

Understanding the Adult Learner
Life Story Research and the Adult Secondary Student Experience

Madeleine Zehavi

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Art Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Art Education) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2013

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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By: Madeleine Zehavi

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Master of Arts (Art Education)

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

Lorrie Blair Chair

David Pariser Examiner

Linda Szabad-Smyth Examiner

Lorrie Blair Supervisor

Approved by Kathleen Vaughan
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

 2013

Catherine Wild
Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a qualitative study that uses life story research methods and grounded theory to investigate the perceptions of three adult high school students on their lives, with particular focus on family, community, and childhood and adolescent educational experiences. The participants were also interviewed about their interactions with and interests in art and art education. The study was conducted over a period of one month, during which time each participant was interviewed once for approximately two hours. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the data was collected and analyzed as per the grounded theory method. The emerging themes which highlighted factors affecting participant academic success and school involvement at the adolescent high school level were: familial/home stability, guidance, stimulation and teaching practices, and stigmatization with regards to both race and teen pregnancy.

Keywords: Art Education, Adult Education, At-risk youth, Drop-out, High school, Life Story research, Student-directed teaching, Culturally relevant pedagogy, Teaching practices, Race, Teen Pregnancy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with immeasurable gratitude that I acknowledge those individuals who helped make this thesis possible.

First, and foremost, I am tremendously indebted to my thesis supervisor, Lorrie Blair, whose tireless dedication to helping me make this project a reality was truly phenomenal. Without her support, guidance, resourcefulness, and incomparable accessibility, I would have never accomplished the completion of this text within such a short period of time, and the process would have not only been more difficult, but undoubtedly much less enjoyable. Many thanks are also extended to the other members of my thesis committee, David Pariser and Linda Szabad-Smyth, who believed in my work, and whose knowledge and suggestions helped me to improve and better focus my inquiry.

Thanks are also extended to my friends and colleagues, whose assistance was an asset to my work: Jen Wicks, for the crash course in thesis-writing, Mark Bourrie for his copyediting suggestions, Dana Schnitzer for the helpful discussion (and the workouts), and Makeda, Mikaella, Lizzy, and Lloydksi for checking in to make sure I was still alive.

Finally, I am grateful for the help given to me by my family: Benjamin, Christian, and in particular Miriam, my mother, without whom this endeavor would have been entirely impossible, and Keith, for taking care of our home and our daughter so that I could write, for the no-nonsense common sense, and for being a most patient listener. Thank you.

DEDICATION

This text is dedicated to my mother, Miriam, whose support, generosity of time, and unparalleled assistance made everything possible, and without whom I would have never accomplished the completion of this text.

I also dedicate this work to Keith, for staying the course even when it was (and sometimes still is) unbearable – I am so very proud of you, and to my grandparents: my *savta*, Erna for setting the first example of high standards in education, and my *saba*, Samuel, who taught me the power and importance of life history. I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Working full time as a teacher in the adult education sector of the English Montreal School Board, I am faced daily with issues of how to reach my students more effectively and improve my teaching practice to better suit their needs. These issues – and their needs – are as diverse as my students themselves, but some major concerns I have located are my students’ struggle to stay engaged with schoolwork, develop an enthusiastic and balanced work ethic and to remain (or become, in some cases) positive and confident about the school experience in general. Working at an inner-city school in the Southwest area of Montreal – one of the lowest income sectors of the city – means that the majority of my students are low-income adults, aged approximately 18 to 40, returning to school after a considerable hiatus from learning. Although technically an adult education center, the school services students aged 16 and up, and many of the younger students are “at-risk”¹ youth and “at-risk” young adults who are recent exiles from the youth sector schools; students who have been expelled or politely removed for re-occurring disciplinary issues and truancy. A number of the school’s students are being followed by social services, and have been either in youth detention or prison, or both. Many are on social assistance and/or work while in school. Many more are parents – adding considerable pressure and making their scholastic success more critical and their time more limited.

¹ “At-risk” is defined as students who “present certain vulnerability factors that may affect their learning or behavior, especially by falling behind academically or socially, unless there is timely intervention” (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport [MELS], 2007). Vulnerability factors can be include but are not limited to: socioeconomic issues, familial problems or problems in the home, drug and alcohol abuse, and delinquency, for example.

As an English teacher with a formal fine arts background and many years of experience working in both an art education context with at-risk youth, I have been exploring various ways to better engage my adult students through the visual arts and music, and have long wondered how the implementation of an arts element to the core academic curriculum might not only improve my students' engagement, but also improve their basic literacy skills and English language proficiency. In an endeavor to contribute to the improvement of the adult secondary curriculum, and to ameliorate my own practices as a teacher in order to better serve the needs of my students, I am interested in the following questions:

(a) How do selected adult learners students coming from youth sector schools in Montreal perceive their educational history and their current adult education experience, and (b) what – if any – are their attitudes and responses to art, art education, and the implementation of an arts-based program to the core academic curriculum?

It is important to note that a significant segment of the adult secondary student population is comprised of immigrants whose secondary and post-secondary schooling is not recognized in Quebec. These students are often studying in order to work in an already chosen field, and, in general, do not struggle with the same problems as adult students born and/or raised in Montreal, who have experienced K-12 (or more precisely – in Quebec – K-11) schooling in local youth sector schools. In addition, the various K-12 experiences (or the equivalents) represented among immigrant students are too disparate

to control for commonality, and suggestions one might possibly make to improve those experiences based on the results and revelations of a study such as this would be overwhelmingly moot. For these reasons, the immigrant adult student population was not the target demographic for this study.

Life story interviews are the best research method for this project. We cannot know what direction we are going in without having solid knowledge of where we come from. It is therefore, in my opinion, best to situate the students in the socioeconomic, cultural, and historical context in which they see themselves in order to understand their needs in the classroom and the greater school environs.

Literature Review

There exists a fair amount of material documenting the positive effects of art programs and art interventions on at-risk youth, both in and outside of school, and on incarcerated youth and adults. However, my search for research on arts-based programs in adult education settings similar to the environment in which I work yielded scant results. It is my opinion that a survey of research pertaining to at-risk youth, both in school and in community education settings, combined with a review of research on arts-in-corrections for youth and adults might provide a better and more thorough understanding of how such a program would potentially fare at an inner-city adult education institution.

Studies on the implementation of art programs for at-risk and/or inner city youth demographics often focus on issues of identity and perceptions of self, future-selves and community. (Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; McIntyre 2004; Packard, Ellison & Sequenzia, 2004; Wallace-DiGarbo & Hill, 2006; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009). When asked to tackle these issues through art, findings show that participants respond quite well, in some cases exceptionally so. Community based art interventions show particular promise, such as in Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins' (2003) study of the effects of art intervention on an after-school curriculum. The researchers found that given a safe space to creatively explore with various media hands-on without the risk of failure – unlike school, “where the goal is to produce the right answer” (p.431) – and the opportunity to engage with other youth in an open and tolerant environment, as well as with adults in a non-disciplinarian context, participants exhibited improved coping strategies for conflict, greater tolerance and respect, and – particularly among the girls – improved self-perception and confidence (Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003). Although respect and discipline are not generally issues one would associate with adult learners who have returned to education on their own, in my experience, they are almost as pertinent as with youth students. Of course dealing with questionable behavior from adults as a teacher requires a different approach.

Packard, Ellison and Sequenzia (2004) concluded from their photo voice research with adolescent girls that image making is an effective means of gaining insight into adolescent youth, engaging participants in self-examination, and self-expression. These findings are very similar to those of Wallace-DiGarbo and Hill (2006), who conducted a

short-term art intervention in a community setting with 12 at-risk middle school students. Using qualitative and quantitative research methods, including two 225-item questionnaires given to the participants both during the program and after it ended, the study found favorable results – feelings of self-improvement, increased self-confidence and a sense of satisfaction in seeing their work culminate in a mural for the community to enjoy – especially among those youth identified by the researchers as most at-risk, and even in the follow-up survey six months later. In McIntyre (2000), researchers found that by allowing participants to be narrators of their experience(s) and actively engaged in examining and re-narrating their possible futures, a greater understanding of the inner-city experience was gained, which could in turn be considered more thoroughly and positively utilized by school personnel, social workers and future educators.

In the above studies, the art programs and interventions were based around the visual arts, but I have found, as a teacher, that drama and music are also effective tools for drawing out students who lack confidence, and these approaches can help encourage creative self-expression, subjective and reflective interpretation, and the telling of one's own narrative. In Halverson's commentary (2010) on the dramaturgical² process, she posits that certain activities (specifically a self-expressive engagement with art) help to promote positive identity development and perceptions for future selves, in particular for youth coming from marginalized populations. Similar to the studies above, Halverson argues that the dramaturgical process allows urban youth the opportunity to construct and narrate positive identities about themselves and for themselves, and therefore "has the potential

² The idea that human action is dependent on time, place and audience.

to be an especially effective” (p.14) means of empowerment within the learning environment.

In my experience as a teacher, I have often noted how lower-income students are left behind as new technologies so quickly become obsolete. Even if they have the means to acquire and/or gain access to these technologies, these students are usually relegated to the role of consumer, and given few opportunities for creative production of their own. As Peppler and Kafai (2007) state: “new directions on media education are particularly important for urban youth (who) are often seen as pushing new adaptations and transformations of media but also as standing on the sidelines of technology developments and productions” (p.2). Their research is based on an ethnographic case study of three students who participated in an informal workshop on media production using Scratch, a multi-media programming environment. The initiative saw the participants successfully produce video games and an animated music video using digital imaging and photography. Urban youth, such as those I work with, often have limited access to new technologies, and endeavors in creative media education can be seen as a pathway for them to not just participate in the consumption of new media but also to produce and author their own designs, re-determining whose voices are included and excluded in the discussion.

With regards to literacy, there is considerable evidence that shows a link between art and writing. In a high school setting, teacher-researchers Zenkov and Harman (2009) found that by engaging students in a photo voice project they were able to get them to write

more, and particularly, write more about themselves. Participants were asked to address questions pertaining to their school experience and the factors that might impede their scholastic success. By creating a student-centered discussion through photography and giving participants a means to *see* the answers to the questions the project asked of them, researchers found a wealth of information about the students' school experiences and noted a visible increase in student engagement with literacy and writing.

Given that many of the adult students I work with were incarcerated prior to returning to school, and in some cases, still find themselves bouncing in and out of jail during their studies, I think it is relevant to examine similar research that has been done with incarcerated youth and young adults. In Lear (2010), an art program was implemented in two of three maximum-security housing unit high schools in an American youth detention center. Lear asks: “(could) instruction in visual art strengthen cognitive abilities as they are applied to complex reading comprehension skills?” (p.26). Her study employed both quantitative data – pre-program and post-program literacy test scores – and qualitative research, which were Lear’s own observations. While various factors can – and should be – accounted for when examining the results of Lear’s research, the overall findings were decidedly in favor of art education, with the participants of the two units using visual arts in the literacy curriculum showing, on average, more than twice the growth than the (one) unit that did not utilize visual arts – specifically with regards to the literacy skills measured by the standardized pre and post tests conducted. Furthermore, the two art education units’ participants exhibited greater self-control, positive self-perception and an undeniable improvement in their artistic abilities – observable in the

sample artwork of Lear's study. Some participants showed improvements in literacy as remarkable as seven grade levels. In Jacobs (2007), qualitative findings indicate a similarly positive outcome. Jacobs states, "early reading and learning failures are precursors to unemployment, crime, drug addiction, homelessness and prison sentences" (p.112). She also identifies the many areas in which K-12 boys not only learn differently from girls, but at severely different rates, one of the reasons attributed to the growing majority of female college and university students. Her use of drawing responses and inquiries into English literature at a boys' youth correction facility school produced favorable results, even though the students were initially reluctant to participate. In the end, however, Jacobs found that the artistic process gave participants an opportunity to focus, tell their own stories, and reflect on and respond to the literature in a "safe" environment, without fear of producing a "wrong" answer. Given the chance to discuss the novels in relation to their art production and personal experience, many of the participants' engagement with the literature increased exponentially, and their overall attitude towards literature and school improved.

Finally, although there would appear to be scant published research in the specific area of interest to me – that is, the effect of art education on adult learners who have returned to high school to complete their secondary education – one study showed positive results when incorporating museum visits into an adult literacy curriculum. Coman (2004) comments that "literature profiling adults learners with literacy difficulties tends to frame them as fearing being wrong or appearing stupid when they are reading and so surely they would feel excluded from an exclusive institution such as an art museum" (p.76). It

should be noted that as per my experience as an English teacher, the above generalization can be considered as indeed based on, at least *some*, fact – many of my own students are reluctant to risk answering a question without being certain that they possess the correct answer first, are apprehensive entering a dialogue related to a text or an issue about which they feel they possess limited knowledge, and often avoid reading out loud in front of the class for fear of encountering an unfamiliar word. The group in Coman’s study, however, did not appear to be intimidated by the museum visits or the discussions about art that ensued – on the contrary, they were “eager to explore different learning opportunities” (p.75) and commented on an awareness that they possessed “heightened visual skills” which they “attributed ... to their need to use alternative interpretive ‘tools and methods’ to address daily challenges” (p.76). The other aspect of this study that is relevant to my own research is the connection between reading text and “reading” art, and how developing visual literacy skills can enhance and possibly improve textual literacy. Coman discusses the distinct skills necessary in the two types of literacy. Although she perceives them as requiring a separate and very disparate skill set – one “linear, sequential and deliberate” the other “arbitrary and often subconscious” (p.76), Coman connects the two by observing that “object-based learning, discipline-based art education, and visual thinking strategies are the methods that allow the practice of visual communication skills. These skills facilitate language development and critical thinking by developing identifying, observing, describing, questioning, and classifying skills, all key ingredients for reading comprehension” (p.77). These observations are of considerable value to any researcher who seeks to explore how art education might affect,

enhance, and possibly improve both an adult learner's perception of their school experience and level of literacy.

Method

My research method for this study is life story interviews, informed by life history research. Life history is a participant-oriented research method with roots in sociology that seeks to reveal how one's life story is embedded within and influenced by "a wider social and historical context" (Breen, 2009, p.7).

Although life history research is based primarily on participant interviews guided by the researcher(s), the participant has ultimate control over what they choose to share. The interviews are generally conversational and open, and the researcher's role is to induce (and carefully avoid constructing) a narrative through select questions. The researcher is responsible for interpreting and presenting the research findings, however, it is standard practice to invite the participant to review and approve all final material. For these reasons, the findings presented in a life history research project can, to a large extent, be seen as a co-creation of the researcher and participant (Breen, 2009).

There are of course some limitations to the life story research method, beginning with the question of what is being left out when a person recounts their life story. There are certainly parts of one's life that will either be left unmentioned during

the interview process, or perhaps even forgotten. Also, as per the notion of a co-creation mentioned in the above paragraph, how much of the research is actually being inadvertently *created* by the participant/researcher and how much is actual fact? Any re-telling of history can not be considered entirely fact, being as it is a subjective recounting of events, perceptions, feelings, etc., but what exactly are the acceptable perimeters and where does subjectivity cross into creation and/or fiction? Another concern is that not all memories are good, and "not everyone wants to remember" (Breen, 2009, p.23). By the same token, the interview process can be, but is not automatically, an empowering and/or affirming experience for the participants, and therefore it is necessary to clearly endow the participants with the power to end the interview at any time, should it become uncomfortable for them. Finally, there exists the question of "who owns the data" (Breen, 2009, p.23), participant or researcher, and the delicate task on the part of the researcher in treating the data with respect and discretion.

Cole and Knowles (2001) state that life history research is an effective method for "honoring the individuality and complexity of individuals' experiences" (p.20) and that "life history research draws on individuals' experiences to make broader contextual meaning" (p.20). Breen (2009) states, "biographical methods enable us to study social reality as it is (constantly) re-interpreted by social actors" (p.24) and that focusing on "the subjective experience of the participant can contribute to more sensitive policies of care and support (p.24). It is these strengths that have led me to consider life story, informed by life history research, the most suitable

research method for my thesis, as well as for my teaching practice. While many teachers often resist meaningful understanding of their students, rather, preferring a one-size-fits-all method of instruction, the contextual knowledge potentially gained by interviewing even a small group of students about their lives and, in particular, their lifelong relationships with learning, may serve to help even the most detached of teachers consider new methods of delivery, and new approaches to both curriculum development and teacher-student relationships. “Significant historical elements, when connected, help give meaning to the present” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p.20); there are few better ways to understand where a student is “at” than by understanding where they have come from. In this vein, life history research has been used in education as a “new way of knowing and teaching” (Atkinson, 2002, p.125), and also increasingly with success in other academic disciplines such as (but not limited to) psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Atkinson, 2002) – fields that, I would argue, are intrinsically linked to education and come part and parcel with a teacher’s role and responsibilities.

I think it is imperative to understand my students as they see themselves and as they see their own life experiences in relation to education and art. Certainly as educators we learn much from our students about how to become more effective and better teachers when we take the time to gain knowledge and understanding of students’ lives before and beyond the classroom.

Procedure

Three participants were required for this research. The participants were current or former secondary adult education students who had done all of their schooling in Montreal. All three participants were over the age of 25, which was preferable for this research in that their age allowed for a significant enough amount of time to have passed (approximately 10 years) since they abandoned their secondary schooling as youths.

Participants were recruited by asking acquaintances whom I know as adult education high school students, and who best fit the above criteria, if they would like to be interviewed about their life story and educational experiences as part of a master's thesis study. I had no difficulty in recruiting enthusiastic participants for this research, with the exception of one prospective participant who, after failing to meet with me at the arranged time, had to be replaced by another.

A two-hour interview was conducted with each participant. The interviews took place during the month of June 2013 and all three participants consented to having their interviews audio recorded. Two of the three interviews were conducted at participants' homes, as per their wishes; the other was held at a café.

The interviews were flexible and conversational in structure and very loosely based on a series of questions which pertained to various issues including, but not limited to: participants' family backgrounds, early childhood and adolescence, experiences in youth sector schools, perceptions of their leaving school, life experiences outside of school

which informed and/or coincided with these events, and their return to education and present perceptions of themselves as students as well as their perceptions of adult education. I also asked them about their relationships to art and their experiences with art education and art making, and finally, how they feel the implementation of an arts-based component to their core courses might affect their educational experience.

Like Atkinson (2002), I believe “the person telling the life story should always have the last word in how his or her story is presented in written form before it gets passed on to others or is published” (p.131); therefore participants were invited to review transcripts prior to the production of the final draft. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and a consent form was provided. They were also notified of their right to suspend the interview and/or discontinue at any time. Participants’ names and the names of the schools mentioned during the interviews were changed to preserve anonymity.

Data

All three participants consented to having their interviews recorded. Because it is impossible to foresee what themes will emerge when doing life story research, Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) was used to facilitate the post-interview introduction of theme-related literature and provide the flexibility needed to ensure an “open-ended, in-depth exploration” (Charmaz, 2006, p.4) of the data. Extensive notes based on the interview recordings were taken, and were coded for emerging themes, in order to better “pinpoint

and develop the most salient categories in (what were) large batches of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p.46) and prepare the coded segments per participant for comparison with other data segments. Memos were then used to develop “preliminary analytic notes” (Charmaz, 2006, p.3) and make comparisons and connections between participants and their stories.

The collected data in this text is presented in three chapters, one per participant, which are each divided into three segments: life story, analysis, and reflection. The final chapter, *Final Considerations*, reflects on the thesis questions individually, and the implications of the study’s results on art education. The text concludes with a final reflection.

Significance

My goal in this study is twofold: first, I would like to improve my own practice as a teacher so that I can motivate and engage my students more with the coursework, effectively becoming a better educator and helping to enhance their experience in education – a feat that would not only serve my students well but, in my estimation, my students’ children also. Secondly, I feel that any gained understanding of the adult student experience, both in general and with regards to art education in particular, would benefit all students and teachers alike, as well as those educators and administrators responsible for developing adult-oriented curricula and course materials.

I believe that any understanding gained by educators about the adult learner experience, especially when that learner can be considered at-risk or previously at-risk, is valuable. Giving students the opportunity to tell their own stories, void of judgment and without the context of grades, can help teachers and administrators better tailor their teaching practices and curricula to the needs of this particular clientele. I should mention that, although my role as a teacher definitely informs the way students relate to me, I generally have a very good rapport with my pupils, which is largely based on mutual understanding. My own life experiences are not so different from theirs; however whereas events in their lives may have led them to stray from education, in my case, the world of school and learning – and particularly art and literature – was an escape. I therefore seek to gain knowledge from my participants about how the system has failed them, where they themselves found their escape or sense of validation, which aspects of education appeal(ed) to them, and what now brings them back to learning. I feel this information is critical in my efforts to better my own teaching practice, and that it might also assist other educators endeavoring to make their teaching methods more effective – hopefully resulting in a more positive, engaging, relevant, safe, and self-affirming learning experience for adult students.

CHAPTER TWO

Robbie

My interview with Robbie took place on a mid-spring Tuesday, in the late afternoon. He lives close to me and I wanted to walk over to get the exercise, but knowing that I might be called home in a rush to deal with the baby, I decided to drive. I pulled up, grateful for a parking spot on the densely populated street. Robbie lives on one of the Avenues, a set of six streets in the middle of Verdun, notorious for their long stretches of tall, attached triplexes, long staircases, and large porches – essentially sets of giant mismatched row housing taking up about 18 square blocks of the neighborhood landscape. The Avenues, as they are known, run north–south across Verdun from the Lachine Canal to the St. Lawrence River, but it is the blocks between Bannantyne and Lasalle Boulevard that are most famous for their stoop culture, police presence, and the occasional house fire. Growing up in Verdun, my mother always hated the Avenues and their attached housing. In the heyday of Verdun’s 1980s arson epidemic, she would say, “If one goes up in flames, they’re all going down.” I myself grew to be bothered less by the threat of fires than the nosy neighbors, who, sitting on their porches, watch your every coming and going. When I arrive on the block I see that it is large item garbage day, and pieces of furniture litter the edges of front yards and have turned the sidewalk into an obstacle course. The sun is yellow, and low, and many residents are arriving home from work. The street is abuzz as people stop and talk to one another, and the stoops are already alive with men and women in their house clothes and slippers, beer cans in hand, and children racing up and down the walkways in bare feet and on bicycles.

I find Robbie's address easily. His is the ground floor of three apartments. There is no stoop here. Instead, the front door is sidewalk level with a short path leading to it, and it is partially hidden from view by the second floor staircase and a large, pink bush of Wild Roses in full bloom. I ring the doorbell and am immediately answered by the sound of a small dog barking.

I met Robbie in 2011. I had gotten to know of him before he was actually a student of mine due to his very outgoing and friendly disposition, and his apparent enjoyment in saying my name with a Scottish brogue every time we passed each other in the hall. Shortly after he started at Lynvall Pierce Adult Center he was registered for my debate class. I noticed right away that he was an intelligent, articulate, opinionated, and sometimes brash individual. He was never rude, but challenged me occasionally, carefully, and for the most part seemed to keep to himself. The only time I recall seeing him socialize with other students was during breaks, when he and about ten to fifteen others would congregate by the back entrance of the school to smoke.

Robbie eventually took Secondary 5 English³ with me in the summer of 2012, and it was then that we got to know each other. He often missed class due to work, and I knew he was struggling to balance his job and school. I learned that Robbie worked for a family friend of mine at his garage when he made a comment about my car that revealed some intimate knowledge of my vehicle. It turned out that Robbie had actually been *in* my car,

³ In Quebec, the term "Secondary" is used interchangeably with "Grade" to denote the grade levels in high school. High school begins with Grade 7 and ends with Grade 11, creating five secondary levels: Secondary 1 through 5.

I discovered, and in fact had been the one to change my tires in the spring. (After his disclosure I mentally scanned my dashboard compartment for personal effects and any possibly incriminating items.) I came to be used to seeing Robbie at the garage when I stopped by for work to be done, or just to say hello. I soon also learned that Robbie was from Point St. Charles, and that we shared not just acquaintances at the garage, but also some common life experiences. Prior to scheduling my interview with Robbie, these things were all really I knew of him. So it took it me by surprise to discover that the Wild Rose bush outside his apartment door had been planted and cared for by the very same hands that I had seen so many times scrawling away in class, black with engine oil and grease, fingernails permanently encrusted with grime. He smiled proudly when I commented on the beauty of the flowers as I entered the front room of his home.

Robbie's apartment was cool and dark, considering the late afternoon sun spilling down the street. The front room, in typical Verdun style, was the front half of a double salon that had been separated to create two separate spaces. French doors closed off the other half from view but I could make out speakers and other large box-like shapes in the shadows. Two leather sofas making an unconnected L faced a large flat-screen television, and behind the television was a mantle built into the wall. On the mantle were a number of pictures and a small urn, which I later learned contained the remains of Robbie's former dog Snoopy, a Border Collie and German Shepherd mix. A small Chihuahua raced around me as I took my seat on the couch closest to the window, perpendicular to the television, and a Peach Face Love Bird flew from his perch on the doorframe and landed boldly on my shoulder as I settled in with my papers and note pad. "Don't be

scared,” said Robbie, noticing me stiffen as the tiny talons marched closer to my head, “Kiwi just likes your earrings.” I was a little overwhelmed as Brutus, Robbie’s Chihuahua, then jumped into my lap, and began to knead my thighs like a cat. Wanting the dog off me but afraid to startle the bird by moving, I stiffened even more, and Robbie, sensing my discomfort, came over to shoo the bird off and put Brutus in the other room. “Do you want something to drink?” he asked, as he led the small dog through the door. I declined, and eased back into the sofa, relieved. When Robbie returned a moment later, sans menagerie, with a Coke can in hand, we began the interview.

Robbie was born 27 years ago in Montreal, atop Mount Royal at the Royal Victoria Hospital. An only child, Robbie’s mother was 16 when she had him, and his father “not much older.” Robbie’s parents lived far from the hospital, down the tree-lined mountain and past the Lachine Canal, in Point St. Charles, one the city’s oldest and historically Irish working-class neighborhoods. Today, the 107 bus route travels from the “Royal Vic” to the “Point”, and from there to Verdun, but it was not so long ago in the history of Montreal that the grandeur of the mountain and its lush, green foliage, spotted here and there with large stone mansions, was a world away from the flat, gray and brick-colored streets of the city’s more industrial Southwest boroughs.

Robbie’s parents were not together long. Robbie’s mother, an aspiring model, was born and raised in the Point herself, and had only a third grade education. His father, originally from England, had come over with his family as a child and settled in the Southwest, where he completed high school and went on to become a mechanic. After devising a

way to build hidden compartments into the engines of cars, Robbie's father soon became affiliated with the West End Gang, the Southwest's notorious, predominantly Irish criminal organization that, for many years, had control of the docks in the Old Port of Montreal. It is said that the Irish still control most of what comes into the city via the docks, even though the bigger heads of the West End Gang are now mostly incarcerated, or have quietly fallen off the radar and moved to the suburbs of the South Shore.

Robbie describes his childhood as "unstable" and nomadic. "Raised by the streets," Robbie was "the neighborhood's kid", moving from place to place and often staying with neighbors and family other than his parents. "I bounced around a lot," says Robbie, "it was difficult. I was left to my own devices, and I grew up by myself." He resignedly stresses the young age and consequential immaturity of his mother and father, and adds with a sigh, "I've never lived in a stable house... I wasn't really cared for as a child."

Robbie's educational trajectory did not begin well. He attended four different elementary schools before he was removed altogether from public schooling and sent for behavioral testing at the Jewish General Hospital's Herzl Family Practice Centre, a facility that provides outreach services including psychological analysis, counseling, and support for children and teenagers. Deemed intelligent with no known reasons for his behavioral irregularities, Robbie explains that his behavior problems were the result of not getting any attention at home. "I wasn't a bad kid, or a bad student, I just wanted attention."

By high school the situation had worsened. 13 years old and entering secondary school in Grade 7, Robbie describes his mother, then 30, as being preoccupied with her desire to find romance and a life partner rather than with taking care of her son. His mother often went away, leaving him alone at home. On these occasions Robbie would not go to school, and his frequent truancy, as well as his apparent drug use, landed him in youth court. Still in the seventh grade, Robbie was sent to live at Dornal Campus, a branch of Batshaw Youth and Family Services in Quebec. Here Robbie managed to finish his first year of high school, but shortly after decided to run away. From 14 to 18-years-old, Robbie was considered to be Absent Without Leave, or AWOL, from the “system”, and his itinerant lifestyle was amplified as a result. Living between Cornwall, Ontario and Montreal, Robbie did not attend school during those years, and instead did what he describes as “the bouncy thing”: doing odd jobs here and there, and living day to day.

Robbie describes himself as a “loner”, saying that he “met a lot of kids in the system” but “never really had a huge circle of friends.” By his teen years he most often found himself alone, his nomadic lifestyle unsupportive of developing lasting relationships. At 14 Robbie began selling marijuana, a line of business that soon expanded to selling “hard drugs”, including pills and crack cocaine. When asked about his own drug use, Robbie admits that he “started smoking weed in Grade 6,” and by the seventh grade had begun “popping pills, like Valium” and “other stuff.” “I chose to live life rather than go to school... and when you’re young, that’s all there is really to do. ... It was just really a life of drugs. Like, a lot of drugs.” When I ask more about his criminal activity he responds by explaining his “attraction to the life,” saying, “I glorified that when I was really, really

young. I used to really dig the lifestyle and that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to rob people, I wanted to do "B and Es" (breaking and entering), I wanted to do lots of drugs. That was 'fun'."

By 18, no longer on the run as a juvenile, Robbie was back in the Point. He was still hustling, and still, in his words, "living the life." Bored, and thinking of the money he would get from Emploi Quebec to return to school, he registered for adult education at Lynvall Pierce, but dropped out soon after. "I lived pretty close to the school. I'd go home to smoke at lunch and just not bother going back."

When Robbie was 19 years old his mother decided to study to become a yoga instructor, and sensing that Robbie also needed a change, she offered to send him to trade school. Not sure what trade to pursue, Robbie decided to follow in his father's footsteps and study auto mechanics. He says of his choice, "I really actually wanted to go to Trenton (Trenton Institute, a school for sound and video production in Montreal), but it was too expensive ... The mechanic thing I did because I was like, well, I might as well do *something*." Robbie completed his auto mechanics course in less than a year and took on a stage position at the same garage where he works now. He laughs when he recalls his first months working as a mechanic, saying, "I used to go to work on speed. I used to take speed at seven o'clock in the morning, go to work and go, go, go, go, go! Sam (the owner of the garage) would be like, 'wow, you're amazing, the best worker ever!' Then one day I'd come in and I didn't take my speed ... I'd work super slow, and he'd (Sam) be like 'are you okay? What happened to you?' ... I was setting myself up where I would never

be able to succeed like that. ... So I left... well, Sam had to let me go ... and I started selling dope again.”

Robbie went back to the streets and started partying often. He spent a few more years hustling, and “had a few guns put to my head, was raided a few times.” When Robbie was 22 he was arrested. He describes the event by saying “I ended up in jail for a bit. I caught a case, and was convicted. I pled out (pleading guilty to the charges, often for a reduced sentence or parole with conditions) and after that I had a record.” When I ask Robbie what the charges were, he looks away for a moment, then looks back at me and laughs: “It doesn’t matter.”

After his release, he moved in with his (current) girlfriend and her family in Verdun. “When I moved to Verdun, even though the Point is right there, it’s so close but so far away, you’re like miles away. ... When you’re here, nobody really knows where you are. Being a neighborhood away makes a big difference.” Three days after moving, he says, he was looking through the newspaper and saw an ad for a job at a DVD distribution warehouse. “I love movies,” he says, “I was raised on movies. When I was really young, you know, my mum was young and she liked to sleep so she would just go to the video store and rent all kinds of movies. ... I was fed movies. I’ve seen everything, there’s not one movie I haven’t seen.” Robbie applied for the job and started working “pulling stickers, mounting stickers, putting together orders, and sending them out. Easy work.” But it was the company owners who had a lasting effect on Robbie. “I started working for these really cool English guys from the West Island (a collection of boroughs at the

western tip of the island of Montreal that together form a suburb of the city known as the “West Island”.) It’s a whole different game in the West Island, these guys are all cool, they all come from money ... These guys were never affiliated with anything that I was ever affiliated with... they smoked pot a little bit but that’s it.” As for his previous affiliations to “the life” Robbie says, “I was done. I said ‘that’s it’, and they (the people he was selling drugs for) said ‘okay, we can’t force you.’ I just stopped, I just left.”

Robbie credits his girlfriend for his turnaround, saying, “She really pushed me to do better. When you finally have someone you genuinely care about, you want to do right by them, so you have to step things up. ... She wasn’t a part of that life, and I didn’t want her to be.” He also acknowledges his bosses-turned-friends at the DVD distribution center for his change of perspective. “I met these guys and I said, ‘you know what, this is the life I wish I had. I wish I was you guys...’ That was really good for me; it showed me the position I wanted to be (in). ... You know, you are the company you keep, they say. So I changed.”

Robbie stayed at the DVD distribution center for three years. In that time, he also moved from his girlfriend’s parents’ home with his girlfriend to his current apartment. “For three years life was very quiet ... I was coasting at the job, it was easy work for someone with a brain” but eventually, as DVD sales plummeted, the business went under and Robbie was let go. He went on Employment Insurance and when that ran out he decided to go to school under a program offered by Emploi Quebec that helps adult students (who meet certain criteria) financially as they return to high school to complete their studies.

Twenty-five-years-old and finding himself at Lynvall Pierce for the second time, Robbie had a new outlook on school. “I felt ashamed that I didn’t have my high school. ... I feel like people look down on you ... I’m very competitive and that helped me get through it.” He also returned to work at Sam’s garage. “I had a problem with my car one day and I went to go see him. ... I gave him my number ... He was nice enough to call me back to work, especially after everything.”

At the time of our interview, Robbie was working full time at the garage, and was six credits away from completing his basic DES (Diplôme d’études secondaires). He was not registered for any classes and had no plans to complete the credits soon. He expressed his frustration to me about his situation, saying, “It’s just six credits, but for what? To take a trade after? I already have a trade. If I want to go to university and study I’ll have to do higher-level classes. So I don’t see the point right now.”

When I ask him about work at the garage he expresses equal frustration and dissatisfaction, saying that he wants to move forward “but where to go? I’m not sure what to do, and I feel like I can’t just leave Sam, especially in his situation (Sam’s young grandson is not well and as a consequence his son, who also works with him at the garage, is often away) and *especially* after he took a chance on me the second time around.” Robbie sighs, “I don’t know where I’m going, or what I’m going to do.”

In spite of the impasses he felt he had encountered with school and work, one positive development that Robbie was very happy with and felt compelled to mention to me was the fact that he had stopped smoking. “I stopped with the cigarettes eight months ago, and I’ve been off the pot (for) about three months. I feel much better. I have more clarity... So hopefully I’ll figure this stuff out soon.”

Stability

One major theme that emerged during Robbie’s interview was Stability. Over the course of our time together that afternoon, which was approximately two hours, Robbie stressed on several occasions the lack of stability, consistency, and care he experienced growing up and leading into his adult years. The words “stable” and “stability” were repeated several times throughout the interview, in such contexts as “I had no real stability,” “there was no stability,” and “I’ve never lived in a stable home,” etc.

Stability in the home, and the effects of stability, and conversely instability, on various aspects of child development have been growing areas of research over the past few decades, as family structures in North America have dramatically changed, and continue to change, from what they were only 50 years ago. Statistical information provided by the National Center for Health Statistics (Ventura, 2009, cited in Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010) in the United States affirms that 40 percent of American children

born in 2007 were born to unwed parents, compared to 18 percent in 1980 and only 5 percent in 1960.

Traditionally, the definitions of stability in the home as defined by researchers in the fields of social studies and child welfare, for example, have been almost synonymous with family structure, e.g., divorce and single parenthood, and mobility, i.e., “limited movement from home to home” (Wulczyn, Hislop, & Jones Harden, 2002, cited in Jones Harden, 2004, p.33). Of course there are several important variables that need to be considered when looking at family structure. It is important to recognize that the characteristics of individuals who become single parents, or unwed parents living together, are often, but not always (and more recently probably somewhat less so with more women choosing to have children alone) different from those of individuals who marry first, and then have children (Waldfogel et al., 2010). The parents in family structures typically considered less stable, such as single parent families and unwed, cohabitating partners, also known as common-law or de facto spouses (whether one, or both adults are biological parents to the child/children in the home) often “tend to be younger, less educated than those in married-couple families, and they may also differ in ways that cannot be readily observed” (Waldfogel et al., 2010, p.89). For the purposes of my own research, I find the traditional definitions of family stability outdated and simplistic, and problematic in their nuances, as mentioned above. Therefore, a more qualitative understanding of stability, one that regards family structure and mobility as two factors among many, is used here. A research review on at-risk and foster children conducted by Brenda Jones Harden (2004), associate professor at the Institute for Child

Study at the University of Maryland, provides a far more holistic definition. “Children who experience family stability have caregivers who remain constant, consistent and connected to them over time; caregivers who are mentally healthy and engage in appropriate parenting practices; a cohesive, supportive and flexible family system; and a nurturing and stimulating home environment” (p. 33).

If these factors are the benchmarks of family stability, then Robbie’s sense of having grown up in an unstable home environment is astutely correct. Robbie’s single parent family structure, the youth and tenuous financial situation of both his parents, the inconsistency of his living situation, the absence of his father and at times also his mother, and the lack of consistent parental attention, guidance, and nurturing put him at a major disadvantage from the start.

During his interview, Robbie repeatedly attributes his troublesome, attention-seeking behavior at school, particularly during his primary years, to his lack of stability and attention at home. He states that he liked to go to school to “socialize,” because he was most often left alone, especially when at home. “Learning-wise, I didn’t have a problem,” says Robbie, “it was just discipline, I was just disruptive, I was *constantly* disruptive ... I think I needed the extra attention, I don’t think my mother was capable of giving me that attention.” He says he was knowingly an unruly student,

“I was manipulative. I learned that from my mother. ... I knew how to push people’s buttons, pull people’s strings. I knew *how* to be disruptive. I wasn’t just screaming or talking in the back of the class, I

knew how to get under (a teacher's) skin. ... You go to school to get attention. Good attention, bad attention, doesn't matter... negative attention (puts you) more in the spotlight. Good attention just gets you a pat on the head, that's it, *and* you gotta keep working for it. It's tough. (laughs)"

Robbie's behavior did not win him any lasting friendships, or the favor of his teachers, however. Instead, Robbie was expelled for the first time in the second grade, and ended up attending four different elementary schools over the course of six years, a trajectory that mirrored his itinerant lifestyle at home and his difficulty maintaining long-term relationships. "Nobody wanted to deal with me," he says. "Nobody took the time."

Although probably based on a combination of self-awareness and common sense, Robbie's understanding of the causes of his behavior is well supported by social and child studies research. According to Jones Harden's findings, "children reared in stable environments are more likely to have positive relationships with peers and more pro-social skills. They are also less likely to have behavioral problems and to be diagnosed with mental illness" (Ladd & Pettit, 2002, cited in Jones Harden, 2004, p.33). From an academic standpoint, Jones Harden states "children with stable relationships with consistent caregivers perform better academically and on achievement tasks and are less likely to repeat a grade or drop out of school" (Epstein, 1991, cited in Jones Harden, 2004, p.33). During the primary years, says Jones Harden, "research has documented that consistent and positive caregiving is related to academic achievement, relationships with

teachers, and engagement in the school ... and is also implicated in children's capacity to comply with rules and behave appropriately in the absence of an adult" (p.35). Further, at the high school level, when "adolescents are occupied with forging an identity, separating from their family systems, and planning for the future," (p.35), Jones Harden states "these developmental tasks are best accomplished when children have had solid relationships with caregivers who have balanced their adolescents' needs for separation with their need to rely on their caregivers for concrete and emotional support" (p.35). Finally, there is also evidence "that risky behaviors prevalent during adolescence are less likely among adolescents who have long-term, nurturing, minimally conflictual relationships with their caregivers" (p.35).

Robbie's sense of what he had been missing growing up was amplified when he started working at the DVD distribution center in the West Island. Speaking about his bosses, "a few cool guys from the West Island," he says, he felt theirs was the kind of life he wished he had had. "I wish I grew up with two-car garages, I wish I had nice parents at home, nice *old* parents that loved me and took care of me and gave me everything."

According to Jones Harden's survey of research, more than three-quarters of children who are subject to "inconsistent and inadequate parenting" exhibit difficulty forming healthy attachments, "but that proportion may diminish with age" (p.34). As an adult, Robbie still considers himself a "loner", and continues to struggle with maintaining stability. When he achieves it, it is difficult for him to embrace change. For example, Robbie has been living in his current Verdun apartment for five years. He tells me "it's

the longest I've ever lived anywhere. My girlfriend wants to move, she's always telling me that. But I really don't want to... I can't. This is my home, I mean, I finally have a home." Robbie finally has a family too. In addition to his long-term girlfriend, to whom he is deeply loyal, Robbie has Kiwi and Brutus, his Love Bird and Chihuahua. It is obvious that his pets are more than just animals. Of all the faces pictured in Robbie's living room, he gets up to show me only Snoopy, his old dog – not his mother, or anyone else who would typically be considered a relation. Snoopy's remains are respectfully contained in urn next to his photograph. At work, Robbie has begun to feel unchallenged and under stimulated. But his intense loyalty to Sam, who believes in him, and provided him with the stability of employment and mentorship, and who is almost like a father figure to Robbie, prevents him from moving on and seeking a new job.

When I ask Robbie if he feels well supported now, in adult education, by the teachers and staff at the school, he replies "yes, but students have to set the tone." I ask him to elaborate. "Well, you have to get noticed, you have to get a teacher's attention. Luckily for me that's something I'm good at." Indeed, Robbie is a commanding presence in the classroom. Robbie's obvious growth and maturity has diminished his disruptive impulses, although he is often outspoken and opinionated, and he has the ability to dominate a class, for example, with high levels of confidence and intelligence. He can also be very sullen. Robbie says, "My girlfriend always tells me I have high self-confidence but low self-esteem, and I think that's true." As an observer, I get the impression that Robbie is very aware of his acumen and on occasion this can make him appear smug. But under the surface I sense that he struggles with his feelings of self-worth, of being valued, and that

these are the internal challenges he faces as an adult student coming from an unstable family background. Robbie has made great strides since his youth, however, and this may be attributable to his resilience. Jones Harden's research documents that certain "protective factors" in at-risk children, including "IQ, temperament, and health, as well as ... engagement with school, and support outside the family (such as a mentor)" (p.36), can promote resilience and counteract the negative effects of an unstable home environment. Clearly Robbie's intelligence and his shrewdness, or what he calls his ability to "manipulate people", were his saving grace and have served him well in this manner. But his astute awareness of his circumstances made him resentful as a youth. "I was super angry, super resentful toward my parents," he says, "(I felt like) there's no point in building *anything* because I lose everything anyways. My parents didn't stick around, nobody sticks around, nobody really cares... you have one thing one day, you lose it the next." While he may not still consider himself resentful, or recognize it openly, Robbie's residual bitterness is palpable when he speaks about his teenage years, and where he is now, at 27-years-old, as a result. "I wasn't the center of anyone's world, or attention. And because I wasn't the center, and most children are, because most parents care ... I was really resentful of that. So I just didn't care. You don't really know. You live fast (and) you don't understand the severity of life, of your choices. ... I don't think I was ever really checked into reality until later in life."

Guidance

The second theme to emerge most prominently during my interview with Robbie was Guidance. Robbie feels that having been “left to his own devices” from a young age by his very young, often absent, and emotionally neglectful mother, he had, as a result, little sense of direction and purpose, possessed a constant need for attention, and was predisposed to be more easily influenced by what he saw day-to-day in the streets of his neighborhood. Clearly high-functioning and intelligent, and highly aware of his own potential, Robbie’s lack of guidance from a stable adult was a hugely determining feature in shaping the negative trajectory of his early childhood and adolescent years.

One of the resilience promoting “protective factors” for at-risk children and youth, as classified by Jones Harden (2004) in her survey of research on family instability and child development, is “support outside the family (such as a mentor)” (p.36). Generally speaking, anyone can be a mentor, and positive mentoring relationships develop naturally for many children and youth during the course of their school years. Stable community members such as neighbors, teachers, school support staff, counselors, and sports coaches, etc., often take on the role of mentors, whether formally or informally. There also exist a growing number of both general and goal-oriented youth mentoring programs in North America, including here in Montreal, and as locally as Robbie’s own neighborhood.

As mentoring and volunteerism are fairly new social phenomena, at least in the formal sense, the body of research examining the effectiveness of youth/adult partnership programs in North America is as recent as the study of the changing family structure – a correlation that is hardly coincidental. Most seminal research thus far shows that formal mentorship programs have varying results (Rhodes, 2002; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002), and that mentoring is a complex and highly nuanced practice that merits further study in order to better meet the needs of a growing demographic of youth like Robbie. However, a meta-analysis of 55 youth-mentoring programs in the United States conducted by DuBois et al. (2002), considered one of the most comprehensive studies on the subject to date, found that, overall, mentoring yields modest to positive results, particularly in the case of middle-school and early adolescent at-risk youth, and specifically when a strong relationship is formed between mentor and protégé that is characterized by consistent and frequent contact, and lasting for a duration of more than one year. Other studies concur with these findings, notably stressing that consistency and a minimum one-year duration of the mentor/protégé relationship is imperative to its success (Rhodes, 2002; Lee & Crammond, 1999), and that weak youth-mentor relationships, and particularly ones that end abruptly on the part of the mentor (who may be preoccupied with his or her own family or career, for example) can have a detrimental and adverse effect on the youth participant, especially, if like Robbie, the youth has already sustained a breakdown and/or loss of one or both parental relationship(s) in the home (Rhodes, 2002; Downey & Feldman, 1996).

The general consensus, however, is that, assuming the proper dynamic and consistency is in place, a mentoring relationship has the capability to yield positive results. For at-risk youth coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and unstable home environments, as was Robbie's case, the potential benefits should not be understated. Notably, positive results have been observed in areas such as improved academic achievement (Slicker & Palmer, 1993), reduced dropout rates (Lee & Cramond, 1999), and improved, less risk-taking behavior. Informal mentoring relationships that develop naturally, either in school or in the community, as mentioned above, can yield equal or possibly even better results than formal youth-mentoring programs, given that duration of relationship is a hugely determining factor in its success, and most children and adolescents develop relationships with their teachers and community members, for example, that last many years.

Educators, particularly those who work with at-risk youth, are increasingly recognizing the importance of mentoring and mentor-like relationships between students and teachers. One of the fundamental core values that must be in place for such relationships to develop is trust. In her book, *In Schools We Trust* (2002), Deborah Meier discusses the importance of developing trusting relationships between students and teachers in order for student success to occur. This trust is better facilitated when class size is scaled down to increase student-teacher interaction, and when the teachers themselves, at least partially, mirror the makeup of the student body. Meier says "a staff that looks and sounds like kids and their families, in terms of race, style, and ethnicity, is another asset when trying to build trust" (p.37), and this is something to which I can personally attest, having worked both with at-risk youth, and formally at-risk adult students like Robbie.

Emanuel Pariser (2011), longtime educator and founder of the Community School, an alternative high school in Camden, Maine, states that “feeling close to at least one supportive adult at school” is one effective school-based intervention that can “increase student connectedness” (p. 18). He cites his own work at the Community School, and the “one-to-one” program implemented there, “an advising relationship between teachers and students” (p.21), as an example of a successful, more prescribed in-school method of mentoring. Pariser’s research supports his theory, showing that helpful, more informal teacher-student relationships – relationships based on trust, mutual respect and a certain level of openness – have the capacity to produce immeasurable benefits for at-risk youth, and particularly for those whose home lives are fragile and thus might otherwise have increased difficulty at school.

During our almost two-hour interview, Robbie does not identify one person in his youth as a possible surrogate parental figure, or mentor, as identified by Jones Harden. For Robbie, this support came late, in adulthood, in the form of Sam, the mechanic who owns the garage where Robbie currently works. When Robbie speaks of Sam, and of his sense of indebtedness to him, I wonder if there is any significance in Sam’s profession beyond the trade knowledge and vocational mentorship he has been in a position to provide for Robbie. After all, Robbie’s own father was a mechanic, and, according to Robbie, it was for this sole reason he chose to study that trade. In either case, Sam has been able to finally provide Robbie with the guidance, support, attention, and respect he has needed and sought for many years, and this is one reason that Robbie struggles with the conflict

of wanting to move on from the job but feeling reluctant to leave the garage and Sam behind.

Robbie expresses quite succinctly, and in congruence with the research cited above, that had he received some guidance earlier on, or even some positive, “tough-love” attention during his most critical early adolescent years, things may have turned out quite differently. He says, “Even though people said I had the potential, nobody did anything to help me. Nobody cared. Nobody pushed me. Nobody took the time. ... I think (that) if at 14, 15 (years old), somebody would have actually stuck my ass in a chair and made me do it (the work), I would have turned out really good at whatever I did. ... I think that if I had even just felt that somebody cared, that would have made a big difference.”

Responses to Art & Art Education

When I ask Robbie about his recollections of art class in elementary and high school, he tilts his head to the side and looks up, as if trying hard to remember. After a few moments it becomes clear these memories do not come easily to mind, and he smiles at me and says that he does not recall much. He reminds me that he attended four different elementary schools, and that he was not really “into school like that.” I ask him to think of the art teachers, the classrooms themselves, the art projects. Painting. Drawing. Clay. *Anything*. He laughs and says, “I remember liking art class, but that’s about it.” What

about art class do you remember liking, I ask. “I guess... being creative. I like being creative.”

I ask Robbie how if he would like to take an art class now, in adult education. He screws his face up and looks at me, perplexed. “Why?” Well, I respond, to make art. To learn about making art, and to learn about art in general. He looks at me flatly. Knowing that he is interested in music, I rephrase the question with music instead. “Yes,” he answers, “I’d like to take music classes. I wanted to go to Trenton but it cost too much. Now, as an adult... I don’t know how useful it would be. Time is really important to me, it’s everything – I’m already almost 30 and I’m choosing where to go in life (sighs). It’s a little late. So I don’t have time to waste on that.” He thinks for a second more and then adds, “You know who can do stuff like that? People who come from stable homes, two parent families, (people) who live in their parents’ basements and can afford to play around. If I wanted to do music, for example, I’d have to live off K.D. (Kraft Dinner). You have to have real passion to sacrifice like that. And even then, the (music) industry is too saturated to really succeed. It’s not practical. It wouldn’t be practical for me.”

Robbie’s attitude about art and art education does not really surprise me. His impression that art making and learning about the arts would be both indulgent and impractical is very similar to the responses I got from the two participants in my pilot project in 2012. They also felt that art served little purpose at the adult education level and that art education of any kind would essentially be a waste of time, when they had so little time to spare. Robbie’s impression that art is something reserved for people who can afford it,

however – middle or upper class people from “stable”, two-parent homes – is quite interesting. Clearly Robbie has an aesthetic sense, his roses reveal this, and he also possesses an appreciation of film, music, and music making. His days do have artful expression, and enjoyment, but he does not acknowledge those experiences as such.

Reflection

Following my interview with Robbie I am left asking two things as I drive home. One, am I patient enough with my students who require more attention? I have had a few students in my classes at the adult level who showed poor impulse control and displayed attention-seeking behavior. For example, they often spoke out of turn, repeatedly, or asked the same questions over and over to get a laugh from the class. There were days I smiled along with them, but oftentimes I became impatient and stern. I do not think I had ever really considered why they did those things, or why they needed the attention. Do adult students with poor behavior require the same understanding, the same patience as children and adolescents, simply because they have not had it easy?

The second thing I ask myself is: how can I make art education interesting for a student like Robbie? How can I spark the necessary passion he speaks of when talking about music making, and film, without him immediately going to the pragmatic place in his mind that equates that kind of creative exploration with guaranteed poverty and struggle? How can I make art as effortless and enjoyable as planting and pruning a rose bush?

CHAPTER THREE

Mark

I met Mark at a café on Sherbrooke Street in N.D.G. shortly after noon on a rainy day in early June. The weather was terrible – gray, windy, and wet – as though spring was reluctant to give up its turn and make way for summer. I had offered a few times to meet him at his apartment, so that he would not have to inconvenience himself, but Mark politely declined my offer every time and suggested a public setting instead. We decided on Shaïka café, a little spot that doubled as an art gallery on the east side of N.D.G., across from Girouard Park. I knew Shaïka would have soymilk for my coffee, and some vegetarian sandwiches were I to arrive hungry, so this location suited me fine. I was nearly blown across the street as my umbrella caught the wind and I arrived at our agreed upon meeting place, dripping wet and disheveled.

I stood in line to place my order. Gently shaking the rain off my trench coat, I thought to myself that this had actually turned out to be a good place to meet, as I had not yet eaten for the day and my stomach was starting to grumble. My second thought was the realization that I did not know what Mark looked like, and that in our short correspondence we had not discussed how we would recognize each other. I scanned the café quickly but nobody's eyes met mine. "I'm here, beige coat" I texted, and then ordered a sandwich plate, and a latte with soymilk for after.

Mark appeared at my side a moment later. “Hello, beige coat,” he said, smiling, and I laughed and said hello. It occurred to me briefly that if someone were watching us, we might look as though we were on a blind date, and this made me anxious to get started with the interview. He already had a coffee in hand as he had arrived a short while earlier and had been sitting, facing the wall, reading the newspaper when I came in. “Where should we sit?” he asked, looking around at the free tables. I suggested some seating towards the back of the café, a table that was quiet and out of the way, and had enough space for my big bag and umbrella. “Go on and sit down,” said the young woman standing behind the counter, watching us eye the tables, “I’ll bring your sandwich when it’s ready.” Mark and I installed ourselves, and after a few formalities we were ready to go. I asked him how much he knew about my research, and he replied that he knew very little. Not entirely surprised, I proceeded to explain my thesis.

A teacher-friend of mine at Lynvall Pierce had referred Mark to me after one of my scheduled participants had stood me up for an interview. Mark had been described to me via text message as “New this year, EQ student, really bright. Canadian.” It had never been my intention to interview someone I had not previously taught, much less had never met, but being on maternity leave my access to students was limited, and being pressed for time and worried that I might lose momentum in my work, I decided to give “really bright” Mark a try. It was for this reason that I was not wholly surprised when he declined my offers to come over. After all, I was a complete stranger to him, and clearly my teacher friend had not given him much information about me, or my work, even though I had sent a description of my thesis for him to give Mark, along with my

interview request. Mark nodded slowly with what appeared to be intense concentration as I finished explaining my research to him. My sandwich arrived at the table, and after excusing myself to take a bite I pushed the plate aside and we began the interview.

Like Robbie, 30-year-old Mark was also born at the Royal Victoria Hospital. When I ask him to describe his family to me, he immediately responds with a smile and says that they are “super nice people”. His parents, who are still together, are both well educated and work in the helping profession. His father is a psycho-educator, and his mother has worked as a youth protection nurse, an emergency response nurse, and now works doing infant care for the CLSC⁴. Mark’s sister, two years older than him, also works in the helping field, and she recently completed her master’s degree in psychology. A psychologist by profession, she, like his mother, also works at the CLSC.

Mark grew up in Notre-Dame-des-Graces, better known as N.D.G., a fairly large neighborhood on the western, more Anglophone side of Montreal that encompasses all types of demographics, both culturally and economically. Mark still lives in the area, as do his parents. Mark describes his family as “stable” and middle class. I ask him if there were any major life events or changes during his childhood and/or early adolescence and he replies “no”.

Mark followed a French Immersion stream while he attended public school in N.D.G. Unlike Robbie, Mark stayed at the same school for all six years of his primary schooling.

⁴ CLSC is a commonly used abbreviation for Centre Local de Services Communautaires, an term used to describe provincial government-funded public health care and social service centers in Quebec.

He says he was a good student in elementary school and that he did not have any behavior issues. By sixth grade he had shown significant academic potential and had obtained high enough marks that he was offered a space in an Advanced Placement program, called the “Galaxy Program”, for the following year, his first year of high school. Mark chose to forgo the AP offer and follow the regular academic stream instead. It should be noted that even though he declined the offer for the AP program, the high school Mark attended in Montreal West, a fairly affluent neighborhood just west of N.D.G., has been considered one of the best public high schools in the English Montreal School Board (E.M.S.B.) roster of institutions for many years. New applicants entering Grade 7 are required to take fairly rigorous tests and many are not accepted. This particular school was also one of the first – if not *the* first – public high schools in the E.M.S.B. (called the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal until 1998) to have full, compulsory uniforms, a feature that gave the school the outward, visual impression, at least, of being a private school within the public school system.

I ask Mark how he felt about school as a youth. “School was not for me,” he replies. “It still isn’t,” he adds, “but I’m better at ‘the act’ (laughs). Back then I had a really skeptical attitude, like, why go to school, what’s the point? I guess at a certain point I figured out that it was to get good marks, but that only takes you so far.” In high school Mark was involved in sports and, notably, played on both the school’s soccer and basketball teams. He says he loved sports for the competitive aspect of the games, the interaction with other players, and, on a more individual level, the mental and physical challenges involved. I

ask Mark to describe his social circle during his high school years and he replies simply that he “had friends...” He shrugs, “It was very normal, average.”

Academically, Mark was a strong student, but he struggled to stay engaged in class and interested in his schoolwork, due to what he pointedly identifies as “serious under stimulation” and constant boredom. “I was always just waiting for the bell to ring,” he says. The lack of teacher-student and student-student interaction in class, and the transmission style of instruction employed by his teachers caused Mark to grow disengaged and apathetic, and by the ninth grade he was increasingly missing school and his marks had begun to drop. Eventually, the school administration recommended that Mark transfer to an alternative high school, where they felt he would be better served. Remembering this, Mark laughs and calls his former high school “a poor, poor institution.” He says, “They just passed the buck. It wasn’t me who was failing – *they* were failing. They said ‘we don’t really think this is the best place for you,’ and all I was thinking in response was ‘you mean, you can’t really teach me here.’”

Mark complied with the school’s “suggestion” of a transfer, saying he “didn’t really care,” and switched to a small, alternative high school in downtown Montreal the following year. “It was not a good place for me. They gave me more freedom, and I just didn’t go to class... I was already disinterested in school, and I already didn’t believe in the curriculum. I was like, ‘this is all a waste of my time.’ There was no structure and I need structure. Structure and stimulation.” Mark laughs, “I’m so demanding!”

At 16 Mark began working part time at a telemarketing call center. As his apathy and disinterest in school grew, he became more invested in his job, and after half a year at the alternative high school, with increasingly irregular attendance, he stopped going altogether. I ask if anything else was going on in his life at the time. He replies, “Well, I had a girlfriend, but no, I just became an adolescent.” His parents were not happy with his decision, but remained supportive of their son regardless. However, they told Mark he would have to start paying rent if he was not going to be in school. “Since I was making enough money at that point anyway, I just decided to move out.” He adds, “Obviously they wanted the best for their kids, and they didn’t want me to drop out of school or move out. They are traditional, but I refused it... I didn’t want traditional.”

Mark worked at the telemarketing office for a few years, and was quickly able to move up the ranks to a higher and better-paid position because, in spite of his youth and inexperience, he worked well and “was very friendly on the phone.” Eventually, the company closed, and Mark decided to move again, this time renting a basement apartment, still in N.D.G., in the building his parents owned.

Mark soon found another telemarketing job at a company owned by friends. He was promoted to manager, and was given the tasks of hiring and firing employees, as well as managing the sales floor. “I did really well, it was a good job. But eventually that industry just burned a whole in my head and I didn’t want to do it anymore. My friends ‘nulled’ (made redundant) my position, and I was able to take an eight-month vacation paid for by the government (laughs).”

When his Employment Insurance ran out, Mark started doing odd jobs for money. Eventually, like Robbie, Mark made the decision to study a trade. Inspired by a friend who had taken the course, and because he enjoys working with his hands and liked the idea of “making stuff”, he decided to study cabinetmaking at a school in the east end of the city. He recalls his first adult education experience at the trade school being no less frustrating than high school, explaining that the teachers were so bound to an outdated curriculum that they refused to show the students new technologies or new tools that were becoming standard on work sites. According to Mark, the teachers would say, “well, when you go work at a cabinetmaking company, they’ll show you.” Again, Mark quickly became disenchanted by the “institutional” experience of education. “So everything I’m learning (at the trade school) I could have just learned on the job, and quite frankly, much quicker, and probably to more detail... This (the system) is poor.” He goes on,

“It’s a cabinet-making course, and guess how many cabinets I made in 14 months? *Zero*. (laughs). I mean, I enjoyed it because I see value in information. I can take that information and – I don’t need to build cabinets with it, necessarily, but – I understand how tools work, I understand how to maintain metal blades or knives, I’ve learned a lot of things there that I can do anything with now. Cool – but they really didn’t properly teach me how to build cabinets... it (the program) doesn’t make any sense.”

Mark began working various jobs after the completion of his course, including a job doing carpentry and installation at trade shows. Unfortunately he sustained an injury to his wrist, and because his employment was contractual he was not entitled to any worker's compensation or physiotherapy. Mark was forced to stop working because of his injury. "I only have a Grade 9 education as far as the government is concerned. So if I can't do cabinetmaking I get to work at Couche-Tard (a convenience store chain in Quebec)... I was living in my parents' basement so I could afford it (not working) at the time... but eventually my parents sold the house... and I applied for welfare."

After a short period of collecting social assistance, boredom got the best of Mark again. "I decided to go to Emploi Quebec. 'Government, you better pay me to do something, because otherwise you're going to keep paying me to sit here and do nothing.' I was mind-bogglingly bored." As per his Emploi Quebec application, Mark had to complete a three-month orientation, "an assessment of personality, an assessment of ambition... I dunno. That was a total joke also, but they need to get their pay cheques too, I guess." They accepted his application on the basis that he had a college trajectory in mind. Mark informs me that the college program he chose was Early Childhood Education, not because he wants to work with children as a daycare worker, but "because it's the only program on the list that is available to me and that fits my time constraints that doesn't make me want to jump off a bridge." I ask him about the other commonly selected programs, like accounting, and he replies, "No. Absolutely not. Even though I'm getting 100s in math. I don't want to do anything of the sort."

At the time of our interview, Mark had completed three semesters of adult education at Lynvall Pierce, and was on course to finish, by his estimate, in winter of 2014. I ask how his current adult education experience compares to high school as a youth. “It’s just like I remember it. Nothing changed. It’s the exact same. I like to call it ‘adult day care’, seriously. Nothing has changed. I’m just apparently more tolerant and patient than I was fifteen years ago.” I ask if he is happy with his decision to return to school. “I think it was a good decision,” he replies, “but *happy*, no. It doesn’t bring me any sort of contentment.” I respond by asking what *does* bring him contentment? “Just... *time*. Just having time.” When I ask what he would do if he could be doing anything, Mark expresses to me that he does not know, and after a moment he responds, “Doing something outdoors I guess, something that lacks definition. Just being a good person... I don’t have an end game, or a goal in mind. My plan is to not have a plan.”

Stimulation & Teaching Practices

The most prominent theme to emerge during my interview with Mark was Stimulation, or rather, the lack of it. Mark expressed quite succinctly that he felt under-stimulated as an adult student, and he largely blamed his lack of engagement with school, both now and as a youth, on his feelings of being consistently under-stimulated and bored in class. He attributes his love of sports and his unwavering enjoyment in being a member of the school’s soccer and basketball teams during his early high school years to the intense level of interaction and challenge involved in those activities, saying, “Even now, I need

interaction, I need something to *do*. In high school there's really nothing to do... There's no interaction. You just *sit* there and listen... I was always just waiting for the bell to ring." I ask Mark if by "do" he means doing in the physical sense, needing to be physically involved or physically active in order to feel stimulated. He responds, yes, he likes "hands-on" activity, which he eventually sought out in the cabinetmaking program, but it is primarily the social interaction, between teacher and student, and between the students themselves, that he finds most stimulating and valuable in the academic setting. Numerous studies have shown that student-centered pedagogy, where students are active in their own learning process – for example, through class discussion, small group work, development of the curriculum generated by student-interest, etc. – yields better results, both in terms of class engagement and actual academic performance, as opposed to more traditional transmission-style or teacher-centered approaches to learning (Ahn & Class, 2011; Peabody, 2011; McHollister & Sayler, 2010). Student-centered teaching practices encourage student interaction through collaborative learning experiences, and foster the use of higher order thinking skills, such as analysis, interpretation, and synthesis (Peabody, 2011).

In their study on student-centered pedagogy at the university level, entitled *Student-Centered Pedagogy: Co-Construction of Knowledge through Student-Generated Midterm Exams*, authors Ruth Ahn and Mary Class (2011) used small groups of students to construct the content of a midterm examination. The course material was divided between groups, and students were encouraged to create questions within the group for their designated chapters, questions that drew "on the evaluation and synthesis levels of

thinking, rather than eliciting a memorized or rote response (p.272). The following day the participants were re-divided with one member of the previous day's groups represented in each of the newly formed groups. "These individuals became the 'chapter experts,' corresponding to the text chapter they had used to draft exam questions in the previous session" (p.272). The study showed that after engaging with other students to create questions that utilized higher order thinking skills on the first day, and then explaining and effectively teaching their subject of "expertise" to their new group members on the second day, the students reported that they possessed a better grasp of the course material and felt more equipped to be tested on the subject matter covered in the exercise. The student participants also commented that the responsibility of being an "expert" allowed each student "the opportunity to be the 'star' at some point, whether by sharing a special talent or perspective" (p.274) and that the interactive and inclusive nature of the activity was enjoyable and fun. Moreover, it helped them to appreciate firsthand the diversity of strengths among their peers. In the words of one student participant,

I began to realize that everyone could be successful when we worked as a team and that each of us had something unique to contribute. Some were strong question writers, other had near photographic memory of details in the text, and everyone brought different vantage points to bear in synthesizing the course material. I am a strong student, yet I learned as much, if not more, from my peers as I did on my own during the activity.

(p.274)

It is perhaps worthwhile to note that the participants in Ahn and Class's study were mostly undergraduate students pursuing degrees in Education, and that they likely understood and recognized the value of the exercise. It would be easy to assume that this type of collaborative learning practice would yield better results in a context such as Ahn and Class's study, however, according to their report, this type of learning situation has been slow to reach the post-secondary level, where transmission-style lectures remain the norm. The authors cite numerous examples of studies conducted on collaborative learning through the K-12 levels, with positive results in all areas of academics including reading, writing, mathematics, and history. It was, in fact, the scarcity of its implementation at the post-secondary level that was, at least in part, a motivating factor for their own research.

At the high school level, student-centered teaching practices have shown great promise, particularly in classrooms with a broad cross-section of cultures, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and, as a result, a diversity of values and opinions (Ahn & Class, 2001; Peabody, 2011). Studies have demonstrated that student-centered learning encourages students to express themselves and to share their own unique perspectives, practices that have proven not only to be validating experiences for the participants, but have also shown positive results in levels of student enthusiasm and engagement in the classroom, and very concretely in terms of academic performance (Peabody, 2011).

The results of a 2011 study (Peabody, 2011) that compared four tenth grade English classes at four different Florida high schools "to understand what impact teacher beliefs and practices can have on student performance", particularly in relation to "high-stakes

standardized tests” in “an environment where a majority of students are at-risk for poor performance based on demographic factors” (p. 183), yielded remarkable findings. The schools were chosen on the basis of their performance in the standardized reading tests of the year before, thus dividing the four into two “high-performing” (passage rate of 65% or higher on the tenth grade test) and two “low-performing” (passage rate of fewer than 40%) schools (p.183). On all other accounts, the schools were similar, and the selection of the schools was controlled for consistency in terms of the socioeconomic background and ethnic makeup (p.183).

The study found that the two classes whose teachers utilized student-centered learning practices for at least a percentage of the class time (60% and 32% respectively) had markedly higher levels of student engagement and attention, and fewer “classroom management or discipline-related issues” (p.185) than the two “low-performing” classes that utilized no student-centered learning whatsoever. The teachers in the “high-performing” classes “planned creative and entertaining lessons for their students on a regular basis” (p.185) and, as in Ahn & Class’s study, “gave students opportunities to plan and carry out lesson plans related to the curriculum... that fostered higher order thinking skills among students because they were required to analyze, interpret and synthesize information on their own before presenting it to the class” (p. 189). The teachers in the “high-performing” classes “consistently displayed a high level of rapport with their students” and “their classrooms were positive learning environments” (p.185). In contrast, in the classes where the instruction and activities were teacher-directed and where students were given little to no opportunity to lead the class or contribute to the

curriculum, “there was a low level of interest or participation in the learning process by students,” the “students acted as passive recipients of knowledge” and “many of the classroom learning activities stressed lower order thinking and learning basic skills” (p.186). Teachers in the “low-performing” classes reprimanded their students more often and were required more frequently to re-direct “off-task behavior” (p.186). In those classes, the students were often observed playing with their cellular phones and other gadgets instead of doing class work, were seen chatting amongst themselves, and “in both classrooms at least one student, and often more than one, was observed with his/her head down for substantial amounts of time during instruction” (p.186). Finally, even though all four teachers expressed feelings of immense pressure related to the state-wide standardized tests (the basis of the study), the “high-performing” classes with teachers that utilized student-centered learning achieved higher scores, even though the teachers consciously avoided “teaching to the test”, introduced less material directly related to the exams, and mentioned the tests less frequently to students than the other two teachers did during class time.

During our interview, Mark identifies the teaching practices utilized by his instructors at the high school and adult education levels as being overwhelmingly transmission-style, teacher-centered, and subject-oriented, although he does not name them as such. He repeatedly comments on the ineffective nature of teacher-centered practices, and their inherent capacity to create detached, apathetic, and unmotivated students. Mark describes teachers who use these methods as “often narcissistic,” and says,

“They’re there not so that you’ll learn the stuff but so that they can show you how much *they* know. They hold something over you. I can’t learn from someone like that... They ask a question and answer it before anyone has the time to put their hand up, and they’ll have you just sit there for an hour – they’ll stand there talking for an hour! There’s a time and place for lectures, but they need to say ‘hey, does anybody know this?’ And genuinely wait to see if anyone has a thought, even, to contribute. They don’t promote confidence and challenge. There’s no interaction.”

A Quebec-based study (Fortin, L., Marcotte, D., Potvin, P., Royer, É., & Joly, J., 2006) on the typology of high school dropouts, cites research that shows “negative school experiences,” notably the perception that teachers are “controlling, unsupportive and uninterested” in students, as one common reason for youth dropping out of school (Fortin et al., 2006). The study was, in part, a response to the province’s high drop out rate, currently estimated at 10.6 percent based on a three-year average from 2009 to 2012 (HRSDC, 2013), making it the highest in the country. The researchers in Fortin et al. recruited 810 participants, a mix of 12 and 13-year-old male (54%) and female (46%) French Canadian, seventh grade students, who were selected from three high schools in three different cities. Two of the three cohorts were “located in more disadvantaged socio-economic areas,” whereas the third cohort came from “more middle-class areas” (p.11). An extensive data collection process was used, including self-questionnaires, given twice to participants for consistency and reliability of answers, on “six risk

dimensions”: family environment, personal characteristics, school plans, academic abilities, teacher-student relationships, and school motivation (p. 12). In addition, answers from equally in-depth teacher questionnaires on each participant were used for comparison, and school records were analyzed for academic and general in-school performance factors, such as truancy and discipline issues (p.15).

Of the 810 student participants, 317 (39%) were identified as at-risk, and the remaining 493 (61%) were identified as not at-risk (p.18). The researchers succeeded in then categorizing four types of at-risk students. Three of the four “clusters,” as the study names them, exhibited combinations of behaviors and backgrounds more typically associated with at-risk students, such as, but not limited to: behavioral issues, family instability and conflict, depression, and low academic achievement. The fourth cluster, corresponding to 36.7 percent of the at-risk participants, showed only slightly higher levels of depression than the not at-risk sample. Otherwise, these participants most resembled those in the control group: they performed fairly well academically and they were socially adjusted and well liked by teachers, who “described them as having no behavior problems” (p.28). In addition, “the participants perceived their family functioning as good” (p.28), albeit with some perceived lack of parental support (which was not detailed in the report). What is significant in these findings was that these students expressed feelings that their classes lacked order and organization, and moreover, that they perceived and exhibited a lack of motivation in class, and were “generally bored in school” (p. 27).

Of the entire at-risk sample, the researchers in Fortin et al. categorized only one third of participants as exhibiting learning difficulties. In contrast, two thirds of the participants exhibited “low motivation as a greater risk factor than poor academic performance” (p. 35). This attribute is often undetectable by conventional methods used for assessing the risk of dropping out and therefore places a significant number of students at risk of falling under the radar and being “passed over for selection to participate in dropout prevention programs” (p.35). Furthermore, and particularly when students demonstrate adequate to high levels of academic capability, this trait is often regarded – on the part of teachers and school administrators, at least –as a problem or flaw that exists solely within the students themselves. Low motivation then becomes a fault students must somehow correct on their own, and the quality of teacher practices, attitudes, and efforts in engaging and stimulating students remains largely unconsidered.

Teacher effectiveness, which includes, on the most basic level, an educator’s ability to motivate and engage students, is a difficult thing to measure. Traditionally, practicing teachers are seldom subject to evaluation, and are rewarded on the basis of their teaching experience and education level, characteristics “commonly assumed to correlate with greater teacher effectiveness” (Giglio, 2009, p.2). The results of a RAND Education study entitled *Teacher Qualifications and Student Achievement in Urban Elementary Schools* (Buddin & Zamarro, 2009) refute this assumption enormously. The study results show that student achievement and teacher experience are in fact very weakly linked, and that there is no evidence of a correlation between teacher education and student achievement. Rather, the authors posit that this presumption is merely based on the

theory that better educated teachers will be familiar with and practice newer and more effective methods of teaching – like student-centered teaching practices – in the classroom. The study also found that there was no perceivable connection between student achievement and the teachers’ scores on teaching licensure examinations (Buddin & Zamarro, 2009).

In contrast, other studies have shown that factors such as teacher expectations and attitudes can have profound effects on student achievement, particularly in the case of black and Hispanic students. In *How Teachers and Schools Contribute to Racial Differences in the Realization of Academic Potential*, researcher Tina Wildhagen (2012) found that teacher expectations of, and attitudes towards African American high school students in particular (both in terms of academics and discipline) greatly affected student performance. Even with several student characteristics held constant, such as behavior and attitude, teacher expectations accounted for 42 percent of the achievement gap between black and white students in the study (Wildhagen, 2012).

The regularity of these low or negative teacher expectations cannot be minimized. The assumption “that black or Latino students could not possibly know the answers to deep or complex questions... is at the crux of the racism still embedded in many teachers’ belief systems” (Landsman, 2004, p.28). These attitudes, unfortunately, will take enormous effort to undo, as the majority of educational institutions themselves, in particular those at the post-secondary level, are based on an exclusive culture of whiteness. In her article

entitled *Confronting the Racism of Low Expectations*, author and educator Julie Landsman (2004) comments:

Entrance into many top-track programs in schools is subtly based on acquaintance with certain authors, certain ways of reasoning, and certain ways of behaving. To be eligible for the best education in this country, you often have to have money, books in the home, the desire and training to sit in one place all day, and *an acquaintance with white middle-class and upper-class cultural icons* (my italics). The result is that whole schools are full of smart African American boys, for instance, who have not made it into these programs. Teachers, counselors, social workers, and principals have determined that they are not bright enough, or they have the wrong attitude, or they are from a dysfunctional family and won't be able to get the support they need at home. (p.29)

Throughout our interview, Mark consistently comments on and intuitively questions teaching methods, teacher attitudes and effectiveness, and systems of teacher assessment and evaluation. He says,

“I think teachers’ pay is a problem, the importance of the job is understated, and the qualifications are understated. There should be continual competency tests for teachers... ‘Can people learn from this person?’ is never a question asked when assessing a teacher! A teacher can’t just say ‘that’s how I teach.’ A teacher is supposed to ask ‘how do you learn?’ I guess that’s the old school of thought versus the new school

of thought, maybe. But a teacher's job is to figure out what the student needs to learn, (what the student needs) to *use* information... not just memorize material... I mean, if it's just about having information, students already have all the knowledge in their smartphones.”

Mark tells me about the teacher he recalls being most effective.

“The best teacher I had in high school put students first, and the curriculum second. It was more important to him that everyone was okay. He actually cared, you could tell. And when I dropped out before writing my exams he was the only person to call my parents – he called them a few times – to try to get them to convince me to go do them (the exams).”

Mark explains, “A good teacher doesn't paint everybody with the same brush... And a good teacher should be understanding, a nice person, first and foremost. That's how a teacher gets my attention.”

Responses to Art & Art Education

Mark tells me that he only remembers taking three months of art in the ninth grade, and that he does not remember his art classes or his art teachers very well. I ask if his art teacher was male or female, and he responds that he does not recall. He says he remembers drawing, and that some of the other students were quite skilled. He also recalls liking the class, partly for its task-oriented structure. “And I think I liked the

technical aspect too,” he adds. I ask why he only took art for three months of the school year, and he explains, “It wasn’t immersive. We got three months art, three months music, and three months drama. You’re supposed to choose which one you want to take for Grade 10, but I didn’t stay there for Grade 10, I switched to the alternative school. And we didn’t do *any* art there – they’re just happy if you come to class.”

When I ask Mark if he would take an art class now, in adult education, he, like Robbie, is not immediately sold. “I would... possibly,” he responds, and then laughs, “but honestly I’m trying to get out of there as fast as humanly possible.” During the course of our interview he had mentioned that he played the guitar, so I ask if he would take music lessons, instead, if they were offered. “Yes,” he replies, “I think I could get into that. I don’t know how to read music, it would probably be good to learn.” He concedes, “even drawing is a good skill to have, it’s definitely a transferable skill.” I ask him how he feels about art and art education in general. He considers my question for a moment and says,

“Well, I wouldn’t understate the importance of creating. I think music and art, in general, are important. People need to think, think about stuff, and to be inspired... Art instigates, and art brings people together. It encourages discussion. That interaction is worth anything. For me, the only benefit I’m getting from school right now is the interaction, with teachers and especially with other students. That’s the *only* good thing.”

Because student-centered practices often call upon the use of higher order thinking skills, and the dynamic and interactive aspect of collaborative learning situations require

students to actively engage with others in discovery and in the sharing of information and perspectives, student-directed pedagogy has been shown to yield positive outcomes for all types of learners, in many areas of education. Art education, in particular, is one discipline that intrinsically uses aspects of student-centered learning, and the art classroom is an especially appropriate environment for collaborative learning and student-interest directed teaching. Learning about art and creating art both provide an excellent opportunity for educators to encourage students to use higher order thinking skills, such as analysis, interpretation, and synthesis. Even in the instruction of technical skills, such as shading, color use, rule of thirds, and clay manipulation, for example, which may be considered the more transmission-style area of art education, students are still ultimately required to learn through “doing” and by active experimentation.

Unlike Robbie, Mark does not at once question art and art education’s practicality. However, his aversion to school, in general, and his desire to finish his DES as soon as possible do not engender an immediate enthusiasm when I ask if he would take art classes at the adult education level. Mark does seem to recognize the value of art and art education, however, at least in terms of transferable skills, and perhaps more importantly, in a theoretical sense related to issues of “confrontation and instigation,” the capacity of creating interaction and the value of creativity itself. Mark says, “Art is valuable because it inspires people. It’s a great means of expression, for imagining, and envisioning. That stuff is pretty important.”

Reflection

Immediately following my interview with Mark I felt compelled to take notes, so I sat in my car, across from the café, and dictated some thoughts into my phone. For one, Mark's desire for a stimulating social experience and his appreciation of the arts left me wondering why he was not more receptive to the idea of taking an art class, especially if he had extra credits to fulfill towards his DES. If not art, he would have to take something else, and so it was not as though the art class would somehow slow his progress. Mark also had expressed a desire for "questions without answers" and his sense that, in order for education to be stimulating "there needs to be wonder." Would art not be the perfect domain to satisfy these wants? It occurred to me that maybe Mark was just so "anti-institution" and so "skeptical about school" – as he himself described it – that anything, whether math (which he is apparently quite good at) or music became less palatable to him, so long as the context was the school environment.

I also reflected on Mark's assessment of his teachers throughout the years, and his feelings on teaching practice, and on what makes an effective teacher. Certainly Mark was on to something, and although I intuitively agreed with him during our interview, once I had done more research I found numerous studies that substantiated what he was feeling, and what he himself had experienced. However, it did not seem to me as though Mark was taking full accountability for his lack of motivation, both as a youth and as an adult student. He expressed that he was "easily bored" and "generally content," yet I could not help but question his nonchalance, at least the feeling that there was more to the

story. I was left wondering if perhaps because – unlike with Robbie – Mark and I had no relationship and had in fact never met prior to the interview, he was leaving something out. Of course I cannot say for certain that this was the case, but it is important to this research that the possibility of some decisive omission be noted.

Finally, I wondered how I would feel if Mark were my student. In my own teaching practice I intentionally incorporate collaborative learning situations, as well as content and methods that I feel are student-directed and student-centered. I consider myself very relatable and understanding, as per Mark's criteria of a good teacher, especially towards students that demonstrate a high level of effort, and I know that I often overextend myself on behalf of students in order to see them succeed, not just in the classroom, but in their lives as well. However, as a younger teacher, and as woman – and especially because many of my students are, or perceive themselves to be, close in age to me or older – I sometimes feel the need to assert myself in order to establish myself as the teacher, which may appear as, or may actually result in, a tendency to be more strict than other teachers. (The same teacher-friend who recommended Mark for the interview often jokes about how strict I am, although I suspect he likes to make fun of me.) While students tend to like structure, as Mark said he did, it is possible that they naturally will respond better to an older, therefore seemingly more experienced (whether this is the case or not) teacher enforcing it.

Mark and I also discussed his frustration with the constraints of the curriculum. As I myself am required by the school board to use exam booklets from the early 1990s, that

are older than some of my students themselves, and contain painfully outdated content, I fully understand Mark's frustration. Mark did recognize, however, that the teachers in these situations, at least, have their hands tied, and are rather like cogs in a wheel. I was thankful that Mark understood that it is not always the teachers, or the cogs, that determine the direction (or very lack of movement) of the wheel, but that the wheel itself is sometimes broken.

My interview with Mark made me reflect a lot on my own teaching practice. I find myself driving home more confident that this type of research, and the self-reflection that comes with it, will help make some repairs – not only in my classroom, but that it might hopefully also help to rebuild a wheel that, if we listen to many of our students tell it, is going nowhere fast.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kelly

My interview with Kelly took place on a warm Wednesday afternoon, on one of the first nice days of summer. She had invited me over to her apartment in LaSalle, and as our meeting time approached I realized I was quite looking forward to seeing her, as though as I was going to meet an old friend. I drove past her address looking for a parking spot and ended up having to park a few streets over and walk back in the sun. Her block was typical of Lasalle housing – Italian-style, white and beige painted brick duplexes with the dark, bachelor apartments off the front driveways and the occasional pair of concrete or granite lions standing guard at either side of a building’s wide front steps. Kelly’s apartment was on the first floor, and her five-year-old son was playing on the stairs outside when I arrived.

I met Kelly in 2011 when she registered for my Journalism class at Lynvall Pierce. It was her first semester at the school and she struck me as a quiet, somewhat apprehensive, yet friendly person. Her cousin Nadine, also a new student, was taking the course as well, and where Kelly was quiet, Nadine was not, and so they were an interesting pair for me to have in the classroom. Kelly and Nadine always sat together. Although she was sometimes shy, Kelly was a hard-working student. She did exceptional work in class, and took the assignments very seriously. Towards end of the semester, Nadine’s absences became more frequent and then she dropped out altogether. But Kelly stayed on, and where Nadine had been sitting, Kelly put her books. In spite of her cousin’s absence,

Kelly grew more confident and outgoing, and her high marks, for all her hard work, seemed to encourage her forward.

In early 2012 I had Kelly as a student again, this time in my Secondary 5 English course. She joined the class halfway through the term, having already completed the first part the previous semester. I was happy to have her in my class, and I knew not only would her outstanding work ethic be an asset to the group, but also that her funny and good-natured personality would liven up the classroom after what had been a long, dark winter of Golding and Reginald Rose. Kelly did just as I anticipated, and once again produced work that was inspired and well considered. Although not the strongest of my students, her painstaking and unwavering effort in all areas of the course compensated for her weaknesses and placed her among the best.

The following semester Kelly switched to another adult education center. Because I visited the other school occasionally, I was able to catch up with her from time to time, and I eventually asked her to participate in my research. Now that she was no longer my student and we were able to speak more candidly, I also found out that we had a fair number of mutual friends and acquaintances. We set a date to meet for the interview once her term exams were over. Because so much had happened for both of us in the months since we had last spoken, I was excited to visit her and catch up.

When I arrived at her apartment, her small son opened the door for me and called down the hall. Kelly came around the corner of the front room, smiling. Her son and his father,

Kelly's partner of eight years, were on their way out to do some errands, and after they left, she gave me a quick tour of her home. We decided to do the interview in the kitchen, which was at the far end of the apartment, down a long hallway dotted with family photographs. Tidy and filled with sun, we sat in the kitchen at the table and I took out my papers and pen. She poured us each a glass of cold juice, and after some catching up about my baby, and about Kelly's most recent term of school, we began the interview.

Twenty-eight-year-old Kelly was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Kelly's mother was 17 when she had her, and although she was a young, single mother, Kelly describes her family as large and very close. "We all stick together," she says, "and the whole North Preston is my family. I got cousins... and cousins, and cousins," she adds, laughing. Kelly and her mother left Nova Scotia and moved to Montreal when Kelly was two years old. Other family members on Kelly's mother's side also made the trip westward at the same time, and the family installed itself together in one neighborhood. Because of this, Kelly grew up very close to her aunts and their children, who always lived near by, if not in the same building complex. "No one from my dad's side is over here (in Montreal), though," she adds. Kelly describes her relationship with her father's family in ways that indicate it was, and continues to be, a very estranged and indifferent association. "I don't call them, I don't talk to them, I don't email them... just, no. The only communication I would ever have with them would be if my mom sent me to my dad's house in the summer, and they would call and be like, 'oh put Kelly on the phone,' but other than that, no." When I ask Kelly if she speaks to her father, she replies, "I talk to him 'cause he's my dad... I don't really know what else to say about it... It just is what it is. He was

never there so there's no connection. No connection at all. I wouldn't really describe him as my *family*."

Kelly's father remarried and still resides in Nova Scotia. Kelly's mother also found new love shortly after arriving in Montreal, in a young car mechanic. They had a son when Kelly was five. Kelly grew up very close to her stepfather, who raised her as his own, and is still with her mother today. Kelly's mother, who had never completed high school, was a stay-at-home mother to Kelly and her younger brother, while Kelly's stepfather provided for the family. "If Jesse (her stepfather) wasn't there, I know my mom would have worked, but because Jesse took care of us, and because he didn't want her to work, she didn't. He wanted her to stay home and take care of me and my brother." When I inquire about the rest of her family, Kelly asks, "This is confidential, right?" Kelly then describes them as low income and all receiving some kind of social assistance, "set aside from my mom, and except for one auntie, who worked all her life." Kelly adds, "I think we were really only okay because of Jesse." I ask Kelly if her mother ever received social assistance also, and after a moment she responds, thoughtfully, "I don't know, you know... I guess she might have, but she never really showed us that, and I never asked." She continues, "for sure she received Family Allowance..." Kelly pauses, and then adds, "You know, she *could've* been on welfare, I would never know – I would never even think to ask her that question."

Kelly attended English-language public school, first briefly in Cote-des-Neiges, and later in LaSalle, where she lives today. Cote-des-Neiges, a borough that sits in the center of the

more “Anglophone” half of the city, is somewhat like Montreal’s answer to Williamsburg – a predominantly West Indian and Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Cote-des-Neiges, or “Uptown”, as it is also called, has traditionally been home to both these communities, as well as to a fair number of South and East Asians, and more recently, an expanding Filipino population. LaSalle, on the other hand, is similar to the rest of the Southwest in terms of demographics – the Anglophone community being largely comprised of Irish, Italians, West Indians and a fair number of “Scotians”, like Kelly. In addition to a sizeable French (Quebecois) community, there is a growing number of Indian and South Asian residents.

In all, Kelly attended three elementary schools. “I got into some problems with my teachers. I was a bad kid,” she says, “I was suspended for the first time in Grade 2 for calling my teacher a bitch.” She adds, laughing, “but she was, and it really wasn’t my fault.” (Incidentally, I was given detention for a week after calling my third grade French teacher the same, and I share this memory with Kelly.) Soon after, still in second grade, Kelly switched to another school in LaSalle, where she completed her primary education. Because she stayed there the longest, I ask if she liked that school better, “Yeah, I did, but I didn’t like school, in general” she answers, laughing. “Well, I didn’t like the teachers, but I liked my friends. I liked going to school with my friends.”

Kelly attended high school in LaSalle. Interestingly, her first high school eventually closed and was reopened as the adult education center she currently attends. When I comment on her return to school as literally a return to the very same building, she laughs

and says, “It’s weird, right? And it was *terrible*. I was in Grade 7 three times. *Three times*, ‘cause I was just so bad... I was really, really bad,” she laughs. “I was a bad student, I had bad behavior. I would skip school, I would get into fights, I would get into fights with *boys*... I disrupted a few classes fighting.” She pauses for a moment and continues, “Just thinking about it now... wow. I was *really* bad.” I ask if anything happened between elementary and high school, any event or life changes that might have affected her behavior, and Kelly responds, “No, nothing changed. I just got worse.” Kelly goes on,

“And just to show you how (little) the school cared, one time I wanted to perm my hair, and I wanted my auntie to do it for me but she couldn’t, so I asked her how to mix the perm together. I asked her over the phone... I was like... 14 (years old). Well, I must’ve done something wrong. My *whole* hair just dropped out. I just cried, and cried, and cried, and cried. I probably cried the whole day! I was literally *bald*. My hair was all gone. And so I had to wait for my hair to grow back, I had to wait for the sides to grow out and for something to grow on top... Nobody wore wigs back then (laughs) at least, not in high school, so I skipped three months of school and the school *never* called my mom, *not once*.”

When I ask Kelly why she thinks the school never called, she laughs and responds, “Because I been in Grade 7 three times already! They didn’t care! After I while I just think they didn’t care. In fact, now that I think of it, I think I skipped the rest of the

school year, and they never called, and I ended up going to Nova Scotia for the summer. So I never went back. But they did *not* call my mom.”

The following year Kelly was sent to an alternative school. “I registered, and I went to visit the school and stuff, and I went there with a water balloon and they kicked me out.” I ask Kelly why she went to the school with a water balloon and she laughs, “I don’t know! But I threw the water balloon at someone in the school and they kicked me out. I was expelled before I even got to go to the school.” Kelly was switched again to another alternative school, where she stayed for almost two years. “I was 15. They put me up to my right grade, Grade 9, and I finished that grade, and then I started Grade 10 but I didn’t finish because my daughter happened... So I dropped out of school because I didn’t want to go to school pregnant. I dropped out before I even started showing. So yeah, that was it. Middle of Grade 10, I left. No more school.”

I apologize to Kelly for asking what is likely an obvious question regarding her level of involvement in school. She replies, “I wasn’t involved *at all*. All I did was smoke, smoke, and smoke some more.” I ask Kelly when she started smoking. “Probably when I started high school, I guess. I was in Grade 7, so I was 12.” Kelly attributes her smoking to her social circle, two twin sisters who had access to marijuana through their brother, and very lenient mother. “She (their mother) just let them do *whatever*, she didn’t have no rules, nothing. So we used to smoke at their house. I was a real dope head, boy...” Kelly laughs. Kelly never participated in any after school activities. “I would hang and smoke with my friends, that’s it. I never participated in nothing... Outside of school I wasn’t

really a troublemaker though. It was just all about smoking with my friends, hanging out with my friends, having fun... I used to drink too. Once I got *so* drunk,” she recalls, laughing, “It was really bad (laughs)... And all of this in Grade 7 – in my three years of Grade 7.”

In spite of her behavior problems in school, Kelly admits she was otherwise a fairly shy teenager. “Even though I was bad, I was still shy,” she says. She tells me how she met her daughter’s father, at the age of 16. “I used to see him on the bus when I was going to school, and I’d be like ‘this guy is so f–king cute’ (laughs). And then one day, I seen him at my auntie’s house and I couldn’t believe it. And I was really, really shy back then. Super shy. Painfully shy. Shy to the fifth power. But I used to be at my auntie’s house a lot... both my aunties lived in the same complex as we did... so I would see him a lot... Turns out he was friends with my cousin, who is three years older than me. My cousin went back to Nova Scotia for a bit, and asked me to take care of his dog. And this guy took over my cousin’s weed business for two weeks. So he was there for two weeks – I had two weeks to rope him (make him mine),” she laughs, “he had a girlfriend but when I found out who his girlfriend was, I knew I had it in the bag. She (his girlfriend) was so *stush* (stuck up) – not like me, I’m chill. I’m a girl who likes wrestling, sports (laughs)... anyways I worked on it for two weeks... and we started talking after that.”

Kelly and her boyfriend were together for four months before she became pregnant. Unprepared to be a mother, 16-year-old Kelly was not happy with the news. She told her mother about her pregnancy on Christmas day. Although Kelly’s mother, only 33-years-

old herself, was not particularly happy either, she left it to Kelly to choose how to proceed. Kelly decided to speak with her boyfriend, Sean. At 17 years old, Sean was surprisingly excited by the prospect of being a father, so Kelly kept the baby.

Kelly left home at 17 and moved in with Sean to start their family. She admits that it took her a long time to feel good about being a mother. “I was still more into myself then, more than my daughter. I wasn’t as affectionate as I am now with my son, at that age. I wasn’t ready... who’s ready at 16? Not me.” Being with her boyfriend helped a little, though, she adds. “It could’ve been worse,” Kelly says, “because at first he was there to help me, take me out, make me feel good... but after a certain point, after she (her daughter) was born, the relationship kind of fell apart. I think my attention was starting to go towards her, and not him...” She continues, “The relationship lingered longer than it should have. Things faded. Also (there were) changes that he made with himself, his friends, his attitudes... things just changed.”

As Sean began to spend time with a different circle of friends, his level of involvement in the drug game became more serious. Kelly recalls an incident when her daughter was three years old and the police raided her apartment. “They put me in handcuffs in front of my daughter. Thank god my little cousin, who was eight, was there, and I told him to take my daughter in the other room so she couldn’t see. At that point I knew I couldn’t be with him no more.” Although the police did not find any drugs in her home – “thank god,” adds Kelly, “’cause they probably would’ve took me too” – Sean was arrested shortly after and sentenced for selling crack cocaine. He spent two years in prison and Kelly

moved back in with her mother. “We would still talk on the phone, but I just had to leave him. His whole attitude had changed. He was like a different person to me.”

With her daughter’s father in prison and her mother to help her with her child, Kelly’s behavior changed also. “After that, I started going out a lot. I would just party, party, party. Half the time you wouldn’t know even where I was. Every weekend I was out drinking, out at the club. I stopped smoking when I was pregnant, so at least I wasn’t doing that, but I was still drinking a lot and partying. I was a big drinker.” Kelly’s mother made her get a job when she moved back home, so Kelly started working at a telemarketing office during the day. “I hated it. I hated the phone. It was really hard when I first started to work because I was so shy, but then I got used to it. After a while though they changed my campaign for another one and I just couldn’t get the results they wanted, so they ended up firing me.” Kelly recalls those days as “a lot of chilling, doing nothing, and going out drinking with no money,” she says, “I don’t even know how I did it. I was on welfare for a while. And I did try to go back to school a few times – ‘cause they give you money (laughs) – but I would just go for a month and quit. I just couldn’t wake up in the morning... I just couldn’t do it. I went back to ‘adult ed’ four times before I actually stayed. *Four* times.”

While Kelly’s daughter’s father was in prison, Kelly started seeing someone else. By the time Sean was released from jail, Kelly had decided to stay with her new boyfriend, even though Sean was actively trying to reconcile their relationship. “I would talk to him (Sean) on the phone and stuff, but as me and D’s (her new boyfriend at the time)

relationship grew and got stronger, I talked to him less and less... D was a really good guy and I had never met anyone who treated me like he did, so I didn't want to mess it up... After a while, I told Sean the only time he should call me was if it was about Kianna (Kelly's daughter), and we kept it like that for a few years." Kelly and D's relationship soon became serious, and one year into seeing each other, Kelly became pregnant, and they had a son. "Unplanned, again," laughs Kelly, "but like Kianna, a blessing all the same." Sean continued to sell drugs and make money, says Kelly, and although her own relationship with her daughter's father was distant, Sean remained a part of his daughter's life, and he and Kianna were very close.

In 2011, very shortly after Kelly had returned to school for the last time – her fifth attempt at adult education and, incidentally, during her first semester as my student – Sean was shot and killed in a drug-related home invasion in LaSalle, leaving Kelly's daughter Kianna fatherless at nine years old. "My daughter was crushed," says Kelly, looking away, "for a long time she would have moments when she would just start crying. I think she still misses him a great deal... but she's doing better now." Kelly was also shaken by Sean's death. "I had just started back at school and I took a week off... a little more than a week, I guess, to be there for my daughter. It was really hard. I had six classes at the time. I did really bad in math... it was hard. But... I stuck with it."

Kelly gives credit to her partner, D, her son's father, for helping her through her turbulent return to school, and her struggle to remain there since. She says,

“D is a big influence in my life. He encourages me to do so much better than I even thought was possible. Like, I never thought I would get to this point where I am right now. He has a great deal of encouragement... and he got the right words to push me. No one else ever pushed me like that. Nobody ever made me believe that I could go somewhere, do something, be somebody. And it’s a good feeling to know that this person actually thinks that I can do this... D was definitely my main encouragement. I have to give him full credit for where I am right now. Not even my mom or my dad or my family stood by and helped me, or congratulated my hard work like him. I didn’t know there were people like that in the world.”

D has also helped Kianna deal with the death of her own father. “He’s into kids,” says Kelly, “they get along great. For sure he can’t replace her father, but he’s a positive influence. That’s another good thing about him,” she says, smiling.

Kelly also gives credit to her children for being a motivating force in her positive trajectory. “As they get older and ask more questions... I want to be able to answer that I went to high school and I got my diploma. I want them to be able to say ‘my mom is a nurse, my mom works at the hospital’... not have to say that I’m on welfare, or that I stay home and loaf and do nothing... Kids help you realize some things, they help put things into perspective.”

At the time of our interview, Kelly had finished up her final semester of high school, and was scheduled to graduate in a few weeks, at the end of June. In addition to her full DES,

Kelly had successfully completed numerous high-level math and science courses to bolster her diploma, making her eligible for entrance into post-secondary science programs. Kelly had, in fact, been accepted into a two year, pre-university nursing program at Dawson College, and was nervously anticipating her first term of CEGEP⁵ in the fall. Both D and Kelly's mother had also returned to high school. Although D had already graduated from high school in Miami, he had decided to leave his job at the airport in order to complete the prerequisites needed to enter into a pharmacology program. Kelly's mother was graduating alongside her daughter. Kianna, a top athlete in her elementary school, was also graduating, and was registered to start high school after the summer break. Both Kelly and D help her with her homework, and they are actively and happily engaged in their children's lives.

Stigmatization: Race

By the time I reached my teens, the principal's office had become my second home. I fought with other students, talked back to teachers, and was often suspended from school. I believe that most people, both my peers and the adults in my life, saw me as selfish, lazy, and uncaring. In truth, I was a shy girl who had successfully constructed a believable image

⁵ A French loanword and acronym for Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel, known in English as a General and Vocational College. CEGEPs are post-secondary, pre-university colleges in Quebec, similar to junior or community colleges in other provinces. Quebec universities, however, require Quebec high school graduates to obtain a CEGEP diploma – a DEC, or Diplôme d'études collégiales – prior to acceptance into under-graduate programs, unless the student is 21 years old or more, and has applied for mature entry status.

of female bravado in order to mask the considerable emotional pain I was suffering because of conditions at home. (Holbrook, 2011, p.250)

The above quote, from American writer, professor, and arts administrator Carolyn L. Holbrook – who, incidentally, like Kelly, also became a mother at sixteen – is so synonymous with Kelly’s school experience that it could have been written by Kelly herself. Unlike Robbie and Mark, Kelly describes her teenage self as a “bad kid” – a “bad student with bad behavior” who was uninterested in school, fought with other students, disliked her teachers and even, in the case of her art teacher, made them cry. Kelly also concedes that, like Holbrook, she was shy, “painfully shy,” and inadvertently hints that her acting out may have been a way of asserting herself in situations and environments where she felt unsupported and/or unconsidered. Kelly maintains a refreshingly good sense of humor when reflecting on her youth, and to her credit, she takes ownership of her actions rather than immediately placing all blame on external influences, or “the system”, as many students are wont to do. But statistically speaking, and, perhaps in cognitive terms, unbeknownst to Kelly herself, the odds were stacked against her from the start. The unstable circumstances of Kelly’s early home life and the general lack of support and engagement she experienced with regards to education both at home and at school, as well as the negative attitudes towards and low expectations of black students by (predominantly white) teachers that, however covert, she likely encountered at some point in her early educational experience, created the perfect climate for Kelly’s delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and ultimately, her dropping out of school.

Art educator and esteemed academic Wanda B. Knight (2007) identifies the coincidence of race, sex, and poverty as being one that, in the context of a white-supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist society (a label succinctly coined by revered author and cultural theorist bell hooks and used throughout her work), forces black females into a particular place of disparity. “These concerns,” says Knight, “are significant when conceptualizing issues related to Black females as racist, classist, and sexist systems of oppression and inequality shape school experiences and outcomes, and are triple threats to academic achievement. The idea of triple threat implies that Black females inherit three major entangled social realities that are assessed negatively by the larger society – being Black, being female, and being poor” (p.24).

As discussed in the previous chapter, black⁶ students are often subject to both subtle and overt forms of racism in the classroom, which can have a tremendous effect on their academic achievement. This racism is manifested in various ways, such as in educators’ attitudes towards black students, and towards the multifaceted aspects of black culture(s) in general, and also in the Euro-centric content of most elementary and high school curricula that by and large dismisses the contributions of knowledge made by black and African peoples (as well as those made by other peoples of color, and arguably most populations existing outside the perimeters of “whiteness”, who are generally referred to

⁶ “Black” is used in this text as a general term to describe persons of (sub-Saharan) African descent – regardless of national background. The terms “African American” and “African Canadian” denote black Americans and black Canadians, respectively. These terms can be used interchangeably to describe both descendants of the African Diaspora and more recent African immigrants (and their offspring) to North America, however this text focuses on the particular histories and cultures of the former. The terms “white” (used to describe Caucasian persons of European descent) and “black” are not capitalized in this text to signify proper nouns unless appearing in a citation where the spelling is otherwise. Although this spelling is contrary to APA conventions regarding usage of these words to describe race, I maintain that “blackness” and “whiteness” are social constructs, which were, arguably, created in direct opposition and reaction to one another following the forced arrival of African slaves in the Americas.

as “other”). Low expectations of black students, proven to yield equal-to or less-than low results in the classroom (Landsman, 2004), are one of the most common ways that school personnel’s attitudes affect the engagement of black students. Low expectations are communicated through various means, such as, but not limited to: lowered rigor in student evaluation⁷, the instruction of low level and basic skills as opposed to age/level appropriate and advanced material, an emphasis on rote learning rather than critical thinking, less promotion to “gifted” and advanced placement classes, and the questioning of high performance work from black students on tests and assignments (Ford & Moore, 2004). Low expectations also have the potential to result in less concern over the absence, truancy, or failure of a black student. Like Mark, Kelly felt disengaged scholastically. She did not enjoy school, she disliked her teachers, and she felt unmotivated by the curriculum and her educators. According to Kelly’s account of her high school years, the schools she attended not only failed to engage her when she was in class, but did not take much action to retain her or to assist her when it became obvious that she was on a self-destructive path towards dropping out. Citing Madon, Jussim, and Eccles (1997), Knight posits that, “in schools, like other places, the achievement effects of teacher expectations are exponential. If teachers expect students to be high or low achievers, they (students) will respond in ways that achieve this outcome. This is known as the ‘self fulfilling prophecy’” (p.34). In *We Real Cool*, bell hooks (2004) affirms that, historically, one of the reasons black power advocates chose to administer support programs for black students in schools was because of the “widespread recognition that educational systems

⁷ A recent study in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* (Harber et al., 2012) showed that positive feedback bias on the part of white teachers when grading black and Latino students may contribute to insufficient challenges, which in turn serve to undermine minority students' academic achievement.

were not only failing the black poor, but were content with this failure, content to blame the victim” (p.37). Arguably, not much has changed.

Another means of decreasing black student engagement in the classroom is through the devaluation of language. Languages typically associated with certain English-speaking black communities and populations in North America and the Caribbean, very generally labeled “Ebonics” or “Patois”, and English-based dialects such as (Standard) Black English and the many variations of it, are often dismissed as “bad English” or as inferior “dialects” that have no place in the classroom. Although Kelly’s mother tongue is neither Ebonics nor Patois, she does speak a black “Scotian” vernacular, a regionally specific kind of Black English, which, in her case, has been tempered by distance from its socio-geographic origins, Nova Scotia⁸, and modified slightly by Caribbean influences.

Whether or not a listener has the ability to situate Kelly’s speech, what is significant is that Kelly’s language possesses qualities, however subtle they may be, that differentiate it from Standard English, the language of instruction. A discussion of language, therefore, is necessary when examining race vis-à-vis student engagement, because black students, like Kelly, are too often deemed as intellectually inferior based on their natural language, and on their level of proficiency in Standard English.

Although there exists a fair amount of debate surrounding the labeling and classification of black language and speech in North America and the Caribbean, in part due to the

⁸ Nova Scotia’s black communities date back to the 1600s, and were firmly established during and by the period of the American Revolution, making Nova Scotia a settlement destination for black immigrants from the Caribbean and black migrants from the United States and other regions of Canada during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Nova Scotian black (or “Scotian”, as they are colloquially called) communities have sustained incredible inequity and disenfranchisement in spite of their large numbers, the most notable historical incident being the destruction of the entire Africville community in Halifax during the 1960s.

persistently Euro-centric lens of sociolinguistic studies, Ebonics and Patois, spoken by the descendents of enslaved Africans in the African Diaspora of the West, indisputably retain grammatical structures that are predominantly based in West African and Niger-Congo African languages. This is in spite of their employment of an extensive English vocabulary. As such, Ebonics (a term invented in 1973 by Dr. Robert L. Williams, compounding the words “ebony” and “phonics”) and Patois, the language of English-speaking Caribbean countries, most often associated with the spoken and written language of black Jamaicans, as well as the Gullah language of the Sea Islands, are generally (although still somewhat contentiously) understood *not* to be dialects of English, but on the contrary, African-rooted languages in their own right (Smith, 1998; Hoover, 1998). This is opposed to the more dialectical English often referred to as Black English, or Standard Black English, where the grammatical structure used is English but the intonational patterns, pronunciation, and grammatical variations employed can be identified as belonging to or influenced by these black languages (Smith, 1998).

Although the contention over the use and classification of Ebonics, in particular, is largely an American debate, its relevance should not be understated in Canadian classrooms, where the diverse cultural makeup of African Canadian students often yields a linguistic mix of Ebonics, Patois, and regionally specific variations of Canadian Black English. Similar to the United Kingdom, which has seen a large influx of immigrants from Jamaica and other previously colonized Caribbean countries now part of the Commonwealth, a significant percentage of Canada’s English-speaking black population has roots in the West Indies, and as a result, much of Canadian Black English,

particularly in large metropolises like Toronto and Montreal, is heavily infused with the intonation and vocabulary of Jamaican Patois and other Caribbean languages. Other English-speaking African Canadian populations, like the historically deep-rooted black communities of Nova Scotia, where Kelly was born and with whom she strongly identifies, have a vernacular that is more akin to American Black English, but the migration and mixing of these varied groups across the country, as well as the undeniable influence of American black culture, have given birth to variety of hybridized manners of speech.

So why does this matter in school? In many classrooms, English-speaking black students whose mother tongues are not Standard English (as opposed to black students whose mother tongue *is* Standard English, and black students from African countries, French-speaking Caribbean islands, and so on) are expected to use, and evaluated on their proficiency in the language of instruction, not only when addressing or answering the teacher, but also in conversation amongst themselves. Particularly in teacher-directed classrooms where students are given little opportunity to speak at all, when students *do* speak, black students often are told that they mispronounce words or use improper grammar, and that they must “correct” themselves and speak “properly” (Delpit, 2002). The result of this is that students stop wanting to talk. Few would argue the benefit of effectively being able to adjust and adapt one’s speech to given environments and situations, a practice linguists refer to as “code-switching”. But ignorance surrounding the roots and integrity of black languages and black English dialects on the part of many educators, and the far too common belief that these manners of speech are somehow

intrinsically incorrect or inferior (an attitude that is not limited to white teachers but is also shared by some black educators as well) have severe detrimental effects in the classroom, and serve to ostracize, humiliate, and, often times, anger black students.

In her article, *No Kinda Sense*, author and university professor Lisa Delpit (2002) examines her response to her 11-year-old daughter's newly acquired use of Ebonics. After Delpit witnesses the destruction of her daughter's emotional state and self esteem following increasing social exclusion at the predominantly white, private middle school she attends, Delpit transfers her daughter to a majority black school, and immediately observes her daughter's self esteem soar. She also hears her daughter quickly adopt the language of her schoolmates, Ebonics, a language that Delpit contends her daughter was exposed to, but was not spoken in her home. Delpit's reflexive essay acknowledges her struggle to negotiate her mixed feelings – as an educated black woman, as an educator, and as a mother – surrounding her daughter's use of Ebonics. She recognizes that her trepidation is rooted in the stigmatization attached to the language and its speakers as somehow being inferior. Delpit also realizes that her daughter's use of, and enthusiasm for the language is based in her daughter's newfound sense of inclusion, and a positive association and solidarity with a group of children amongst whom her daughter's presence is valued, celebrated, and desired – company amongst whom she feels at home. Delpit uses this understanding to examine why, then, if her daughter can pick up what was essentially a second language, and code switch as needed, do some black students experience difficulty doing the reverse? Why is there resistance to the dialect of instruction?

If educators are not creating the conditions necessary to validate and celebrate student diversity and culture, but are, on the contrary, creating environments where certain students are made to feel unfairly judged, inferior, and anxious, how can we expect students to be enthusiastic about – much less, successful at – acquiring Standard English language proficiency, a competence upon which they are continuously evaluated, in and outside of the classroom. Moreover, how can we expect youth to flourish in any regard under the weight and scrutiny of these deeply ingrained attitudes of inequity on the part of teachers towards black language and other aspects of black culture? “If students are to acquire a second language form in school, teachers must not only see their students as nondeficient, they must understand their brilliance, and the brilliance of their home language” (Delpit, 2002, p.42).

Another important factor to consider in the successful engagement and education of black students like Kelly (and certainly any student of color, or arguably “other” background) is the content of the general curriculum and its lack of material that reflects student cultural diversity in the classroom. In her essay on culturally relevant pedagogy, Professor Gloria Ladson-Billings (2011) states, “the perspective of culturally relevant teachers is that the curriculum is a cultural artifact and as such is not an ideologically neutral document” (p.36). She adds, “The history curriculum reflects ethnocentric and sometimes xenophobic attitudes and regularly minimizes the faults of the United States and some European nations” (p.37). Similarly, Delpit (2002) maintains that the imbalance created by a lack of curricular material chronicling black and African contributions to history and

contemporary culture, and the hyper-dissemination of negative images of black people in the media has a dire effect on black students. She contends,

We have not fully realized the extent to which the media and general American belief systems have permeated the consciousness of African American children. Many have internalized the belief of the larger society that they and people who look like them are less than the intellectual norm. From media portrayals of African American criminals, to news broadcasts which ignore the positive models of African American maleness, to a focus in schools on slavery rather than on the brilliance of the African intellectual legacy, children come to believe that there is nothing in their heritage to connect to schooling and academic success.

(p.46)

Delpit's statement touches on the issue of the miseducation of black male youth – a dissertation topic in its own right. This matter is important to mention – even briefly, however superficial that may seem – in a discussion pertaining to Kelly's experiences, because men, even fundamentally disenfranchised men like so many black males are, exert a huge influence on women's lives in the patriarchal context of our society. What is more, they are fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, and friends, and as such, their success, self-realization, and survival impact the lives of countless women and children. Without diminishing the particularly perilous challenges that black females like Kelly are faced with – the victims of what Knight (2007) calls the “triple threat” – young black males are also faced with what can only be described as a “crisis of black masculinity” – a

systematic stratagem that has kept black men “in their place since the era of slavery by keeping them uneducated, economically subordinated, and under tight surveillance by oppressive policing and penal systems” (Carlson, 2012, xi). Statistically, black male students are “twice as likely to be at risk for dropping out when compared to young African American females and are suspended more often than Whites in elementary schools, and twice as often in high school. Throughout K-12 schooling, African American males have the highest suspension and drop out rates” (Davis, 2009, p.404), and the statistics on black male incarceration rates are notoriously alarming. One need not look any further than Kelly’s own family for stark evidence of this calamitous reality – Sean, a high school drop out, was incarcerated and eventually killed in violence, leaving Kelly’s daughter fatherless. Although the issue of black masculinity and education is highly complex, and for various reasons cannot be adequately analyzed within the perimeters of this text, it is critical to highlight that the consensus – among scholars, sociologists, activists, cultural theorists, educators, and others, who have thoroughly investigated this matter with a vested interest in the success of black students – is that schools are failing to provide black male youth with credible and viable examples of positive black masculinity. On the contrary, the contemporary school system and its curricula serve to reinforce standards of inequality, disengagement, self-sabotage, and mental, emotional, and financial poverty among young black males (Prier, 2012; Middleton, Coleman & Lewis, 2011; Delpit, 2002; Davis, 2009).

Culturally relevant pedagogy has the potential to critically mitigate the challenges that are imposed upon black students, both male and female, as well as other students of color

(and “others”) in what bell hooks patently identifies as our white-supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist social context. It also has the capacity to create spaces of learning and inquisition that are safe, and encourage students to embark on processes of inquiry themselves, giving students the informed agency to ignore, work “extra” hard against or live in “otherness” and liberate themselves (Knight, 2007) from society’s perceptions of who they are. Culturally relevant teaching practices understand that schools are but one aspect of a student’s learning experience, and that the world outside of school is wrought with lessons and messages that continuously affect all students’ senses of self, purpose, and potential. The void of culturally relevant material in the curricula is perhaps the one of the easiest imbalances to fix, even within the constraints of time, texts, and exams. Effective teachers who understand this not only implement student-interest and culturally relevant material, but also “assume that an asymmetrical (even antagonistic) relationship exists between poor students of color and society. Thus, their vision of their work is one of preparing students to combat inequity by being highly competent and critically conscious” (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p.34).

Stigmatization: Teenage Motherhood

As with Robbie, Kelly’s mother was a single teenage parent. Children of teenage parents are, in addition to other adverse conditions, more likely to have behavioral problems, drop out of high school, become incarcerated, and, in the case of female children, like Kelly, give birth as adolescents themselves (Hoffman, 2008). Kelly’s family life was

subject to periods of considerable instability, even in her blended family with the presence of her stepfather. Although Kelly's stepfather was a significant parental figure throughout her youth, the absence of her own biological father likely produced a certain amount of bitterness in Kelly, which is palpable in her clear disinterest when she speaks about her estranged relationship with him and the lack of contact with his side of the family. In contrast, Kelly seems to consciously avoid making comments about her mother's parenting that might be tenuously interpreted as negative, and as such, does not mention any memories or feelings of neglect as a child, with regards to education or otherwise. However, when she credits her partner, D, for motivating her to excel in school, Kelly poignantly states, "Not even my mom or my dad or my family stood by and helped me, or congratulated my hard work like him."

In all likelihood, Kelly's mother probably felt she was ill-equipped to help Kelly with her school work and in not helping her, she was unable to fully impart to her daughter the importance of education – or give her all the attention, time, and guidance that she required – in spite of what we can only assume were her best intentions. She and her mother, says Kelly, were not that close when she was young, and during her childhood and adolescent years, Kelly says she felt closer to and spent more time with her aunt, her mother's younger sister, who always lived in close proximity.

Kelly also admits that becoming a mother was a difficult adjustment for her the first time around, and, that at 16-years-old, she arrived at the role of being a young parent quite reluctantly. Kelly quietly discloses, in thoughtful and slowly measured speech, that she

was not very affectionate with her daughter, and regrets being more preoccupied with herself than she was with her child for the first few years of Kianna's life. The chances that Kelly's mother experienced similar or the same difficulties as Kelly in adapting to teenage motherhood are high, and in fact, Kelly's struggle to become an effective parent may have been, at least in part, modeled on the behavior and attitudes of her mother.

The profound influence of parents' behavior and parenting style, as well as their attitudes and experiences towards and with education cannot be understated. According to a 2008 report released by Statistics Canada (Luong, 2008), which highlights the results from a pan-Canadian, cross-sectional study entitled The Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID), a study which "examines the personal and long-term socioeconomic characteristics of women aged 30 to 39 who gave birth as teenagers" (p.6), "family background variables (are) statistically significant" (p.9). The study showed that among teenage mothers, those whose own mothers had completed postsecondary education were more likely to complete high school and significantly more likely to complete post secondary studies than those whose mothers had never graduated from high school. The influence of the participants' fathers' education level almost mirrored that of the mothers, with only slightly higher postsecondary completion rates. (p.9). The study results show that "even parents who completed only high school (are) positively related to the likelihood of completing high school and postsecondary studies," and that "overall, parental education would seem to have a great influence on a woman's own educational outcome, regardless of teenage motherhood" (p.9). In other words, the positive influence

on young mothers of having one, if not both parents who are high school graduates appears to ease even the most adverse challenges of teenage motherhood.

Although Kelly's problems in school did not begin with her pregnancy, as a teenage mother, the chances of Kelly finishing high school within the regular time frame – that is, between the ages of 16 and 18 years old – diminished considerably. Indeed, Kelly states that the reason she stopped going to school was not because she was struggling with her work – on the contrary, she had managed to complete Grade 9 successfully after being promoted to her “right grade” from Grade 7, and was not at risk of failing Grade 10. Rather, according to Kelly's account, she dropped out because she had become pregnant and was uncomfortable going to school. The stigmatization that Kelly feared, and likely would have faced, as a teenage mother is well documented, and was probably something she was, to some extent, familiar with, being the child of a teenage mother herself. Stereotypes of teenage mothers are plentiful, and overwhelming negative, and it is little surprise that Kelly chose to forgo stigmatization at school by dropping out when she learned of her pregnancy.

Although she clearly does not (or chooses not to) give them much credence, Kelly, like Robbie, was subject to difficult conditions at home, such as instability and a lack of guidance, which compromised her school life and her tenuous relationship with education. Like Mark, Kelly was faced with ineffective teaching practices at school, that, in her case, likely had the added quality of being adversarial and racially biased to not be in her favor. Being a victim of the “triple threat” (Knight, 2007) placed Kelly in a

particular position of disadvantage, to a large extent even more so than Robbie and Mark, and her teenage pregnancy only served to compound these challenges, force her into further marginalization, and reduce her chances of success. However, in spite of this, Kelly was able to find motivation in her circumstances, and with the encouragement of her partner, a reason to succeed. Her two children, unplanned, “but blessings all the same,” have given Kelly the incentive to challenge herself, as well as to confront the cycle of young single motherhood, undereducation, and inequity – and all of their ensuing consequences – that was passed on to her. In graduating from high school and seeking higher education, creating more stability in her home, and cultivating a loving and close relationship with her children, Kelly has defied her inheritance and reversed the paradigm – an act that, in its own quiet and personal way, is thunderously political.

Responses to Art & Art Education

During her interview, Kelly lists all the classes she disliked as a youth in school, so I am pleasantly surprised when, after I ask if there were *any* subjects she liked at all, Kelly quips, “I liked my art class.” She explains, “You know, where you do, like, arts and crafts and stuff... paper maché, drawing, learning about colors... that kind of stuff. That class. And I liked gym. That’s it.” I ask what about her art class she enjoyed, and she responds, “It was the projects, where you have to make certain things... draw pictures, make some kind of display of some sort... (For example) the teacher would ask us how we would set up an amusement park, and we would have to make a display with all the rides we would

have, and where they would go. (I liked) being creative... it was fun.” I ask Kelly if there were aspects of the art class that differed from her academic courses, aside from the content, that made the class enjoyable, and she says, “It was probably that we had interaction with other students that made it more interesting, ‘cause you know, you could find out what they were working on, what they were doing, you could talk about your different projects. That keeps you interested in what the class is about. Like, if I talked to another student about their project, I could suggest something (for them) to do, and they could suggest something for my project too. That keeps it interesting. It wasn’t like math class, where you don’t get to suggest nothing, you just sit there and listen to the teacher ramble on for the whole hour.” I ask Kelly what her impressions were, or memories are, of her art teacher. “Aw man, the only thing I actually remember about her was making her cry! Like, the whole class just made her cry,” says Kelly. “She couldn’t control the class. The whole class was just ‘outa wack’ – doin’ this, doin’ that – she would yell to try to get us under control and it wasn’t happening. She would just cry. She was *soft*. A big softy. I don’t even know why they put her as our teacher.” I ask if her art teacher taught other courses, or if she was a specialist art teacher. Kelly responds, “No, she only taught art. But yeah, she would just cry more than teach, and that’s my first and my last impression – I don’t remember nothing else about that woman.” I ask Kelly if she can recall if her teacher was a good artist. “*No*,” she answers, brusquely, “I don’t remember if she was a good artist, she didn’t really do no art – all she did was cry. *No*,” she repeats tersely, as if annoyed by the memory of her teacher crying, “I don’t know if she was good.” For clarity, I ask Kelly if she recalls her teacher ever demonstrating what she wanted them to do, or showing them her own work as an example. She responds, “No.

She would show us things other students had done, but she never showed us nothing she had done.” I ask Kelly if she thinks her art teacher was capable of doing the work she asked her students to do, and she answers with an animated, “Naw, no,” shaking her head. “C’mon, how hard is it to be an art teacher?” She continues, “You can just go on the Internet and search things, (search) projects for the students to do and then tell them to do it. And if they ask you ‘Miss, can you show us?’ You just gotta say ‘well here’s something, um, Jimmy did (laughs), from the other class – my stuff’s at home.’ So yeah, she’s giving us instructions but she ain’t never show us what she did with those instructions herself (laughs)... I don’t remember her drawing nothing, I don’t remember her making nothing. She just made tears (laughs) and then she went home.”

Later in the interview, when I ask Kelly if she would be interested in taking an art class now, in adult education, her response echoes Robbie and Mark. “I think when I first started (adult education), I would’ve took it, but at this point, if I had the option, I’d take something that’s more beneficial towards my program, like biology, or psychology, or something like that,” she says. “I would’ve took it before though, yeah.” Her answer indicates to me that, like Robbie, Kelly questions the practicality of art in adult education, especially when one has a focused career path in mind, so I ask her frankly if she thinks she has any use for art, or learning about art. She responds, “Um, no. Not in my lifestyle, no. The only use I can think of would be decorating my house or something, like, knowing about the colors and stuff. But no... I mean, I don’t mind going to the museum and looking at the artwork, I guess... but doing it myself, no... I guess I could also maybe do some art with my kids, but they’re more into sports anyway.”

As with Robbie and Mark, Kelly's recollections of her art education experiences are few and vague, but she too recalls enjoying her art class in school, and overall, has positive memories of her art-making experiences, in spite of what she describes as an ineffective art teacher who was poorly prepared to manage and inspire Kelly and her classmates. Kelly never mentions whether she felt she herself was technically "good" or "bad" at making art, but rather, focuses her responses almost entirely on the positive social interactions that took place in the art classroom, that were so contrary to her experiences in other, more teacher-directed classes. She also fondly recalls the opportunity for creativity in the context of both individual and group student-interest projects.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the art classroom is a highly appropriate milieu for collaborative learning situations and student-directed teaching. It is ideal for encouraging the development of student creativity and ideas, and critical thinking skills. The art class environment can provide students with the opportunity for, as Mark puts it, "confrontation and instigation" – practices that also make the art classroom an idyllic setting for teachers to employ culturally relevant pedagogy and introduce culturally diverse course material.

Although the development of various competencies are generally part of the K-12 art curriculum, most of the actual course content is generated by the teacher, giving educators the authority to create their own syllabus. This bestows art teachers with tremendous responsibility. If students are given the opportunity to be exposed to and

interact with a multiplicity of artists, art practices, and ideas, art teachers might set the precedent in engaging those students, like Kelly, who rarely see themselves reflected and celebrated in course material, and seldom feel their voices and contributions – whether individual or collective – sought out and validated. If “the perspective from which we approach art is overdetermined by location” (hooks, 1995, p.2), then artful experiences within the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy have the potential to give all students, and particularly those located on or beyond the margins, the chance to shift and expand their site of perception and construct a “gaze” from wherever they wish to stand. The culturally relevant art teacher understands that “art constitutes one of the rare locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact” (hooks, 1995, p.8).

Reflection

I was left thinking about Kelly’s interview for many days after we met. For one, I was happy to have spent time with her and to have met her children, who I had heard so much about but had never encountered prior to that afternoon. My sense of pride in Kelly for her accomplishments cannot be understated, and I was touched when she credited me as being one of a handful of teachers whose classes she had genuinely enjoyed. In my own teaching practice I actively seek out and incorporate diverse material outside of the curriculum, and I encourage students to inform me of their interests so that I might provide them with related material and better tailor the syllabus to their needs. My hope

is that the literature and imagery that I incorporate in supplementing the core curricular material might allow students to not only engage more with the course, in particular, and with school in general, but also help to strengthen their sense of potential. This means that my classes notoriously have more work than other teachers', but from my students' level of involvement in the material I suspect that they do not mind. I also feel it necessary to be honest with my students, and thereby always contextualize and openly critique the material and expectations of the course with regards to language, culture, socioeconomic and gender issues, as well as in terms of real life pragmatism. The research that followed my interview with Kelly encourages me to continue learning how to push the boundaries of possibility in the classroom, and Kelly's feedback about my courses and teaching practice reassures me that it is worth it.

The second thing that stayed with me following my interview with Kelly was not so encouraging. It was hard for me to understand how I had never learned of the death of her daughter's father until two years after, and it was difficult for me to accept that, while she was my student, she was experiencing a traumatic life event and yet I had completely failed to sense that something was amiss. In the past five years I have also attended my share of funerals, including my brother's, and those of a few male friends and acquaintances who, like Sean, died too young under violent circumstances. I am someone who knows loss, and is familiar with the sometimes-untimely ways of street life, so it troubles me to think that, though Kelly and I did not know each other well at the time, I missed the opportunity to support her in some capacity.

With this in mind, I reflect back to the closing of our interview. While discussing adult education teacher-student relationships in general terms, Kelly stated that, although the effort to connect with one another should be mutual, she feels that it is the teacher's responsibility to create a dynamic that makes the student "comfortable enough to say what (they) need to say." I am reluctant to consider myself an unapproachable person, but it is conceivable that in putting on my "teacher's hat" I sometimes disconnect and make myself emotionally inaccessible. In doing so, perhaps there are times that I render invisible some of those qualities that make me human and that would allow my students to see me as I am – which is, in reality, not so different from them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Final Considerations

The participants recruited for this study were typical of the non-immigrant demographic of adult education students that I have taught and encountered over the past five years as a teacher in the adult sector of the English Montreal School Board. Although I cannot make any generalizations from the results of this study, my findings certainly inform the fields of art and adult education, both independently and where they intersect. Through the emerging themes, I was able to gain insight into the experiences and perspectives of three adult learners, information that I believe is representative of a fair number of adult students coming from youth sector schooling backgrounds in Montreal.

In this final chapter, I return to my two thesis questions and consider the findings of my interviews and the ensuing analyses in the context of these inquiries. Subsequently, the practical implications of the study's results on art education practices are contemplated. The text concludes with a final reflection on my research experience.

How do selected adult learners coming from youth sector schools in Montreal perceive their educational history and their current adult education experience?

All three participants recalled their educational history in both elementary and high school as overwhelmingly negative. The participants were alike in their responses in that

they consistently stated that the one, perhaps only, positive feature of their childhood and adolescent school experience was the social and interactive aspect. With the exception of one teacher, Mark's Grade 10 math and science teacher, who he described as "exceptional – he put students first, the curriculum second," the participants could not recall any educators who had motivated them or whose teaching style had succeeded in engaging them. The same teacher aside, the three participants could neither recall any school staff (teachers, counselors, sports coaches or administrators) that followed up on them after they dropped out. All three participants expressed the feeling that the schools were glad to see them go.

There were no specific life events, or critical turning points that the participants could identify as precipitating their general condition of disengagement with school, which began at the elementary level. With the exception of Kelly, who became pregnant at 16, no life events immediately affected their decisions to drop out.

Robbie volunteered clear connections between his home environment growing up, which was highly unstable, and his poor behavior and academic performance at school, a deduction on his part that is well supported by research. Neither Mark nor Kelly stressed a similar link, although Kelly mentioned a general lack of support from her mother and father specifically with regards to education. Otherwise, Kelly was careful not to be openly critical of her family, both immediate and extended. Mark, whose family was the most stable and supportive of the three, made no link between home and school, and in contrast, was very positive in describing his parents and his relationship to them.

Both Robbie and Mark were openly critical of their educational experiences within “the system” (a term used by both) and shared the sense that they had somehow been “failed” or had “fallen through the cracks.” Kelly, on the other hand, seemed to place the better part of the responsibility on herself. She also appeared to harbor less general frustration, but this could have been the result of her having recently finished school, and therefore potentially having an ameliorated outlook.

It bears mentioning that all three participants smoked marijuana in their youth. While I would not attribute their general apathy towards school during adolescence (and beyond, in the case of Robbie, who only recently quit, and Mark, who still smokes) solely to their marijuana smoking, I do not think it helped and I believe it may have been a mitigating factor. Further research would be necessary to determine the extent to which the use of marijuana –socially, financially, and neurologically – affects student engagement, especially among adolescents. Marijuana smoking and drug use was not the focus of my inquiry in this study and I did not want to risk making the participants feel defensive by going further with this line of potentially inappropriate questioning.

The participants’ attitudes about their adult education experiences varied greatly. Robbie gave the overall impression that he felt lost, using terminology such “going nowhere,” “too late,” and “pointless” in describing his current situation. An awareness of time and the notions of “time passed” and “time wasted” were major concerns of his. Robbie also admitted a tendency to be defeatist and a habit of self-sabotage; indeed, the fact that he

stopped attending school six credits shy of graduation would support this estimation. Robbie's job often interfered with school, and the intersection of working life and education seemed more than just a scheduling conflict, but a mental clash as well. Robbie expressed that he has no career trajectory in mind beyond his current trade, which he identified as one reason for his frustration.

In contrast, Mark had a career trajectory that he dismissed as "the only program on the list ... that doesn't make me want to jump off a bridge." Unlike Robbie, he expressed that his ideal plan would be to "not have a plan." While not against learning and skills acquisition, Mark openly expressed a negative assessment of the "institution of school," and he was clearly loath being a participant in "the system" again, although, as he put it, he "understands necessity" and is "playing the game." He was most adamant of the three participants in describing the value of the social interactions that take place in the school environment, and how he felt those exchanges help to make him a better person. He explicitly cited the social aspect as being the "only good thing about going to school."

Kelly seemed the most positive of the three in describing her adult education experience. Again, this may be in part due to the fact that she was only weeks from graduating when our interview took place, but my observations of her while she was my student, one and two years prior, are consistent with this assessment. Kelly appeared considerably more motivated than either Robbie or Mark, and had a clear career path in place. In spite of being a victim of the "triple threat" (Knight, 2007) and experiencing what she described as fluctuating levels of engagement with and success in specific courses throughout her

studies, as well as having to meet the demands of her home life, Kelly persisted. Kelly also seemed more socially independent as a student and less concerned with the community aspect of school, likely because her primary interest and sources of motivation are at home: her children and partner.

What are adult students' attitudes and responses to art, art education, and the implementation of an arts-based program to the core academic curriculum?

With the exception of Kelly's art teacher, who, according to her recollection, was easily and often brought to tears, all three participants recalled their elementary and adolescent high school art education experiences positively, albeit rather vaguely. The fact that their recollections were collectively and consistently so vague and few might indicate that art education is fairly marginal in most schools, particularly in elementary schools where it should be a central part of the curriculum. The three participants expressed a generally positive attitude towards art in the present time. None of the participants currently do any art making, although both Robbie and Mark have an interest in music. Robbie is a deejay and he is interested in electronic music production, while Mark plays the guitar.

In spite of their positive recollections and their shared beliefs in the value of "creativity", when asked later in the interviews if they would voluntarily participate in an art education course or program at the adult secondary level, the participants expressed little to no significant interest. Both Robbie and Kelly seriously questioned the practicality of art

education at the adult level, and of art and art making as serious pursuits in general. Robbie stated that a career in art is something only “middle class people who live in their parents’ basement” could afford to pursue. When the question was rephrased in the context of music, a major interest and hobby of his, Robbie still maintained the view that the music industry is “too saturated to succeed” and therefore any serious dedication of his time and energy to music making would not be practical. Kelly felt that once a student had determined their career trajectory (presumably outside of the arts), a course in art making or art appreciation served no purpose other than to gain credits, credits that, in her case, would be better obtained by studying more “relevant” subjects. Kelly expressed that art does not fit into her “lifestyle” and that were she to take art classes it would be for practical reasons, such as learning about color in order to decorate her home.

In contrast, although initially uncertain about taking an art education course at the adult level, because of his desire to finish school “as fast as humanly possible” (and the assumption that said art class might slow him down), Mark did not immediately reject the idea. Particularly when the question was rephrased, as it was for Robbie, in a musical context, Mark stated that yes, he would be interested in taking a music course were it offered, and after further thought, he added that he would also study drawing and take an art appreciation course. The former, he posited, is a “transferable skill” worth having, and the latter, he stated, would be a viable means of bringing individuals together to discuss and exchange ideas – activities Mark considered important.

Interestingly, Mark possessed a vocabulary and a confidence in articulating his ideas and opinions about art, as well as an understanding of art's intrinsic value, that neither Robbie nor Kelly shared. This was notably in spite of his very limited formal art education experience, one that may have been briefer and less "immersive", as he put it, than the other two participants. Mark stated, "Art is valuable because it inspires people. It's a great means of expression, for imagining, and envisioning." The terminology that Mark used suggests some contact and familiarity with the language of art. Access and exposure will greatly affect one's ability to communicate his or her opinions about and responses to art, and presumably, Mark has been more acclimatized to art production, as well as to the view that art and art making have intangible, fundamental worth. Robbie and Kelly, on the other hand, appear to have had less contact, and likely, little exposure to art or art making that they find meaningful or relevant. This has affected not only their ability to comfortably express their opinions about art, but also their perspectives on art's merit. Robbie and Kelly questioned the "worth" of art and art making in terms of practical value, and they seemed to view artwork itself primarily as a commodity. Their comments were incongruent with their statements on the importance of creativity, however – as though creativity was a theoretical space they themselves were not permitted to inhabit.

In Coman (2004), poor literacy skills are given as a possible reason why adult learners may "feel excluded from an exclusive institution such as an art museum" (p.76). Given that all three participants in this study are highly literate and articulate, especially in relation to the average English-speaking adult secondary student, I posit that this feeling of exclusion and disconnectedness, and the consequential dismissal of art's value, as

demonstrated by Robbie and Kelly, might also be affected by one's socioeconomic and cultural background. If art is deemed largely impractical and irrelevant to survival amongst those for whom survival is an issue, then the likelihood of being exposed to art and art making within the home and the community is greatly diminished. "Many of us do not know that black folks create diverse art, and we may not see them doing it, especially if we live in working-class or underclass households ... art (both the product and the process of creation) may be so devalued – not just in underclass communities, but in diverse black contexts, and, to some extent, in our society as a whole – that we may deem art irrelevant even if it is abundantly in our midst" (hooks, 1995, p.2). Hooks' statement, although racially contextualized, aptly describes many socio-economically disadvantaged and marginalized people's relationship to art. With this in mind, if the majority of adult education students come from low-income circumstances – such as Robbie and Kelly and a large segment of the adult student demographic that I have encountered as a teacher – perhaps this perspective supersedes and informs what then becomes the secondary issue of literacy, making art education a starting point for addressing a multiplicity of issues within the educational framework.

Implications for Art Education

The results of this study suggest that in order for youth to succeed in school, they must have the optimal conditions of stability and support at home, regardless of socioeconomic background and parents' level of education – factors that can augment one's potential for

success but certainly do not determine it. In addition, and especially for those whose home environments are not favorable, in that they are unstable, inconsistent, and/or unsupportive, students must have adequate access to mentoring and guidance programs that are both emotionally nourishing and pragmatic.

Student-directed, student-interest, and culturally relevant teaching pedagogies might better serve learners from marginalized backgrounds and students deemed “at-risk” than traditional, transmission-style teacher-directed practices, which subscribe to “a kind of social Darwinism that supports the survival of the fittest” (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p.35). Educators who employ these transformative teaching methods understand that not all learners have been given the skills and nourishment necessary to reach the standards of what is considered intellectually and psychologically “fit” – thereby rendering unequal their chances at “survival” on what is a most asymmetrical playing field. This does not dismiss, however, the value of these teaching methods for all students.

Arguably, these pedagogies would be as, if not more, effective for adult learners as they would for children and adolescents. Adults returning to high school are in particular need of more flexible and transformative, even revolutionary, teaching practices – practices that help them to strengthen positive self-awareness, confidence, and higher order thinking skills. Art and art education are inherently conducive to these transformative pedagogies – which can be practiced in part, in whole, or in combination – and the art classroom possesses the value of being able to create spaces that are, at once, stimulating and safe, solitary and interactive. By employing pedagogical methods that validate

student voices and perspectives, and by allowing students to investigate and experience a diversity of artistic traditions and practices, art educators can help students engage their critical and creative minds, and liberate their imaginations. Art education teaching practices that are inclusive and culturally relevant, and seek to make links between the arts and other disciplines, might not only improve student engagement with the arts but also student engagement with school and education in general. This can, in turn, positively affect student academic performance by strengthening connections to and enthusiasm for learning, improving overall literacy, and imparting students with a sense of informed agency over their lives.

Reflection

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a household where, in spite of considerable instability and periods of dire financial difficulty, much value was placed in education. Even when my mother was not able to be as supportive or attentive as I would have liked, she did her best to make sure I would escape the stigma of being labeled as a “welfare kid” by ending her dependence on social assistance and returning to school twice during my youth. I was fortunate to have developed a love of reading and art at a young age, which fostered in me a powerful relationship with words and the musicality of language, and a love of artful expression that proved to be a continuously grounding force. I also attribute this to my mother, who, with limited means, purchased used books and colored

pencils, and gave me my own record player – gifts that allowed me to transcend an immediate reality that was, in many ways, permeated with instability, pain, and hardship.

As an adult, I see the vestiges of my mother’s gifts, including the unintended lessons of her struggle that have informed my evolving consciousness. Without them, I am fully aware that my chances of success would have been significantly compromised.

Working as an educator, especially while studying and building a family of my own, has also presented me with gifts in the form of what are sometimes difficult lessons that have both challenged and inspired me. Those lessons, and this research, through the lens of my own, often antagonistic, life experiences, have had a transformative impact on my self-awareness. I think of my participants, in particular Robbie and Kelly, who were my students, and I commit myself not only to reflect on and improve my practices as a teacher, but to expand my capacity for openness and engage in mindful connectedness with my students as a human being. It would have been impossible for me to do this research without reflecting on my own life history, but the extent to which the process of self-reflection would impact me was wholly unforeseen. For this I am grateful. “Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (hooks, 1994, p.21).

Taking risks, whether as adult students returning to school, or as teachers committed to transformative pedagogy, is an endeavor inherently rife with struggle. But if we are to succeed we must remember that the benefits outweigh the discomfort, which like all things, will pass, and that any undertaking that seeks to improve our consciousness, and create standards of equal empowerment and agency are undoubtedly worth the effort.

“We cannot be easily discouraged. We cannot despair when there is conflict. Our solidarity must be affirmed by shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth”

(hooks, 1994, p.33).

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**APPENDIX A — CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN *Understanding the Adult Learner:
Life Story Research and the Adult Secondary Student Experience***

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Madeleine Bonnie Zehavi of the Department of Art Education of Concordia University (514-449-1363, bonniezehavi@gmail.com), under the supervision of Dr. Lorrie Blair, Department of Art Education of Concordia University (514-848-2424 ext 4642, lorrie.blair@concordia.ca).

A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is as follows: to gain a better understanding of the adult secondary students' experiences (history and current) with art and education in Montreal.

B. PROCEDURES

I understand that I will be interviewed (by Madeleine Zehavi) on two occasions, at a café or at a similarly quiet, safe location of my choosing. Interviews will be about my life experiences, from childhood to present, and will focus on my educational experiences and my experiences with art and art education. Interviews will be approximately one hour, and audio recorded *if I agree*. Otherwise, Madeleine Zehavi will take notes. My identity will remain confidential, except to the researcher, Madeleine Zehavi. I understand that all hard-copy data will be stored in a secure location and digital files will be saved in a locked hard drive. Data will be kept for two years and then destroyed.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

I understand that there are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. If I feel emotional discomfort at any time I am free to decline from answering the question that may have triggered the discomfort. I am also free to suspend or end the interview at any time if I so wish.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.
- I understand that my participation in this study is CONFIDENTIAL. Participants will be known by pseudonyms.
- I understand that the data from this study may be published.
- I agree that the interview may be audio recorded: YES NO

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

If at any time you have questions about the proposed research, please contact the study's Principal Investigator: Madeleine Zehavi, Department of Art Education, Concordia University (514-449-1363)
Email: bonniezehavi@gmail.com

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance Advisor, Concordia University, Dr. Brigitte Des Rosiers, at (514) 848-2424 x7481 or by email at bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca.

APPENDIX B — SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe your family, starting with your grandparents, if you wish, or your parents?
2. What was it like to grow up in your family household as a child?
3. Can you tell me what your elementary school experience was like?
4. What were your favorite classes in elementary school?
5. What kinds of things do you remember doing in art class?
6. Did you enjoy art class? Did you like your teacher(s)?
7. Did you enjoy making things or dancing, singing etc as a kid?
8. What kinds of activities were you involved in outside of school?
9. Did anyone help you with your homework?
10. What were your parents/caregivers' attitudes towards art? Towards music?