

Using critical pedagogy and narrative in alternative programs to redirect
the at risk learner's educational experience.

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ABSTRACT

Using critical pedagogy and narrative in alternative programs to redirect the at risk learner's educational experience.

Bonnie Mitchell

The purpose of this study is to examine various systemic frameworks which define the at risk learner. Critical pedagogy is then analyzed indicating how critical educational pedagogical practices contribute to successful alternative education projects for at risk learners. The application of this pedagogy is culminated with the creation of narrative to demonstrate that the educational experience in alternative settings for at risk learners can be transformed from one of marginalization to conscious criticism and successful accomplishments in the Quebec high school curriculum. Finally, a case study of an alternative school program which services at risk learners and which is situated within the larger school complex is presented. The conclusion shows that the use of both critical pedagogy and narrative merge in alternative programming to heighten the opportunity for personal change and improve the educational success of at risk learners. Suggestions for further research are made to help understand and improve the educational experience for the at risk learner in high school.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1:	INTRODUCTION	...1
	Importance and Timing of this Study	...4
	The Problem in Defining At Risk Learners	...6
	Limitations to the Definition Process	...12
CHAPTER 2:	DEFINING THE AT RISK LEARNER	...14
	The Origin of Standardization and the Rise of at Risk Learners	...14
	Theoretical Perspectives of the Education System	...18
	Defining At Risk Learners	...19
	Assessment of the at risk learner	...22
	Four Aspects of the Definition of the At Risk Learner	...24
	<i>Psychosocial</i>	...24
	<i>Socioeconomic</i>	...26
	<i>Cultural Differences</i>	...29
	<i>Academic</i>	...30
	The definition as set by the Ministry of Education of Quebec	...31
	The At Risk Learner	...36
CHAPTER 3:	CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, THE CREATION OF NARRATIVE, AND HOW IT RELATES TO ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION FOR AT RISK LEARNERS	...39
	Paulo Freire and Critical Pedagogy	...39
	Neil Postman and the Need for Narrative	...44
	At Risk Learners as Agents for Social Change	...47
	Conclusion	...50
CHAPTER 4:	THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM A CASE STUDY	...52
	Overview	...52
	Implementation of The Alternative School Program	...53
	Population of The Program	...53
	Physicality and Detail	...55
	Approach	...56

CHAPTER 4: CONTINUED

Historical Information and Personal Stories of The Alternative School Program	...57
Statistical Report of The Alternative School Program	...65
Present and Future of The Alternative School Program	...66
Community Awareness	...67
Preparation for the World of Work	...71
Criteria for Entry into Program	...73
Curriculum Design	...75

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS
FOR FURTHER STUDY ...88

Awakening The Learner	...88
The Importance of Narrative	...91
Suggestions for Improvement and Further Study	...91

REFERENCES ...96

APPENDIX A: PROTOCOL OF RULES AND PROCEDURES
OF CASE STUDY ...99

APPENDIX B: ENTRY PROCEDURE AND
CRITERIA SHEET FOR REFERRAL
OF STUDENTS IN CASE STUDY ...102

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the definition of the term at risk learner. Various theoretical frameworks based on the education system, which attempt to explain the at risk learner, and exploring the educational philosophical issues surrounding at risk learners are presented. The intent is not to redefine the label of “at-risk”, but to highlight an alternative program that aids these students in their educational journey. Critical pedagogy and the philosophy of the use of narrative is combined by pointing to how the processes of critical pedagogical educational practices and the creation of narrative contribute to successful alternative education projects for at-risk learners. Finally, a case study of an alternative school program which services at-risk learners within the larger school complex is examined.

My interest in this topic generates from seven of my ten years of teaching experience where I have worked very closely with at risk learners whether they were labeled or not by the system. When I first began teaching in 1993, there was no program in place to aid the at risk learner in their behavioural, personal, or academic challenges in the school setting. The model of inclusion was in place with the exception of the core courses for the learning disabled groups, students were streamed according to bilingual or regular classroom groupings. The school was experiencing difficulty with a growing number of students whose behaviour and academic shortcomings were denigrating the whole school as a result of disruptions, violence and difficult teaching situations. After three years of teaching in the mainstream system, my

experience as a teacher seemed to always centre around the students who were marginalized from the regular system for behaviour and irregular performance. Students found to be in trouble in the regular classroom gravitated toward my classroom and tried to become involved in the projects in my different environment. The differences were notably in the physical layout, the project base areas of learning, and in the teamwork approach of groups in my classroom environment. Noticing that there was a group of students in the population of this large comprehensive high school who seemed to contemplate or were actually dropping out of the system, I proposed to the administration of the school and the school board that the creation of an alternative program within the school would address the needs of the at risk students. As well, it would inadvertently improve the morale, success and peace of the whole school, as the “disruptive” students would be removed from their regular classroom.

Over the course of the seven years that I have been working with the at risk population of the large comprehensive high school, I have experienced many challenges and obstacles with regard to the diagnostic process, support system, and political agenda of the school board in terms of at risk learners. This has propelled me to search for further study into the labeling of at risk learners, the management of their learning environments and success levels, and the political structure in place to service these young people. As the reform movement in curriculum in Quebec comes to fruition in the school system over the next five years at the high school level, it is my intention to protect and focus on the needs of the at risk learner in the high school’s increasingly all-inclusive environment. This new curriculum approach will be explained further in this chapter.

In the public school system, many students are experiencing failure. They enter the system in primary school and by the age of seven or eight some are identified as students in need of extra help in managing and coping with the system. Students are similar only in their label of “at risk”. They vary greatly in their situations, manifestations of behaviour and learning style, and ability to cope within the structure of the school community.

The labeling of at risk learners is broad and sometimes inadequate and does not serve the learner in a positive way. The system is set up to stream these learners out of the system instead of helping them to be successful within it. Furthermore, the regular system at present is not designed to offer proper services to the students who are at risk. There is a missing link whereby the awareness of the at risk learner’s needs is only sporadically identified and often mismanaged. When alternative programming is in place, the student is helped, but remains on the fringe of the system. Although the learners are improving because of the alternative program to the system, they also highlight the need for changes to the regular high school system. The student, however, is still made to feel that they are at fault because they do not fit into the system’s way to learn which may or may not contribute to their success in an alternative setting.

The educational experiences for these learners are examined indicating the need for necessary improvements to services for at risk learners within the constraints of the regular school system in Quebec. Educational experiences are defined as the learning events and critical skills acquired by the learner within the secondary public educational system.

IMPORTANCE AND TIMING OF THIS STUDY

The importance of this study is related to the change in the educational system that is taking place in this province. The context of the Quebec curriculum reform is based on current research that suggests,

...three orientations for reform: the new curriculum should be comprehensive and diversified, have a long term perspective and be open to the world. These are the orientations that can best prepare young people to meet the challenges of an inclusive, pluralistic society, a knowledge-based job market that is constantly evolving and economic globalization (Quebec Education Program: Secondary Education, 2002, p.4).

Shifting from a traditional education to one that uses the tools and theories of critical pedagogy requires that the needs of the learner be met in a safer and less restrictive environment. The traditional system includes the methods of standardization in the testing of compartmentalized subject matter, teacher centered learning environments with little room for group work or collaboration, and mandatory groupings of students by grade level and ability, all of which contribute to the alienation of at risk learners. The curriculum reform movement in Quebec includes some transformations to the regular system that would enhance the experience of the learner using critical pedagogical educational practices, however the approach that the educators, and in turn the system, take to these learners will be key. In the working document from the Ministry of Education of Quebec, entitled *Quebec Education Program: Secondary Education* (2002), the reformed program for secondary education has three distinctive characteristics. Primarily,

...it integrates all subjects in a coherent whole focused on the major issues of contemporary life; it explicitly targets 'cross-curricular' learnings, which transcend the

boundaries of subject specific learnings, and it has a twofold educational aim – to develop students' competencies and foster their sense of responsibility for their own learning process (p.3).

This relates to the theory of critical pedagogy in its focus on discovery, mastery, and relevant topical approach. Using the student's search for identity and their world view as the focus of their education program (p.3), is a shift in the system that will further ostracize the at risk learner if programs are not in place to address the specific needs of these learners. Specifically, they need smaller class sizes, more one to one attention, therapeutic consciousness raising curriculum approaches and a safe, healing environment in which to grow.

The danger of misinterpreting the needs of an at risk learner will hamper their development as they need a different setting to help them to modify their behavior, realize their own potential, and rediscover their own ability to learn. The timing is crucial as the reform lines up to become the doctrine and educational plan for primary and secondary schools Quebec wide. This mode of education has already been implemented at the elementary levels and the incidence of at risk learners has not diminished because of the curriculum reform. The increasing need of services for at risk learners at the grade seven and eight levels is addressed in the case study in chapter four. Thus, as educators in the high school system we must be prepared for the diverse population coming through the system. They will not only be learners of a different kind and their needs as learners will be varied. At risk learners will need services in place to assist them in their development in citizenship and lifelong learners as the curriculum reform suggests as its goal.

The government cut backs and budgetary constraints on schools have created an urgency to produce sound educational decisions that involve little

money. The limitations of the high school to provide small class sizes and longer hours of individualized resource for the students become part of the necessity of alternative learning environments. School administrators must be able to decide for themselves the allocations of staffing and resources within individual schools. As school boards become more decentralized the authority lies on the principal and the governing board to decide the best path for a school to take. In agreement with the theory of critically pedagogical educational practices and the application of the use of narrative, this study examines the best possible scenarios for schools to take in their approach to at risk learners. Ignoring the diverse needs of at risk learners in a comprehensive high school classroom of 32-35 students is avoidable and change is necessary.

THE PROBLEM IN DEFINING AT RISK LEARNERS

The most important challenge of this study is in the definition of the at risk learner. What designating term applies solely to the at risk learner? Manning and Baruth (1995) state that "several problems will continue to place youth in jeopardy in the twenty first century: the school dropout rate, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, delinquency and violence, poverty, and a host of other conditions and behaviour"(p.10). The question is how to properly define and then serve at risk youth. Once we adequately define the nature of the learner we are dealing with, then we can provide some insight into the learning and teaching strategies that can be employed to help the at risk learner become a successful student within the regular school system.

Freire (2002, 30th anniversary edition), Postman (1996), Postman and Weingartner (1969), Manning and Baruth (1995), and Senge (2000) point to specific theories of at risk youth, flaws of the traditional school environment, and propose solutions which involve critical pedagogical methods. Large comprehensive high schools in our education system have limitations with regard to at risk youth and substantiate the need for alternative learning environments.

The study of at risk learners has been examined from many points of view. Specifically, it views the growth of the number of at risk youth in our system as being attributed to psychosocial, socio-economic, cultural, and academic influence. There are various possible ways that a learner may become labeled, “at risk”, yet the services in place to aid the learner once labeled are limited. In terms of psychosocial interactions, the rise of behaviour disorders and emotional malfunction are part of the explanation of the increase in at risk youth cases in our school system. The socio – economic influence is addressed as the two parent one-income family disappears and the various family situations created leave a vacuum in the guidance and assurance for a young learner. Furthermore, the increasing number of diverse cultures present in the same educational system puts pressure on the learners to conform to the traditional school culture. Finally, the academic objectives in the traditional curriculum serve as the interlinked theory between the at risk learner’s personal situation and degree of learning attained. The psychosocial, socio-economic, and cultural theories work against the at risk learner to create negative academic experiences.

In order to make conclusions as to how the success rate and learning attainment of at risk learners is to improve, we need to examine the limitations of the regular school system. Through the detailed examination of an Alternative School Program within the confines of a larger comprehensive high school, the positive environment created for the at risk learner offers insight into the theories explored and the constraints of the system.

At present, at risk students who do not succeed in the present school system are considered failures, stereotypically labeled, deliberately alienated and discarded. The systemic paradigm of what it means to succeed helped to create the conditions that at risk learners experience and the students at risk are quite possibly created by the imperfect system that is in place at present. Clearly defining the at risk learner according to the prevailing theories and examining the limitations of the regular school system may develop a working plan within the constraints of that system.

There are multiple approaches to the notions of special needs students who fall into the at risk category. The theory of Paulo Freire's (2002, 30th anniversary edition) banking education is based on the belief that once knowledge is explained to the learner, then the educator may add more. The passing on of finite information from the teacher to the learner is the basis for the traditional educational system prevailing in Quebec. The nature of this type of instruction leaves the learner in a state of oppression, lacking in critical thinking skills necessary to construct their own sense of knowledge and inquiry. This system has proven to be less effective with the passing of time because of a variety of changes in our society as a whole. The advancements of technology, the access to information, the increased potential of individuals to

become consumers of knowledge, and the rapid pace at which we are developing are all contributing factors to the changing needs of the learner in their learning environment. Paulo Freire speaks about critical pedagogy as alternative means to become the new hegemony for acquiring knowledge. The power shift from teacher to facilitator, suggested in Quebec's reform curriculum philosophy, is an important aspect of the new curriculum in accordance with this theory. Through the instruction of the broad areas of learning, the cross-curricular competencies, and the interdependence of subject areas, as defined as the structure and components of the Quebec Education Program, teacher's roles will have to change. At risk learners will greatly benefit from this new approach to learning.

The broad areas of learning include health and well-being, personal and career planning, environmental awareness and consumer rights and responsibilities, media literacy, and citizenship and community life. They encircle the student world view as their focus and the teacher's role will be to facilitate problem solving skills and the integration of the cross-curricular competencies as well as the subject areas. The cross-curricular competencies ensure that, "schools have a responsibility to facilitate student's access to these sources and help them develop the cognitive flexibility they require to process and use a broad variety of information effectively" (Quebec Education Program: Secondary School, 2002, p.16). The nine competencies are continuous from the elementary structure and are, to use information, to solve problems, to exercise critical judgment, to use creativity, to adopt effective work methods, to use information and communication technologies, to know himself/herself, to cooperate with others, and to communicate appropriately (p.17-33). These two

aspects of learning, through competencies and broad areas of learning, will be integrated into subject areas and invested in cross curricular activities by the teachers who will have to become less subject specific and teacher centered, in order to facilitate multi-tasking and teamwork among their students and their colleagues. This level of critical pedagogical educational practices will need to include a new voice for all participants.

Further to Freire's theory (2002, 30th anniversary edition) is that of Neil Postman's (1996) idea of creating a narrative. The narrative is the identification with their own personal story that all persons make in their life experience. What can help to identify an at risk learner is that they operate needing a different narrative voice from the standardized one offered through the constraints of the regular school system. The at risk learner can satisfy their own learning needs through the individualized approach that Postman takes in his discussions of childhood, society and knowledge. Basing their education on the search for self-identity within their own diversity and finding their curiosity in thinking critically will create the pursuit of social change and that helps the at risk learner to become empowered. Freire's theory of critical pedagogical educational practices has invented a language of freedom for education that will help the definition process of the at risk learner. Defining the at risk learner more succinctly and providing them with the opportunity to choose change is what the theories of Freire and Postman do to relate to the at risk learner. We can emancipate the at risk learner from educational oppression, the origin of which will be explored more fully in the following chapters.

Manning and Baruth (1995) have insisted that there are many reasons for the at risk learner to manifest him or herself. The term indicator is used to

differentiate between the particulars in the definition process of at risk labeling. "An understanding of who is at risk and who is not at risk is necessary prior to determining the most appropriate educational experiences for a child. The nature of at risk conditions often makes determinations difficult" (p.5). There are many indicators and they create the potential for a student to drop out of the system before they are finished the secondary school program. In our post-industrial society, it is important to acknowledge the fast paced changing world we live in. For the purpose of this study, it is imperative to understand that the education system has been slow as an organization to attempt change to suit the needs of the people in a changing world. Manning and Baruth exemplify the need for change in how the youth are identified and the urgency of putting them in places where their educational experiences will help them to move forward in their journey to adulthood and citizenship. "The educator's challenge lies with determining whether and when at risk conditions should be addressed" (p.7). There is a need for further investigation into the programs of study in place to help the at risk learner when they are labeled with a condition that merits intervention by the system. The indicators for at risk students are clearly delineated in Manning and Baruth's study and can be applied generically to all schools as a place to start sorting out the characteristics of the at risk learners.

Finally, the Ministry of Education department of Quebec has published a formal definition of the at risk learner that is documented in the booklet entitled, *Social Maladjustments and other Handicaps (2001)*. The vague nature of the definition of what it means to be at risk needs further examination and

the programs in place to address these learners once they are assessed using this definition is also of great concern.

LIMITATIONS TO THE DEFINITION PROCESS

In terms of the education system in Quebec, at the primary and secondary level, at risk behaviours have been witnessed at all levels. The likelihood that a student will exhibit at risk behaviour is increasing dramatically and at the same time the system's capabilities to offer specialized services is becoming more limited. The statistical information to this part of the study is vague and difficult to locate. Although the "drop out" and "at risk" phenomenon is professed by education professionals province-wide, there is little documented proof of its scope and severity apart from drop out statistics.

Freire (2002, 30th anniversary edition) and Postman's (1996) theories are limited as well by their lack of attention to the specific needs of the learners in this study. They offer broad theories of the nature of learning, childhood, and the communal acquisition of knowledge. They do not address the needs of schools to specifically aid this population.

In conclusion, the intent of this study is not just to outline the acceptable and existing definition of the term at risk learner or provide clear guidelines for alternative programming and critical pedagogical educational practices to help the at risk learner become successful.

Clearly, existing definitions rest on identifiable framework. Nevertheless, for reasons of clarity and consistency, I will continue to employ the term "at risk" to designate students currently enrolled in The Alternative School

Program, which is the focus of this study. The major theoretical component of this study is the marriage of critical pedagogy and the creation of narrative. They work together to accentuate the at risk learner's transformation from oppressed, marginalized learner to proactive seeker of knowledge. The form of instructional model to help the at risk learner is an alternative environment to the regular classroom. The students will be more successful by learning how to break the patterns of their at risk behaviour. Chapter 2 examines the existing definitions of at risk learners that have evolved in education and theoretical perspectives of the definition process. Chapter 3 underlines the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy and creation of narrative as it applies to the success of alternative education projects for at risk learners. Chapter 4 describes an alternative school program as a case study. It highlights the personal stories of some of its learners, and the program's background, as well as the effect of the present education system on at risk learners. Chapter 5 presents the positive aspects of alternative settings as a solution for the at risk learners of large comprehensive high schools. Finally, it states the need for alternative style teacher training programs with some suggestions for further study for improvement in the effectiveness of such a far-reaching plan.

CHAPTER TWO

DEFINING THE AT RISK LEARNERS

This chapter examines the past and current definition of the at risk learner as it is recounted by theorists and the Ministry of Education of Quebec. By understanding the definition as they apply to the label of “at risk”, the practical application of alternative programming is exemplified as the optimal practice of education for these types of learners. As will be explored in detail in the next chapter, alternative methods and critical pedagogy offer solutions to the challenges the at risk learner faces in our school system.

THE ORIGIN OF STANDARDIZATION AND THE RISE OF AT RISK LEARNERS

In the early eighteen hundreds, Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States of America and the writer of the Declaration of Independence, began the transformation of schools through his writings of the pursuit of equality. Influenced by Jefferson, Horace Mann in 1839, the newly elected board of education member set out to verify the quality of the schools in the greater Boston, Massachusetts area. He “implemented a standardized test to galvanize public outrage about the Boston schools” (Senge, 2000, p.31). What he found were great discrepancies in the ability and knowledge attainment of students in all schools he visited. In his report, number 12 of the U.S. school reform of the 1840’s, Mann (1844) wrote of a centralized education where “he believed that the traditional curriculum could be universalized, and that

culture, hitherto reserved for the upper classes, could be democratized. The common school would be commonly supported, commonly attended and commonly controlled; its ultimate goal would be sociological and national unity” (Mann, 1844, p.1).

What he asked of the system and later implemented, has become what we strive for now almost two hundred years later, a standardization of education. The Boston school system was one of the first in North America to devise a curriculum whereby all students in all schools would be learning the same material and would take the same examinations in order to claim their competencies in school (cf. Senge, 2000). The supervisors could then ensure what the Americans were being taught and the new level of literacy and mathematical skills would be a vast improvement over the previous systems and superior to that of other nations worldwide. Mann had the idea that all young people should know certain things and so he set out to standardize the schools so that good citizens with sound reasoning skills and quick minded workers would walk out of the schools and into the new factories of the industrial age. “The result of this machine – age thinking was a model of school separate from daily life, governed in an authoritarian manner, oriented above all else to producing a standardized product, the labor input needed for the rapidly growing industrial – age workplace” (p.31). The creation of factories and mass production created the need for workers who could produce, and the larger product output the factory attained, the better for the factory owners.

In those fast paced times of the industrial revolution, schools worked for the economic system, as the beginning of the production line. Students became part of the process to work faster, more efficiently, and to produce more.

Workers were trained in skill of repetition and concentration, and schools mirrored it as preparation for the real world. As North America moved into the twentieth century, and the industry moved from unskilled labour to skilled labour, capable of operating machinery of a complicated nature, the demands of education changed but the philosophy behind it did not. Students were still treated as empty vessels to be filled with just enough knowledge to complete the requirements of the job market.

Coupled with this change in the economy from farming and agriculture to industrialized factory settings and urbanization, there was also the advent of unions and the protection of child labourers. This meant a complete change in the way children spent their time, as they were no longer welcome in the places of business that exploited them for so long. Schools became the places where custodial duties took hold. The early years of schools were set aside for the learning of the basic skills and the system developed so that students would become more and more specialized in their own field of expertise by the end of their childhood in order to then occupy some job or career in the industrialized world. The place for apprentices to learn on the job diminished and schools trained students over a period of eleven years to become 'something'. In order to measure this 'something', the government standardized even further and the school held exams for all to determine who would be able to fit into the world of work.

What Horace Mann created in the pre industrial period, has solidified since the Second World War. Schools measure intelligence based on a standardized number made up from assessments done on exams that a large group of people write at the exact same time. Entrance to university, college, or

a trade school is all based on these numbers acquired from the results of one or two tests in the fields of preparation like English, Math, History and Science. The school system has also put into place many tools to be able to interpret the data and uses efficient models of statistical analysis to figure out who is in what percentile or quintile rank, thus determining who is at the top of the success chart and who is in the failure section of the ponderation scale. Schools have become preparatory places for assessments and students self worth is judged by their performance on standardized testing. It has been this way since the industrial age began.

About the time that the industrialization of North America began to shift from factory and product based to tertiary or information and technology based, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was directed to analyze the education system in the United States. In 1981, the Secretary of Education was concerned that the education system was breaking down. The report, entitled, *A Nation at Risk* set in motion a reflective, and sometimes even hostile debate over the education system and its value to the people. The reason this holds so much significance for this study is that this is the foundation of the term “at-risk” and its origin is the nucleus of the purpose of this study. The nation was deemed at risk in 1981 by the study that proclaimed that something must be done to improve the state of education in America. The at risk people were all the learners present and future who would pass through the education system and not be given satisfactory preparation for the changing world in which they were living. Since 1981, the changes in the world have been overwhelming and far-reaching in scope in terms of technology, access to information, and the very understanding of the way the brain learns. To say a

whole nation is at risk is to start a critique of a system, of a society, of a government, and ultimately of a people; and the debate of at risk behaviour in schools in America has settled most profoundly on the learner. North America has created the at risk learner, and so we must take responsibility for them, and help change the way they are told to learn things and the way they are treated by the system.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Political manipulation is present in all aspects of our interactions in society. The setting in which formal education occurs is the most political arena of them all. In a powerful statement in *The Pedagogy of Liberation* (Freire & Shor, 1987), Paulo Friere emphasizes that education is politics. Students, more specifically at risk students, who enter the education system because they wish to learn, become pawns in a strategic game of win-lose coordinated by the dominant class of every society in the modern world. The dominators continue to decide the rules for the game and the “fee” for entry, holding learners hostage to their culture and social status group. The freedom to learn for curiosity and satisfaction of self cannot exist in the stratified system the dominant class has created. To allow all people the chance to learn freely without politics is too dangerous for the dominant class, for it fogs the division between them and us, and removes the barriers that are in place to keep the social stratification multi-layered and impenetrable from one to the other. The persistence of inequality is therefore considered, in the overall, functional for the society as a whole, though not for the individual (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000, p.5). Children

have to learn this part of the education game, which is made brutal and real to learners from a very young age in the system. Once the learner is given the stamp of culturally, educationally, or socially disadvantaged, this label follows them through the system on a predetermined journey until the system tells them that they have reached the maximum level in the time permitted. For the child, sometimes unaware consciously of their label, the education system becomes a series of discouraging lessons designed to teach them to stay far below their potential for greatness, yet satisfactorily equal with the social class expectation of their label. Although the children do not see the stamped label on them, the existing system of dominance defines them and excludes them from some aspects of the educational game as it guides them through according to their predetermined journey. The child is the victim of their life, their culture, their learning style and their chemistry, to be victimized by the adults who teach them the game.

The at risk learner exists because of the reality described in theories of social stratification and meritocracy. They all contribute to the perspective that the at risk learner is to be rejected. Rejected by the school system they drop out believing themselves to be failures, and continue on into adulthood as people who do not attempt at anything because the system convinced them they were inadequate.

DEFINING AT RISK LEARNERS

Many studies exist to define the at risk learner. They are similar in their conclusions of the symptoms and the variety of aspects to examine when

determining whether a student is at risk. In the following definitions by Manning and Baruth (1995), Kottler (2002), and the Ministry of Education of Quebec (2001), general and specific identification criteria will be compared in order to develop a working understanding of the at risk learner within the constraint of the public education system in Quebec. The definitions have commonalities from the psychosocial, socio-economic, cultural, and academic perspectives of youth development.

Students At Risk by Manning and Baruth (1995) provides theoretical background into the at risk learner. These students are experiencing certain conditions that lead them to be at risk to drop out of the school system, and they are in a system designed to aid and service the stable, well functioning students first and foremost. When assessing the situation of a student to establish whether they are at risk or not, there are several factors to take into consideration. The first and highly influential aspect of the at risk condition is the demographic characteristic of the learner. Although stereotyping is a danger for the educator's assessment, it holds serious implications for the learner. The second position is that of gender. At risk behaviours seem to be surfacing more in both boys and girls for opposing reasons. Girls are more likely to be victims of rape; abuse, and pregnancy, and boys are more vulnerable to accidents, substance abuse, and suicides (p.8). Targeting these aspects of the crises will enlighten the educator as to who are the potential at risk learners because of these various situations. The third important consideration for at risk conditions is that of ethnicity and cultural difference. "Perhaps due to racism, stereotypical perceptions, and discrimination, some culturally diverse groups experience increased propensity toward being at risk than their Anglo American

counterpart” (p.8). These three conditional components are the first lead into finding the at risk groups in the community and investigating further into their situation will hopefully lead to proper decisions to help the students.

The topic of at risk assessment cannot fully be appreciated without looking at the term at risk and its implications. The official definition of the term at risk, as written in Manning and Baruth’s (1995) book is that of being in danger of not meeting your potential in some way. This is vague enough to be interpreted and specific enough to know that help is warranted for the individual with the at risk label attached to his or her file. Creating a label for the purpose of helping a student reach their full potential should not be a term that further jeopardizes their self-image or chances for success. The actual labeling practice is a risk factor on its own for the adolescent who already feels stigmatized by the very conditions that signaled them in the first place. The delicate balance of the learner’s feelings and their needs are priorities for educators to consider in their assessment process.

If we examine the conditions for an at risk learner to be on the verge of ailing or dropping out of their educational situation or worse, it encompasses more than the immediate scholastic surrounding of the child in question. The school, their personal situation, and the community of learners around them all play parts in the creation of their at risk conditions. School conditions might actually be causing the risky situations, through inappropriate instruction, competitive learning environment, ability grouping, and hostile classroom environments. Furthermore, the societal pressures may be contributing to the at risk student’s inability to cope with consumerism, adult pressures on children to behave like adults, sexism, and racism. Personally, the child may

be experiencing role confusion, low self-esteem, family trauma, abuse or a combination of all these risk factors (Manning and Baruth, 1995, p.11). The conditions explained all contribute to a larger picture of at risk behaviour and are difficult to pinpoint, assess, or even focus on when confronted with an at risk learner. They are, however the starting point for the long process of assessment and identification needed to recommend an appropriate learning environment for the at risk individual.

The other factors to consider at this point become the detailed ones affecting the learner in a profound and invasive fashion. They range from low achievers, school dropouts, teenage pregnancies, tobacco, alcohol and other drug addictions, delinquency, hate crimes and criminal behaviour, health, and various other disabilities that impede the progression of the learner in the traditional school system. All these symptoms need to be addressed in a personal and secure environment where the at risk learner will be able to confront and deal with the personal, social, and societal challenges that impede their progress.

ASSESSMENT OF THE AT RISK LEARNER

In terms of correctly assessing and identifying the at risk learner, a form of checklist seems to be the most efficient way of documenting the behaviours. Most school boards in Quebec have in place a format whereby the teacher can observe and do an initial assessment of an at risk learner. The process then goes to a committee who will decide if a more complete diagnosis is required. The danger here is that the process must not contribute to the at risk condition

of the learner. For example, educators in the past have used identification and assessments procedures that may fail to recognize the learner's special intelligences or their gender, cultural, or developmental differences. For example, in Quebec as recently as 1993, in the document entitled, *School and Behaviour: Identifying Students with Behavioural Difficulties and Evaluating their Needs* (Ministere de l'Education, 1993), the definition for at risk learners stated, "a student is deemed to have behavioural difficulties when...he or she has an inability to adapt, manifested by significant difficulties in interacting with one or more element that make up his or her social, family, or school environment"(p.15). Being unable to adapt suggests that they have little coping mechanisms to use intelligences of a diverse nature. The definition and assessment tools that were in place could misinterpret an at risk learner's behaviour and further jeopardize their opportunity for change. Through inaccurate or biased results, tests may have been the actual reason or excuse for the students being at risk (Manning and Baruth, 1995, p.27). Labeling students "at risk" continues to be a controversial procedure that requires ethical and sound management in order to protect the fate of all students under its scrutiny. The limitation of assessment on a large scale in a large school environment is the danger of tokenizing the at risk learner. They have already been labeled by the system as possibly being lazy, or bad, and simply need educators to change their personal views and become more sensitive to burden that the at risk learner carries.

FOUR ASPECTS OF THE DEFINITION OF AT RISK LEARNER

Psychosocial

The burden of assessment is not as complicated as the at risk learner is to him or herself. They carry intricate personal baggage and the definition of the at risk learner can be examined in at least four sections; the psychosocial, the socio-economic, cultural and academic. The psychosocial aspects of the at risk learner have been defined as including behaviour disorders, emotional malfunction, and attention disorders such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) or ODD (Oppositional Defiance Disorder). According to Jeffrey A. Kottler (2002), in his book, *Students Who Drive You Crazy*, at risk students are “in imminent danger of abuse, those who are especially vulnerable to substance abuse, those who are on the verge of leaving school, or those who come from dysfunctional families” (p.16). In all the dysfunctions of the family that are possible, Kottler maintains that the students are doing the best they can with the situation they are in. “Before we can ever hope to reach challenging students, we must first understand why they are acting the way they are. All behaviour, whether it is comprehensible to you or not, persists because it is helpful in some way to that person: it has some functional value or some protective role in the family” (p.27). Defining at risk students based on their behaviour demands a thorough investigation of the behaviour, but also the source and purpose of the behaviour. The psychosocial make up of the at risk learner is diverse and unique to all learners but the commonality is that they exhibit the behaviour because they need to in order to function.

Emotional malfunction is often a defense mechanism employed by youth in order to protect themselves from the trauma or pain of their reality. The school system is not necessarily the reason for this trauma but it may contribute to the problem by not identifying or helping these students to realize the root of their behaviour and how it is serving the students. At risk learners are often judged and chastised for the very behaviour they use to get the attention of an adult to help them in their plight. Although the behaviour disorders classified as emotional malfunction can be lumped together with the various forms of attention deficiency by educators who are unfamiliar with the differences between them, recent brain research done by Dr. David Sousa, (2001) suggest that it is in fact, a different functioning of the brain that creates the ADHD, ADD, and ODD learners. They are categorized as at risk because of the behaviour they exhibit in the traditional classroom.

Attention-deficit Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a syndrome that interferes with an individual's ability to focus (attention), regulate activity level (hyperactivity), and inhibit behaviour (impulsivity). It is one of the most common learning disorders in children and adolescents. It affects an estimated 4.1 % of youth ages 9 to 17 for a period of at least six months. About 2 or 3 times more boys than girls are affected (p.47).

The study further states that, "one thing is certain: Parents and teachers do not cause ADHD. However, how they react to a child with ADHD symptoms may lessen or worsen the affects of the disorder" (p.49).

Defining at risk learners is a complicated endeavour encompassing many facets of the intricate layers of people. Psychosocial analysis is more refined than previous history will state and many services and resources in place in the school system help alleviate the pressure of assessing many disadvantaged learners. The environment that children are growing up in today is radically

changed from years past. Nevertheless, many schools have not changed their instructional approaches to accommodate the resulting new understanding of how the brain learns. It is possible according to Sousa (2001) that there exists a danger that school and classroom operations can inadvertently create or enhance ADHD-like behaviour in students (p.51). When the traditional school environment of teacher centered, lecture style, sedentary set up is continued, the child who is struggling with these issues of behaviour, will be marginalized and excluded. This aspect will be further discussed in the case study of The Alternative School Program in chapter 4.

Manning and Baruth (1995) further the brain research of the behaviour component of the at risk learner by including the learner with exceptionalities. It is not their specific impediment that defines them as at risk, but rather the treatment that is a contributing factor in their at risk behaviour symptoms. The six types of exceptionalities are as follows: 1. Sensory handicaps, 2. Intellectual deviations, 3. Communication disorders, 4. Learning disabilities/ minimal brain dysfunction, 5. Behaviour disorders, and 6. Physical handicaps and health impairments (p.143). The definition of an at risk learner, although it allows for the inclusion of all these possibilities, is not reliant on them as sole indicators of the learner's situation, they simply are included in the psychosocial aspect of the definition.

Socioeconomic

The second important component in the definition analysis, is the socioeconomic situation of the at risk learner. The economic situation of the learner and their family contributes heavily in most students at risk for removal from the education system. The lack of financial resources forces many

adolescents who are at risk to drop out in order to work for pay to support the family. They are more likely to take low paying and manual labour jobs as their skills acquired do not allow them the opportunity to pursue career oriented positions. Their experience of exclusion from the system occurs because the traditional academic track does not allow for exceptionalities in terms of economic preoccupations of poverty stricken adolescents. Although it is not the sole reason for the possibility for being at risk it plays a crucial role in many critical areas. "Lower Socioeconomic status has been linked with other at risk factors such as low ability, lack of motivation, or poor health" (Manning and Baruth, 1995, p.18). However, using the socioeconomic status of a child is not possible in the formal assessment of a child in the process of at risk diagnosis. The personal income or family situation is not information that is available to educators officially, and it is usually only through an established relationship of trust that a teacher or support staff will learn of the student's personal situation. In the traditional school system the opportunity for connections to be made with students is not as possible because of time and curriculum constraints. The educators are simply overloaded with so many students and so much material to "cover" that the individual needs of the students are often overlooked. In a classroom of 30-35 students it is almost impossible to determine who has eaten a balanced breakfast or who has to support their family at home outside of school hours. In this way, neglect of the students within their own socioeconomic situation by their own families, the school, and society, contribute to the definition of the at risk learner and of their reality.

In defining the at risk learner we also learn of the imperfections of the school system in which they try to exist. Furthermore, many of the previously

mentioned psychosocial emotional malfunctions and behaviour symptoms, excluding the behaviour disorders, surface as a result of the socioeconomic situation that the learner endures. Socially, the at risk learners are at odds with the norms created by the class system that is running the schools. The class system includes both the high end and the low end of the economic spectrum because without each other, there would be no need for classifications at all. The socioeconomic status differentiation has helped to create the at risk learner. When the definition of the at risk learner is used, it must include the reason why an at risk learner might not be motivated in the educational system. The pursuit of meritocracy and the influence of the class system structures play a part in their lack of motivation to succeed.

The system recreates and perpetuates the exclusion of the at risk learner. This diminishes their motivation. Victimization results and the dominant class of the social structure thus protect their spot in the hierarchy of education and society. All of this stability in the very fabric of our reality creates a lack of power for the at risk learner. They are in danger to drop out of the system that could help them to overcome their class struggle, yet their powerlessness contributes to their plight by holding them back from becoming agents for social change. Once the elite cements the bleak and limited future for them in their social class system, most lose curiosity to achieve any kind of educational success. Learning for them becomes the enemy as much as meritocracy.

When the at risk learner exhibits the symptoms of one who has lost curiosity for learning, the system then reinforces their at risk situation by labeling them as such and not offering sufficient services to overcome their

problematic situation. For example in one instance, the adolescent exhibits behaviours of an at risk nature, does not understand the lesson at hand, and attempts to get attention from the teacher and his or her peers by calling out that they “do not get it”. This student is segregated to the back of the room where they are told to sleep, colour, or do whatever they want as long as they do not talk or disrupt. Further to this are the students standing in the main office for an hour or more or the remainder of the period because they did not conform to the expectations of the teacher in the room. This is not to take away the responsibility of the learner to control his or her behaviour but rather to point out the inconsistencies in handling the at risk learner situation through example. In some instances, students will protest that the lesson is moving too quickly only to be removed for inappropriate questioning. Finally, the sullen and forgotten student who misses class or does not pay attention by sleeping or daydreaming is the most overlooked in the classroom, as they have given up their will to learn and try not to attract attention to their struggle.

Cultural Differences

All these risk factors contribute to a challenging and often discouraging existence for the learner in the traditional school system. On top of the already overburdened at risk learner is yet another aspect for consideration. Culturally, the at risk learner may have entered unfamiliar territory in our traditional education system. All the elements described above in the social class system are foreign to the at risk learner who comes from a diverse background that is removed from the way of thinking in North American schooling. When the students in our school system come to school with diverse backgrounds and experience, for learning to take place, there must be openness available to all

students to use their previous knowledge as a means to learn. “Historically... political thinkers who have generally been associated with the ideals of a community, have seen diversity as a threat that must be carefully controlled” (Moon, 1993, p.14).

The at risk learner holds diversity as one of their characteristics, through their learning style, their heritage, their behaviour capabilities or disorders, and their emotional baggage. What sets them outside the traditional classroom system, as learners, is the system’s inability to allow the diverse learner to have their cultural needs met within the regular school system. The motivation for the at risk learner diminishes because the feeling of being excluded comes with their lack of tools in dealing with the expectation of the existing system. In turn, they feel powerless and lose the urge to learn about each other’s cultures as well as share their own culture. The tokenization of multiculturalism also contributes to this factor. When your own culture is diminished by the stereotypical celebration of your rituals and beliefs as entertainment for the dominant class, then a resentment is created that potentially stops the at risk learner from valuing and trusting the system in which he or she is asked to perform. This culminates in the use of language and vocabulary that is new to the culturally diverse learner. Their culture and their “story” is not valued as a means to communicate historically or socially. They lack the skills to complete the narrative aspect of education. This necessity for acceptance and success will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Academic

So far, we have seen the psychosocial, socioeconomic, and cultural influences that partake in the definition of the at risk learner. These are all of a

personal nature in the sense that they mean to interpret the actions of individuals in a social setting. As if it were not complicated enough to get through all this, the learner in today's school system also must learn to perform academically. The regular school system's methods reward people who succeed and exclude people who fail. The people who fail do not achieve the sufficient numbers that prove to the system that they have achieved a predetermined level of intelligence. This level is decided by the system that will judge them inadequate. The system in its practice of hierarchical meritocracy, disallows the learner success if they cannot master the specific style of measurement and evaluation deemed by the system to be the most effective. Learners from diverse cultures, traumatic emotional backgrounds, and diverse learning styles "fail" because they cannot adapt to the system's procedures in the time allotted them by the Ministry of Education. The exclusion of learners leads to the label they receive of at risk. They are in fact at risk because they highlight the imperfections and inequalities of the system. Their existence is essential to the improvement of the system as they force a re-evaluation of the methods, philosophies, and the practices of the entire system.

THE DEFINITION AS SET BY THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION OF QUEBEC

In order to fully define the at risk learner in our community, it is important to analyze the definition as it is officially set out by the Quebec Ministry of Education. According to the Education Act (2003), all students have the right to

...educational services adapted to their needs. As soon as difficulty or handicap prevents a student from pursuing his

or her studies as intended by the Quebec Education Program or achieving greater social integration, school principals must establish an individualized education plan to provide educational services adapted to the student's needs (Quebec Ministry of Education, p.1).

In the document, entitled, *Students with Handicaps, Social Maladjustments or Learning Difficulties: Definitions* (2001), we find the various definitions that have been officially written for the Quebec regular education system. The monetary resources available to these types of students is not documented. The resources in place to help the learner once they are labeled rely heavily on individualized programming to be arranged and carried out by the individual schools. This aspect of at risk education needs further study and could perhaps sit as a thesis topic of its own.

The document, *Students with Handicaps, Social Maladjustments or Learning Difficulties: Definitions* (2001) outlining at risk learners is divided into two categories. "The first broad category, which comprises students with social maladjustments or learning difficulties, is divided into two groups: students with difficulties, termed at risk students, and students with severe behavioural disorders. The second broad category is that of students with handicaps"(p.2). For the purpose of this study, we will only look further into the first category of the Ministry's definition. For the student who is experiencing social maladjustments or learning difficulties, they are identified as at risk if they, "experience difficulties that may lead to failure; exhibit learning delays; have emotional disorders; have behavioural disorders; have a developmental delay or mild intellectual impairment" (p.5). The focus of the system on the services to provide for these students is becoming increasingly the sole responsibility of the school itself. This means that the Ministry has standardized the amount of

money that each school will receive for the at risk population and it is up to the school to allocate the funds to an appropriate service or program. This could range from alternative programs, resource programs, tutoring, attendant or technicians in either behaviour or academics, and professional development for staff as well.

Evaluation of the needs and abilities of these students remains necessary in order to identify the services they should receive and to establish their individualized education plan. However the procedure can now focus more on the search for conditions favoring their educational success than on a specific diagnosis to establish their admissibility to funding of the services required (p.5).

Academically, the new definition as set out by the Ministry suggests that at risk learners will be cited, assessed in a vague but proactive manner, and that action will be taken to help that learner to succeed within their right to education under the education act. It is my belief that if this were truly in place in an efficient and personalized manner, there would no longer be a need for such a label because the individualized needs of the students will be met by the sheer interest and follow through of such a complex diagnostic tool that this definition suggests is already in place. The main part of this solution that is missing from the present regular school system is personnel. There are simply not enough positions in a school for all this assessment to be done and for the individualized programs to be implemented. This proves the need for an alternative school program to exist in a large comprehensive high school, which is the focus of the case study in chapter three. According to this definition document,

...the concept of at risk students is based on a noncategorical view of the educational services provided to students deemed at-risk, which emphasizes preventive action. From that viewpoint, the administrative

identification of at-risk students is not a precondition for offering them services adapting to their needs. This outlook is also based on the observation that the categories previously used were somewhat fluid and unreliable, which did not justify the time spent gathering information for them. In addition, the previous definitions, when applied strictly, left no room for preventive action (Students with Handicaps, Social Maladjustments or Learning Difficulties: Definitions, 2001, p.5).

This statement does little to comfort the student who is at risk in a system where they are continually marginalized and excluded. The common link that all at risk learners have is their inability to change their educational situation. Hence, oppressed by the deeply rooted beliefs and practices in our regular education system, academically, socially, and culturally, they became at risk learners who lack motivation, power and curiosity for learning.

The Ministry of Education defines them as such and offers a vaguely liberating plan that neither changes the institutions creating these at risk situations, or provides the human resources required to operate and improve the educational situation of the at risk learner as an individual or in a group setting. In the secondary system, the at risk learner has been documented as exhibiting these symptoms,

1. academic delay; 2. learning difficulties or disorders; 3. mild intellectual impairment; 4. non-academic difficulties (pregnancy, anorexia, depression, addiction, etc.); 5. emotional problems; 6. missed several classes without a valid reason; 7. been involved in several incidents related to discipline (suspension, detention, etc.); and 8. have behavioural disorders. Also, other students experience difficulties because they are not proficient in the language of instruction, are not adapted to the host culture, or do not understand the subtleties of the language, despite measures such as welcoming classes or despite having spent time in an ordinary classroom. They too may need special services (Students with Handicaps, Social Maladjustments or Learning Difficulties: Definitions, 2001, p.6).

In addition, the document explains that,

...we propose a definition of at risk students that is based on their progress or lack of progress towards the goals established by the school regarding their learning, social development and qualification. It is the student's progress in relation to these goals that will determine whether preventive action or special education will be necessary (p.5).

This type of definition is based on the recognition of a need and the intention to provide a service designed to make educational success for students who would normally be unlikely to succeed. In terms of the definition for the term at risk, this document provides a guideline to work from when designing prevention programs for small groups or individuals.

The document does not, however, put in place a portfolio of personnel to assess, implement or monitor the progress of the students in question. This responsibility would fall on the shoulders of the regular high school teacher who, for all intents and purposes, is already overburdened and not sufficiently trained to diagnose at this level of at risk situation without the support of caring professionals who would coach the teacher through the psychosocial adjustments needed to recreate the drive for success in these at risk learners. The main problem with this scenario is that the definition and the services outlined are modern and have changed with the children in the system, however, the delivery, management, and assessment of the students academic achievement and subsequent success, is an unchanging traditional entity based on standardization and social class injustice. When the two opposites continue to collide in students' experiences, the at risk learner population continues to rise.

THE AT RISK LEARNER

The at risk learner is not motivated to change their academic situation. They understand that they do not measure up to the standard of success as defined by the system.

Too often youngsters are sorted into top, middle, and bottom groups where they are expected to learn at different rates and various levels of accomplishment. The result is that many children are forced to the margins of school life where they do not benefit in fair and proportional ways from the environment intended to help all of them succeed in their learning (Sinclair & Ghory, 1997, p.87).

Motivation is measured by the ability to change your situation. Understandably, the at risk learner cannot change their situation because they are relegated to the sidelines of their own education simply because of the sorting process in place in the regular system. The at risk learner is marginalized and it is easier for them to leave the system entirely as they are already excluded academically. Giving up becomes their only option, much as the child on the playground who is not allowed to join in the game, goes home alone.

These learners exhibiting at risk behaviour or even labeled at risk but not properly helped are on the verge of leaving the secondary school system and are powerless to change their situation. The criterion for high school graduation is a perfect example of how the at risk learner, regulated to the sidelines, becomes powerless to change their educational experience. Needing fifty four credits, including secondary four History, Physical Science, secondary five English and French creates a lose-lose situation for the at risk learner who has been marginalized for his or her past academic inadequacies. In addition to acquiring these criterion for graduation, the learner must do it in the time

allotted or be further marginalized to find his or her secondary school credential elsewhere. The time allotted speaks of the age at which the young person may no longer attend the high school. When a student turns eighteen, he or she must be in their last academic year of the youth sector and be in a position to satisfy the requirements for graduation. If students are not candidates to graduate in the school year where they turn eighteen, then they are not allowed by law to continue their education in the youth sector and must seek credits in an adult education center.

Although adult education centers are professional and accredited institutions, they are still viewed by the dominant class as the place where the dropouts and failures go to buy their diploma. In reality, the adult education system is far better suited to the at risk learner as it explores individualized learning styles, and adjusts class periods to suit the needs of the learner. However, in our existing system it is still defined as a failure to not complete high school requirements in the specified time frame. The at risk learner ends up being so hurt by the system that excluded him or her, that he or she becomes unwilling to take that risk of seeking out the system of adult education. Using their own brain to question knowledge presented to them or the system itself, inquiring as to the reasons behind an idea, and disputing facts as possibly flawed, would not occur to them because they have been so down trodden by the ideal of perfection that they were unable to obtain in the regular system. This of course applies to the at risk learner who leaves the system without finishing secondary school. They are the ones that the system exclude permanently, the ones who perpetuate the class system by not continuing their studies in hopes of breaking out of their class struggle.

For the many reasons and definitions given of the at risk learner, the regular system is shown to be flawed. The existing education system purposefully excludes these learners because they put into question the very foundation of the structure in which we teach, learn, and exist in our hierarchical, meritocratic society. The at risk learner is the necessary piece in our education system if it is ever to change. The at risk learners, given the positive and caring environment that they need in order to heal from the damage of their personal, social, cultural and academic experiences, can be the agents of change that such a system needs. If, as the power holders, the teachers, the administrators, and the Ministry of Education in Quebec, learn to value the at risk learner as the beacon for change then a healing curriculum (cf. Phillips, 1993) can be created together. They clearly know what is wrong with the system and if we give them the tools, the language, and the motivation, they will bring us successfully through a social change that will in fact value equality and diversity in our school communities.

In the following chapter, I present an examination of Paulo Freire's (2002, 30th anniversary edition) theory of critical pedagogy and its potential to address at risk learners problems in their school experience. In addition, Neil Postman's (1996) theory of the necessity of narrative offers the link between the critical pedagogical theories and the creation of a new narrative for the at risk learner.

CHAPTER THREE:

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, THE CREATION OF NARRATIVE, AND HOW IT RELATES TO ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION FOR AT RISK LEARNERS

PAULO FREIRE AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Paulo Freire's (2002, 30th anniversary edition) idea of critical pedagogy is a multifaceted approach to learning whereby we can create agents of social change in our at risk learners. Critical Pedagogy is a method of teaching which recognizes individual subjectivity through discourse. (Weil, 1998, p. 29)

Questioning, inquiring, and acting upon the possibility of educational change can awaken a drive in the at risk learner to change their present situation. An agent for social change is someone who takes risks to alter their own reality through action. What begins in the alternative setting as the foundation for educational change, ripples out into the fabric of social, cultural, and political frameworks. Using liberatory pedagogy, we can "conceive of a praxis that helps students learn how to 'live' a word that implies a deeper discovery of what it means to be critically and actively involved in the process of becoming" (p. 29).

As explained in *Issues in Freirean Philosophy*, (Heaney, 2002), "education for liberation provides a forum open to the imaginings and free exercise of control by learners, teachers, and the community, while also providing for the development of those skills and competencies without the exercises of power" (p.2). Freire has invented a language of freedom for education as he combines what Giroux (1985), calls "the language of critique with the languages of

possibility” (p.xii). The language of critique is the deconstruction of the present state of the at risk learner’s dilemma. In this instance, educational practices and their effect on the at risk learner can be itemized and analyzed in order to search for solutions. This happens in the assessment stage and critical consciousness of alternative education practices.

The language of possibility is created when the participants inquire about change. At risk learners come as willing students, having chosen the alternative method instead of the regular system classroom. The freedom subsequently comes through dialogue, problem posing, generative themes, critical consciousness and finally conscientization. It is not a linear path but rather a spiral one, doubling back on previously learned knowledge in order to deconstruct, and reconstruct the details of knowledge and inquiry simultaneously. As Giroux (1985) further points out, Freire’s referent for change means a form of action that emerges from the joining of the language of critique and possibility. When the students enter into an alternative setting, they make a commitment to become an agent for social change just by their presence in this system. They can only enter willingly, and that is the first sign that the level of motivation is raised up from apathy to inquiry. When someone has low motivation, it is because of the fragility of his or her present situation. Alternative education, as it stands outside yet compatible beside the regular system, questions the solidity of the system that rejected the at risk learner. This empowers the students to believe that they are in fact winning in a parallel system that will not exclude them from their own educational experience.

The knowledge that the at risk learner has of their own lack of success in the regular system, creates a curiosity in the learner when they enter the

alternative setting. Much like in *Reaching and Teaching All Children: Grassroots Efforts that Work*, (Sinclair and Ghory, 1997) alternative settings offer, “ a place where the spirit as well as the mind will be nurtured and challenged” (p.86). As one alternative school states,

The Alternate School is a sociopolitical institution that reflects, perpetuates, and reproduces the prevailing ideology assuming specific values about what constitutes a good life. It shapes the perspectives of it troubled adolescents and holds certain types of knowledge as valuable. Through enlightenment and establishment of critical consciousness, teachers and students attending the school can create the daily change and reconstruct the environment of the school (Leonard, 1998, p.55).

In creating this critical pedagogy through the beliefs of Paulo Freire, we can emancipate the at risk learners from educational oppression. As agents for social change, they can in turn, change the world. “To change the world through work, to proclaim the world, to express it, and to express oneself are the unique qualities of human beings. Education at any level will be more rewarding if its stimulates the development of this radical, human need for expression” (Freire, 1985, p.21).

In the mission statement for the case study alternative setting of chapter four, it states that they are providing the opportunity for at risk learners to regain academic success, and in fact, it is giving the at risk learner a voice to recreate the narrative of his or her own critical consciousness. This empowerment can instill a new found curiosity for learning that has been previously dormant in the at risk learner’s oppressed state. The main theme used in liberating pedagogy lies in the dialogical method. At risk learners discover how to speak, in a new voice, one that is steady, confident, and sure, that knowledge is measured by more than just one mean. Freire (1985) states,

“A dialogical relationship is a sign of the cognitive act, in which the knowing object, mediating the knowable subjects gives itself over to a critical revelation” (p.167). The three major components of motivation, power, and curiosity are satisfied by the at risk learner through the practical application of dialogue not just as a method of study, but as an ideology of learning. The teachers and students create the social change from within the school setting and what has been found to be of particular significance is that it seems to be having a positive ripple effect in the home lives of the students and in the community where they live.

Once the students in an alternative environment become aware of their own voice and use dialogue to seek out their educational experiences, the teachers approach to problem posing methods intensifies their critical consciousness. Where banking education only allows for students to absorb previously determined knowledge and facts, finite and without possibility, problem posing education creates inquiry. At risk students are not neutral in their approach to learning and “problem posing contextualizes knowledge and is based on instructor and learner posed questions as catalysts for learning” (Boyce, 1996, p.8). The learners bring their previous experience and knowledge to the table in the problem posing method. It is the first important sharing that happens in the opening dialogue of learners. The nucleus of problem posing is that

a problem frames an entry into a complex situation without an apparent solution. The objective is not to generate a solution but to explore the complexity and inter-relatedness of individual, organizational, and social issues, to learn about a problem and its context, and to identify ways in which learners can take collective action that constructively responds to the problem with which they have engaged (p.8).

For at risk learners, this encourages them to seek out the knowledge, gain confidence in academic abilities, and share their own strengths and talents.

In creating a critically conscientizing experience for learners, the use of dialogue and problem posing needs a third component to complete the approach for at risk learners. Brainstorming with students to find out their center of relating and moving forward in their search for knowledge requires the use of generative themes. This focus emerges from the lives of the learners as they engage in dialogue and problem posing (Boyce, 1996, p. 6). This entry point into any topic to be learned creates a connection for the learner and motivates them to seek out new information and retain their knowledge in depth for long periods of time. All of these tools combined with the at risk learner's decision to change their educational experience create viable and rich alternative settings. Critical consciousness is attained through praxis bringing about social transformation.

Voicing one's experience and developing a reasoned critique places one in relation to a dominant ideology. Identifying possible individual and collective actions that express a critical position is creative and provocative. Thoughtful critique combined with acts of individual and collective resistance increase one's experience of power and agency in the world (p.9).

Freire (2002, 30th anniversary edition) speaks of emancipation education and conscientization as a solution to oppression. The at risk learner is among those oppressed and once they have achieved the necessary emotions of empowerment through critical consciousness, they can attempt to rewrite their own education journal of experience. At risk learners need to be able to recreate their personal story in order to affirm their own existence and knowledge.

NEIL POSTMAN AND THE NEED FOR NARRATIVE

Neil Postman (1996) offers the key to the puzzle of the at risk learner's salvation from exclusion in his theory of creative narrative. The tools and practices of critical consciousness education as explained through the theories of Paulo Freire do not stand solely as the solution to the predicament of the at risk learner. Postman argues that the narrative is the missing component in the modern education systems. It is the blueprint of learning and the diary of our lives.

The narrative is a story- not any kind of story, but one that tells of origins and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose. A god, in the sense I am using the word, is the name of a great narrative, one that has sufficient credibility, complexity, and symbolic power to enable one to organize one's life around it (Postman, 1996, p.6).

Individuals are drawn to the creation of and sustainability of their own narrative. At risk learners have lost the ability to recognize or want their own story. In critical pedagogy, the students are empowered by their new awareness of the educational world. Their emancipation comes when they can critically analyze it as the source of their label of at risk learner. That is when they are truly conscientized and able to become agents for social change.

If Neil Postman argues that the demise of our system of education in the western world has to do with the loss of narrative, then at risk students do feel there is no inherent purpose or story they can hold on to as their *raison d'être*. A school after all, is the one institution in our society that is inflicted on everybody, and what happens in school makes a difference (Postman, 1996,

p.xiii). Therefore, the pursuit of traditional education through the practice of meritocracy keeps the social class structure in place. When Postman begins his book, *The End of Education* (1996); he relates a conversation he had with a philosophy professor. This professor had left the university where he taught because, “he no longer believed in the purpose of the institution, and every course, irrespective of its content, was infused with the spirit of narrative he could not accept. So he left” (p.5). I believe every at risk learner is overwhelmed by the same feeling, but has no voice with which to express it. They are excluded before they can acquire a voice, keeping the damage that the existing system’s narrative has done as the hidden dilemma for the at risk learner.

Interestingly enough, the learner that is directly damaged by the exclusion aspect of the narrative of our existing system do not act on the at risk learner’s situation they may witness. The schools’ “drop-outs” are ostracized from the school community and this is how our social structure remains intact despite the pain and humiliation so many suffer in school. The narrative of the existing system is one that the at risk learner cannot understand or accept. They become marginalized for their rebellion against the hurtful and non-productive methods that alienate them for their diversities. They cannot compete with the narrative in place as they have become cemented in generations of learners who have suffered just like them. In the words of a parent when they found out that his son had been recommended for an alternative program, “I suffered through the hell of high school and barely made it, he should have to, too.” The capacity to make meanings through the creation of narrative gives a point to our labours, exalt our history, elucidate the present, and gives direction to our future” (Postman, 1996, p.7). These

meanings, histories, present day definitions, and predications all leave the at risk learner because they are not in the realm of the at risk learner's definition of learning. They have been removed by the education system's standardized narrative.

Once we understand the inadequacies of the regular system with regard to secondary education and the at risk learner, then we can effectively apply Freire's theory of critical pedagogy and Postman's theory of the necessity of the narrative to the education of the at risk learner. In Freire's ideas of critical pedagogy, he opens the possibility for the at risk learner to become an agent of social change. Humanization or human agency, as Freire calls it (2002, 30th anniversary edition) is the action response to the oppression of the traditional education system.

As much as Freire has to offer to the changes needed in education to help the at risk learner, Postman's theory of narrative is essential to the social changes that are possible. Basing the changes to the schooling recipe in alternative education on the search for identity within diversity and finding a voice in the curiosity of critical thinking and dialogue, will make true the pursuit of social change and that helps the at risk learner to be empowered. The at risk learner is always struggling between the painful choice to reject learning and trying to find their own narrative and thus a purpose for learning. The instinctual need to think critically and to analyze their own learning has created the situation of the at risk learner on an unconscious level. Using the dialogical method in generative themes and problem posing, critical pedagogy and the exploration of narrative will emancipate the at risk learner.

AT RISK LEARNERS AS AGENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The future of the at risk learners has yet to be fully researched. The proof of the social change that the students who have chosen to change through the choice of alternative school programs for their educational situation is qualifiable, but still in a vague, undocumented notion. Some have flourished and some have not yet been able to cope with the oppression of society, as it exists. Their marginalization of younger years, however diminished in their years in the alternative setting, was for some, more powerful than the concientization they realized while completing their high school diploma. It could be said that their oppression was greater than their concientization period and so they rejected their own awareness of their oppression. Three students can be exemplified from the original 20 of the first group of high school graduates in the case study school of chapter four. They are pursuing studies in the helping professions, in psychology to work with troubled teens, a computer teacher in the adult education sector, and one in social services, in hopes of changing the system. They are the only three reported cases from over 200 students over the course of seven years, who chose to become agents of social change within the system and work for change. This is not to say that the rest are not successful, for each one of them has been able to define their own success in their way.

The existing system would say that the social class system is still being upheld and that alternative education has not changed the system because there is not a majority of post secondary degrees being pursued by this group.

The school system defines success in one way, but the stories of the at risk students who live fruitful and balanced lives now because of their awakening are aware and will force change upon the system in their proper time, through the generational change that is parenting in this small suburban community. As the alternative setting uses the regular system's resources to promote social change, so can the students who move on into the world. When the alternative setting's beliefs become the narrative of the regular system as is predicted with the reform movement, only then we begin to write of the hierarchical system in an historical context.

If the theories of Paulo Freire (2002, 30th anniversary edition) and Neil Postman (1996) are to be combined to create a critical consciousness for the at risk learner, then they need an opportunity to rewrite the narrative of their own reality. Through alternative style education, they can choose to recreate their story of learning. Some would call it therapy, and others, emancipation. The at risk learners are allowed to voice their questions about the system that rejected them, and in doing so, realize that the narrative did not match their own. This is when they have the chance to write their own narrative for learning.

Teachers in alternative settings struggle with this notion when they coexist with the at risk learner everyday in the classroom. Their group of learners need to be given different tools than the ones the teachers were instructed to use in their teaching training programs. Postman and Wiengartner (1969) state,

as things stand now, teachers are apt to think of themselves as truth tellers who hope to extend the intelligence of students by revealing to them, to having them discover, inconvertible truths and enduring ideas... teachers as error detectors who hope to extend the intelligence of students by helping them reduce their mistakes in their knowledge and skills (p.120).

Rewriting the narrative of the teacher-student relationship has become the cornerstone of the success of alternative education. The Postman (1996) idea of owning a narrative for learning to make sense is what at risk learners need. When we can take the bitterness out of the traumatic past that these at risk learners have had in their educational journey, then we can help them to reconstruct their own understanding of the dialogical method. It is imperative that part of the critical pedagogy of the at risk learners has to be learning to question. With the empowerment for change, the new narrative for learning's purpose, they can then ask questions that aspire to their own critical consciousness. The narrative that the regular traditional school is holding on to in this pursuit of the same class system of meritocracy is what is destroying the at risk learner. It strives for democracy and equality yet there is no place for the diverse needs of the at risk learner. As the number of at risk learners grows at an alarming rate, the regular system must realize at some point that the at risk learner is every learner and that the narrative of the regular education system is obsolete. When adolescents have no purpose for school, school has failed, not the student. The increasing number of students attending alternative programs speaks to its ability to reach the at risk learner.

The narrative that the at risk learner creates has one most powerful component in it: the quest for an identity. Liberatory education using critical thinking and conscientization demands a narrative for everyone to have a credo to follow. It is clear that we must move beyond critical pedagogy into the writing and reading of the new narrative as it is created by at risk learners. It is an individualized story that explains the purpose and the value that the person places on their own learning and their quest for knowledge. Postman (1996)

holds hope that students who discover their own narrative will get excited about the chance to take part in this phenomenon he calls 'the great conversation.' If we follow these ideals, we will create the calling for all at risk learners to be agents of social change who participate equally and diversely in emancipation education.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented the various competing definitions of the at risk learner in western society and Quebec. The students exemplified here are struggling to realize their own potential for greatness and have been repeatedly hurt by the system that is supposedly designed to educate them for their adult life. Manning and Baruth (1995), Kottler (2002), and The Ministry of Education in Quebec (2001) all have documented proof that the definition process has serious flaws in the educational approach to at risk learners at present.

Although the standard definition seems to be accepted continent wide, the implementation of services and practice to help the at risk learner overcome their aversion to success are not uniform. The support for the at risk learner is diminished by the preconceived judgment that they are the problem and that their adaptation to the existing educational situation should be the focus of their redirection. Unfortunately, they lack the drive to change their educational experience for all the reasons stated in this chapter.

The students and the teachers can transform the motivation, power and curiosity of the at risk learner in a new narrative of schooling through alternative settings and the philosophical approach of critical pedagogical

educational practices. The at risk learner can learn again with the acquisition of the language needed and the willingness to acknowledge and transform the oppression of their regular school system experience.

When the five-year old learner tentatively raises his little hand in the first grade classroom asks the teacher “why”?; the new narrative of critical pedagogy will pave the way for that teacher to respond using various tools related to problem posing, dialogue, and generative themes. The teacher will then lead the individuals and the group on a journey of discovery, while teaching them how to narrate their own story. Using the dialogical method, problem posing inquiry, and critical consciousness raising activities, the group of learners will become agents for their own social change. We zoom ahead to the grade eleven classroom where the taller but still curious learner raises his hand asks, “why?”; the teacher responds with the same kind of questions and problem posing discussion starters. Until this is a truism, alternative settings as we will see in the following case study, are necessary as a protected haven for the at risk learner.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM – A CASE STUDY

OVERVIEW

This case study examines the success rate, definition process and service provided to the at risk youth in an alternative school environment of a large comprehensive high school in the Monterégie region of Quebec. The alternative school program services approximately 5 % of the total population of the larger high school and uses resources that are financed from within the budgetary constraints of the high school. This alternative school program functions as a fringe program for those who are on the verge of dropping out of school. The population is presently chosen through a series of referrals, research into experiences, and interviews. The students are comprised of residents of a lower to middle class suburban city of approximately 42 000 people. The languages spoken are 65% French, 29% English, 5 % Allophone. The economic situation of the majority of families is at or slightly above the poverty line. The incidents of divorce are in keeping with national averages but the statistics regarding level of alcohol and nicotine consumption are among the highest in Canada. This calls for further study as it encompasses a sociological view of the family structure and health values that may or may not contribute to the at risk population's definition. There is also a cross ethnic experience as the high school hosts at least two hundred students from a neighboring first nations reserve. The students labeled at risk from the first nations community comprise

about 8 % of the alternative population. The socio-economic and social diversity of the native population contributes to the need for alternative services for at risk native youth as much as other ethnic groups.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM

This program is designed to help at risk students within the regular high school. Using alternative styles of instruction and reflective assessment, critical pedagogical educational methods, community based learning, high structure and behaviour modification, this program attempts to aid learners who, for a myriad of reasons, have lost touch with their own educational path. Some of the most important aspects of the program include community volunteerism, work experience, fund-raising, and field trips. The students experience new ways of seeing the world year round and are given many opportunities to alter their own perception of the world around them.

Becoming a member of The Alternative School Program's community is indeed a lifelong commitment, as the school becomes a part for who you are and who you strive to be. Alumni will attest that they not only found themselves, and their respective stories, but also figured out much of their future choices by living The Alternative School Program for at least one year.

POPULATION OF THE PROGRAM

The population and the age range has been senior level students but will widen from the last two grade levels of high school to include students from the

first, second and third levels of secondary school. This change is in keeping with the Ministry of Education policy on the needs for students with social maladjustments or in short, the definition of the at risk learner. It states that its priority must be given to servicing for prevention and early intervention of at risk behaviour (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.24). The needs of the high school have been carefully analyzed through the referral process and extensive interviews with teachers, support staff, student services and administration. It was determined that there is a growing number of students who are presenting at risk symptoms or behaviours in the early grades and that preventative intervention is necessary to ensure the success of those students and the ones existing around them who may be adversely affected by the at risk students' reactions to their learning challenges. The group segregation model of alternative schooling offers the least restrictive environment to these students with at risk signs and/or social maladjustments as determined by the definitions outlined in the previous chapter.

The changes to the population size have imposed some major improvements to the staff required. In the new model, the student teacher ratio will be set at 1 to 24 students with the benefit of having a floating teacher who will relieve each core teacher of their workload by implementing, planning and team-teaching some of the objectives of the program in a rotating schedule. The size of the group is still large for this particular style of learner, but the advantage of having a team teacher who enters the classroom is a bonus for the staff. The team of teachers has grown accustomed to having not only their core group of 17 students to teach but also reorganized groups of the whole population for specialty subjects such as science and history as was done in the

past years. The change is that the teachers will only teach their core group of twenty four students with the addition of a team teacher for specialty projects and small group mentoring. This will be explained further in the proceeding sections on curriculum challenges and changes.

PHYSICALITY AND DETAIL

The alternative program began with twenty-six students and two teachers. The learning space was temporarily altered to suit the needs of the diverse population. At present, there are three teachers and two support staff operating this school, which exists as a totally segregated environment from the regular high school. Although in the same building, the connections are few, and the physical location poses challenges to both the manageability of such a school and the size. The physical location contains three classrooms and one common space with a kitchen, one washroom, and a lounge area. The space has been unchanged since the program's inception and the population has outgrown the present facilities. The need for more space and facilities to enhance the experience and success rate of the at risk population in the high school has created a major challenge for the upcoming eighth year of operation.

The physical space will be much improved with particular mention to acquisition of separate washroom facilities for boys and girls. The new home of this alternative setting is more suited to the alternative model of community with its own entrance and exit to the building, access to outdoor areas that will be maintained by the students, and larger classrooms to allow for work areas to be created based on the style of learning that a given activity will demand. This

alternative school program will cater to the diverse needs of the at risk learners and the program of study that is outlined later in this chapter explains the redirected educational journey that the at risk students take. The kitchen area will be the only place where the students will be allowed access based on permission or special projects and there will be a private meeting room, called “the wicker room” where students will go for important and private meetings that need to take place. Each classroom has enough space to accommodate twenty four students at grouped work tables, a computer center with three computers, a printer, and internet access, a small group project area, and a resource corner with books and other activities to stimulate the more energetic learner who may need to change his or her focus frequently.

APPROACH

The added bonus that the physical space helps to create is the implementation of a cross-age, cross curricular approach for the students from all levels. They will share the core group room, the responsibilities of maintaining the immediate community, and work cooperatively to accomplish the main goals of the curricular objectives. The learning is project based and the integration of cross-curricular themes will facilitate real life learning and teamwork. The entire school year progresses through the praxis (reflection & action) of conscientization necessary to alter the educational experience of at risk learners. Before explaining the strategic curriculum choices and daily routine, it is important to mention the historical overview of this program and to outline the success and failure rate of such a program as it stands as a solution to the

problem of at risk learners in the regular school system. The success rate is based on yearly statistics of attendance. The successful students are the ones who finish the school year in the alternative school program. The failure rate accounts for the students who are asked to leave the program or who quit before the 180 days of the school year are completed. The academic results are not factored in as they reflect an individualized journey for each at risk learner and cannot be standardized or compared to each other but only to the student's individual previous record.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION AND PERSONAL STORIES OF THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM

The Alternative School Program began as a two-year pilot project in the fall of 1996. Two teachers pioneered this program for an at risk population of 26 students from the regular high school in grade nine. At risk was and is defined as any student who seemed to be considering dropping out and/or exhibiting behaviours, which prevented them and subsequently their peers, from learning successfully. The referrals for this pilot project came from the knowledgeable and experienced staff members who helped signal the possible students. The administration completely supported the program, as did the teachers' council and the parent committee. A space was set aside for the project and the teachers spent numerous hours learning and mirroring the philosophy and procedure from an already established alternative school in the same region. The subjects taught were at the grade ten level and the first month was spent doing projects with the students that covered the objectives of the

grade nine curriculum that pertained to grade ten. The student population exhibited many outspoken behaviours and the staff dealt with multiple incidents of drug abuse, violent outbursts, and inappropriate communication. With the help of the CLSC social worker and the parents, the first year was a success. The strict four-rule system of 1. no lying; 2. no skipping; 3. no drugs; and 4. no alcohol (see appendix.p.78) stayed in place and four students from the original group were asked to leave the program before the end of the year. As previously explained, the success rate was calculated based on their attendance in school, which went from approximately 45% to 90%. In a highly structured and smaller environment, the students were regaining their self-esteem and their love of learning. The statistic analysis is as follows:

Year #1
(1996-1997): 26 students in September
-22 in June
-2 left to go to other institutions
-2 left school
-85% success rate for completion of school year
-Grade ten students went on to next year: 22

The second year proved to be even better than the first. The same group remained in order to complete the pilot project and all but four graduated from secondary school with all their required courses. The group began to change their academic situation and learned to alter their behaviour in the school setting. Further to this, they had acquired the power of voice and narrative. Armed with this gift, they sought out lives rich in experience, reflection and success. The two year pilot project was then approved one more time by the teacher's council and the parent committee to remain within the high school framework as a resource for the school and the at risk population at the grade nine, ten and eleven levels. The statistic analysis is as follows:

Year #2:
(1997-1998) 26 in September
-21 Graduated in June
-1 moved to Laval
-3 left school
-1 left to go to other institution
-85% graduation rate

From this class, the personal testimonies to their present lives are noteworthy. The at risk learners who were considered to be outside the possibility of successful completion of the high school diploma have gone on to pursue active and healthy lives. There are two presently pursuing their bachelor's degree, Melanie in psychology, Jonah in social services. Mark left high school and followed his dream of biking out west. He works in Banff as a REIKI trainer and outdoor tour guide. He plans to bike down to Chile next spring and is still in contact with us periodically. Barbara has recently married, purchased a home in the region, has two children and studied interior design. Peter is now teaching Computers to Adults in Toronto while pursuing his Bachelor's in Education part time. Erin graduated from the McGill Nurse's aide program and is working full time at the Montreal General hospital as of this past fall. These students are highlighted, as they were "drop-outs" when the program was implemented and were enticed back to participate in this pilot project by the pioneer teachers.

The third year of the program housed 38 students at the grade nine and ten level, with a small group of five students completing their grade eleven requirements. The two teachers were allotted the services of a teaching attendant as the workload and the amount of students increased due to the level of success of the program. For 38 students the staff comprised of two teachers and one part time attendant at 25.5 hours. The staff agreed to work

over and above the hours in their collective agreement, knowing that the timeframe of a regular school day could not be compatible with the needs of this at risk population. There proved to be many differences in the way that The Alternative School Program functioned and it was impossible to compare its structure to the regular school system. This fact remains as one of the strongest reasons why the program works for the at risk learner. It is so different that they feel they have been given a new chance at success. The statistic analysis is as follows:

Year#3: (1998-1999)
-38 in September
-27 in June
-5 left school
-6 left to go to other institutions
-86 % success rate

Out of this group, there are many success stories. The situations where these students find their own success grows every year as they accomplish their goals. Mark is a certified carpenter and working as an apprentice full time. Steven is in the Office Technology program, and a successful father planning to start his own moving company this spring. Anthony has completed the welding program and is working full time in his trade. Roger is planning to go to Concordia in the fall to study writing and photography. Many others have returned to say they are struggling but persevering. One student came to say that she wanted to come by for so long but could not as she felt she was not doing well enough, and although that is surprising, the attachment and pride these at risk learners now feel for themselves is in itself a success. Being committed to finding your true purpose became normal to learners who had previously disqualified themselves from the game of education and success in

adulthood. They may have taken longer to find their story, but they continue their search.

The fourth year brought more changes to the alternative program as the demand from the high school population grew. In need of the services for a wider clientele, the staff decided to take on a third teacher and a new group of students. With a ratio of one to fifteen, the population grew to 44 students, sixteen of these students graduated with all their required courses. The teacher administering the program was given the title of Head Teacher within the school but not at the board level as it would demand salary increase, and the allotment of the students' time with various social services, i.e. social worker, drug and alcohol counsellor, increased slightly to accommodate the growing need in the population of at risk alternative students. One in five students exhibit behaviour disorders such as Attention Deficit hyperactivity Disorder and Attention Deficit Disorder. Out of forty-four learners, eleven were classified or coded with these disorders in behaviour. The statistic analysis is as follows:

Year #4
(1999-2000): 44 in September
- 38 in June
- 1 left school
- 4 left for other institutions
- 1 moved to New Brunswick
- 90% success rate in June

Out of the fifteen graduates from this year, there are at least 10 still in school, most are working full time. Jeffrey is finishing up his courses in Hairdressing and is already working in his trade. Guy is working full time and is very happy with his high school diploma accomplishment. He visits often and is always proud to go back. Karen is a full time mother and planning to go to Concordia in the fall. The need for teachers became imperative and the upcoming year the

program took on the task of mentoring two student teachers in their fourth year in the education program at a local university.

The fifth year of The Alternative School Program saw a further increase in demand for placement, which changed the groups from 1:15 to 1:17 students per class. The process of selection was difficult as almost all the learners interviewed showed the motivation for change and the need for the service. A combination of factors is responsible for the percentage of success droppage this year. The students' success dropped slightly this year as 13 students were asked to leave the program before the end of the school year. Three of the students were asked to leave for the same incident involving alcohol, and one left on their own for medical reasons. Furthermore, one of the teachers working in the setting decided that it was not a suitable job placement so new staff was hired to take over one class. This caused a delicate balance for students in their experience as they tested the limits of the "new" teacher. When at risk learners realize that they are entitled and deserve a new learning environment, they will demand it and seek it out, putting enormous pressure on the staff members to help shape the school year for the group. The children must test the bottom line of each adult so that they may create trust for themselves as they have been hurt by the system in the past. They seek structure and consistency and this suffered as the new staff had to learn their own lessons this school year. This slight decrease was compensated by the arrival of five new students midway through the school year. The groups were divided up into three groups, grade ten, grade ten/eleven split, and a grade eleven class. Twenty-one students graduated this year from high school with their entire required course load. The statistic analysis is as follows:

Year #5
(2000-2001): 46 in September
-33 in June
-5 left for other institutions
-7 left school
-1 medical reason
-86% success rate this June

Two thirds of the grads from this year are pursuing their studies in either CEGEP or Trade school. Specific details are not yet available as the students are still being tracked through their programs of study.

The sixth year of the Alternative School Program was a year where the program remained at the status quo of 45 students. The space did not safely accommodate more than this number. The demand was such that there were over one hundred students recommended, and those chosen were carefully selected. There were 20 graduates this year and the amount of students asked to leave the program was seven. The special project operations technician position, at twenty hours per week for the Fonds Jeunesse grant, began in May of this year and is set to continue through the 2002- 2003 and 2004 school year. This adjusted the scope of the program to focus on the community and volunteering as well as the world of work. The technician's position was to plan, set up and execute various community based projects in accordance with the mandate of the Fonds Jeunesse. The progression of the entire alternative school program has matured toward this grant project. The students were given the opportunity to work volunteering in the fields of their interest in the community and it brought the themes of critical pedagogical educational practices to life for this school program. The details of this project are explained in detail later in this chapter. The statistic analysis for year six is as follows:

Year #6
(2001-2002): 45 in September

- 37 in June
- 1 moved to Alberta
- 3 left school
- 4 left for other institutions
- 91% success rate in June

Out of the Grad class of 20 students, 12 are continuing their studies; Brian is a newly graduated marine, ranking Land Corporal in the American Armed Forces. Terry is pursuing a degree in the Specialization of Law and Society at the CEGEP level. Melanie went on to pursue a social sciences degree in CEGEP and plans to study education. Kayla enrolled in CEGEP and plans to study translation at the university level.

The seventh year of the program demanded even more changes to occur. Over one hundred and fifty students were recommended and the interview process and administrative pressure forced the staff to decide to take fifty-one at risk students. The reason for the increase in population was that the students interviewed appeared to have such a great need for the service, and although the facilities were overcrowded, it was felt that the program could accommodate this amount of people in its space, with some modifications. The unofficial word from the administration was that the program needed to service more students or risk being eliminated as a cost cutting measure. The adult education corridor was agreed upon as a common space for use of the bathrooms, as the alternative space had only one toilet for fifty-five people. The year was considered a successful one and only eleven students were asked to leave the program. The facilities had become too small for such an endeavour and the administration and teaching team decided on a suitable relocation for the 2003-2004 school year. To date, over two hundred students were recommended for the program for next year, and the staff decided that serving

only grade ten and eleven needed to be expanded in order to better serve the high school's community. The following table summarizes the historical background of The Alternative School Program.

STATISTICAL REPORT OF THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM

	Students enrolled beginning of school year	Number of Students who left during the year	Number of students remaining in program at end of year	Percentage of Students who succeeded
1996-1997	26	4	22	85%
1997-1998	26	5	21	85%
1998-1999	38	11	27	71%
1999-2000	44	6	38	86%
2000-2001	46	13	33	72%
2001-2002	45	8	37	82%
2002-2003	51	11	40	78.4%
Totals	276	58	218	79%

PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM

The eighth year of Alternative will take on seventy-two students from all grade levels in order to service the needs of a growing school population. The services will need to be slightly adjusted, and as previously outlined, plans are being made to accommodate such a group in a new and larger space. The official mission statement as it appears in the newly created information document for the program, reads as follows,

This program has been designed to help at risk students within the high school. Using alternative methods of instruction, community based learning, high structure and behaviour modification, this program attempts to aid learners who, for a myriad of reasons, have lost touch with their own educational path. By redirecting their at risk behaviours and helping them to face the obstacles in the way of their learning, the alternative school program increases their likelihood of success (Directions, 2003, p. 3).

The historical context, the mission statement, and these random examples show students completing their high school requirements as set out by the Ministry of Education. They are pursuing their studies or are working successfully in the job market. The results seem normal in keeping with the pursuit of lifestyle and skills that young people take after high school. The difference is that these same students were at risk for failing or dropping out of the system before they went through The Alternative School Program. All of them came to the program disillusioned with the educational process, weary of authority, and especially cautious of taking any sort of risk with regard to their own educational process. They were students who had accepted that they were not going to be successful in the world of adulthood and they were convinced that they had been excluded from the regular high school experience. They had

in fact been marginalized by the very symptoms that showed them to be at risk when this program began. As they are imperative for the system to improve from, they too needed to be protected from that system and given a fresh start and a new experience in school. Through the experience of building this program and working with at risk youth for seven years, it is apparent that if the system were truly addressing the needs of all learners, there would be no need for alternative settings, which segregate and exclude students to the fringe of the regular system. If the curriculum reform in Quebec is to do what it states as its goals, then the alternative system would become the regular setting and all students participating in the high school experience would benefit from cross-curricular experiences and community minded education.

COMMUNITY AWARENESS

The students live within these community walls and contribute on a daily basis to its management. Their input into how it is run, the planning of special activities, and keeping the school clean is integral to the quality of their commitment to the learning experience. The practice of community awareness and volunteer projects gives the students total control over the scope, details, planning and execution of their project. The most recent projects involved thematic choices made through generative themes of concern to the students. The Freirean (Boyce, 1996, p.6) approach to topical theme created projects based on fundraising, animals, children, and theatre. The fund raising concepts took the form of raising money for cancer research, through the sale of lollipops. The attention to the personal narrative or story of this group's lives

was instrumental in their decision to raise funds for cancer research as they all lost a loved one to the disease. The group cohesion was tight and their motivation was centered around proaction for a trauma that had helped to create their at risk situation. The empowerment they felt was demonstrated in their commitment and stamina to follow through until the end.

The group devoted to animal awareness, fundraised for the local animal adoption organization and volunteered at the local animal shelter. The students were concientized to another kind of oppression through their experience with animals. Visits to farms, where the students worked along side farmers and ranchers, empowered this group to feel they were making a difference to animals. The group's final goal to raise money for an abandoned dog's costly medical bills proved to be life altering for some of the group. One student went on to work as a volunteer in an animal health clinic and wants to become a veterinarian. Critically conscious of the suffering that animals felt, these students realized how to help change painful situations through dedication and caring.

The group interested in helping children organized and fundraised for the benefit of the single parents association's christmas party with entertainment and christmas presents for all the children in attendance (120). Students who were from single parent families participated and were able to give something back to an organization that had perhaps helped them in the past. Organizing and planning this event empowered the group to work together, define roles and share their experiences. The actual party was a huge success as students who would normally not be involved with children played games, organized a piñata, and entertained large groups of children. The single parents benefited as they

relaxed and ate the supper that the students served. They were seen as leaders and givers in the community and this increased their self respect and confidence in the face of the community members.

They furthered their endeavour by creating a Santa's workshop where over two hundred kindergarten children from the elementary schools wrote to Santa and were answered by this group of alternative students. The students dressed up as Santa, Mrs. Clause and the elves to hand deliver the letters to the schools. One girl came back crying because she was so overwhelmed by the impact she had on the children. A young kindergarten girl had hugged her tight and said, "I love you and thank you for being real!" The at risk learner was able to create a magical experience for a young child. This experience changed this student's esteem in an enormous way.

The theatre group took on the project of building, rehearsing and performing a Christmas play for the seniors groups' Christmas luncheons. They chose the play, had a student appointed director, rehearsed regularly, built their set, the costumes, and laughed a lot during the experience. The performance was entertaining and the seniors were impressed with the group on many levels. They served the luncheon, talked with the seniors, and then performed for them. The exchange of generational dialogue was enriching for the students in this group and they genuinely enjoyed their project from beginning to end.

The students brainstormed, grouped themselves according to interest, and with the help of a project manager, scheduled, and completed these various projects that had a direct impact on the community. The community aspect of The Alternative School Program ended with the students participating in the

presentation process of their projects to each other and to the governing board members who preside over the school board. The governing board is the acting committee who makes decisions for the school. It consists of parents, teachers, community members and students. The reaction of the members of the governing board is influential in the support that The Alternative School Program receives and this project has intrigued the members to look more closely into the success of this program as it successfully serves the at risk youth of the school.

This aspect of the alternative experience was enriching and life altering for most who participated. The students were empowered by their own ability to make a difference and the praise they received from the community was testimony to the events. At the same time as these projects took place, the student felt a sense of belonging, and formed a community of learners who were respectful of each other, motivated and using all the skills necessary to conduct themselves as successful young adults. The academic results showed a strong positive correlation and the esteem of the students rose through their involvement in this project. The alternative style enhanced the high school experience for these at risk students and redirected some of the major at risk symptoms into a focused and energized environment for the learner. The lack of focus behaviours diminished, and the enthusiasm of the group spurred individuals on to choose interests in career paths that remain in the helping professions.

One student, after the experience, has decided to pursue a college program and university degree in early childhood education in order to become a kindergarten teacher. This same student, fighting with low grades and low

motivation for school in the past, with 50 missed days in the previous school year and 2/3 academic failures in the major grade ten subjects, ended up as the valedictorian for the alternative school program this year and was accepted to two CEGEPS in the program of her choice. She has rewritten her personal narrative of education and transformed herself from at risk learner to a risk taking learner.

PREPARATION FOR THE WORLD OF WORK

The community project for the alternative setting is one of two major community components that help to serve this clientele in a positive way. The second aspect of this community project that is beneficial and particular to this alternative setting is the preparation to the world of work. The students are exposed to many careers through research projects and guest speakers from the community who speak of their professions and business management. To name a few, the owner of McDonald's restaurant and Dairy Queen spoke to the students about job placement and employability. A representative from the Social Justice committee of Montreal came to discuss the World Bank and globalization, and a workshop on investments is given to all students to explain the value of money and investing in the future. The students receive mentoring and coaching in the process of resume preparation and interviewing through the help of able seniors in the community who volunteer their time to perform mock job interviews and show students how to present themselves for a job. The exchange of generational influence has bridged the gap between the youth

and seniors of this community. The improved relations have created new opinions for both students and volunteers.

The six month project culminates with an actual work experience for the students whereby they do a job that interests them for a period of two weeks in the spring. The project manager organizes all of the placements and brings the students to their interviews prior to job placement. Out of the total students placed, 30% of them were offered summer employment from the experience. Fifteen students were placed in the elementary schools as teaching assistants and support staff and out of those students ten of them have expressed an interest in post secondary training in these professions. With a taste of reality in the world of work, the at risk learner can modify their preconceived notions of independence. Entering the work force is no longer viewed as glamorous and this experience shows many that responsibility of working is often challenging and difficult. Having The Alternative School Program as a safety net in this work trial allows them the opportunity to experience work without the riskiness of holding down a real job. Many students go on after the work experience to seek employment in our community and feel ready and able to hold down a part time job. Learning their rights and responsibilities before they enter the job market empowers them to behave accordingly in their work.

The work experience component has been in place for the entire seven years of The Alternative School Program and its success rate has only increased with each passing year. The challenge for such a program is that the resources allotted to the organization and implementation of this aspect of alternative schooling can only be attained through grants from various organizations. With the final year of this grant's funding running out, the added pressure is on the

staff to find the money to continue a much needed aspect of this service to the at risk learner. The project manager is an integral part of the approach to learning and the community support is paramount to the reawakening of the alternative student's life experience.

CRITERIA FOR ENTRY INTO PROGRAM

This alternative setting uses a criteria sheet designed to determine whether students are at risk and if they are characterized as needing special services. The teachers in the regular high school are the major contributors to the population and their input through the itemized indicators is a key tool for the staff of the alternative setting to use when choosing students for the program. The students cited as potential alternative candidates are signaled based on the following criteria. (See appendix 2, p.99) This list conforms to the present Ministry of Education guidelines for assessing at risk learners. They must be presently at the grade 7,8,9,10 or 11 level; they must be exhibiting poor academic performance but with the potential to do well; they must be showing one or more but not necessarily all of the behaviors listed on the criteria sheet. These include,

skipping school on a regular basis, lack of motivation, introverted behavior or depression, low morale or "acting out" behaviors which are inappropriate for classroom standards, personal or social problems that the teacher is aware of, frequent visits to the main office for discipline reasons, lateness, incomplete homework, inability to try new things in class because of low self esteem in certain academic subjects, low level of math skill, low overall self esteem or negative statements, excitability or inability to concentrate, substance abuse, and rude or disrespectful behavior to others. (appendix two, p.99)

These are all encompassing and vague so that any student who should be signaled may be based on the indicators that are applicable. They are also closely related to the definition process as determined by the Ministry of Education as explained in Chapter two. The present cumbersome task for the staff of the alternative setting is that out of a population of 1000+ students, the referral list is in excess of two hundred names. The school administration is a vital link for the staff in its selection process. Using report cards, discipline records, interviews with parents, support staff and the students themselves, a decision is made by the alternative staff as to whether the student needs the benefits of an alternative setting to redirect their learning experience. The students who have been signaled by more than two teachers and are recommended by the administration become the first round of students interviewed and then the selection process continues through out the year. Compounding this, students who have not been signaled will sometimes seek the services of the alternative setting as a means for self-directed change. This poses problems for the system as the self-diagnosis of at risk learners is not considered as viable documentation in the student's file.

The choice to allow students entry into the program is controversial, as the philosophy supports willingness on the part of the learner, but they then bypass the learners who have been so defined by the system's tool of assessment. The unfortunate part about this process is that many students are still overlooked through the screening process that excludes learners who may be at risk but only exhibit mild symptoms or introverted behaviour. Those who were not interviewed but referred are still highlighted to the administration as possible students to observe as they may begin to show more overt at risk

behaviours in the coming year. It is still unclear whether it is the inaccuracy of the process or the increasing numbers of at risk students and it is this situation that has led to the need for this study. As the population increases, studying the effects of the alternative setting on the at risk students promotes its value and the potential of such a system being applied throughout the school to better serve the clientele.

CURRICULUM DESIGN

As previously stated, the curriculum approach is one that includes a cross course design. This ongoing experiential approach is altered from year to year according to the needs of the students in their academic profile. The students are registered for the Ministerial courses at the appropriate grade level in the computer reporting system, but they work in a cross curricula design that enhances their educational experience. The teachers take care of the allotment of number grades for each course and most evaluation is done through self-reflection and student input. The students have shown in the past that they become more motivated to learn information that is real and personal to their lives.

When The Alternative School Program did a journalism project with the community newspaper, the students were brought together to generate themes for possible articles to investigate and write about that meant something to them as young people. The two boys who spoke up passionately were interested in the story of their friend who had trouble with the city. The friend's father had built his son a very large ramp so that the friends and the son would

stay home to practice their skateboarding and BMXing tricks. BMXing is an artistic form of biking that involves precision stops and starts, balancing tricks, and ramp jumping. The combination of bikes and skateboards imposed many obstacles on the parents who had to conform to the city's laws and the insurance company's demands. The bylaws were respected and the construction was complete. The problem was that the boy's neighbours wanted the ramp dismantled as the young people were using it regularly and the height of the ramp allowed the boys to see into the neighbours' backyards.

Using this example may seem cumbersome but the point is that the project suggested by these students was one where the boys felt they had no say and no power to alter the circumstances of the situation. At this point in the school year, the boys had only been somewhat involved in the alternative experience and had shown minimal interest and motivation for the schooling process. The prospect of this project was both motivating and challenging for the boys, as they had to investigate all sides of the situation before writing their article. They researched the city's bylaws, interviewed the mayor and the city councilors responsible for the approval of this construction, measured the actual ramp, and spoke with the friend's father about the ramp and its history. What they learned from this experience propelled them to write a great quality article that spoke in an objective tone with professionalism and maturity. They felt empowered by the process and learned so many of the skills deemed necessary by the curriculum demands of English Language Arts, Law, Morals, and Personal Social Development, Citizenship, and Journalism. The at risk students became journalists and their behaviour changed in other areas as well. They were more attentive in math class, did their homework more

frequently, and most importantly walked with pride as their article took the front page of the community newspaper that month.

The far-reaching results included a visit from the Mayor to talk to our student population about community, an event also organized by students. As a result to the whole ramp question, because the boys proved that it was within the regulations for backyard constructions, the neighbours had no legal recourse to demand its destruction. The friend's father was most impressed with the level of commitment and maturity that the boys showed and it relieved him of the stress of the whole matter. The empowering action that the boys undertook, within the laws and freedoms of citizens, proved to them that they could change the community with their efforts. Their personal feelings of frustration from before the article disappeared and the boys became true agents of social change.

The whole experience has had far reaching benefits for one of the boys in particular as his motivation rose so steadily that he accomplished all of his requirements for graduation in this school year. As recently as January, it was doubtful that this student would have enough credits to complete his studies on time. The staff will attest that the redirecting of this students' ability into something he felt passionate about was an important factor to that learner's reversal of fortune and experience. The other key for this learner was the sense of belonging and care given to him by the staff. The Alternative School Program must use many tactics and approaches, as the same project that awakens one at risk learner does not necessarily do the same for another. Having smaller groups, a segregated environment, and a flexible schedule affords this program the freedom to create experiences, as they are needed for the learners that call

out for them. The diverse needs of the at risk population demand that multiple resources and original events take place so that the at risk learner will see a fresh approach and a new idea presented to them, one with enough dramatic appeal and youthful intrigue that the at risk learner will open their eyes to look at the world differently. This starts with their academic experience.

Through the acquisition of the necessary credits of the grade ten and eleven level of the high school diploma criteria, at risk learners move ahead in The Alternative School Program toward the secondary school diploma as if they were a regular program student. The differences in alternative methods appear in the individualized program and the addition of a course, entitled, Student in Society, which fosters change for the student's social, cultural, and academic experience. Furthermore, if a students enters the alternative setting with insufficient grades and incomplete courses at the lower level, the student can move at their own pace and motivation into to the next level throughout the school year if they so choose.

The restrictions in the standardized testing of the grade ten and eleven level courses limit the times at which these tests are offered and the students can only advance by one full grade level within the same school year. For example, if the student shows proficiency in English Language or French as a Second Language subjects and midway through the year, decides to move forward to the next level; they can participate in an in house final supplemental exam. If successfully achieved, it gives them the necessary credits to then be registered for the course at the next level. As was the case with the young journalist, his English skills improved dramatically which allowed him to acquire the grade ten credits he was missing due to his at risk situation the

previous year, and to move through the grade eleven curriculum requirements for the June Ministry exams of grade eleven. Having successfully completed the June session, he completes his English language arts requirements for his high school leaving certificate without losing a whole a year of repetition. This is due to the fact that once his motivation was reawakened, his confidence boosted, and his sense of belonging secured, his ability rose and his academic achievement was more attainable.

This works for the majority of courses offered to secondary students, but where we have the greatest challenge improving their results are in the three major subjects of Mathematics, History, and Science. The students who are at risk and have previously failed these courses have a difficult time overcoming the trauma felt by the grades previously held as judgments of their exclusion from success. The mathematics course is particularly damaging as the negative experience that these students have dealt with in Math class stem from many years of failure and are not simple in scope. The psychosocial damage done to the self-esteem of the child reveals itself in the math curriculum where the students are asked to use critical thinking skills, calculation capabilities and deductive reasoning to solve intricate math problems. The problem is not so much in the challenge to solve, but in the confidence needed to take risks and make mistakes. The at risk learner has been so stigmatized by their mistakes and foibles that they retreat into themselves and do not attempt math as it represents all the true reasons they have been labeled “at risk”. This is where the majority of the negative behaviour comes through and the students’ attendance record becomes compromised. If they have to pick a day for illness,

it is usually a Math test day. The anxiety level and poor results which the at risk learner experiences during Math are grounds for a further thesis study.

If one had to speculate based on my experience, it would seem that somewhere between the addition/subtraction module and the multiplication tables in grade three is where the at risk behaviours start for many youth. The high school curriculum in Mathematics is based on five years of layering over the same concepts and notions. Each scholastic year increases in complexity but the essential axioms and theories are reoccurring. The root of almost all calculation and deduction is based on the multiplication tables, cross multiplication, factoring and elimination. If a student has not successfully acquired these skills in the grade school experience they will begin to experience frustration and failure from the beginning of high school in Math. For instance, in the regular high school this year, 266 students are in grade seven. Out of the 266 students, 103 have failed grade seven Mathematics. This translates into 38.7% of the population or more than one third of all grade seven students. Further to this is that out of the 103 students who have failed with a mark lower than 60%, only 50 are eligible for the summer school session because they have attained a grade between 50 and 60%. This means that the school determines the students eligible to redo the course in the hopes of passing the grade level. The percentage of students not even eligible for summer school, (53), is 20% of the grade seven population. This means they will be held back an entire school year in at least Mathematics because of their math result. If 206 students overall were recommended to the alternative program out of 1000+ students, this statistic is 20% being at risk for failure or exclusion from the system. This is high to perfectly correlated to the mathematic failure rate at

the entry level of high school. Almost one to one, the 20% who fail grade seven Math with a mark of less than 50, matches the 20% of the population who are recommended for The Alternative school Program. This correlation is astounding as the predominant shared characteristic of alternative students in this school setting is their fear and loathing of math.

Curriculum fear seeps into the other core subjects, as math skills are necessary in the science courses as well. As the student experiences difficulty in one or two subjects, their fragile self esteem of early adolescence falters and they begin to respond with less and less enthusiasm to most of their academic challenges. One of the priorities of The Alternative School Program is to overcome the obstacle of math as a subject to be feared and rejected into a challenge where mistakes are acceptable and the use of trial and error is normal to acquire success in computing. Once the emotional and psychosocial memories of mathematical experiences are critically dialogued and deconstructed, the student who was previously at risk because of their Math experiences becomes a learner who attempts to improve their academic standing. This critical consciousness is essential to the academic approach to math in this setting as the blockages to this course stand in front of all progress to be made with the at risk learner.

The math program is attainable at the individualized pace of these learners, but the challenge of attempting the ministry's standardized exam for secondary school leaving is a limitation to the concept of cross age, cross subject area curricula. The time is needed to instruct the modules for the grade eleven students and the restrictions in the yearly schedule do not include suitable preplanned activities for the other students to participate in during the

mandatory teaching time for Math 514. This is the grade eleven regular Math course, which the students must pass a provincial exam for CEGEP entry, but not for high school diploma requirements. This course focuses on the application of the notions learned in the previous four years of the math program. To overcome this problem in the coming school year, two of the core groups will be cross age from grade eight to grade ten, and the third core group will be comprised of grade eleven potential high school graduates with room for a small minority of the most at risk students in the program. The reason for this split is to offer the younger and extremely socially maladjusted students the opportunity to learn from much older and newly motivated individuals who will positively influence the behaviour of the younger students in the room. They will participate in the curriculum and it will only benefit them to see the academic standards that are expected of them in the future. The floating team teacher will work with the extreme small group to improve their math mentality and skills and will attend to their math curriculum.

The other two groups will benefit from the cross age experience in Math and use peer teaching and projects to concretize the information needed to attempt Math at all levels. This adapted curriculum is designed to make Math friendly and enticing for the at risk learner, in the hopes that they will begin to experiment with the topics and use trial and error to move ahead.

The other two subjects of History and Science offer their own challenges as the curriculum guidelines as set out by the Ministry of Education bombard the students with so much finite material that most give up. Most at risk learners who carry emotional baggage and lack self esteem are unwilling to attempt to memorize formulae and dates because it is so unfamiliar to their

experience as a marginalized student. Furthermore, they do not see the relevance and view these mandatory courses as being part of the system's oppression and control. The Alternative School Program has struggled with the teaching of these courses as presenting the material in a linear and teacher centered fashion negates the whole process going on around them. Negotiating the course content is not optional however, and the constraints of the ministry exams restrict the freedom for critical consciousness approaches these courses could offer.

In order to overcome this problem in the upcoming year, the staff will attempt to create student-centered areas for research and discussion of issues that will allow the students to voice their opinion about historical events and their ramifications on the present. In science, the lab aspect of the course might possibly be done first as discovery learning and then application to the historical facts of these discoveries might be explored and discussed. It is certain that the lecture style and factual basis of both these courses contributes to the at risk's learner's experience of victimization and exclusion as they reject themselves as learners in these courses.

Questioning and dialogue are contrived in these courses as the information is predetermined and the point of view expected for the final examination questions is subjective. Integrating the objectives into other courses of study such as English Language Arts and French as a Second Language, will break this pattern and that is the essential component for the at risk learner. Using literature, movies and music from varying time periods brings the eras to life and creates a connection to the events and the people who lived them. The spectrum of allowable material in the languages programs

is so broad that coupling the modules with the historical events and the scientific discoveries creates a curiosity in the learner that exceeds the need to memorize. Changing the way it is learned has a positive effect on the memory retention necessary for ministerial examinations for high school completion.

The other subjects learned in the alternative setting include social studies, sciences, ethics, student leadership, and the languages, as mentioned previously. The course which sets The Alternative School Program apart from the regular system is the Student in Society course which allots four credits to the student at the grade ten and eleven level. It is an umbrella course which is altered from year to year based on the needs of the groups. It is designed to reflect the student's place in the school, community, society and the world. Modules and projects in the past have included the reading of *Sophie's World* and an intricate debate of the history of philosophy and psychology projects on the great thinkers and creators of modern psychology such as Piaget, Freud, Young, and Eriksson. When the students learn about the concept of learning and the how the brain works and changes over time, they begin to understand the importance of the educational agenda, and exposing to them to the "hidden curriculum", thus empowering them to become learners who understand the reasoning behind the system. They feel like an insider who has vital secret information which has previously been out of their reach.

Further to this notion is the information session and workshop on academic pursuits and further studies. As part of the curriculum objective of the Student in Society course, the students are consistently made aware of the credit system in place to judge them and know how many credits they have, need and must acquire before they can move on to other new endeavors. The

students for the most part, have never been instructed on how to read their transcript from the ministry. The concept of quintile ranking, percentile rank and ponderation (all math concepts in the course objectives) are explained to them so they see its relevance in understanding the numbers of their own Ministry result paper and can apply it to their math awareness and mastery. This is also a tactic which retrains the at risk learner to take charge of their academic experience and knowing just what they need reduces the stress they often feel about their future and their present situation.

The additional aspect of Student in Society as a course of study includes gender issues. This is a unit where the girls and boys are separated and issues of difference and gender are discussed. This component has become a staple in the alternative curriculum as it allows both genders time to reflect, question, and understand the world from the point of view of their sex. The girls most often have been victims of trauma and this forum allows them a safe environment in which to talk about their experiences and work through the devastated problems that some have had to overcome like rape, abuse, and addiction. The boys on the other hand, have also experienced trauma, however understated, and use the time to discuss issues of interest to their gender and investigate the role of boys and men. This is positive and therapeutic for some of them as their family situation are sometimes fatherless. Providing them with role models and a trusting environment in which to discuss their own growth from boys into men is essential to help undo some of the dysfunction that some have built up over time.

This course offers what an Individualized Educational Program(IEP) would not be able to accomplish in the regular system as no course offers these

objectives and can be adapted to the group or individual's as needed. The IEP is the method of service presently in place in the regular system to assist at risk learners in their situation. The principal, teachers and the parents meet to determine an individualized path for the learner to follow. The IEP is designed to be the most effective plan for at risk students, yet it is trapped in the standardized system of the large comprehensive high school. The lack of staffing and resource to track and follow up on the IEP process undermines its purpose and further damages the at risk learner. They become hopeful that they will receive specialized attention, help in their most challenging obstacles yet the minimal human contact, and follow through leaves many feeling abandoned and powerless. Having alternative settings in the school allows for the at risk learner to benefit from the positive aspects of individualized education and learn about their own educational situation in a safe and consciousness raising environment.

The Student in Society course will take on a new flavour in this upcoming school year as the team of teachers attempt to experiment with theme based terms of study which will be reflected through this course and cross over into the other core courses. For example, term one will focus on the world and its history. This will allow the students to plan and develop projects on world history, the advent of democracy and inspire the short stories, creative writing of English Language Arts to focus on myths, legends, and creation stories. Furthermore, the French as a Second Language course will explore the origin of words and language to acclimatize the students to the root of many French vocabulary words that influence the English language as well. This journey through history will happen in all the courses in specialty sessions on

the history of mathematics, scientific thinking and invention. Throughout the whole term about discovery and change, it will also foster a sense of newness for the at risk learner. To come to school to learn new things that he or she never knew they could find out about the world and themselves instills the curiosity needed to move forward in their educational narrative.

The other three school terms will be centered around the community in term two, the mind, and body of the individual in term three, and then the modern world and the future in term four. In order to transform their experience the need for a dramatic shift on the approach and style of the curriculum is essential. Using the methods of the newly created reform curriculum movement will enhance this experience and this experimental endeavour in the high school will possibly influence the actual reform procedures as it is refined and finalized at the ministry level.

In the following chapter I present conclusions to this study of using of alternative settings as a means to help the at risk learner in their educational experience. Critical pedagogical educational practices and the use of narrative, as explained in the writings about Paulo Freire (2002, 30th anniversary edition) and Neil Postman (1996), offer the foundation for critical consciousness that at risk learners will find in the alternative settings designed to help them. Through suggestions for further areas to investigate and research, I end with queries about the teacher training programs and the budgetary constraints on education, which threaten the future existence of alternative settings.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

What I have provided is a case study which illustrates how critical pedagogy and the gift of narrative can be implemented in an alternative school setting. The definitions and theoretical background of the at risk learner pointed to some limitations of the regular system and do not take into account how the at risk problems can be addressed. Manning and Baruth (1995) offer many definitions for the existence of the at risk learner. Their work and that of Kottler (2002) and the Ministry of Education of Quebec (2001) lead us to a clear idea of what an at risk learner might look like as they struggle in the regular system.

AWAKENING THE LEARNER

One aspect is certain, the at risk learner who is excluded and marginalized in their present educational journey will most assuredly benefit from any and all attempts to entice them back into the mind frame of curiosity and love of learning for learning's sake. Theoretically, Paulo Freire (2002, 30th anniversary edition) and Neil Postman (1996) have captured the experience of these at risk learners through their writings on critical pedagogy and narrative. Through the actualization of Freire's theories for emancipatory and liberatory education, the at risk learners in The Alternative School Program can change their educational experience. In a radical and profound addition, the use of narrative presents the means for the at risk learner to communicate this

journey. Experimenting with the dialogical method, generative theme work, and problem posing pedagogical tools entices the at risk learner to seek out power in their inquiry of knowledge. The rise of their critical consciousness can lead to conscientization and create agents for social change through the express use of writing and reflection. Postman (1996) says that narrative is the great story of one's existence that confirms one's existence in the great community of the world. The at risk learner uses all that Freire (2002, 30th anniversary edition) stands for and combines with the instrument of Postman's (1996) narrative to recreate their educational experience and subsequently the rest of their life.

Before they have spent any time in an alternative school program, many at risk learners will tell you they foresee their future as dark and without happiness. In five years, they cannot imagine where they will be and some even refer to their lives as over, or in jail. The educational game has eluded them. They have tried to play only to be told that their methods were not acceptable to the situations in which they found themselves. Their understanding of the rules became distorted by the ever-changing standard set for them by the people at the helm of the system. The inequality of education has excluded the at risk learner because of the meritocratic standards set for the entry into higher learning. The at risk learner who is scarred by the system or family trauma or emotional or physiological setbacks, experiences obstacles that disallow them the chance to follow the established steps to educational accomplishment.

The gifts of meritocracy are two-fold, the more you advance and work in the educational system, the more you advance in the social status group's ranking. When the at risk student enters high school they are gradually sidelined from this aspect of the game as they do not have the knowledge

necessary to merit entry into the hierarchy. The behavioural and academic expectation of students by teachers perpetuates this theory and backs up the notion of social stratification amongst learners. Advancement via academic proficiency is the basis of the system that is in place in our society today. It does however, take into account the varied needs or learning styles of the at risk children entering this journey. It states that it does place a great deal of importance on diversity and it is readily acceptable to a different kind of learner. Unfortunately, by the time a student is in the secondary part of this journey, all acceptance of diverse learning styles are replaced with the standardized curriculum objectives and “one size fits all” curriculum.

The school system is making strides to try and recover the losses of over 137,000 youths who drop out of school every year in Canada and cost the government over \$ 4 billion a year in welfare expenditures (Statscan, 2001). Through the implementation of special needs services the school boards are attempting, through diagnosis and intervention, to help the at risk learner find their own place within the regular schools that exist. Band-aid solutions such as Individualized Educational Programs have proven to be insufficient for the at risk learner as the system lacks the personnel necessary to diagnose, plan, and track the progress of the at risk learner in the large regular high school system. With the numbers of at risk learners on the rise, this study shows that alternative settings are necessary to provide the at risk learner with a safe learning environment in order to rediscover their ability to learn.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE

In this practice of alternative education, both Freire (2002, 30th anniversary edition) and Postman (1996) will be put to work as the collaboration and negotiation process creates the narrative for each learner in each new school year. With great freedom comes great responsibility and the learners who were previously at risk, will become risk takers in this transformed environment. “Social transformation is not merely the result of consciousness. Emancipation involves acts of individuals and collective resistance” (Boyce, 1996, p.3). The situation of alternative environment on the fringe of the regular system works to assist its creation of the new narrative for the at risk learner. The group’s common experience of being labeled as at risk learners unifies them in their attempt at social change. Without the necessary tools of reflection, writing, and sense of self through narrative, the learners would become lost in their quest for identity and consciousness with no voice with which to express their realizations. Therefore, in conclusion, it is the praxis of both theories, when applied simultaneously, that create the social transformation of liberatory education for the at risk learner.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND FURTHER STUDY

With the invention of alternative education by Dr. Gary Phillips (1993) in Seattle, Oregon in the 1960’s, schools continent wide are sometimes successful in implementing separate programs for the care and instruction of at risk youth. The enormous time commitment that this type of schooling demands,

creates a challenging job market where it is difficult to find able and willing participants for teaching positions.

School boards are becoming less able to allow teachers, whose beliefs in alternative styles of education propel them to perform this way, because the use of limited resources decreases. The funds available to the individual schools to create these settings within regular high schools is a victim of the new budgetary constraints of many boards' deficit reduction plans and cost cutting measures. The higher cost of alternative settings because of smaller student to teacher ratio, are tolerated for now, but not valued, as they should. They are an innovative and successful way to reach the at risk learner and the most viable suggestion for improvement would be to allocate sufficient funds to these types of programs as a means of prevention for the future burden of the welfare system. An investment in these programs would have incredible payoff results in a short time with some long term projections and planning.

Running an alternative program for 72 students on a shoestring budget of \$1000.00 per year is impossible and only puts further strain on the already overburdened staff to incorporate fundraising into the curriculum as a means for survival. The parents are now being charged a fee for entry into these programs, which negates the notion of free education for all under the education act. The socioeconomic situation of many at risk learners restricts them access to these programs as they cannot afford the fee for entry and once more become marginalized because of their at risk situations. The case study school never refuses anyone based on their financial situation, further burdening the budgetary constraints to the bare bones of existence.

The main mission of the education act and the new policy on special needs focuses on early intervention and prevention programs. Presenting the statistical and financial ramifications of the at risk population out there, without high school diplomas using welfare as a means for survival, will most assuredly convince the budgeters in government that a reallocation of funds will transform the entire system from within in a matter of five years. The financial burden on education through cuts to government spending is simply an atrocious mismanagement and lack of vision into the future on the part of the government.

The other suggestion for further study into the reality of alternative education for at risk learners is that of teacher training. The scores of students who are labeled at risk now in the system are entering classrooms where teachers have had little or no exposure to the concept of at risk behaviour and lack the experience and even the knowledge to understand how to help these types of learners to function successfully. It is imperative that the university teacher training programs become partners with alternative settings, use valuable classroom time with student teachers, and allow them to observe and investigate the school environment where at risk learners are flourishing. Bringing in student teachers to the alternative setting and creating a dialogue where the students can voice what went wrong for them in the system is a wonderful exchange for the at risk learner in their concientizing journey and a valuable learning experience for the teacher in training.

The Alternative School Program has been heavily involved with the mentoring and training of teachers through the student teacher work experience offered at the universities. Taking on student teachers each year has

proved to be a positive way of creating an awareness of the needs of the at risk learner. An enriching experience for a recent student teacher to The Alternative School Program involved the students instructing her through a workshop about how to “handle” their type of learner. The dialogical and humorous gift that those learners gave each other could very well transform the system faster than any radical change in policy would effect. The staff of The Alternative School Program regularly partakes in the cooperating teacher seminars and the head teacher is part of the mentoring team of the school board. Hosting the training session for the associate teachers and their student teachers prior to the placement has proved to be a valuable tool in the training and retention of alternative staff members.

The suggestion is the implementation of a training course for teachers in their undergraduate program at university. The course would focus on the plight of at risk learners. It would show through at risk learner guest speakers and alternative setting visits how the at risk learner’s journey appears after they leave the elementary school system and land in the large comprehensive high school. This is an essential suggestion for improvement to the at risk learner’s experience as the teachers entering the system will become more aware and in tune with the struggles of the students they will meet in their career as educators. This might seem far from direct contact improvement to the actual alternative and/or regular programs, but will actually take on the school system from within and help foster change and equality in education.

If this approach were prioritized at the university level, the alternative system should become obsolete as a fringe program as it gains momentum and is adopted as the mainstream ideology for learning. This can only happen if

teachers enter the job market sensitized to the whole concept of at risk learners, the school's role in their creation, and the possibilities for improvement as suggested from alternative settings and their growing numbers. The grassroots of alternative organizations where the value of the learner is put before policy and standardization of class roles can work to slowly infiltrate the system and later the perceptions of the community. When the education system gives up the notion that they are in the business of fixing children, then letting go of conformity will create a place for diversity and acceptance will grow.

Finally, the existence of alternative programs has grown out of the oppressive experience of at risk learners in the present, traditional education system. The need for change and the critical consciousness that has emerged through alternative programs benefits of this style of learning as students are redirected in their path to emancipation. Thomas Jefferson would disapprove of the individualized attention and personal story that is created from this type of schooling as it would not fit into his industrialized view of the future. Thankfully, in this post industrial time, alternative schooling will create the agents for social change that will hopefully overpower the need for standardization in our increasingly pluralistic and diverse world.

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APPENDIX A:

PROTOCOL OF RULES FOR THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM

- 1. No Drugs**
- 2. No Alcohol**
- 3. No Unexplained Absences**
- 4. No Lying**

1. No Drugs

This rule includes the following components:

- Students are not allowed to consume illegal drugs before, during or after school on school property.**
- Students are not allowed to sell, buy, or possess illegal drugs of any kind on school property.**

Procedure:

If we suspect a student to be involved in violation of this rule the following course of action is taken.

- 1. Student is isolated from the rest of the group.**
- 2. Teachers will confer and decide the line of questioning appropriate to the situation.**
- 3. The student is questioned.**
- 4. If just cause and reasonable suspicion is found, the student and/or his/her locker and possessions are searched.**
- 5. Parents and Administration are notified of the situation.**
- 6. Police are called if necessary.**
- 7. The student's position in the Alternative School Program is re-evaluated. The student may be asked to leave the Alternative School Program and is referred back to the high school for placement.**

N.B. If a student is under the influence of an illegal substance or in possession of any illegal substance, they will automatically be asked to leave the Alternative School Program.

2. No Alcohol

This rule includes the following components:

- Students are not allowed to consume Alcohol before, during, or after school on school property.**
- Students are not allowed to sell, buy or possess Alcohol of any kind on school property.**

Procedure:

If we suspect a student to be in violation of this rule the following course of action is taken.

- 1. Student is isolated from the rest of the group.**
- 2. Teachers will confer and decide the line of questioning appropriate to the situation.**
- 3. The student is questioned**

4. If just cause and reasonable suspicion is found, the student and/or his/her locker and possessions are searched.
5. Parents and Administration are notified of the situation
6. Police are called if necessary
7. The student's position in the Alternative School Program is re-evaluated. The student maybe asked to leave the Alternative School Program and is referred back to the high school for placement.

N.B If a student is under the influence of Alcohol or in possession of any Alcohol, they will automatically be asked to leave the Alternative School Program.

3. No Unexplained Absences

This rule includes the following components:

According to the standard protocol of this and Alternative Settings, and unexplained absences is defined as such:

An unexplained absence is when a student does not inform the teacher of his/her whereabouts between the hours of 7:30am and 2:25pm. Any and all situations whereby the student makes contact with their teacher is considered an explained absence and is dealt with accordingly.

Appropriate Absences include:

- Medical reason with a doctor's note
- Death of a family member
- Crisis situation determined as such by the discretion of the teacher, social worker, psychologist and/or parents.
- Predetermined absence with the agreement of teacher.

Procedure when the student is not present and has not called:

1. When a student calls they must do so prior to 7:45am and speak to a staff member not another student.
2. Teacher will attempt to contact student throughout the day.
3. Parents and/or guardians are notified of student's absence.
 - If contact is made, student will be responsible to make-up the time and assignments with their teacher. A meeting with parents is arranged to discuss the situation.
 - If contact is not made at any time during the day, the conclusion is made that it is a situation of unexplained absence. The student is asked to leave the Alternative School Program and is referred back to the high school.

4. No Lying

This rule includes the following components:

A student is held responsible for telling the truth in all situations. As protocol for the Alternative School Program, any lying which directly affects the enforcement of the above mentioned rules can lead to a student being asked to leave the Alternative School Program.

Procedure when student is found to be lying:

1. The teacher and student will arrange a meeting to discuss the situation.
2. Parents and/or guardians will be involved if necessary.

If the student and teacher solve the situation through discussion it is followed through internally.

If the situation is determined to be a confirmed lying situation, the student is then re-evaluated and may be asked to leave the Alternative School Program.

If a student is found in violation of any of the 4 rules, the student will be dealt with on an individual basis and may be asked to leave the Alternative School Program for the remainder of the year.

APPENDIX B:
ENTRY PROCEDURE AND CRITERIA SHEET FOR REFERRAL TO THE
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM

Procedure for entry in the program

1. Teachers and school administration refer students to the program.
2. Alternative team of Teachers meet with the Vice principal to discuss applications
3. Consultation is done with parent or guardian
4. Interview of student by teachers
5. 2nd and 3rd interview if required
6. Selection of students by Alternative Staff
7. Parent information night

There is a \$75 student fee charged in the program above regular board wide user fees that is requested at the parent information night in June.

Referral Sheet

Referral Sheet for New Students

Re: The Alternative School Program

Name of Student: _____ **Present Grade:** _____

Please use the following criteria in order to guide you in your suggestions for candidates for next year. Please place a check in front of the comment or comments that best describes this student.

- ___ Presently in grade 7,8,9,10 or 11
- ___ Poor academic performance; particularly in core subjects
- ___ Has tendencies to be confrontational with authority
- ___ Student is underachieving; not working to potential
- ___ Student experiencing social problems i.e. - not functioning well in regular class setting
- ___ Frequent unauthorized absences (skips at least one of your classes per week)
- ___ Student exhibiting behavior generally of a serious nature: delinquent
- ___ Student at risk to drop out

- ___ Student is experiencing personal problems which affect ability to function
- ___ Student would thrive on more personal attention and who are not receiving same at home
- ___ Student would function better in small group setting with closer supervision and monitoring
- ___ Above average intelligence
- ___ Difficult to motivate
- ___ Introverted
- ___ Student seems to have trouble grasping math concepts

- Students do not have to meet all criteria to be considered for The Alternative School Program

Comments:

Your Name: _____

Thank you for your cooperation,

Bonnie Mitchell
Head Teacher - Directions