of 'lived' experiences and teacher-student connection.

As the focus is funnelled to address the unique narratives of at-risk students, the value of individual experiences and insight is crucial. However, as Eisner (1998) reminds us, "…a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing…" (p. 67). Allowing multiple perspectives such as those of at-risk students, teacher and researcher, offers multiple interpretations of the experience. It further broadens our vision to include aspects of the at-risk experience formerly removed from our frame of vision. Using multiple approaches is fundamental when working within dynamic and transformative environments. Qualitative research requires a discernible eye and an ability to detect, not only, what is clearly significant, but what information is subtly pertinent to the study. Further, it is through qualitative exploration that we become familiar with the environments, relationships and social experiences which influence students at-risk.

Site Selection

My role as both student and teacher at the School of Outliers has rendered it the site for this study. Although Bogden and Biklen (2007) express concern for studying one's work environment due to its lack of objectivity, they admit that in some instances such an attempt has proven successful. Since we taint interpretations of our experiences with our own knowledge and perspectives, I approach my analysis with the intent of understanding varied experiences and perspectives. My roles in the School of Outliers allow wider access to understand the make-up of the school and its clientele.

Participant Selection

Upon graduation, students often maintain strong ties to the school due to the intimate teacher-student connection. Many students often visit the school to keep staff informed about their endeavours and future plans. It is through these 'check-ins' that graduates became aware of the study and chose to participate. Thus, participants were recruited through word of mouth. Eleven students were interested in participating in the research. Those interested in participating were invited to a working session whereby various aspects of the study were discussed. Students were informed of the purpose of the study, the time required, the manner of conduct and the implications of participation.

The basic assumption is that, what has served as a solid base for participating volunteers throughout high school continues to serve as a sounding board, even when they are no longer part of the environment. Their 'visits' demonstrate the importance of the connections they have made. For the participants, being involved was seen as a way of 'paying back' the school community.

Data Collection

Following the initial meeting, the participants were asked to reflect on their participation and attend a second meeting to complete the required permission forms and receive the Guided Journal. Participants had a period of three-weeks to complete and return the Guided Journals.

Although participants were provided with a three-week period to respond to the Guided Journals, this working session was implemented to ensure that these journals would be returned in a timely fashion. Further, students were invited to work on their Guided Journals at the meeting. The Guided Journal questions were read and clarified for all participants. Further, questions were posted on the walls around the classrooms. This served as an 'ice-breaker' for the session. Questions such as the following were answered in a collaborative and interactive manner.

- What makes a teacher great? Ineffective?
- What makes schools alternative?
- Do boys learn differently from girls? How?
- What are some of the ways you learn best?
- What makes a school great?
- Does going to trade school or college matter to you? Why? Why not?

Through dialogue and active participation these at-risk student graduates began to share their ideas in an open forum.

Out of the eleven participants, eight (four males and four females) completed their journals. Although all eight journals provided information into the experience of at-risk

students within an alternative setting, some journals were far more detailed than others. The limited ability of some participants in communicating their experience affected the quality and depth of the journals.

Upon review of the journals, the selection of interviewees was made. Two interviewees were selected on the basis of their Guided Journal entries in terms of detail, extensive response and clarity of voice. Interviews were conducted to clarify and deepen the understanding of specific experiences of particular graduates. Interviewing participants clarified meaning, intent and experience detailed in selected Guided Journals.

Description of the School of Outliers

In 1981, at a time when at-risk students were seen as rebels, misfits and throw-a-ways, two teachers acknowledged mainstream school structures as rigid and incompatible for at-risk students. This initiated the development of a program that allowed at-risk students to re-engage with their academic lives. The School of Outliers began its first year as a pilot project in two empty classrooms in an already existing mainstream school in Greenfield Park. Their teaching day began at 4 p.m. and ended at 11 p.m. due to the mainstream administrators' fear of "contamination of attitude" from the at-risk students. Initially, the program was only meant to address the behavioural and attitudinal challenges these students faced. However, these educators came to recognize their students' academic ability. This allowed them to graduate from high school and thus, the school began pursuing the academic components of a standardized high school diploma and accreditation from MELS as a legally recognized school.

In 1997, the School of Outliers obtained its own space in an old elementary school house located in the Montérégie area. It was finally home. From the idea of two transformative teachers, the School of Outliers became the first alternative secondary school to answer the needs of at-risk students of the English sector of the Montérégie. It is now a respected school under their School Board with much deserved recognition (Prime Minister's award for Teaching Excellence (2001), the Queen's Jubilee Medal for Volunteerism (2003) and recognition by Maclean's Magazine for third best school in Canada for Community Involvement (2005).

The at-risk student population is of average or above average intelligence with behavioural, social or emotional difficulties. These students present problems that cannot be addressed within the regular school system. Initially, the demographic of the student population was composed of mainly white, lower to middle class males. Since 2000, the student population maintains an alternating ratio of 60\40 (male\female). Nowadays, students are younger entering as repeating Secondary III and IV students. Since 1981, approximately 2320 students have attended the School of Outliers. Out of the 2320 students, approximately 20 (.86%) students have been of visible minority status.

The philosophy of the School of Outliers is student-centered. The school places full responsibility for change directly on the student. Students are responsible for making initial contact with the school by scheduling an interview. This initiative is central as it places the student in charge. As each teacher has a unique approach, students are matched with the teacher who can best address the needs of the student in question.

The School of Outliers promotes a learning environment with small classrooms and a personalized, specialized atmosphere. It is designed as a one-year program which offers the curriculum as determined by the Québec Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sports as well as school board accredited courses. At the end of the academic year, students graduate from high school while non-graduates (Secondary I-IV) are re-assessed. Non-graduates are either referred to their home school or recommended to stay at the School of Outliers.

Although the School of Outliers is intended to be a one-year program, increasingly students have requested to remain at the School of Outliers. These at-risk students acknowledge benefitting from small class sizes, Core Teachers, strong teacher-student connection and additional support.

Physical environment. The School of Outliers is unique in its décor and atmosphere with an open-concept structure. The walls are wallpapered and filled with pictures of former students. Students who return for visits can find photos of themselves since they are part of the history and narrative of the school. Each classroom is individually decorated. Teachers incorporate their unique flair in their classrooms allowing for personal nuances to the environment. The classrooms are filled with tables, not individual desks. In addition, couches are available to find as a comfortable space to read. The physical structure is conducive to open dialogue and friendly encounters. An open kitchen, where students often engage in cooking activities, exists as the heart of the school. Staff and students can, much like a traditional family, prepare treats or cook a meal for others. The philosophy of "paying it forward" is always in practice as indicated that whatever is prepared must be shared with another class. This exchange provides an

air of congeniality and cohesion: fostering positive peer relations and teacher-student connection.

Entering a classroom is similar to entering someone's home. Students quickly recognize the individuality of each teacher and space among the cohesiveness of the school. There is no teacher lounge nor separate teacher washrooms nor is there a cafeteria. Staff and students live and operate in the same environment. They share the same lived reality. This simple resolve demonstrates the absence of an 'us' and 'them' and exemplifies an egalitarian, common shared space for all.

Atmosphere. Teachers welcome all students at the start of the day with a warm smile and a "good morning." They are greeted at the front doors, congratulated for being on time and reminded of the importance of doing so for those who are late. The school constantly outlines its four unconditional rules (No skipping, No lying, No drugs, No booze), helping at-risk students to understand that the first step in developing critical consciousness is to obtain self-awareness.

Hidden within these four simple rules is a code of conduct students must follow. Respect for self and others, raising expectations and maintaining an ethical standard are the cornerstones of this code.

Rules. For many at-risk students, truancy and absenteeism have been the contributing factor to their academic challenges. Attendance is a necessary component in addressing any student engagement. It is difficult to enhance student engagement when the student is not consistently and regularly attending school. Hence a strict 'no skipping' policy is a fundamental necessity at the School of Outliers. Further, a 'no

lying' policy is essential since any dialogue cannot be initiated without honesty and trust. Students are aware that teachers and students work together to resolve the obstacles that hinder their chances at success. Layers of dishonesty and distrust must always be peeled away prior to beginning a process of re-engagement.

Substance abuse has always been a critical issue among at-risk students. A school board wide policy requires students to refrain from drug use and drug possession. The School of Outliers adheres to this policy. However, due to its population, greater support is provided to those students who are struggling with substance abuse. Teachers are aware as to which students are 'using' and will then recommend drug counselling services. Further, students who attend school under the influence of drugs are not taught. Parents are contacted and are asked to pick up their child from school. Parents are made aware of the extent of their child's issues. In many cases, parents are fully aware of their child's drug use. This proves challenging and offers further opposition to educators who may be the only adults in the student's lives who are challenging them to tackle their addictions and personal troubles.

Teacher-student relations. The role of the Core Teacher is crucial to the development of student-teacher relations. This one-on-one mentoring partnership is often the 'hook' that keeps students in the classroom. This dynamic relationship allows the educator to address necessary factors in maintaining student engagement. In addition, Core Teachers are better able to address the small behaviours that are often SOS signals. These signals are often sent quietly and may escalate into much larger, inappropriate behaviours if left unanswered. The close connection between teacher and student is fundamental to help minimize the escalation of negative behaviours.

Small classrooms (maximum of 16 per classroom) provide a learning environment which builds on student strengths and addresses weaknesses in an honest, realistic manner. Within a consistent, routine-based framework, students and teachers are held accountable for their progress. This structure further allows Core Teachers to educate the whole student within a cooperative environment. Also, engaging students in community projects such as Youth Symposia (Substance abuse, Violence), community-based businesses and partnerships with local programs, students are provided with varied opportunities to excel and buy into the School of Outliers.

Post School of Outliers. Graduates from the School of Outliers enter the work force, pursue post-secondary education or enter vocational training programs. The supportive environment that these students become accustomed to in the School of Outliers proves to be even more crucial in the lives of many of its graduates than anticipated. Many demonstrate challenges or often fail in the pursuit of post-secondary success. This perhaps demonstrates that the learned skills among at-risk students at the School of Outliers are not readily transferred. Furthermore, the absence of an equally supportive environment in their post-secondary experiences limits their chances at success at the post-secondary level.

My Story

> I am an invisible man. I am a man of substance, of flesh and
> bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I
> am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.
> (Ralph Ellison)

We can envision a young Ellison, sitting in the classroom, invisible to those around him. His potential, skills and talents were hidden invisible and his contributions unwelcome. His presence was checked in the attendance book, yet he remained 'absent' in the mind of the teacher.

It is often the 'quiet' ones, those who are well-behaved, who do not demand much attention and do as they are told who go unnoticed. We often attribute words such as "at-risk," "disengaged," or "disruptive" with students who make their discontent shown. Unfortunately, those who remain quiet and passive, who require little teacher attention, are equally disengaged from the classroom. I was one of those students.

As a child, I was the docile, obedient girl. Jump forward to my high school years where my time was spent involved in sports and attending classes. The need to be seen, heard and appreciated as a contributing member of the school community was demanding a space within that very environment. The once and at times still tranquil girl required a larger space to exist in her entirety. In hindsight, it is always simpler to pinpoint our needs and yearnings. In the moment, the words escaped me. The need for voice and my inability to communicate surfaced as opposition to what was being asked of me creating a disabling school pattern. My disdain for the environment that failed to acknowledge these changes in me cropped up as truancy. My dismay at the lack of empathy developed into apathy. Not understanding why I felt the way I felt, I trudged through high school hallways in disarray, discontent and disconnected.

By the time I reached Secondary IV, little hope remained in high school being an environment where growth and exploration could occur. Having attended three different

high schools and encountering a multitude of teachers, I was certain that schools followed an Ikea-style, out-of-the-box system and that its teachers were as easily manufactured.

In 1992, some acquaintances mentioned the School of Outliers. They had attended the School of Outliers for their "not-so-quiet" resistance to mainstream education. They boasted of couches in the classroom, Bingo at the Old Brewery Mission and caring teachers. All I had to do was make an appointment for an interview. All the school had to do was accept me.

The interview date arrived and I put my best face forward. I smiled, shook hands, nodded 'Yes, Sir,' 'No M'am,' just like nice girls do. I handed over my report card with all the shiny A's and a few scattered, less brightly lit B's. I imagined that I was the best candidate for a school with couches in the classrooms and a large kitchen to bake cookies with the teachers. By the end of the meeting, I realized that I was wrong. I was not a perfect candidate and they refused my entry on the basis that I did not fit the profile of a delinquent at-risk student. I left feeling deflated and distanced myself from the remaining positives in my life. It was several weeks later that my mother's desperation, having watched my despondency, led her to contact the School of Outliers. A second interview was scheduled and off I went, shoes shined and my best smile slapped on my face.

The second interview was slightly different. They were not concerned about grades or report cards nor were they interested in my extra-curricular activities. They were, however, interested in why I felt that the School of Outliers was a better educational setting for me. For the first time, I was able to express my concerns, be heard

and it was this voicing of my then-current struggles that opened the doors to an educational environment that was not like the others.

During my two years (1992-1994) as a student at the School of Outliers, I quickly became aware of the complexities of being a student on the margins. In a mainstream educational setting, I remained an outsider among mainstream students. In an alternative setting, I was the outsider in a school of outsiders. The very elements that led to my disenfranchisement from mainstream schooling (apathy and disengagement) are what allowed me to gain access to an alternative setting designed for at-risk students. However, my ability to manoeuvre, both on an academic and social aspect, led to my artificial inclusion within mainstream and provided the edge within an alternative setting. Even as a student, it became evident that the need for social access to enhance the lives of at-risk students and teacher-student connection were key components to the success of alternative education.

As a student at the School of Outliers, I recall attending the Phantom of the Opera, visiting a mosque, museums and preparing the yearly turkey dinner for the homeless. My weekly volunteer placement at the Montreal Chest Hospital, a photography store and a daycare centre, is where some of the real learning took place. While volunteering at the Montreal Chest Hospital, I remember accompanying an elderly woman. We often discussed her experiences, aches and pains, life and death. The lessons we hold dear often come from these intimate experiences. Most influential were the teacher-student relationships that were shaped through student engagement. No longer did I feel like a student, but felt as a member of a larger community. Despite the importance of Math, Literature, History and Science at the School of Outliers, the

insights that have remained with me are those which had little to do with academics. The School of Outliers understood then what I have come to understand now: that schooling and education are two distinct entities and one does not necessarily beget the other.

Upon graduating from the School of Outliers, I was concerned of the stigma attached to having attended a 'special' school. Little did I realize then the preparedness that came attached with such an endeavour. The workload and work ethics the School of Outliers demanded from its students, prepared me for greater challenges ahead. When I entered Marianopolis College, the skills, tools and habits that were developed during my time at the School of Outliers made my college experience laughable.

I spent a year at Marianopolis College studying Creative Arts and applied to York University in Toronto. I was accepted into the Double Major, Honours Program (Psychology and Communications) and made my way to Toronto. After spending a semester at York University, working two jobs and living on my own, I decided to return to Montreal and pursue my studies at Concordia University. Still no plans to enter the field of Education, I began a degree in Biology. Shortly, thereafter I had my son and waited to return to my studies at a more opportune time.

Two years later, I returned to study in the Applied Human Sciences program at Concordia University. It was then that the Teaching Principal of the School of Outliers asked if I was interested in working at the school as a Behaviour Technician. A Behaviour Technician assists the teachers with students who are challenging and often, disruptive. Due to the strong teacher-student bond I experienced when I was a student,

there was little hesitation in my response. To return to an environment which fostered cooperative conditions and social consciousness was refreshing.

Working in the classroom alongside Core Teachers, I was able to gain first-hand experience of working within this specialized setting. Being familiar with the environment, philosophy and practices at the School of Outliers, I quickly became enmeshed in the school and its practices. Shortly thereafter, I assumed the post of Administrative Assistant.

It is through fulfilling these positions that I witnessed how deeply ingrained the school values and philosophy are among its staff and school structure. The critical pedagogic notions underlined the everyday sense of equality and authenticity in the School of Outliers. This awareness solidified my understanding of the lived realities of Core Teachers. It also showed how their pedagogical praxis engaged students to become aware of their social positionality as student and citizen, which eventually led to their transformation.

After graduating from Concordia University and having worked at the School of Outliers for several years the opportunity arose to teach. I was on maternity leave with my third child when the Teaching Principal contacted me and asked if I would be interested in returning as a teacher.

Core Teachers are responsible for all subjects with the exception of French and Science. Since the school not only addresses the curricular guidelines set by the MELS, the in-house accredited courses such as Student In Society, Gender Issues and Great Thinkers, must also be taught by Core Teachers. Beyond the academic scope of teacher's

duties, teachers at the School of Outliers have always acted as counsellors, friends, advocates, role models and at times, 'parents' to students. Many educators with decades of experience, who choose to teach at the School of Outliers, quickly realize the difference in demands, clientele and skill required to teach in this specialized setting.

Although I was uncertain about teaching as a profession, I accepted the position. My initial decision was to fulfill the post for one complete academic year and re-assess my commitment to teaching.

Eleven years later, I remain in the same educational environment. Five of those years have been as a Core Teacher. I recognize the importance of having had an in-depth experience within the same educational framework. I am able to recognize the elements that enhance or detract from the space we create on a daily basis. Working with two educators, who were my teachers when I was a student, serves as guidepost for my practice. They also serve to remind me of the critical factors that ensure success in my practice and in the lives of the students. These factors are the teacher-student connection and the development of critical consciousness. Under the leadership of the co-creator of the School of Outliers, I have as mentor, a woman who maintains the vision and philosophy of what at-risk students need. This serves as a reliable sounding board to grow as a professional.

Self-Study

Prior to being asked to fill a teaching position, I had not pursued an academic background in teaching. Entering the field of education without preparation left me feeling unqualified and ill-equipped to fulfill such a role. However, I quickly became

aware that my academic background had little to do with my potential success as a teacher with an at-risk clientele. Clearly, proper training with academic subject matter is necessary in order to 'teach' students using effective pedagogical practices. Having worked in the school, I understood the curriculum guidelines, applicable strategies and most of the subject-content required by the MELS. However, my lack of formal training created a receptive and unguarded approach to learning how to teach, not only the curricula, but within this specialized context.

Lacking a traditional background in education created a malleability that allowed the Teaching Principal to help mould my practice. Perhaps my effectiveness as a teacher within such a context is due to my 'training in context'. Although I benefitted from a specialized training, the school produced an educator suited to its purpose. Further, the mentor relationship that was created between the Teaching Principal and myself exemplified the necessary teacher-student relationships that foster success, commitment and growth. As Palmer (1998) expresses in *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Landscape of a Teacher's Life,*

> Mentoring is a mutuality that requires more than meeting the right teacher: the teacher must meet the right student. In this encounter, not only are the qualities of the mentor revealed, but the qualities of the student are drawn out in a way that is equally revealing (p. 21).

Following my entrance into the Bachelor's in Education at Concordia University, I realized that very few courses were applicable to non-mainstream settings. The reality of classroom practice and what is learned in teacher training are incompatible. Having

practiced in an at-risk classroom concurrently to teacher training provided a clear picture of what teaching means theoretically, pedagogically and personally.

If I could pinpoint one aspect that builds a bridge between my role as an educator and the at-risk student who sits in my classroom it will be the discovery that I too was a student at the School of Outliers. They seem to recognize in me something that exists within themselves. This classroom connection goes beyond teacher-student compatibility. It can be defined as reciprocal engagement. Reciprocity makes room for exchange in a cooperative and caring environment. It moves beyond the confines of the classroom and opens a window into the lives of both student and teacher. Hutchinson, in her book *Students on the Margins* (1999), explains,

> Not only does reciprocity involve challenging the artificial distinction between a teacher's objective stance toward learning and a child's subjective learning, it involves listening with an ear to hear the meaning a child is attempting to make or share. Reciprocity is demonstrated when a teacher steps outside of the classroom and attends a student's piano recital or soccer game. Although a small thing, it demonstrates that the teacher understands that the life of the child extends beyond the walls of the classroom and that who the child is as he or she walks into the classroom is shaped by experiences and relationships outside of the school (p. 129).

The understanding that my role as educator and their role as student are reciprocated through daily exchanges enhances an environment of trust, cohesion and

recognition of one another's multiplicities within the classroom. It must be said that there is no existing classroom dynamic that completely equalizes teacher and student relations. What the students recognize is the authentic exchange rather than the teacher-student power dynamic. This exchange leads to strengthen teacher-student connection. From the point of view of the students, my experience as both student and teacher within the School of Outliers lends credibility to their experience and serves as a powerful reminder as they struggle toward their own critical awareness.

As an educator working with at-risk students, the perception is that we 'teach' the un-teachable. Among my peers who work in regular or gifted school settings, my work is charitable. In essence, I am a 'teacher on the margins'. Understanding the stigma attached to at-risk students moves beyond our biases and encompasses those who attempt to recognize their narratives as valid accounts of marginalization. The prescriptive action plans implemented by government, boards and educators only serve to keep 'at-risk' students and educators 'inside the box'.

It is through resistance to the marginalizer that I, as an at-risk student, was able to succeed within mainstream education. This resistance permitted me to choose an alternative to a typical mainstream education. Also, acts of resistance to being further labelled at-risk led me to define myself within an alternative framework creating a greater sense of independence and identity. As Hutchinson (1999) explains,

> When persons are marginalized, either stereotypically or psycho-socially, they can internalize the message of the marginalizer, attempt to ignore it, or they can resist the attempt to push them to the margins.

When resistance occurs as a response to marginalization, it is a claim

for autonomy, for example, for the ability to either define the terms of

one's own difference…or to have recognition for the meaning one is

creating (p. 50).

Through such resistance one creates a clear definition of self and identity that

addresses authenticity and integrity. Thus, marginalization can provoke a

conscientization that leads to an emancipatory experience of self as marginalized and self

as educator of the marginalized.

Student data and my personal experience both serve to demonstrate the need for

students at-risk. Although reasons for attending the school vary, we must not dismiss the

need for a supportive and nurturing educational environment and strong teacher-student

connection. Not only do teacher-student connections push students to develop critical

consciousness, these connections serve to engage educators in a reflective pedagogical

praxis.

Further, it is in creating a 'safe space', a 'caring space' and a 'learning space'

geared towards at-risk students that teacher-student connection takes hold. It is in these

spaces where students risk being vulnerable that the greatest growth can occur. As

Palmer (1998) states, "a learning space needs to be hospitable not to make learning

painless but to make the painful things possible, things without which no learning can

occur…" (p.74).

In my experience, the School of Outliers created such a space for me to evolve

and mature as a student and to develop and emerge as an educator. As I tackled the

challenges of facing the 'hard truths' that both students and teachers encounter, knowing that I did not face them alone continues to empower and enhance my educational praxis.

Primarily, when we seek to engage in a critical pedagogy that prepares at-risk students to see themselves as active participants and global citizens, we must keep in mind that for any critical consciousness to occur, at-risk students must engage and be willing to transform themselves, their surroundings and their conditions: without the will to do so, no conscious growth can manifest itself.

In this chapter, I presented the setting of the study as well as my story and self-study as part of the data on which this thesis is based. In the following chapter, I put forth another data set. The student narratives consisting of eight guided Journals and two interviews will be shared to demonstrate the experiences of at-risk students at the School of Outliers.

Chapter III

The Narratives

The purpose of including student narratives in this study is to understand the links between learning and being. In this context, we can witness the students understanding of the world, their interactions in it and their vision of their possibilities. Acknowledging student insights and experiences helps educators to understand how critical consciousness is developed with at-risk students. Gaining insights into the lives of at-risk students opens an interactive dialogue between teacher and student. Invariably, both parties interchangeably play the dual roles of 'researcher and contributor'.

The main theme which emerged clearly from my self-study and the journals is that of teacher-student connection and the process of developing critical consciousness. In this chapter, I present the collected data from the student journals.

Participants were asked to respond to a series of questions related to their personal and academic backgrounds, the events that labelled them 'at-risk' and their experiences as students at the School of Outliers. Eleven participants took part in the study. Eight participants completed the Guided Journals (See Appendix A) and two of these were interviewed for further understanding of the narratives. The Guided Journal questions were designed to understand the experience of at-risk students.

Once completed by the participant volunteers, the Guided Journals were initially read to determine the depth and breadth of content and then later were re-assessed. Relevant themes began to surface in the experiences of students at-risk. One common theme, which quickly became apparent, was teacher-student connection. The passages

used in the data were directly taken from the journals. To better grasp the realities of at-risk students, it is important to include student 'voice'. Using direct quotes from the Guided Journals serves to limit the distance between the story being told and the storyteller. It also serves to provide participants a venue to evaluate their own experience since "we can only appraise and interpret what we have been able to experience" (Eisner, 1998, p. 17) and it is through voice that experience is expressed and disseminated among marginalized groups. (Minor corrections were made to ensure readability).

The following narratives are the responses to the Guided Journal questions. They are organized based on background (i.e., family/home dynamics, reasons for entering the School of Outliers, experience prior to the School of Outliers, year of graduation), and excerpts from their Guided Journals.

Maverick

Background. Maverick is an 18-year old white male student who resides with both his parents in a middle class neighbourhood in the Montérégie area. He is the youngest of three siblings. He has two older sisters, one in the workforce and the other in CEGEP. Maverick's home life is turbulent at times. Being the only son in a home with two sisters, Maverick's father, while under the influence of alcohol, often beats him.

Maverick spent two years at the School of Outliers. During this time, there was little indication of the abuse he endured at the hands of his father. Maverick has always indicated respect and admiration for his father. His pleasant and charming nature often served as diversion to the unspoken turmoil he experienced.

While at the School of Outliers, Maverick struggled academically. His resistance to arrive to class on time and honour deadlines affected his grades. Further, his self-medicating drug habits greatly reduced his ability to be attentive in class. Yet, in spite of these obstacles, Maverick demonstrated initiative with in-school activities becoming a contributing member to several board-wide student committees.

Maverick was sent to the School of Outliers due to his expulsion from a mainstream high school. (Students who are expelled are provided with the opportunity to attend another school within the school board. In most cases, students expelled for violating the school board's zero-tolerance policy for drugs and violence are recommended to the School of Outliers). He was caught with stolen items, drugs and related paraphernalia. Being expelled at the end of the school year prohibited him from writing his final exams.

Journal entry. In his narrative, Maverick describes an early start to his academic woes. Attempting to pinpoint the start of his school struggle, he states, "I don't even know where to start." To the best of his recollection, he identifies Grade 3 as the turning point. Maverick explains that it was in Grade 3 that his parents decided to have him change schools. The reasons for this change are unknown. However, Maverick feels that the loss of friends led him to act out. He recalls becoming a "pest." "I would annoy people I didn't like. I would get them angry and they would eventually just blow up," Maverick claims. He describes engaging in antagonistic behaviours towards his peers and being a "hard-headed kid in elementary."

Despite the behavioural changes in elementary school, Maverick expresses the drastic changes that took place in secondary school.

I barely went to class. I skipped and smoked up a lot. I was careless about my work because I failed a year and was not motivated to even go to school. It was almost a stage of depression. I got arrested a few times and I was constantly getting Saturday detentions and getting suspended, so homework was the last thing on my mind. I was caught breaking into lockers and I was searched and they found things that were stolen. I was caught with marijuana, a grinder and rolling papers. They called the cops, the whole nine yards. My parents came to school and I got into a lot of trouble. My getting expelled affected me a lot because it was the end of the year and I could not do my exams which led me to fail Secondary IV. I was in Grade 10 for the third time. I was not happy at all and then my girlfriend broke up with me after being with her for two and a half years. She said that I was a mess and she couldn't deal with my habits. It broke my heart and I was just filled with anger, but if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have opened my eyes and realized that I was doing nothing with my life.

Despite the fact that it was not his choice to attend the School of Outliers, Maverick feels that his experience in the school led him to make positive changes.

It helped me open my eyes to reality. I liked how teachers are honest with the students and actually teach us about life rather than just

38

academics. They go outside the box and think different. It's made me feel better about myself by helping others and volunteering. I started to care more about the direction I was going in life.

Maverick attributes the change in his behaviour and attitude to the positive student-teacher connection he developed while at the School of Outliers.

My teacher is the one who motivated me for everything. She opened my eyes and helped me when I needed help. She told me when I was in the wrong. We had a good relationship which made me feel comfortable. I liked how I could go to class knowing that I wouldn't have a hard time with my teacher. I had that problem with some teachers in my old school.

Maverick felt that his experience at the School of Outliers was complete. "It is just a matter of taking advantage of the resources around you," he states.

Post-secondary status. Maverick graduated in June 2010. He continues to work at the same full-time job he worked while attending school. Maverick is interested in attending Cooking School or CEGEP, yet remains undecided at this time regarding his future goals. He has the opportunity to work alongside his father as a city worker.

Nahla

      Background. Nahla stems from a white, upper class nuclear family. She has three sisters, one of whom is her twin. She is a smart, eclectic eighteen-year-old. Her home life has been fraught with conflict. Her father often travels for work, since it is with him she feels most comfortable, his absence has had a profound effect on her. Her relationship with her mother has been strained for many years and she continuously argues with her older sister. She does, however, feel a close connection with her twin sister. This tense environment creates an emotional strain for Nahla. Often times, these anxiety-creating conditions led to high absenteeism.

      She attended a regular, mainstream high school until her graduating year when she transferred to the School of Outliers. Nahla's experience was one filled with growth and challenges. Being witness to the tragic death of a friend, the School of Outliers served as respite while Nahla dealt with the remaining effects.

      Journal entry. According to Nahla, she had a successful elementary school experience. She boasts being "very strong" in reading and writing at a young age, yet she found herself "rebelling" and doing horribly in math. As a twin, Nahla was often compared to her sister. Being labelled as the 'bad one' led her to resist further and find ways to distinguish herself from others. She defines her elementary schooling and home life as somewhat positive.

           Overall, it was a good experience, but the resistance to go to

           school set in young because I realised nothing was going to be spoon-

fed to me and "my ambition was handicapped by my laziness."(She

quotes Charles Bukowski, Author and Poet.) My social life was more

important than school from age 13 until the time I came to the School

of Outliers. I would constantly be roaming around town getting into

trouble. My parents were unhappy with me and where I was headed.

We would always be fighting about curfew and school. I just wanted to

be out. [My] parents were on the verge of divorcing for five or some

years, which was never much help either.

Nahla describes her poor work habits as a factor that led to poor school performance. Nahla had "no patience" with school and would even throw out her homework in front of the teachers. It was in the summer of Secondary IV that Nahla became more disengaged and increasingly unmotivated due to the tragic loss of her friend.

She was out with some friends smoking marijuana. Things turned for the worse when they decided to cross the highway to buy snacks at the local store to answer their "munchies from being stoned." As they attempted to traverse the busy crossing, her friend stepped into the traffic and was instantly crushed by a passing truck. Not only did Nahla lose a close friend, she unfortunately witnessed the violent death leaving her with a myriad of emotions to deal with on her own as she even resisted counselling.

The first week of school I was already going to class high, falling

asleep and not doing my work, not to mention being in Secondary III

Math for the third year. I wasn't planning on going anywhere fast nor

41

did I have any motivation. My vice-principal recommended I attend the School of Outliers. I thought a lot about it. The School of Outliers was known as a school for delinquents so I was a little unsure at first, but I had friends [at the School of Outliers] who loved it, so I decided to take the step forward.

Nahla expresses that entering the School of Outliers helped her gain "morals" and ways to be "diplomatic" rather than rude and inappropriate. Her view of "delinquents" was altered due to peer interactions and better sense of self-perception. Although Nahla lost many friends due to her change in schools, she felt it was for the better. Nahla expresses the impact of her experience at the School of Outliers.

A teacher who understood me, that's all I needed. As soon as I walked into the school, my teacher and I knew exactly what type of day it would be and we'd work past it if we knew it would be a crumby one. I realised that I was a lot happier because I felt I was understood. I didn't feel left out like I always did. I stopped doing drugs, started getting healthier, gained weight and felt better about myself. I wasn't a wallflower like the rest. Instead, we were all rainbow coloured against a black background. It was a great feeling to come into a school where I was appreciated every day.

The School of Outliers does not house a gymnasium, so alternative health activities are offered like Ballroom Dancing, Yoga and Running Clubs.

Nahla feels that appropriate gym facilities would enhance the success of some of the students at the School of Outliers.

Post-secondary status. Nahla graduated from the School of Outliers in June 2010. While awaiting for her acceptance to CEGEP in the liberal Arts program, Nahla has joined the work force. As well, she has started to address her personal issues regarding loss and disconnection.

Harry and John

Background. Harry and John are twins raised in a middle-class environment by a single mother. Their father left the family and the resulting divorce was particularly difficult. Contact with their father remained challenging due to his verbal and physical abuse. Harry and John's mother was and remains consistently involved in both their personal and academic lives.

During their time at the School of Outliers, Harry and John excelled academically and socially. Their grades improved dramatically and their involvement in school activities provided them with a range of outlets and unique experiences.

Journal entry. Harry describes his elementary school experience as "kind of a blur" and felt that his experience in primary school was "rough at times." His life was "hard." He was affected by his mother's disappointment in his grades. Harry's poor organizational skills and unwillingness to do any work affected his results.

Prior to Secondary III, Harry struggled with achieving respectable grades and attending classes. Harry cites Secondary III as the pivotal year where he met a teacher "who changed [his] my life" at the School of Outliers.

> I was failing everything. I was just not motivated with school. I did not get along with my teachers. They could not connect with me. Then I came here in Secondary III and everything changed. The connection and welcoming from the staff at the School of Outliers led to my improvement. It is not just one teacher. You are motivated by every teacher. They always kept telling me that we can achieve something in my life.

John, Harry's twin brother, had a similarly negative elementary school experience. John explains that he went to French school and it was "terrible." He eventually transitioned to an English school and "did great." Comparatively, John felt that his "home life was awesome" and despite his struggles in school, he felt the experience in general was positive. John acknowledges poor work habits and a need for change upon entering Secondary III.

> I never did anything. I was not motivated. I was at a period where I did nothing in school and needed a change. I entered the School of Outliers in Secondary III and I improved the moment I entered the building. I loved everything about the school. I changed from being a loser who did not care about school, to a winner improving in every skill possible like life skills, academics, everything.

Certain items stand out from both John and Harrys' experiences. Harry was greatly affected by the disappointment of his mother, yet John was inspired by his mother's support. On the other hand, John was deeply scarred by the abusive behaviour from his father, while Harry could resist its effect. These differences at home demonstrate in spite of similar environments many different factors impact on at-risk students, which must be factored into the students' narratives. John and Harry both feel that the School of Outliers needs a gymnasium for a physical education program since "competition is extremely important for boys" (John).

Post-secondary status. Harry and John graduated from the School of Outliers in June 2010. John and Harry both attended CEGEP. Although John still attends CEGEP, he is keen to pursue a Psychology degree. However, he no longer enjoys school due to its lack of teacher-student connection at the college level.

Recently, Harry was involved in an altercation and was charged with assault despite his claims of being falsely accused. The events took place at a party where a young man was hit and claimed that Harry was the aggressor. The stresses and added pressure of facing charges are what influenced Harry to withdraw from CEGEP. He works full-time while awaiting the resolution to the charges laid against him.

Sarah

Background. Sarah is a white, middle class eighteen-year-old. She lives at home with her mother and stepfather. For many years, her home life was filled with conflict. Poor relations with family members and friends were exacerbated by increasing drug consumption pushing Sarah to her tipping point.

During her time at the School of Outliers, she demonstrated a consistent and solid academic effort. However, the struggle with 'staying clean' was always evident.

Journal Entry. Sarah describes her elementary studies as a "normal" experience in spite of her poor work habits. However, it is in her home life that Sarah faced many challenges.   She describes her home life as difficult.   "I was rebellious and misunderstood. I had a hard time connecting to my family."

> I believe it was the middle of Secondary IV that things began to
>
> change for me. The minute I knew I needed to change was the same
>
> minute I realized I had a problem.   [Or perhaps what Sarah is
>
> articulating is that the minute she realized she had a problem, she knew
>
> she had to change.]

According to Sarah, this realization occurred in 2008 when her drug addiction led to the downfall of cherished relationships specifically with friends, her father and her boyfriend. Disappointment in herself and family led her to acknowledge the fact the she had a "problem." Most influential in her decision to make a change was her mother. The support her mother showed and close connection led her to make a drastic educational

change. Her decision to enter the School of Outliers served as the additional support needed to conquer her personal setbacks.

Upon entering the School of Outliers, Sarah explains the change of self-perception she experienced.

I started to care about myself and learned how to do exactly that. I began to have faith. The School of Outliers helped me improve in every single, possible way. It made me realize I had potential and what I was doing would affect my future. [My] commitment to school, the connections I gained and the doors that opened for me were factors that led to my improvement. The teachers were open-minded and had peculiar teaching methods.

When asked 'What was different about your experience in the School of Outliers than your previous school?' Sarah states, "I cared and was cared about."

Sarah claims that she would "not change a single thing" regarding the school. According to Sarah, the educational environment provided by the School of Outliers was the exact resource necessary for her to face her personal challenges.

Post-secondary status. In June 2010, Sarah graduated from high school with no ambition to attend CEGEP. Sarah joined the work force upon earning her high school diploma. She has no desire to attend CEGEP, but will pursue a career in tattoo artistry.

Nikki

Background. Nikki stems from a lower class home. She lost her mother to suicide as a young girl. Her father, an alcoholic, raised her and her sister. Nikki spent three years at the School of Outliers undergoing changes.

Nikki often experienced frequent, uncontrollable outbursts of rage. Her lack of critical thinking skills led her to choose abusive partners. These relationships greatly affected her moods and attitude toward school. Her time at the School of Outliers was similar to a roller-coaster ride, but these rages eventually dissipated due to her connection to the school environment.

Nikki was recommended to the School of Outliers due to these uncontrollable rages, violent mood swings and consistent acts of resistance and insubordination.

Journal Entry. Nikki describes her elementary school experience.

> I liked my elementary school, but I could have changed my
> attitude. I was a bully and didn't appreciate other students and teachers.
> I was kicked out of most school outings like the Halloween parties and
> trips to the sugar shack. Looking back, I would have changed most of
> my experiences. Things at home were not stable. I did not care about
> my family. Also, I was going out with the wrong person. Finally, I
> didn't really care for school.

However, Nikki explains that it was only in "Secondary III or IV" that things began to change for her.

I failed at [mentions previous school] and decided to come to the School of Outliers. I thought it might be better. I was skipping school a lot and was involved with drugs and alcohol. My family cared, but it didn't matter to me at the time. Lots of people cared, but it didn't mean anything to me.

Things changed for Nikki when she entered the School of Outliers. Nikki began to talk to teachers more and felt they cared. She felt connected to them because "they treated you as family, their own children."

I began to think about what I wanted in life. I stopped doing drugs and learned more about myself. Knowing you have to grow up and realize that you have to start your life helped a lot. [The School of Outliers helped me improve] because they just care so much for each student in their class. They focus on you. If you need more help, they will stay later to help you learn. They give you all the time you need. There is no rush to your learning. It helped me develop mentally. The teachers were there for me and my family. They believed in what I could do and understood me at the time.

At the School of Outliers, students are not permitted to leave school grounds during school hours. Nikki feels that this could be changed, but acknowledges that it "may not be a good idea because students may go do drugs or drink at that time." Staff used this exact logic to base their decision when instituting the policy which prohibits students from leaving school grounds during school hours.

Post-secondary status. Upon graduation from the School of Outliers in June 2008, Nikki initially attended CEGEP. However, the financial and academic pressures in addition to the lack of teacher-student connection led her to withdraw shortly thereafter. Nonetheless, Nikki is now working as an office assistant in a local company.

Jenny

Background. Jenny's home life was filled with stress and conflict. Stemming from a lower class home, she struggled with having her basic needs met. Poor communication between family members created chronic tensions contributing to Jenny's anxiety and health issues. Jenny was often hospitalized for severe panic attacks and anxiety-based illnesses. Prior to attending the School of Outliers, Jenny describes her home life as "stressful, unloving, lonely and rebellious." Her academic and personal struggles impacted all aspects of her life. Jenny believes that the challenges faced at home were the catalyst for her academic issues.

Having failed Secondary IV, Jenny contemplated leaving school altogether. However, having heard of the School of Outliers from former students, she felt it could be a setting more suited to her needs. During her second attempt at Secondary IV, Jenny arrived at the School of Outliers.

It was there that Jenny felt a sense of acceptance previously unbeknownst to her. Having the space to be herself and be understood were key elements to Jenny's academic success at the School of Outliers.

However, Jenny's struggles began at an early age. As an elementary student, she felt that school was useless. Although her parents expected her to do well in school, she

felt that parental pressure to be more like her siblings and her poor work habits hindered her chances at success. Maintaining an attitude of indifference and disengagement led to a poor entry into secondary school.

The negative habits Jenny solidified in her elementary setting were exacerbated in high school when her poor work habits and lack of positive social interactions further led to poor decisions. Jenny's inability to do her homework, arrive at school on time or attend classes amplified her struggles with maintaining positive relationships with her teachers and peers. Further, the stress placed on her parents due to her inappropriate behaviour led to many conflicts within the home.

In Secondary I, Jenny's bad attitude and truancy, left unaddressed, led her to run away from home and engage in regular drug consumption. As the years went on, Jenny continued to maintain one foot in the school and another in a world filled with drugs, violence and depression. Although Jenny held a part-time job throughout high school, she most often arrived to work "stoned." Jenny began to feel like she "needed a change of environment." Due to the choices Jenny made, she confesses that her "life was spiralling downward. My family, friends, boyfriend and my own life were being torn apart."

Journal entry. The transition to the School of Outliers was, at times, challenging since Jenny was not used to having teachers hold her to such high standards. She quickly 'bought into' the idea that learning could be engaging and became connected to the School. Jenny describes her experience at the School of Outliers.

My life was taking a turn for the better. I got my family back, got a job, started being polite again, [I] did more with my friends whom I changed for the better. My attitude on life was looking much nicer and I wanted to go to school and learn. The staff always supported me. I had countless meetings with my teacher about my attitude. Academically, the teaching pattern helped me: how they chose to teach it, by repeating it until we got it…by letting me be who I was and by supporting me in the choices I was making were just some of the reasons why I did well there. The classmates, teachers, special guest speakers, the classes that were offered like Ballroom Dance, Art and Work Experience, these aspects, plus staying after school if your homework wasn't done, motivated me to do my homework which made me want to stay in school. It gave me confidence to stand up for myself without that guilty feeling. [Now] I am more polite with others. I try to control my temper and be as open-minded as possible. It [School of Outliers] was more like a family. They didn't judge me for who I was, what I was wearing, how I acted. The teachers were there to help me with my school and personal troubles.

When interviewed, Jenny shared further details about her circumstances.

Jenny: Where do I begin? (laughter)

Interviewer: Just tell me your story…

Jenny: Well, it started when I was in [mentions previous school], my parents…my dad used to beat me a lot because I was a rebel child. There was one day that he beat me so badly that I had bruises on my arms. I went to school and told my Vice-Principal and I said, "Look. There's something wrong. I need to talk to somebody." She got [Youth] Protection involved.

I went through family counselling and that worked for a bit. Then, my social worker kind of backed off and said, "Oh, you are okay," but it didn't work as well as she thought it would. It happened again and I called her again and she just said she didn't care so I thought she has to help me and not walk away.

So I ended up with another social worker after another incident. I actually stole $2000 from my parents because they were neglecting me. They would always give my sisters' hand-me-down clothing to me, but none of their clothes would fit. So I took their money and I splurged on myself. I came home from babysitting one day and I asked my dad to use his computer and he said, "No. Give me back my money" and punched me in the face. So I took the phone and called the cops and told them what had happened. They arrested him the same day and held him for a night and then they told me you have to leave. You have to go somewhere else. You can't live like this. I was sixteen at the time.

I went to live in a foster home. I wasn't allowed to see my parents for a while, at least not my dad because they thought it would trigger something. So I was going home, but not seeing my dad. I wasn't allowed to go when he was there. We had meetings with counsellors, principals, Youth Protection, my social worker and her boss and family counselling. Everything. It was just not going as I wanted it to go. I missed my family. I almost lost them because of something I did and I finally told them that I stole money. I spent Christmas time at the foster home. I wrote them all a letter explaining what I had done and they all thought it was for drugs and you know, 'we thought you owed somebody money or a big person was going to kill you'. They actually appreciated that I told them, but they just asked why I hadn't told them sooner or why I didn't just ask for new clothes or new stuff. I tried to tell them, but they just didn't understand and now it's okay. I mean, it's better that they know that it was me. Obviously it was four years ago, but it's still not the same now. I still feel really guilty and it sucks. I almost lost my family. I'm still paying my parents back. I'm not ashamed of that. I tell everybody. It's an open story now. Like here at this school, I didn't want anybody really to know, but I had to tell someone.

Interviewer: How did all this affect you academically?

Jenny: It affected my academic performance a lot. I did very poorly because when I wasn't here, I would just not care. I had other things to worry about like meeting with counsellors and other stuff so I was doing very

poorly. Then when I switched and changed my life around, I kind of realized that school was important and that I had to take it as it comes. Do my homework and try not to get in any more fights with my parents.

Interviewer: Can you pinpoint specific things that your teacher did that helped you? Can you be specific?

Jenny: Everything. It was a smaller class than a regular school, more one-on-one time available and extra-curricular activities that made you want to do better in school and further pursue activities. Also, the way of teaching was different. The teachers actually cared about how you were doing. If you had a problem, they'd tell you to come in. No matter how long it took them, they'd help you until things were better.

Interviewer: How important to your success was your personal desire to change?

Jenny: It was very important for me to change because I didn't want to live with that for the rest of my life. I didn't want to be in denial. It happened for a reason and now I've overcome this reason. I am 21-years old. It's in the past. For me, it's a big step that I took to maturity and opening another day to my life. Ok, this has happened. Now, I am not going to live my life like this anymore. I'm just going to shut that door and lock it.

Interviewer: If you had to define the role of a teacher, how would you do so?

Jenny: She is more of a friend, more of a family member. She is a teacher, but then she is also there as a counsellor, as a friend, as just somebody if you

need to vent. As a guidance counsellor, she'll help you get on your feet and you know, give you, not necessarily options, but she'll push you in the right direction that you want to go with your life. Obviously, all the teachers know me here. They've all had a big impact and helped me. I appreciate that connection.

Interviewer: How important are extra-curricular activities to student engagement?

Jenny: I was also in choir, not school related, but still something to do for me. It was important because as a child, I never really had any extra-curricular activities. I mean I was in Girl Guides, Sparks and Brownies, but other than that, I never did any sports or had very many outings in school because my family could never really afford it. So it was something to say that I'm in Choir or I'm doing Ballroom Dancing or something just to say that it's different than what others are doing and I like it. It's motivating me to do better in this school because if I don't succeed in school my parents are going to take me out of Choir and I wouldn't be able to do Ballroom Dancing anymore because it was with my class. It impacted my school life so much that I was actually doing my homework and I was bringing everything in on time and getting good grades. I was proud of myself and it pushed me to do something that I thought I would never be able to do.

Interviewer: If you had to name one thing that kept you hooked into school, what would it be?

Jenny: Probably the dancing [laughs]. Probably, but on a real school basis, I'd say that it was more family oriented and you didn't have to be somebody who they wanted you to be. You just were yourself and everybody accepted you for who you were. You know, being connected.

Interviewer: What made you disengage from school before coming to the School of Outliers?

Jenny: The fact that I was doing poorly and my grades were really bad, my family issues. Like this is what you have to do… strict…and I am more of a person that's like 'yeah, I'll do that when I want to do that. Right now, I want to do this, I don't want to do that, but I have to do that.' It just wasn't my thing and everybody there was fake and trying to be somebody who they are not supposed to be and I didn't feel I was accepted as who I was and felt like it was better for me to just leave.

Interviewer: What are you doing with yourself now?

Jenny: I work full-time at [local retail store]. I want to go to school for Massage Therapy, but it is really expensive. I'm going to work for a little bit and when I get the money, I'm going to go.

   Post-secondary status.   Jenny graduated from the School of Outliers in June 2009. For Jenny, the benefits of her time at the School of Outliers are clearly expressed in her interview. Nevertheless, Jenny attended CEGEP and withdrew shortly thereafter due to financial strain and academic pressure.

Bosco

Background. Bosco is a Jamaican-born nineteen-year-old. Bosco immigrated from Jamaica to Montreal at six years of age. His transition proved difficult due to his accent and lack of understanding of the French language. These issues led Bosco to express his frustrations through violence. He often got into fights and was frequently suspended from elementary school.

Bosco describes his home life as being "very bad." An abusive father and constant beatings pushed Bosco to move out at seventeen years old with nothing more than a backpack filled with his belongings. Bosco had to "find a place and a job." He explains that "at first it was hard because no one wanted to take me in or help." Fortunately, Bosco found a friend who was willing to give a helping hand "under the condition that 'gangs' did not come around."

Bosco was recommended to attend the School of Outliers due to a serious altercation at a Burger King. During his time, he quickly found ways to adhere to the strict rules of the School of Outliers. The strict structure allowed him to excel academically and demonstrate growth.

Interview. Bosco describes his experience.

Interviewer: How did your parents push you to have good marks?

Bosco: My parents pushed me to have good marks because every time I came home with a bad report card, my consequences would be beatings and groundings. That's how they pushed me to have good marks. Another

way they pushed me to have good marks was my parents, mostly my dad telling me that I wasn't going to be anything good in life. In my own head, I wanted to become something good in life.

Interviewer: As you mention in your journal, how did this lead you to hang out with the wrong crowd?

Bosco: The good crowd was filled with nerds and bookworms. I wasn't interested. I was mostly interested in the bad guys, the 'delinquents.'

Interviewer: What made you connect to this idea of 'delinquent'?

Bosco: It seemed more fun at the time. They were doing nonsense, skipping school, hanging out at Cinema Guzzo, going to the movies, not doing homework, chilling in groups and gangs. The reason why I didn't take the teachers seriously is because they really didn't make school fun. It was mostly about books and education. If you didn't understand one subject, they would kick you out of class. They didn't have time to help you. They were only interested in those students who could pass easily. If you didn't take it seriously, they would kick you out of class and if you didn't understand a math problem that was on the board, they wouldn't really explain it to you, so I didn't take them seriously.

Interviewer: How did leaving your parents' house affect your educational path?

Bosco: It affected my educational path because I didn't have anyone to motivate me at the time. I had myself and my girlfriend. The important person

during that time was my dad and he wasn't there. I didn't really have him. I lacked that.

Interviewer: Would you feel comfortable explaining the Burger King incident that you mention in your journal?

Bosco: The Burger King incident was when I was 16 years old. My friend and I and about 40 people went to Cinema Guzzo. This guy started an argument with someone else. I tried to separate them without getting involved in the fight. The guy turned on me over the dispute they were having. It escalated and I stabbed the guy. Since I was 16 at the time, it changed my life. To this day, it is still changing my life.

Interviewer: For better or worse?

Bosco: For the better and sometimes for the worse because when I think about it, I'm always worried that someday that guy might come around and do something to me.

Interviewer: Can you pinpoint the things that your 'special' teacher did to help you acknowledge your own potential?

Bosco: My special teacher helped me because she saw great potential in me. She told me so every single day I came into school. She told me "Good Job!" on my work. If I didn't understand a math problem whether it was easy or complicated, she would go through it. If I still didn't understand, she would review it again and again and again until I understood it. It was

basically the fact that she stuck by my side and helped me through things no matter what it took.

Interviewer: In the School of Outliers' setting, what compelled you to do your work and participate? What helped while you were here that increased your motivation to do your work?

Bosco: The main thing that helped me was that I realised that I was getting the help that I wanted. It was the help I didn't get before. Since I was getting the help, I decided I might as well take it because you never know when it's going to come around again.

Interviewer: How important to your success was your personal desire to change?

Bosco: The main reason why I wanted things to change was because of my dad. He convinced me that I was never going to be anything in life and I was going to end up in jail. So that motivated me to change a lot. Since he told me that, I wanted to show him that 'Look! I can change!' and no matter what others say about me, I will change.

Interviewer: How did the School of Outliers convey their desire for you to succeed?

Bosco: First, they showed it by accepting me into this school because [laugh] I've seen a lot of people come into the School of Outliers and not get accepted. [Students do not get accepted if they are unable to demonstrate willingness to change and an awareness of their conditions. Students are placed on a

two-week probationary period prior to being fully accepted into the school]. That motivated me to change.

Interviewer: If you had to define the role of a teacher at the School of Outliers, how would you do so?

Bosco: The way I describe the teachers is they show the students they care and they want you to succeed. They want you to gain the knowledge in life.

Interviewer: In your opinion, how important were the extra-curricular activities to student engagement?

Bosco: They were very important because to me Ballroom Dancing was something that I never learned before. I started off as a rough student, not caring about it and not wanting to do it. My teacher taught me that 'Look, this is why Ballroom Dancing is good for you'. It teaches you how to be a gentleman. It teaches you how to have courtesy and how to be respectful. That's basically where my motivation came from - from those activities.

Interviewer: How important were those social skills, that social language that was given to you? You probably might not have learned these skills in another setting. Were these important to your growth as a person?

Bosco: Those social skills were very important because they helped me get a lot of good jobs. They helped me to communicate with people. They have also helped me to fit in and helped me get rid of my shyness.

Interviewer: If you had to define the stages you experienced along your educational journey, what would these stages be?

Bosco: My first stage would be in elementary. I was more of a student who tried to fit in. At first, I couldn't fit in so I made friends with the wrong company. Ever since then it escalated to being in gangs, getting into trouble, always getting grounded and sometimes being kicked out of school. Some of the other stages that I took were basically, later to have the motivation to come back to school and want to learn.

Interviewer: Did you leave school at any point? Did you leave and come back to school or were you always a student with all these challenges?

Bosco: I was always a student with all these challenges, but the reason why I left my previous school was because of the stabbing which happened when I was 16. They said that the parents were worried about their kids, so in order for them not to be worried anymore, they said I would have to go to a different school.

    Post-secondary status. Bosco graduated from the School of Outliers in 2009. He is working at a federal job as a security officer. Later on, he will pursue his career as a police officer in order to help others the same way he was helped.

    In sum, it is crucial to grasp the lived realities of at-risk students for it substantiates the manner in which they articulate and support their marginality. Their awareness and ability to pinpoint those elements which deny them the space to cultivate self as person, self as student and self as community member, is central to critical

consciousness. Significantly, discernment of how such exclusion is manifested is pivotal in transforming their existing conditions.

These student-graduate narratives provide valuable information to the journeys of at-risk students within Quebec's educational system. More specifically, these narratives express the personal experiences of several students who have developed critical consciousness moving from intransitive to transformative thought through strong student-teacher connections.

In this chapter, I outlined the entry conditions certain students arrive with at the School of Outliers and the changes they undergo. In the following chapter, I address the information the at-risk students' narratives reveal, the stages of critical consciousness they undergo and how the need for teacher-student connection is significant.

Chapter IV

Teacher-Student Connection and Critical Consciousness

It is difficult to ignore the hardships and difficult issues at-risk students face in their lives every day. Not only are they struggling with issues of abuse, violence and addiction, they also are struggling with the effects of poor cultural and social literacies. Lack of these skills exacerbates the situation at-risk students find themselves in as they navigate the social landscape. Hence, at-risk students' cultural and social illiteracies dramatically hinder their personal and academic lives.

The negative school behaviours prevalent to at-risk students create academic and social lags. These learning gaps impact on their development of the much needed skills of reading literacy, critical literacy, cultural literacy and the use of social language, all necessary to tackle classism, socioeconomic limitations and political structures. High absenteeism and incomplete class work encourage low reading literacy levels and the acquisition of much needed background knowledge among at-risk students. Not only are at-risk students challenged by a lack of reading skills, these challenges are compounded by their inability to make sense of the texts, of the social context, and the political structure in which they live.

Specifically, the graduate student narratives from this study show the presence of destructive relationships coupled with an inability at-risk students have to develop positive human connections. As well, the narratives point to the learned helplessness which leaves these at-risk students feeling indifferent, futile and insecure. This state is

further compounded by dysfunctional cognitive patterns which prevent these at-risks students from thinking critically about their conditions.

At-risk students have developed a sense of learned helplessness. With a past filled with school failure, scholastic gaps, weak study skills and behavioural dysfunctionality, at-risk students are burdened by their histories. Subsequently, due to their poor personal and academic profiles, at-risk students develop a dysfunctional cognitive pattern which directly alters their opportunities for success. Since failure has been their intimate partner for many years, the notion of adopting positive expectations, raising their personal standards and embracing the benefits of cultural and scholastic literacy elude them as viable options for change. At-risk students quickly develop various forms of resistance to protect themselves from the status quo, its related demands and expectations. Past experience has shown them that resistance towards learning and school is a valued defense mechanism offering the much sought-after self-preservation, ego protection and social status of the 'unreachable'. Being 'unreachable' minimizes demands and hence expectations are kept low for at-risk students. Such a negative outlook not only drastically affects the student, but the teacher as well. Once these negative views are entrenched in at-risk students' thinking, the teacher faces the largest of all challenges: that of helping at-risk students gain an awareness of their issues in order to problematize their life conditions and hopefully lead to change. It is through the development of a strong teacher-student connection that dialogue, reflection and action can occur. In sum, developing critical awareness is key in the journey toward critical consciousness.

This chapter describes the teacher-student connection as per the student narratives. These narratives indicate the importance of the teacher-student connection in helping at-risk students to move from intransitive thinking to transformative thinking; specifically, to develop critical consciousness. Furthermore, the narratives unveiled the four stages of critical consciousness: developing awareness; developing critical literacy; developing a schemata for deconstruction and developing a transformative reconstruction. Second, I discuss my experience as a student and a teacher at the School of Outliers. It is through the transitioning of these stages that I gained critical consciousness.

Developing Awareness

Developing awareness is central to the tenet of critical consciousness. At-risk students enter the School of Outliers with a host of problematic behaviours. Unaddressed levels of oppositional behaviour (demonstrated by the narratives) increase student distancing and disconnection. Even though these acts of opposition are actions against the status quo by at-risk students, these acts are unsuccessful. Bullying, drug use, truancy and violence are truly SOS signals, which must be interpreted by educators since at-risk students do not have a functionally developed voice ready to articulate their needs.

In the School of Outliers, at-risk students arrive with intransitive thought patterns which have restricted their opportunities for growth and change. These students are passive, impotent and immobilized to 'see', let alone, make the necessary changes to their lives. Mired in their situations, they feel hampered by education rather than uplifted by it. With little hope of change, they resist engagement, connection and partnership. Their

histories have shown them that such avenues always lead to failure. This immobilization often paralyzes at-risk students and prevents them from taking what they most need to take: a positive life-challenging risk of trusting a teacher.

Teachers can take the first step in leading at-risk students toward positive change through the use of critical pedagogy. With the student-teacher connection and individual challenges, at-risk students can emerge from this state of learned helplessness to a state where they can begin to articulate awareness, a new perception and a different sensibility toward their life conditions. They begin to understand the impact their voice, life experiences and knowledge may have on their lives and the world around them. When at-risk students begin to recognize themselves as co-creators of their conditions, they move from impotence to self-reliance; from passivity to awareness. With such an awareness comes the stage of 'problematizing the situation'. Such a stage allows at-risk students to develop a new clarity and a more accurate perception of their life events. As they further problematize their lives, they cease to blame others and begin to articulate their personal responsibility. Through dialogue and teacher-student connection, at-risk students now work towards their own critical consciousness.

The School of Outliers is often a 'last resort' for students who have consistently struggled academically due to their personal issues. As part of the admission process, students are interviewed. This interview serves to place responsibility on the students for their actions, to assess their level of awareness and to demonstrate their commitment to change. Although some students have little choice in attending the School of Outliers, through the interview process, they recognize the cooperative nature of the school. Some students enter with a sense of optimism. This change presents an opportunity for a new

start in a new environment free of past faults. Through communication, dialogue and critical reflection of their conditions, students begin to see the need for honesty, cooperation and commitment. Without honesty about past behaviours, there is little hope for critical awareness. It is in the interview where the teacher-student connection begins. It is in the sharing of expectations, disappointments, failures and hopes that at-risk students' vulnerabilities are exposed. It is from this basic level that student and teacher develop connection and work toward critical consciousness.

As an at-risk student, I was initially rejected from the School of Outliers on my first attempt. I entered the first interview thinking they wanted me to be 'perfect'. What the staff wanted was an authentic understanding of my issues. Being silent and passively understating my experiences, I was unable to relay my situation. As many at-risk students, I had learned to 'play the game'. I had learned that my conditions were unimportant. By engaging in dialogue, my circumstances emerged at the forefront of my life allowing them to be addressed.

Most students enter the School of Outliers with some awareness of the events which negatively contribute to their lives. However, few are fully alert to the impact of these circumstances. It is through dialogue and reflection that at-risk students begin to assess their positionality. If students remain ignorant of their positionality, little growth can be anticipated despite their inclusion within a specialized educational setting. Thus, awareness is primordial for at-risk students to emerge from their circumstances and engage in critical dialogue and reflection.

In my experience, the underlying causes for my despondency and apathy were clear. Family secrets are meant to be kept. An environment which encouraged critical dialogue and critical awareness was the key in order for me to develop an awareness of my conditions. Through its in-house courses, the School of Outliers helped me to develop greater awareness of the personal and social conditions which impacted my life.

Student In Society, a course developed by the School of Outliers serves to address social issues. These issues are relevant to at-risk students. It is an example of how critical pedagogy can lead to developing awareness. In problematizing the issues regarding society and at-risk students, teachers and students engage in reflective dialogue and critical analysis. Issues such as political structures, oppression, and the "isms" helped to broaden my experience and those of the participants. In acknowledging some of these issues, the participants and I began to grasp the contexts in which we lived. By making the personal global and the global personal, I began to contextualize my environment. From this standpoint, I was able to engage in reflective dialogue and address my personal challenges.

By peeling away the layers of the broader social issues, at-risk students move from a superficial textual level towards a critical, student-developed analysis. Critical pedagogical values such as participation, reflection, dialogue, positionality, democratic and affective engagement all help to move at-risk students further in their growth. It places the student as researcher, and encourages the student to question the material presented beyond the textual information given.

The narratives show the participants' opposition to their personal circumstances. They depict the events that led to oppositional behaviours. However, their perceptions do not demonstrate an in-depth understanding of their social and personal conditions. Prior to arriving at the School of Outliers, they provide little evidence of the link between their conditions and their troubles. They expressed feelings of 'self-blame' as though their actions were solely responsible for their positionality. Their inability to acknowledge the underlying circumstances limited their ability to verbalize their experience. They were unable to identify their behaviours beyond simple acts. Their notion of self as an at-risk student carried a sense of normalcy. Without clear links to their causal influences, they would not be able to emerge from their conditions with a sense of purpose or social agency.

As for Maverick, who was physically abused by his alcoholic father, his annoying behaviours and taunting of his peers escalated to drug use and thievery in his previous school. His narrative further shows consistent oppositional behaviour since Grade 3. Without a sense of agency, Maverick was unable to engage in any form of critical reflection. Bosco's physically and verbally abusive home life still was important to him. His abusive and violent past, no longer served as a site of agency, but as removal from the environment he could no longer normalize. Nikki, who experienced fits of rage distanced herself from her conditions through violence. Her acts of bullying in elementary school, poor relationships and drug use in secondary school distanced her from her true needs. As Nikki explains,

I was a bully and didn't appreciate other students and teachers.

I was kicked out of most school outings such as for Halloween or the

sugar shack. Things at home were not stable. I did not care for the

opinion of my family. I didn't really care for school.

The inability to pinpoint the casual factors led her to react to the dynamics in her life. Unable to identify the social underpinnings of her life, she consistently struggled with relationships. Her aggressive reactions held Nikki hostage to the oppressive elements existing around her. Without understanding her conditions, reflection remained absent.

Although their personal environment set the stage for opposition and struggle, their conditions fractured their intransitive thought patterns. For Maverick, breaking up with his girlfriend was the catalyst in developing awareness of his drug and academic issues. This connection, now broken, shifted his perception and left a crack wide enough for him to initiate the changes he needed. For Nahla, the loss of a friend pushed her to change her ways. This tragic event triggered the 'rock bottom' state which often propels at-risk students to reach for self-awareness. For Bosco, facing a life of prison was the pivotal moment in recognizing that the past need not dictate the future. The reality of his father's words and their broken connection challenged him to create drastic change. However tragic these events are, Maverick, Nahla and Bosco had to perceive their conditions, not as locked gates for which they did not hold the key, but as locks for which they knew the combination.

Attempts at promoting critical pedagogical practices are evident. However, it is no easy feat. Students enter the School of Outliers habituated to the restrictions of teacher-centered environments. In mainstream settings, at-risk students are limited in

how they participate. Fear of disruptive and inappropriate behaviour of at-risk students can lead teacher's to restrict at-risk students' autonomy. For instance, Nikki was prohibited from attending school outings. Limiting her access to social contexts necessary for her transformation, impeded her development. Social language skills, be they instilled by school outings or student committees, are essential to the development of awareness. Bosco struggled with math. Instead of being offered help, he was removed from the class. These instances indicate the resistance teachers have with respect to at-risk students. Further, it demonstrates the impact such behaviours have in labelling students at-risk. Moreover, teacher resistance perpetuates the 'banking' model of education. As Bosco explained, teachers were willing to teach students who were capable of easily grasping the subject matter. This contributes to the results-oriented model of education at-risk students struggle to engage in.

With the pressures of reaching MELS set standards and achieving success rates as outlined by the MESA agreements (increase the graduation rate from 81% in 2008 to 88% by 2020 (MELS, 2010) the academic challenges faced in the classrooms are overwhelming. Compounded by academic lags, behavioural fracas and socio-emotional needs of students, it is no wonder that at-risk students are left on the sidelines.

The narratives distinguish between oppositional acts and acts of resistance. More specifically, at-risk students' acts of opposition translate into cries for help. They are attempts at altering their immediate situation. However, without critical thought and reflection they fall short of creating any change.

The narratives and my experience with the School of Outliers support the notion that teachers must grasp the underpinnings of the lives of at-risk students. They must recognize the need for social and cultural literacy in the development of critical consciousness among at-risk students. Without this fundamental understanding, teacher-student connections remain absent. Without addressing the needs of all students, we continue to maintain the model of efficiency over humanity.

Developing Critical Literacy

It is the duty of educators to become problem-posers and present subjects relevant to student life. Generative themes present the issues behind social conditions. Through the development of inventive curriculum, student-generated issues are critically explored at the School of Outliers.

It is through the exploration of relevant themes that teacher-student connections lead to critical consciousness. Engaging in dialogue creates space for voice. To better grasp the realities of at-risk students and create teacher-student connection, at-risk students' voices must be shared and received. It is in this exchange that trust, connection and critical awareness is developed. Generative themes facilitate engagement and foster critical analysis.

Problems posed by teachers regarding the homeless, battered women, violence and abuse lead students to explore generative themes. These themes address the personal, political and social conditions relevant to their experience. In addition, community programs help students move from an intransitive state of apathy to empowerment. It is through empowering at-risk students that the use of thought, voice

74

and action help students to make changes within themselves and within the larger social structure. Furthermore, exploring generative themes assists at-risk students in their development of cultural literacy.

It is through the School of Outliers catering business that connections between students and teachers often emerge and bind. It is not only how to prepare a meal. Nor is it knowledge of how to set a table that is acquired within this environment. Students learn the necessary etiquette and manners that allow them access into areas that were previously restricted to them. By participating in student advisory committees and sitting alongside the Director General of the school board, at-risk students learn ways of manoeuvring within the political structure.

The absence of contextually appropriate social skills often limits at-risk students in their social manoeuvring. Social language teaches students to communicate in a manner which, through using the right words, right approach, in the right context, solidifies their voice in the right manner. Social intelligence is developed in families with parents who teach their children how to move about in various social contexts. At-risk students are not taught how to manoeuvre in their best interests.

Jenny quickly learned to use the social language appropriate to alert the authorities of the abuse she suffered. Bosco learned how to manoeuvre his way through legal proceedings due to his violent act. Jenny and Bosco both describe the invaluable lessons they learned from Ballroom Dance. Bosco describes how Ballroom Dance taught him to be a gentleman. He found comfort in different social contexts giving access to employment opportunities. Although I was exposed to varying social contexts as an at-

risk student, seeing them struggle to gain social language skills put into perspective my positionality. Similarly, Maverick describes how good he feels volunteering. Yet, seeing others who face hardships helps him re-frame his own positionality.

Being an outsider among outsiders consistently re-framed my perception as an at-risk student. Further, it continues to affect my teaching practice as I am reminded that what at-risk students need must be relevant outside the classroom and beyond high school. Ballroom Dance and Etiquette class are opportunities for at-risk students. It equips them with critical literacy skills to read the situations they find themselves in. It further enhances their chances at success outside an at-risk framework. Through critical reflection of what lies ahead, they begin to embrace these opportunities knowing that social language must be part of their repertoire.

In order for critical consciousness to take place in any environment, the structural aspects of the milieu must create a sense of safety, openness and engagement. At the School of Outliers, where there are no bells, no structured periods for instruction, no lunch hours (students eat when they are hungry during teaching times), students and teachers co-operatively determine how the day develops. Such a climate fosters cooperation, interaction and engages the students to invest in their own development towards critical consciousness. Taking interest in the lives of at-risk students beyond the classroom enriches teacher-student connections.

Deconstruction

The narratives show that at-risk students can move from resignation to awareness to engagement in developing critical consciousness. As they transition through these

phases, they continuously deconstruct their perceptions, habits and ways of being. By providing at-risk students with a space to deconstruct their conditions, this school helps students become confident in their choices. Their learned irresponsibility transforms into accountability. Their sense of futility develops into a sense of purpose.

It is through the development of awareness and the skills of critical literacy that at-risk students emerge from cycles of conflict. The atmosphere at the School of Outliers provides a sheltered environment where at-risk students feel less vulnerable and therefore more able to share their experiences. Further, as they engage in reflective dialogue, they are able to re-define the conditions which have limited their growth. Through peer interactions and teacher-student connections, at-risk students re-frame their roles. They begin to break free from the constraints that labelled them at-risk. As they begin to de-construct these behaviours, conditions and interactions, they begin to emerge from mere awareness. In cooperative teacher-student partnerships, student and teacher begin to understand the prevalent issues. In essence, they begin to grasp how their conditions affect their lives. Further, they begin to distance themselves from the negative circumstances which hold them back. With the support of the teacher connection, they begin to shed the burdens they have long carried.

Although teacher-student connections are necessary for at-risk students to attain any level of critical consciousness, it is in this stage that at-risk students need further support. Through deconstruction, at-risk students struggle with moving from the familiarity of their past conditions to the unfamiliarity of new ways of being.

Sarah, who struggled with substance addiction, perceptively expresses the need for deconstruction. It was once she recognized that she needed help that she was able to recognize her problems. It was only in the safety of strong teacher-student connections that she was able to face her issues. Her ability to recognize the problem led her to deconstruct her resistant acts and move towards acts of agency. Awareness through critical literacy is fundamental to effectively deconstructing one's conditions.

As at-risk students begin to move away from negative choices, they further deconstruct their conditions. Making new friends was key to the deconstruction of Jenny and Nahla's conflicted lives. Prior to being students at the School of Outliers, Nahla and Jenny were consumed by negative relationships. By distancing themselves from the elements that negatively impacted their conditions, they were then able to re-create some aspects of their lives. Being part of an environment, where their peers struggle with the same issues, promotes cooperation and cohesion. Having connection with educators who understand and share in their reality further supports their growth.

Transformation and Reconstruction

Critical reflection on the condition of at-risks students must be followed by action toward personal and social transformation. It is cohesion of thought and action coupled with a critically reflective practice which leads to transformation and reconstruction.

Although the narratives demonstrate great strides in their pursuit of self-determination and critical reflection, the influences of the family environment, values and conditions continue to greatly sway the lives of at-risk students. In spite of this, it is

through critical literacy that educators at the School of Outliers pursue transformation and reconstruction as a desirable and attainable goal.

Ideally, the School of Outliers aspires to achieve critical transformation and reconstruction for at-risk students. This stage of critical consciousness is an essential step toward enhancing their experiences. Among all participants, it is perhaps Jenny, who felt neglected and Bosco, who stabbed another young man in an altercation, who have come closer to transformation. Jenny's awareness of her abusive circumstances led her to seek help among school officials, Youth Protection and the police. As she realized she could no longer live under those conditions, she began to move from oppositional acts to acts of resistance. As she contrasted her needs with her abusive home life and the neglect of basic life requirements, she developed a sense of agency. The realization of the underlying factors in her life led Jenny to contact the necessary authorities. These acts of resistance provided hope of engaging in a dialogue conducive to transformation.

Jenny engaged in critical reflection when contrasting her life and the socially accepted norms. She developed a reflective practice which enabled her to analyze the manner in which her acts of resistance led to change (i.e. Youth Protection, counsellors). Jenny realized that she was no longer a passive inheritor of her conditions. In fact, through concrete acts of resistance Jenny could no longer remain lifeless in her struggles.

Sadly, the majority of graduates did not engage in praxis. With the exception of John who continues to attend CEGEP, the narratives demonstrate various unresolved challenges at-risk students carry in post-secondary contexts. Whether they are uncertain of their future goals or have attended and withdrawn from CEGEP, participants appear to

continue struggling after leaving the School of Outliers. They miss the cocoon which created the much needed safety to engage in critical dialogue. The teacher-student connection which provided the necessary support, absent in post-secondary contexts, leaves at-risk students feeling lost as they falter under the strain of post-secondary life.

Nikki, Jenny, Harry and John grappled with the academic demands of CEGEP. The autonomy it required to successfully manage their workloads was absent. The consistent support provided at the School of Outliers was non-existent. As at-risk students enter larger, self-directed institutions, the loss of "family", safe space and *encadrement* proves disconcerting. Evidently, the absence of teacher-student connection which propelled their growth at the school hindered their success.

In comparison, my experience at the School of Outliers fostered greater independence and autonomy. Although the teacher-student connection was present at the school its' absence did not hinder my later engagement outside of the school context. In fact, knowing that I was privy to such an educational environment strengthened my resolve to succeed beyond the School of Outliers. Having experienced both mainstream education and its efficient results oriented approach, the School of Outliers allowed room for mistakes, experimentation and failure. As all narratives express, it was "knowing someone was there" which made all the difference. Perhaps the difference is that I did not solely depend on the teacher-student connection to sustain me. Although I grew up in a single-parent family during secondary school, my home life was stable and loving. Paradoxically, having worked at the School of Outliers for the past eleven years, I feel at home in this environment. Working alongside colleagues who once taught me, may be an indication of the sense of safety I continue to experience. Nonetheless, it is a limited

number of at-risk graduates from the School of Outliers who successfully succeed in post-secondary education.

In the working session, students expressed the need for alternative CEGEPs. As they discussed the value of post-secondary education, their "nothing to lose" mentality made light of the need for skills and critical thinking in today's job market. Despite the examination of generative themes, they maintain a self-centered approach in general. This limited vision shows their inability to fully grasp the external factors that dictate their conditions. Furthermore, their past and their deep-seated values continue to play a major role in their future.

As participants were recruited on a word-of-mouth basis, the willingness to share their experiences exemplified their need for continued engagement in a place they once called "home." As Nikki outlined, it was "family." Their sharing can be seen as a stroll down memory lane of a time where they felt good about themselves and their educational outcomes.

It becomes apparent that without the structured environment and teacher-student connection, critical consciousness ceases to grow beyond the deconstruction of at-risk students' issues.

In this chapter, I outlined four elements of the role teacher-student connection plays in critical consciousness. By applying student narratives and my personal experience, it becomes evident that at-risk students require purpose, intensity and sustained teacher-student connection if they are to move beyond the deconstruction phase of critical consciousness. In the following chapter, I provide key elements of this study

and address current challenges faced as a teacher in the School of Outliers. Further, I provide recommendations for future research.

Chapter V

Conclusion and Recommendations

As I began this study, my intent was to develop a continuum to mark the tipping point to explain where seemingly non-at-risk students become at-risk. This continuum would have served to help educators identify strategic points of student disengagement. Educators could then intervene with appropriate tactics during significant periods. Recognizing these stages would aid in preventing student distancing and therefore increase student retention. However, paying attention to the "voice of the data," other compelling information arose. As an educator working with at-risk students and having lived some of their realities, I am drawn to listen to their voices through the student narratives. The participants reveal the benefits of small classrooms, generative themes and the teacher-student connection. More specifically, it is their narratives which clearly outline the significance of the teacher-student connection and the value of developing critical consciousness with at-risk students.

In this chapter, I present the findings from three key sources of data: the participant narratives, my own narrative and a teacher self-study. I also link the findings from this data to the importance of the teacher-student connection in developing critical consciousness. In addition, I provide suggestions in addressing this issue among at-risk students at the School of Outliers. Recommendations for further research are also highlighted.

If at-risk students are not equipped to critically engage in developing awareness towards critical consciousness, their academic and personal success is questionable.

Without critical awareness, at-risk students continue to maintain their negative behavioural, attitudinal and academic issues. Through positive teacher-student connection and strong bonds, at-risk students begin to emerge from their conditions which limit their potential. Their need for personal and social connection is central. It empowers them to face challenges and develop resilience in facing their personal and academic obstacles.

Primarily, awareness is the foundation for further development towards critical consciousness with at-risk students. In placing the onus on their shoulders to accept responsibility for their actions, at-risk students begin to exert more control over themselves and their conditions. Through a significant teacher-student connection, both parties work cooperatively to engage in the growth process. Although some at-risk students at the School of Outliers arrive with some level of awareness of their conditions, most do not. It is through the teacher-student connection that developing awareness is continuously tackled. Through critical pedagogical practices, at-risk students at the School of Outliers are immersed in an environment which engages them in critical dialogue and reflection. In examining large-scale issues and making them personal, at-risk students begin to move away from a self-centered perspective. They move toward a universal understanding of their positionality. Thus, they become capable of clearly problematizing their issues in appropriate contexts.

In developing their critical and cultural literacy skills, they learn the 'languages' and strategies for critically assessing and reflecting on generative themes. In examining, questioning, challenging and reflecting on relevant issues, at-risk students adopt a way of seeing the world that further develops awareness and critical thinking. As they begin to

challenge the world around them, they become better equipped in challenging their world. It is only once at-risk students grasp these skills that they can begin to deconstruct their conditions in hopes of reaching transformation through reconstruction.

Once at-risk students develop the necessary tools to resist, rather than oppose their conditions, they constructively address the issues which hold them back academically and socially. Resistance becomes the path to deconstructing their surroundings which moves them towards reconstruction. In stripping away the layers of conflict and hurt, at-risk students sort out the conditions which hinder their growth. By grasping the essence of their issues, they manage to cope with them in concrete and positive ways. These changes create a ripple effect that influences their academic, social and personal lives.

Ultimately, by reconstructing and transforming their lives, at-risk students concretize what they have learned. As they apply critical awareness, dialogue and reflective practice, they are able to re-shape their conditions. In reconstructing their lives, at-risk students no longer resort to acts of opposition to address the problem. They have developed ways to resist that are contextually applicable. Needless to say, developing critical consciousness among at-risk students is only conceivable within an environment of comfort and safety. It is under the umbrella of well-being, security and connection that these steps can be investigated, absorbed and challenged.

Recommendations

Based on the graduate narratives and my personal experience, there is a shift that at-risk students from mainstream education undergo when they enter alternative settings

like the School of Outliers. Being removed from the mainstream framework which marginalizes at-risk students, the importance of environment, critical pedagogical practice and teacher-student connection on at-risk students becomes apparent.

The School of Outliers, at present, provides a stalwart model for improving the academic and social circumstances of at-risk students. Solid teacher-student connections are central to establishing trust, dialogue and a reflective practice. Further, small classrooms increase peer participation furthering the importance of connection. Addressing attendance issues with a 'no skipping' policy, limits truancy. Further, Core Teachers engage at-risk students through generative themes, cultural and social literacy, student voice and transformative dialogues. Such student engagement in critical pedagogy helps at-risk students to connect to their learning, lives and social responsibilities.

First, student-teacher connections must be developed with long-term growth in mind. To ensure solidification of critical consciousness, teacher-student connections must exist in the appropriate space and be allowed time to fully develop. Such periods of time allow for greater teacher accountability and consistency when evaluating at-risk students' progression of learning. Since the School of Outliers acts as a one-year program, lengthier stays at the School of Outliers ensure concretization of at-risk students' critical consciousness.

Second, at-risk students struggle to move beyond intransitive thinking. Through the years, they have accumulated numerous examples to reinforce their fatalistic thinking. An abusive home life, poor academic and absent teacher-student connection demonstrate

to at-risk students that they have little reason to believe that their lives can be different. Therefore, the teacher-student connection requires intensity, durability and depth. Without a strong, purpose-driven teacher-student connection, at-risk students remain resigned to their learned helplessness and hopelessness.

Third, a key concept of critical consciousness is the life-long coaching to ensure its stability. To address this, we cannot ignore the lived realities of at-risk students. The burdens of abuse and neglect ripen into deep wounds affecting their self-confidence and their inability to think critically. Outside of the safe environment they have grown accustomed to, they struggle to maintain the practices necessary for success. At-risk students who are dependent on external forces to guide and manage their lives must develop a greater sense of autonomy. Dependence is a way of controlling the events in the lives of at-risk students by controlling their perception. In the past, at-risk students have been told they are lazy, stupid, worthless and simply 'no good'. This constant barrage of abusive language further negates their experience in the classroom. For this reason, it is crucial that at-risk students alter the way in which they see the world. Through the positive teacher-student connection, at-risk students begin to view themselves as worthwhile and cared for by others. The development of critical awareness of their past and present conditions helps at-risk students to control their own futures, become liberated as individuals and emerge as positive citizens.

Recently, the Fraser Institute, a "competitive market" oriented research organization publicly contested the MELS' intent on eliminating province-wide testing. Similar to the reforms in Florida discussed early in this paper, the Fraser Institute claims that abolishing province-wide testing would make it impossible to establish school

rankings based on academic performance (October 22, 2010). As their slogan states "If it matters, measure it!" Clearly put, our schools remain tied to a results-oriented model. Thus, Taylor's model of efficiency continues to plague our schools.

The narratives and my own experience reflect the increased need for 'slowing down'. As schools remain mostly focused on test scores and use public rankings as measures for success, at-risk students quickly get left behind. The narratives show the effects that a results-oriented model has on at-risk students. Scholastic gaps, oppositional behaviours and early school departure are just some of the by-products of the banking-model of education. For at-risk students, their resistance to such a model of education is a 'sane voice' amidst this governmental and competitive market need "to rush, push, bump up and dummy down." At-risk students inherently understand the lessons failure can teach them, the benefits well-paced learning can give them and the opportunities a positive teacher-student connection can show them.

Five, educating teachers in critical pedagogy would provide them with the tools to address at-risk students in both mainstream and alternative settings. Since critical pedagogy serves as the fundamental approach to developing awareness and critical praxis, critical pedagogy would be of great benefit to both teacher and at-risk student. If we are to develop critical consciousness and engage students as critical thinkers, then we must give them the tools to do so. One important tool is to allow at-risk students to be engaged with teachers equipped to support this development and engagement.

Six, is the importance of early intervention. A strong elementary educational background is a key factor in reducing the number of at-risk students and early school

leavers. Academic frustration, often stemming from poor reading comprehension skills, leads to at-risk behaviours. Reading is identified as an essential tool in all subjects in MELS' reform. It is imperative that the foundations of reading be properly taught so that students have an important tool as they navigate their way through the system. Teaching reading all the way through to Secondary V would be of benefit to all students, not just those at risk. If the MELS state that "success among all students" is the goal, then it must be a goal for all and not just those students who have mastered reading skills. Teacher-training programs must focus on how to teach novice teachers how to teach reading so that no educator receives accreditation without being certified in reading instruction. Just like social language and cultural literacy can separate those who will succeed from those at-risk, so too can a strong reading foundation do the same. Limiting scholastic gaps in the area of reading skills will not only help at-risk students with their learning goals, but it will also limit their at-risk behaviours. To further ensure the reduction of behaviour problems, perhaps the creation of alternative elementary schools is an idea whose time has come. Alternative elementary education would serve to hook at-risk students early in their educational careers by emphasizing the importance of a positive teacher-student connection and the value of critical pedagogy even in the elementary classroom. Coupled with this would be a rich saturation of support services and resources to help families and communities to work with those at-risk. Recently, the Advisory Board on English Education published *Educating Today's Québec Anglophone* (MELS, 2010). This brief outlined 39 recommendations for enhancing the role of Québec Anglophones in Québec society. Out of the 39 recommendations, only one (2%) was relevant to early school

leavers and at-risk students. Is this not reflective of how we treat students on the margins?

Finally, creating a full alternative path to high school would provide the duration and intensity necessary in fostering contextually appropriate teacher-student connection. A lengthier experience within alternative environments practicing critical pedagogy is key. This would allow for the development of critical consciousness and its solidification to take place.

In conclusion, the problems at-risk students present in the educational system must be addressed. They must be encouraged to critically address their issues. They must engage in dialogue to reflect on the actions which take them through awareness to critical literacy to transformative thinking. Critical pedagogy and specifically critical consciousness are valid educational tools that educators can implement in their practice with at-risk students in regular schools as well as alternative schools. In a milieu which fosters these practices supported by teacher-student connection, at-risk students can emerge resilient and hopeful. Therefore, the goal is to create inclusive educational settings for all students based on the factors identified as necessary for sustaining at-risk students.

However, our current results-oriented structure does not account for the time required to address these issues. As schools struggle to climb the rankings and 'bump-up' students who have not acquired the necessary skills, we continue to place boulders in the path of at-risk students. If we are to engage at-risk students as citizens, our investment must be long-term. They can no longer hold their breath during class time nor should

they resort back to their fatalistic habits as they leave school grounds. As one at-risk student wrote "I wake up every morning for school. I don't want to become a fool. Taking down my notes; trying to realize false hopes. Realizing sitting in the class is the only way out. I'm not going to sit here and pout. The bell rings. It's time to do illegal things."

Many at-risk students can develop awareness, yet have so much further to travel toward critical consciousness. The role of teacher-student connection in developing critical consciousness in at-risk students can only achieve so much. The strength of this connection battles against the myriad of factors lying in wait for at-risk students after the bell rings at the end of each school day.

Reference List

Bogden, R. &. (2003). *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods* (4rth ed.). New York: Pearson Education Group.

Borg, C. B. (Ed.). (2002). *Gramsci and Education.* Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.

Brendtro, B. &. (1990). *Reclaiming Youth At-Risk: Our Hope for the Future.* Indiana: National Educational Service.

Callahan, R. (1962). *Education and the Cult of Efficiency.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Campo-Flores, A. (2010, April 1). *Newsweek.com.* Retrieved December 13, 2010, from Newsweek: http://www.newsweek.com/2010/04/01/a-new-high-bar-for-schooll-reform-in-florida.html

Boiko, M. &. (Producer), & Coyes, G. (Director). (1992). *Alex Taylor Community School: Learning with Love* [Motion Picture]. National Film Board.

Darder, A. B. (Ed.). (2009). *The Critical Pedagogy Reader.* New York: Routledge.

Eisner, E. (1998). *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice.* New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Entwistle, H. (1977). *Class, Culture and Education.* Cambridge: Methuen.

Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and School Success: The Politics and Culture of Educational Achievement. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 18(4)*, 335-356.

Farrell, E. (1990). *Hanging In and Dropping Out: Voices of At-Risk High School Students.* New York: Teacher's College Press.

Freire, P. (2006, April). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th Anniversary ed., Vol. 49(2)). New York: Continuum.

Gilmore, J. (2010, November 3). *Statistics Canada.* Retrieved December 13, 2010, from Statistics Canada: http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/2010004/article/11339-eng.htm

Giroux, H. (1983). *Theory and Resistance in Education.* Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey.

Giroux, H. (1996). *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth.* London: Routledge.

Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The Story of Success.* New York: Little Brown and Company.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Hammond, C. (2007). *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report.* South Carolina: Clemson University.

Hirsch, E. (1988). *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know.* New York: First Vintage Books.

Horrocks, D. (2010, December 10). Keeping Our Kids in School. *The Montreal Gazette*.

Hutchinson, J. (1999). *Students on the Margins: Education, Stories, Dignity.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Institute, F. (2010, October 22). *Fraser Institute.* Retrieved March 5, 2011, from Fraser Institute:

http://www/fraserinstitute.org/researchnews/news/display.aspx?id=16726

Kincheloe, J. (2005). *Critical Pedagogy.* New York: Peter Lang.

Krishnamurti, J. (1953). *Education and the Significance of Life.* New York: HarperOne.

Labaree, D. (2010). *Someone Has To Fail.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Lamb, S. M. (Ed.). (2011). *School Dropout and Completion: International Comparative Studies in Theory and Policy.* New York: Springer.

Leedy, P. &. (2005). *Practical Research: Planning and Designing.* Columbus: Pearson.

Mclaren, P. (1993). *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter.* New York: Routledge.

Minister of Education, Sports and Leisure. (2007). *Behavioural Problems: New Knowledge, New Initiatives.* Québec: Minister of Education, Sports and Leisure.

Minister of Education, Sports and Leisure. (2009). *L'école J'y Tiens.* Québec: Minister of Education, Sports and Leisure.

Neil, A. (1960). *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing.* New York: Hart Publishing.

Palmer, P. (1998). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the landscape of a Teacher's Life.* New York: Jossey-Bass inc.

QPAT. (2003, April). *The Educational Project and the Success Plan of the School.* Retrieved January 11, 2011, from http://www.qpatapeq.qc.ca/corporatif/english/common/educational_projet.pdf

Shor, I. &. (1999). *Education is Politics: Critical Teaching Across Differences, K-2. A Tribute to the Life and Work of Paulo Freire.* Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Weiler, K. (1988). *Women Teaching for Change.* New York: Bergin and Garvey.

Welch, A. (1998). The Cult of Efficiency in Education: Comparative Reflections on the Reality and the Rhetoric. *Comparative Education*, 157-175.

Appendix A – Guided Journal Questions

1. How would you describe your elementary school experience?

2. How would you describe your home life prior to your entrance at the School of Outliers?

3. Describe your work and homework habits prior to entering the School of Outliers?

4. At what age or grade level, do you believe things began to change (improve or worsen) for you prior to entering the School of Outliers?

5. At what grade level and age did you enter the School of Outliers? What significant events were occurring at that time in your life?

6. What reasons brought you to the School of Outliers?

7. How has the school of Outliers helped you improve academically, personally and socially?

8. What changes did you witness in yourself that occurred during your experience at the School of Outliers?

9. What factors do you believe led to this improvement?

10. What factors were present at the School of Outliers to help you increase your motivation?

11. What factors were present to help you maintain your motivation to succeed?

12. What factors were absent at the School of Outliers that could have helped you achieve your goals?

13. What would you alter to the schedule of the School of Outliers: start later/end later? Mandatory study hall? Homework period?

14. What was different about your experience at the School of Outliers than your previous school?

15. What suggestions would you make in order to improve the School of Outliers?

Appendix B – Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. At any point in your life, did you realize you had a problem before someone from the outside pointed it out to you?

2. Has the structure and organization of the school day (i.e. no teacher's lounge or staff room, no separate washrooms, etc... impacted your progress as a student? As a young adult?

3. Has including critical thinking throughout the curriculum developed further awareness of your personal and social struggles?

4. What do regular schools need to change to become better?

5. What makes schools "alternate"?

6. What makes a school great?

7. What, in your opinion, differentiates an "at-risk" student from a "regular" student?

8. Provide examples of how engaging in critical dialogue (i.e. Youth Symposia, Town Hall, Student Advisory Board, etc.) has contributed to your experience at the School of Outliers?

9. How relevant to your success was your personal desire to change?

10. If you had to create a list of phases you experienced along your educational journey, what would those stages be and/or consist of?

11. Questions vary as they are dependent on the information provided within the participants' journal entries.