

RE-ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING CONTEXTS:  
NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN ADULTS AND YOUTHS IN THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL  
DEVELOPMENT

by

RENIRA ELYODI VELLOS

B.A., Wheeling Jesuit University, 1996

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
(Development, Learning and Culture)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(Vancouver)

March, 2009

## **Abstract**

Framed by sociocultural theory, this study used participant observations and active interviews to examine the classroom practices of adults and youths at one alternative high school. Constant comparative analysis and a participation framework used as a heuristic device to organize data foregrounded the social and discursive practices that both were constituted by and constitutive of an engaging learning context. This study advances a sociocultural model for engagement based on the community of difference that youths and adults co-constructed. It highlights the key role of adults and other mediational means in mediating relationships that promote engaging learning contexts. Though alternative high schools are symptomatic of the contradictions inherent in the process of schooling, for the adults and youths who participate in them, they are often rich learning communities.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>List of Tables.....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>List of Figures .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>Dedication.....</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Context of Study.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Problem Statement.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Significance of Research.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Research Purpose and Rationale.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Overview of Thesis.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: Literature Review .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Section 1: Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>13</b>
General Genetic Law of Cultural Development.....	13
Mediation .....	15
Culture.....	16
Internalization .....	17
The Zone of Proximal Development .....	18
Social practices .....	20
Discursive practices .....	21
Joint construction in the ZPD in the context of a re-engagement program .....	23
<b>Section 2: Literature Related to Schools, Early School Leaving, and Engagement .....</b>	<b>24</b>

The Purpose of School in Industrialized Societies .....	25
Factors Associated with Early School Leaving .....	29
Pupil-related factors .....	29
School-related factors .....	30
Constructed factors .....	32
Macrosystem factors .....	33
Engaging and Disengaging from School .....	35
Relationships with teachers .....	39
Power dynamics: Student autonomy and shared responsibility .....	40
Students' perceptions of school: Curricula and teachers .....	42
Constructing Re-engagement .....	45
<b>Summary of the Chapter .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: Methodology .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Researcher Positionality .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Context of Research .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>School Board Report: A Description of Present Day Mountain High .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Gaining Access .....</b>	<b>57</b>
Meeting the Head Teacher .....	57
Meeting the Teachers .....	58
Meeting the Youths .....	59
<b>Participant Selection .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Data Sources .....</b>	<b>62</b>
Participant Observations .....	63
Active Interview .....	65
Organizing the Data .....	66
Participation framework .....	67
Context description .....	67
<b>Data Collection Procedures .....</b>	<b>67</b>

Participant Observations.....	68
Active Interviews.....	68
<b>Data Analysis.....</b>	<b>68</b>
Data Analysis Procedures.....	69
Doing Analysis: The Puzzle versus the Lego.....	70
<b>Ethical Considerations.....</b>	<b>72</b>
Challenges .....	72
Suggestions to Researchers .....	73
<b>Addressing Validity and Reliability in a Qualitative Study.....</b>	<b>74</b>
Triangulation .....	74
Member Checking .....	75
<b>Summary of the Chapter.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: Mountain High “Feels like Coming Home” .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Research Time at Mountain High .....</b>	<b>77</b>
Participants .....	77
Schedule .....	78
<b>Morning Routines at Mountain High: Life in this Community .....</b>	<b>79</b>
Before the Beginning of Classes .....	80
Jim’s Block A Class: English 11 .....	83
Linda’s Block B Class: Social Studies 11 .....	88
<b>Familiar Classroom Practices at Mountain High .....</b>	<b>92</b>
Passing the Test .....	93
Power in the Classroom Context .....	96
Who’s the Boss? .....	97
Showing Up and Being on Time .....	99
<b>Defining Commitment to Community: The “Philosophy” of Mountain High.....</b>	<b>101</b>
A Commitment to Community: A Staff Characteristic.....	102

Sense of Community: “Our Mandate to Our Students” .....	104
Extensions of “Community” to Parents.....	107
Ministry of Children and Families: Staff Perceptions That They “Dropped the Ball” .....	109
Vision of Mountain High by the Head Teacher: “The Whole Person” .....	110
Orientation: Staff Introducing Youths to School Board Rules and Policies .....	114
<b>What is “Alternative” ? : A Community of Difference .....</b>	<b>116</b>
Relationships: “The Currency is Respect” .....	117
Relationships between adults.....	117
Relationships between adults and youths.....	118
Extending the relationship to the institution of school .....	122
Community of Difference.....	122
Adults: Mediating youths’ identities.....	123
Reconstructing identity: Youths.....	126
Reconstructing identity: Adults .....	127
One alternative, one community .....	128
Pedagogy of Flexibility .....	130
Time .....	131
Physical space .....	134
Learning tasks .....	135
<b>Summary of the Chapter.....</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: A Sociocultural Model for Re-engagement .....</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>Defining Engagement and Re-engagement.....</b>	<b>138</b>
Social and Discursive Practices in the Classroom.....	139
Social Activism: Beyond Classroom Practices .....	142
<b>A Sociocultural Model for Re-engagement.....</b>	<b>144</b>
The Social Context .....	145
School Culture: A Community of Difference .....	148
The key feature: Respect.....	148

Engaging Context: Shifting Power and Transforming Identities .....	149
The interaction of negotiation and participation .....	151
Examples of negotiation and participation.....	152
Internalization: Identification with and Contributions to this Community .....	154
<b>Summary of the Chapter .....</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6: Mountain High a Community or Container?: Recommendations,</b>	
<b>Contributions, Limitations and Future Research .....</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>Community of Difference or Container for Difference? .....</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>Recommendations for Educators for Constructing Engaging Learning.....</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>Contexts with Youths.....</b>	<b>161</b>
“Rules Without Relationships Don’t Work” .....	161
Class and School Size.....	162
Human Resources: Adult/Youth Ratio and Support Personnel.....	163
Attendance and Support Programs .....	164
<b>Contributions to Sociocultural Research on Engagement in Educational Contexts .....</b>	<b>165</b>
Theoretical Contributions .....	165
Methodological Contributions.....	166
<b>Research Limitations .....</b>	<b>167</b>
My Biases .....	167
Research Design .....	168
Research Scope.....	169
<b>Future Research Directions .....</b>	<b>169</b>
Quantitative Data.....	170
Social Class .....	171
Informal Learning Contexts .....	171
<b>Summary of Thesis .....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>174</b>

<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>Appendix A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>Appendix B: REVISED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>Appendix C: PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK: Observation Sheet.....</b>	<b>189</b>

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1. Participant Information.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Table 2. Class Schedule by Time Blocks. ....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Table 3. Classes Observed at Mountain High.....</b>	<b>79</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1. Constructing Engagement: A Sociocultural Approach. ....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Figure 2. A Model for Re-engagement Drawing on the Review of Literature. ....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Figure 3. Layout of Mountain High.....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Figure 4. Layout of Jim’s Classroom.....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Figure 5. Layout of Linda’s classroom. ....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Figure 6. A Sociocultural Model for Re-engagement.....</b>	<b>145</b>

## Acknowledgements

*What I have accomplished with this research is situated within relationships with people who have helped me become who I am at this moment.*

I take this moment to thank my supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Vadeboncoeur, for providing me with guidance while still allowing me the space to develop my thoughts and ideas. Her never-ending patience and encouragement has allowed for my ideas to evolve and take new forms. I also thank Dr. Deirdre Kelly who, through her thoughtful and provocative insights, and her calm reassurance, helped me make sense of my data. I also thank Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl whose positivity was contagious and energizing, and Dr. Peter Seixas whose historical contributions and penetrating questions added new dimensions to my study.

I also extend my gratitude to the Mountain High community for welcoming me with warmth and generosity. I especially thank the teachers who allowed me into their classrooms and the youths who offered me their experiences. I also thank the Head Teacher and the Youth and Family worker who offered me their unique perspectives.

In closing, I would also like to acknowledge all my friends and family who supported me in their unique ways during this time. I make special mention of my partner, Evaristo, and his willingness to share this experience and support me while I followed my dreams. I also thank my mother, Romana, and my sister, Maritza, whose words of encouragement kept me going. In addition, I also thank my friend Diane for her listening ear while I talked through my thoughts and ideas, many of which were still forming

## Dedication

*In loving memory of my grandfather, Don Celestino,  
whose life creed to always be mindful of the future  
of his grandchildren and great grandchildren  
before making any decisions,  
influences how I think about my role in the world.*

# **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

## **Context of Study**

In British Columbia, the Vancouver School Board (VSB) released their District plan 2008-2009 (VSB, 2008) in which the VSB made a commitment to providing the highest quality of learning experiences for all students, focusing on school engagement, learning, and development, in a safe and inclusive learning context. In keeping with this commitment, the VSB indicated in their district plan three goals to facilitate this process. Goal 1 was specific to their commitment to literacy and to ensure that all students will read and write with competence, confidence, and enjoyment. Goal 2 was dedicated to social responsibility, stating that all students will feel safe, demonstrate growth, and participate actively in the development of a socially responsible and diverse school learning community. Goal 3 was specific to the inclusion and success of Aboriginal students in Vancouver schools from Kindergarten through to the completion of Grade 12.

These goals are largely open to various interpretations because, for example, key concepts like engagement, learning, development, and social responsibility are undefined. This research elaborates and clarifies one of these goals, the goal of constructing a learning context for all students to actively participate in a socially responsible and diverse learning community (Goal 2). The VSB emphasized that this goal was designed to meet the needs of vulnerable students, students with lower levels of school connectedness, students who experience alienation, and students who are affected by mental health issues, especially depression or anxiety. Many of these students are reflected in this study. Contributions made to elaborations of Goals 1 and 3 are more indirect. Engaging learning contexts may enhance the learning of literacy and other skills (Goal 1) and the personal histories and experiences of students from various backgrounds,

including young people of Aboriginal descent and youths experiencing poverty (Goal 3), may play a role in school engagement.

While the VSB goals for 2006-2007 addressed promotion of quality learning educational experiences, reports of statistics both from Canada and British Columbia (B.C.) have indicated that there is much that needs to be done to meet these goals. These reports of the data gathered need to be compiled and used in a representative manner within the social context under which they were collected. When reports of statistics are used individually, they may not present a complete picture of the state of education, or may misrepresent the data by blurring definitions and/or presenting conflicting information. For example, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) indicated that there was a considerable decline in early school leavers between 1990-1991 and 2004-2005 (Bolby, 2005). However, when LFS measures estimated these early leaving statistics at 16.7% and 9.8%, respectively, these numbers did not reflect the disparate school outcomes associated with different populations of youths within the larger context of the Canadian society. As another example, the LFS measures reported rates for British Columbia that were the lowest in the country at 7.5%. However, a closer examination of these measures calls into question the definition used to estimate dropout rates based on youths between the ages of 20 to 24, who are not attending school, or who have not graduated high school. The LFS survey claimed that this was done to selectively exclude persons who are on a “temporary break from his/her schooling” (Bowlby, 2005, p. 2). However, the rates presented by the LFS survey were challenged by the B.C. Progress Board Report (2007), in which British Columbia ranked ninth in the number of high school graduates per thousand in Canada. This placement was below that reported in 2006 when the B.C. Progress Board Report ranked B.C. eighth in the number of high school graduates per thousand in Canada. These poor high school graduation outcomes are reflected in the graduation rates in B.C. in Bachelor’s and first-degree programs, where B.C. ranks last in Canada (Plant, 2007).

Taking into account the various definitions for “dropout” or “graduate,” and the different statistical measures used to determine the rates, the Vancouver School Board (2008) reported an enrollment of 110,000 students. Of these, 31,000 students were enrolled in elementary schools, 25,000 students were enrolled in high school, 54,000 students were enrolled in full-time equivalent (FTE) programs, adult continuing, or distributed programs, all managed by the VSB. These figures indicated that only about 50% of the population for which the VSB was responsible at the time of the study was in mainstream school. The rest were enrolled in adult education programs. The VSB was responsible for 74 elementary schools, 17 elementary annexes, 18 secondary schools, 56 district programs connected to secondary schools (including Alternative Resource Programs), six adult education centers, and one distance education school at two locations. The various programs managed by the VSB all had varied approaches to learning, and the many types of programs indicated that the VSB was not able to reach all students through mainstream elementary and high school programs.

The Vancouver School Board (2007) defined alternative resource programs as designed for,

those students whose needs cannot be met within the setting of the neighborhood secondary school. They are designed for students who demonstrate behavioral difficulties and at-risk behaviors which may affect their learning, their interpersonal relationships and/or personal adjustment, over a prolonged period of time. (p. 16)

These programs, along with adult education programs that are available to youths over the age of 16, fall under the category of “Second Chance Programs” (Gingras, Bowlby, & Pilon, 2001) and provide training and educational opportunities for youths who leave school early, or who do not fit in the mainstream school system. Second chance programs, including alternative resource programs and adult education programs, are potential sites of re-engagement for youths who do not “fit in” mainstream school and who may have left before graduation. The process of re-

engagement—the conditions under which it may occur and for whom—is the subject of this research.

In Canada, an estimated 212,000 youths left school before graduation in 2004-2005. Of these, about 50% were expected to return to try to complete their high school diploma by enrolling in second chance programs offered by school boards (Bowlby, 2005). When youths who return to additional training after early school leaving are studied, the “second order dropout rates” calculated from their success only reduce the overall reported dropout rates by about one percentage point for each year measured. Once a youth leaves mainstream school, the possibilities of actually completing school are drastically reduced (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002).

Yet, as noted by Bowlby and McMullen (2002), second chance programs through which students who have left mainstream school contexts return to attain certification—including adult education programs and alternative resource programs—may help to alleviate some of the negative consequences experienced by youths who left high school before graduation. For example, high school non-completers (22.5%) in the LFS survey were more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates (14.6%). In addition, Finnie and Meng (2007) found that by providing programs that improved literacy and numeracy skills, the labor market outcomes for school non-completers were significantly improved. These youths may then have had better access to full-time jobs and benefits to which they may otherwise have had limited access.

Bowlby and McMullen (2002) also suggested that although 45.9% of the young people who left school were sorry they did so, and that 52.9% of females and 41.7% of males who left high school regretted having done so, the factor most associated with the decision to leave was school-related. Most of these students indicated that school was “boring.” Of the youths who left, 60% indicated that they had left school once before, 18.9% had left twice before, and 6.3% had left three times or more before leaving school permanently. When school-related factors were assessed in this study, engagement was defined as “the way in which young people

participate and identify with school” (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002, p. 35). Engagement was measured through a survey, and the results indicated that early school leavers spent on average less than three hours a week studying or working on assignments, reported fewer instances of getting along with their teachers, participated less in both school based extracurricular activities and out of school activities, and were more likely to say that learning in class was useless.

Engagement, defined above by Bowlby and McMullen (2002), was also noted to be a core commitment, alongside learning and development, articulated in the Vancouver School Board’s district plans for 2006-2007 and 2008-2009 although it was undefined in the VSB documents. While it is unclear what was meant by “engagement,” the use of the concept in the title of the document is an indication of the VSB’s recognition that engaging and maintaining the engagement of students through the completion of high school is as important as learning and development. The VSB extended the importance of these commitments through post-secondary education as well. The engagement and re-engagement of youths in learning contexts is at the heart of this study.

### **Problem Statement**

“Early school leavers” are youths who, for one reason or another, did not complete high school. This terminology was chosen because “it affirms a commitment to the view that all young people should be encouraged to stay at school to successfully complete the post-compulsory years” [in Canada, this is after age 16] (Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson, & Wurst, 2004, p. 15). An exploration into the factors associated with early school leaving extends from individual behaviors and attitudes to wider social factors including family, race and ethnicity, school policy, socioeconomic status, and social class. While these wider social factors provide a glimpse into the varied reasons associated with early school leaving, it leaves few suggestions on how to address this situation other than long-term goals, such as restructuring the school system, or eliminating current social conditions like racism and poverty. These

suggestions, although vital, do not necessarily identify either short term or practical recommendations. In addition, many of the studies conducted on school leavers have taken a deficit approach to the issue, or have used research methods that do not take into account the experiences of youths in school beyond that gathered through surveys. It is for this reason that my study addresses specific aspects of education that may have an impact on school completion through the lens of sociocultural theory—a theory that presupposes a dialectical relationship between the individual and society (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991)—and employs a qualitative research design to capture the experiences of the participants during the study.

The research question for this study was: How do youths and adults use social and discursive practices to construct an engaging learning context in a re-engagement centre? To examine the joint construction between adults and youths, I articulated the following sub-questions: (a) What kinds of social practices do youths and adults engage in that mediate their joint construction of the learning context of a re-engagement program?; (b) What kinds of discursive practices do youths and adults engage in that mediate their joint construction of the learning context of a re-engagement program?, and; (c) What features of social practices and discursive practices characterize “successful” mediation in the context of this re-engagement centre?

This study takes into consideration many studies that point to numerous factors associated with early school leaving. These include reports from youths who left school early that suggested that classroom contexts play a significant role in the final decision to leave school (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995). Interaction of youths with teachers and peers, as well as not being able to identify with the curricula, were identified as powerful motivators in the final decision to leave school. Also, Davis (2002) described teachers’ impact on a student’s decision to leave school and how teacher attitudes and beliefs about student success may predict school leaving behavior especially in minority students, and students from

low socioeconomic backgrounds. Croninger and Lee (2001) found that students who reported feeling that their teachers supported them, and that their teachers were a significant source for guidance on both school and personal matters, felt more engaged in school.

Researchers have noted that peer rejection and peers in general, may influence a student's decision to leave school (French, & Conrad, 2001; Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996). Some studies have linked bullying to poor academic performance and eventual school leaving both for the bully, as well as the victim (Woods & Wolke, 2004). Lock and Steiner (1999) further reported that students' social acceptance might be negatively affected if their peers questioned their sexuality. When his or her peers questioned a student's sexuality, it was related to increased instances of bullying and to an increased risk of early school leaving for the student whose sexuality was questioned (Lock & Steiner, 1999).

In a study by Dei (1996), Black participants felt that the school curriculum essentially suppressed their racial identities when it ignored their varied histories. Dei (1996) suggested that when students used the words "boring," "frustrated," and "alienated," they were actually referring indirectly to social structural conditions that were reinforced in school. The words used by students in Dei's study were not limited to this study. Another study focusing on individual behaviors noted that many students intentionally participated in class-cutting, which led to course failure, and in turn led to early school leaving (Fallis & Opotow, 2003). Students reported that the factors that led to their "boredom" in class as well as their initial class-cutting behaviors were rooted in alienation and disengagement from school (Fallis & Opotow, 2003; Toppo, 2006).

Boredom can be both a personal instance of disengagement from the world at a particular point in time, and a recognition of collective disengagement that often occurs within the classroom (Breidenstein, 2007). Breidenstein's (2007) study on boredom in the classroom found that students who demonstrated the most visible outward signs of boredom were communicating

this to their fellow peers and encouraging a collective detachment from classroom activities. Once students acknowledged an activity as boring, they jointly engaged in activities that drew attention away from classroom activities toward activities that overtly conveyed their detachment. While boredom in this study was only identified in overt social activities, some students may experience boredom at a more personal level. Boredom of this nature presents a research challenge because it may be difficult to assess a student's personal state of engagement or detachment from classroom activities.

In addition, studies also demonstrated that students who felt that the classroom had little to offer them, and who showed marked disengagement in terms of their relationships with teachers, academic performance, perceptions of school, motivation in school work, and participation in school work between Grade 8 and Grade 12, were at higher risk of early school leaving (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). While the literature suggested that early school leaving may present long-term individual, as well as social consequences (Jerald, 2006), schools and, in particular, classrooms, may not provide students with a social context that enables them to remain in school.

For youths who have left school, regardless of the reason, returning to an educational context in an attempt to complete their high school diploma may prove extremely challenging. This challenge may become exacerbated if the conditions for which they initially left school are similar to the ones they meet upon their return. In Canada, as in the United States, alternative educational programs for students have been attempted with mixed results (Rumberger, 2004). However, Rumberger (2004) identified numerous re-engagement programs, as well as other pilot studies of programs, as successful in keeping youths engaged in school long enough to complete their high school diploma, or high school equivalency. An examination of programs designed specifically for students who left mainstream schooling and subsequently returned to complete their diplomas may yield valuable insights about how to create engaging learning contexts.

## **Significance of Research**

The significance of this study is twofold. First, this research examines the relationships between factors associated with school leaving as identified by previous studies including: pupil-related factors, school-related factors, constructed factors, and macrosystem factors (e.g., LeCompte and Dworkin, 1991). Using a sociocultural approach focusing on the dialectical nature of the relationship between the individual and the society (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991), this study examines school-related factors, which indirectly reflect pupil and macrosystem factors in the construction of re-engaging learning contexts. Few, if any, studies have attempted to look at the issue of early school leaving as a result of school-related individual and social interactions. For example, studies from a traditional psychological perspective have typically identified early school leaving as a problem associated with individual deficits within the youths (e.g., Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Rumberger, 1987). Studies from traditional sociological perspectives have tended to focus on the social reproduction of early school leaving as a product of wider social and economic factors beyond the control of the individual (e.g., Dei, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Griffin, 2002). Instead of taking a traditional psychological or traditional sociological perspective, this study takes a sociocultural approach that works across the discipline of psychology with its focus on the individual, and the discipline of sociology with its focus on social structure and systemic factors (Wertsch, 1991). Sociocultural theory argues that knowledge is socially constructed and that development occurs through the internalization of social practices. These social practices once internalized form the foundation of an individual's consciousness (Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural theory, which is elaborated in Chapter 2, provides a theorization of the relationship between the social world, as mediated by the social and discursive practices in classrooms, and the particular adults and youths in a learning context.

Second, this study focuses on aspects of learning contexts that have been identified as promoting engagement. In general, studies have highlighted the inequities in schooling as a

critique of the process of schooling: a negative thesis. However, this study attempts to examine a positive thesis: what does the process of re-engagement look like, under what conditions, and for whom? While I recognize that there are many factors within the school context and the wider social context that may influence school disengagement, my focus is on those aspects of learning contexts that promote school engagement and, in addition, may facilitate school completion. By emphasizing aspects of schooling that provide enabling conditions, alongside the narratives of young people for whom they provide support, recommendations for constructing learning contexts that are engaging for all students may more readily be made. In addition, however, it is important to note that a positive thesis is not necessarily acritical. Indeed, by drawing upon a sociocultural approach I am locating my work in a critical perspective: a perspective that seeks to reduce inequity by identifying and examining, for example, contradictions in the way learning contexts are constructed.

### **Research Purpose and Rationale**

Studies concerned with school engagement have traditionally focused on factors related to individual students or school contexts that lead to disengagement and have negative school outcomes like poor achievement, lower scores on standardized tests, and early school leaving (e.g., Dei, 1996; Panofsky, 2003; Willis, 1977). The focus of this study is on students who have previously left school, and have returned in an attempt to gain their high school credentials, with an emphasis on identifying features of the learning context that engage them and under what conditions. A first assumption is that individuals and contexts cannot be separated and are mutually constitutive. Therefore, they must be studied in relation to each other. A second assumption of this study is that, for youths who have left school, the return to a learning context that closely resembles the mainstream educational system in which they initially failed, may prove as disappointing as mainstream school was to them and may lead to a similar early leaving outcome. However, if they encounter a learning context that has similar learning goals as

mainstream school, but has a different approach to learning, these students may be more successful. This study was, therefore, conducted with a local re-engagement program for youths who returned to complete Grade 11 and 12 of high school.

Youths who left school and have chosen to re-engage may have more recent memories of the aspects of mainstream school that may have contributed to their initial decision to leave, and so may prove an excellent source for information about the aspects of the re-engagement program that allowed for them to become engaged in learning, and remain engaged through the length of the program. These youths may also have experiences garnered from “real life” that youths in mainstream schooling may not have had and that may influence their present experience of this learning context. These experiences may range from having jobs and earning a living, to being responsible for the care and well being of their families. As such, these youths may require learning contexts that are different than those found in mainstream school.

### **Overview of Thesis**

In sum, Chapter 1 presented a discussion of the context of this study, a brief overview of literature related to early school leaving, the significance of the research, and a discussion of the research purpose and rationale, including research questions. The following chapters are organized as follows. Chapter 2 provides a literature review with key sociocultural concepts central to understanding how social and discursive practices in learning contexts may help to describe how youths and adults experience the learning context as engaging, and includes literature related to schools, early school leaving, and engagement. Chapter 3 presents a qualitative design for conducting this study, beginning with a discussion of researcher positionality, the context of research, a school board report, access and participants; moving to data sources, procedures, and analysis; and concluding with ethical considerations and addressing questions of validity and reliability. Chapter 4 presents a description of the context, a discussion of the social and discursive practices noted during the study, and provides evidence

for a community of difference. Chapter 5 offers an interpretation of the study, identifying definitions for terminology based on the data collected and proposing a model for re-engagement. Chapter 6 provides a summary of the theoretical contributions of this study, as well as pedagogical recommendations for educators and suggestions for future research. Overall, this thesis contributes by describing and examining how engaging learning contexts are co-constructed; a topic that may be beneficial for both youths and educators committed to helping youths learn.

## **CHAPTER 2: Literature Review**

This chapter consists of two sections. The first section, which describes the theoretical framework, includes the following parts: an introduction to the general genetic law of cultural development; a description of the process of internalization; a definition of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), including social and discursive practices, and; a discussion of literature related to the joint construction of engaging learning contexts. Section two provides a literature review on topics that relate to how learning contexts are constructed including: the purpose of school; a brief review of factors associated with early school leaving; engaging and disengaging from school, and; a discussion of re-engagement. The chapter ends with a brief summary.

### **Section 1: Theoretical Framework**

This section of the chapter is dedicated to defining two main tenets of sociocultural theory that provide a foundation for understanding learning contexts and how these may be jointly constructed as engaging. First, a brief overview of the general genetic law of cultural development is followed by definitions of three related concepts: mediation, culture, and internalization. Second, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is introduced along with definitions for social practices and discursive practices. Literature is then used to exemplify the process of joint construction in the ZPD in the context of re-engagement programs.

#### **General Genetic Law of Cultural Development**

If we consider school to be an institution through which the process of education and enculturation take place (Cole, 2005), then school is one of the many contexts that reflect Vygotsky's (1978) general genetic law of cultural development. Here, Vygotsky proposed a dialectical relationship between the society and the individual in that:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice or on two levels. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological level. First it appears between

people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. (p. 57)

Therefore, the development of a child occurs across social contexts first, before being internalized. One of these social contexts is school, and this is the focus of this study. However, it is important to recognize that the sociocultural approach is influenced by the Marxist notion of dialectical materialism (Vygotsky, 1978). A central tenet of this notion is that, “all phenomena be studied as a process in motion and in change” (p. 6), and that change is the product of conflict. Vygotsky (1978) also proposed that, “the psychological development of humans is part of the general historical development of our species” (p. 60). As such, the study of phenomenon must also examine issues of conflict and the history of conflicts that may influence social contexts like schools.

Research has shown that the process of schooling reflects a contradiction: frequently the process fails to keep children engaged, learning, and developing in school (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Bryck & Thum, 1989; Croninger & Lee, 2001). As Cole (2005) explained, “classroom interactions are embedded in, and rest upon, an enormous amount of cultural conditioning” (p. 211), which reflects hegemonic cultural ideologies about the purpose of school, the identities available to teachers and students, as well as definitions for success and failure. Research concerning how engaging learning contexts are constructed comes to the fore in particular when we consider Bakhurst’s (2007) claim that, “for Vygotsky, the ultimate aim of all educational practice is the same: to promote the full and active life of an intellectually and morally accomplished social being” (p. 56). This view is supported by Wertsch (2007) who proposed that given that the goal of education is to “socialize students to use socioculturally provided and sanctioned semiotic means, the issue is how to engage them in a way that will lead to increasing levels of expertise” (p. 190).

The focus of this study is youths for whom the institution of school has failed, yet who have chosen to return with the hope of attaining a level of certification equivalent to a high school diploma. In so doing, the social context changes from mainstream school to a learning context that may not be the traditional institution of school, but that still remains a context for learning how to gain expertise in becoming an active and contributing member of society. These contexts are referred to as learning contexts, rather than “classrooms,” to identify them as different from traditional classrooms in mainstream schools. Learning contexts reflect the wider social context, but may do so in ways that are distinct from classrooms.

### **Mediation**

Mediation is a major concept in the theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978). It is exemplified in the notion that higher mental functioning and human action are mediated through the use of cultural tools, including material objects, like pens and computers, and ideational objects, like sign systems. The primary cultural tool is language, the use of which is considered to be mediated action alongside of physical behaviors. This study examined how youths and adults in learning contexts mediate their actions to construct their learning context. To understand how mediation occurs, I discuss cultural tools, language, and relationships as mediational means.

In this study, observations of how language and other cultural tools are used to mediate engagement were made. Language, as a sign system, mediates our action on both an interpsychological level, as demonstrated in our use of language to communicate with people in our social world, as well as on an intrapsychological level, as demonstrated in our use of inner speech to direct our own action, both thinking and behavior (Wertsch, 1985). Other forms of mediation involve the use of cultural tools to aid in conceptualizing the world around us. Some of the cultural tools noted include how the learning context was configured, how discussion or questioning was initiated, and how adults and youths took up identities in this learning context.

Relationships also mediate the learning context. Participants in relationships are theorized as individuals who use mediational means to interact with others in their context, or as described by Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom (1993), as “individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means.” In this study, both youths and adults were individuals who operated with mediational means, and who did so in a dialectical relationship. Ideally, the relationships constructed together promote what Vygotsky (1978) referred to as higher mental functioning by, in this case, allowing each to benefit from each other’s experiences and knowledge as a “qualitative transformation” (Wertsch, 2007, p. 79). A relationship becomes a means through which youths and adults negotiate their learning context, and construct practices, including social and discursive practices, through which engagement occurs.

### **Culture**

Holland and Cole (1995) interpreted the word “culture” in Vygotsky’s (1978) writings to mean “the contexts of everyday activity as the local medium through which mind is formed” (p. 475). Following Vygotsky, these researchers proposed “culture-as-mediating-artifact” that is simultaneously material and ideal. By this definition culture is both “an aspect of the material world” and one “that has a collectively remembered use” (p. 476). Therefore, culture may be embedded in “material culture” as equally as it may be embedded in “social routine.” Gutierrez (2002), in her study of cultural activity, proposed that these two features of culture become intertwined in the study of learning contexts.

Gutierrez (2002) argued that activity systems in “educational practices are constituted through the junction of cultural artifacts, beliefs, values, and normative routines” (p. 313). She also proposed that culture might refer to classroom culture, as well as the cultural group to which one belongs, and that the social practices in classrooms are important for understanding wider cultural practices as well. She further stated that:

By studying classrooms and other learning contexts as cultural activity, we learn how different microcultures for teaching and learning emerge, and how forms of participation can be linked to the kinds of cognitive forms individuals construct to accomplish cognitive and social functions. (p. 313)

This view of culture, with both material and ideal features, may be applied to learning contexts. In this study, culture was used to identify features of the school embedded in classroom practices, as well as social practices embedded in the history and philosophy of the school. The term “classroom practices” was used to refer to the social and discursive practices found within the context of the classes observed.

### **Internalization**

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that internalization is the process through which an operation that initially represented an external or social activity is reconstructed and begins to occur at an internal level within the individual. The process of internalization is a transformational one—both cultural tools and individuals are transformed—rather than a process of transmission: in terms of the general genetic law of cultural development, this may include what Cole (2005) referred to as the process of enculturation, or schooling. School becomes one context through which learning, engagement, and culture are internalized and reconstructed within children; a transformation of both child and context. The same may also be said of learning contexts that are not limited to mainstream school.

Vygotsky (1978) used the pointing behavior of the child to exemplify the transformation that takes place during internalization. In this example, he explained that a child may initially “point” as a movement without significance. Yet, as adults interact with this child they attach meaning to the movement by interpreting it as “pointing.” Over time, the child begins to internalize the meaning attributed to pointing and that pointing leads to a directed response. By internalizing this interpretation a child may begin to use this pointing behavior to “mean,” to

construct meaning, and to direct the attention of adults. In all learning contexts, the early experiences of children gain meaning through a similar process, and the practices in which they engage form a foundation for further mediated action.

In learning contexts, social practices—such as seating arrangements, the raising of hands to ask questions, the process of taking attendance at the beginning of each class—have meanings attached to them that youths internalize. These meanings may include an understanding of the requirement of a social practice, for example, that they need to raise their hand to speak, or the value of a particular social practice, for example, contributing to the classroom culture in ways that are recognized by the teacher. Over time, some students engage in these social practices in ways that show that they have internalized the requirements and values of a learning context, for example, they raise their hand to speak and the teacher allows them to contribute to a discussion.

Ideally, the internalization of social practices in learning contexts allows youths to be socially adept, both in these contexts and in social situations beyond them. Once internalized, youths make these social practices their own incorporating their own meanings, and use them to interact with the world in more sophisticated ways. Internalization therefore, reflects a transformation of social practices and not mere imitation of social practices. This allows youths to more actively contribute to and participate in their social world. However, not all social practices have positive social outcomes all the time, though the process of internalization is still evident.

### **The Zone of Proximal Development**

Vygotsky (1978) proposed the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as a developmental range wherein children move beyond their actual developmental level to their potential developmental level and higher levels of mental functioning under adult guidance or in collaboration with more experienced peers. Typically, learning within the ZPD suggests that one participant mediates the learning of the other in order to foster development. In the ZPD, what

individuals may do with the help of more experienced others is more than what they had mastered individually, and “what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (p. 87). In this study, mediation in the ZPD is seen as bidirectional; as a function of the relationship between participants, and as a “joint construction.”

The ZPD highlights the importance of learning as beyond mere imitation or behavioral regulation. Vygotsky (1978) argued, “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88). The ZPD serves as a means through which children become engaged and participate in their cultural contexts. With this in mind, ideally, learning contexts provide guidance that leads to sophisticated mental functioning, engagement in social practices, and expanded rather than limited identities for youths.

In the context of re-engagement programs, learning is likely to be distinct from learning in mainstream school. Although the learning goals of a program may be similar to that of mainstream schooling (Rutherford & Quinn, 1999), how this context is jointly constructed is likely to be affected by the youths’ and adults’ experiences in mainstream schools, as well as their experiences out of school. While learning in the ZPD typically occurs under the guidance of someone with more experience, for example a teacher, when experiences with teachers in mainstream schools are unsuccessful or negative, these may influence how learning contexts in re-engagement programs are constructed and may affect the potential progress of youths.

Learning in the ZPD is not limited to any specific context or task. Rather, what may be learned with the help of a more experienced other extends beyond tasks to the cognitive and affective processes associated with those tasks. This is key when trying to understand how children learn who they are, what they are capable of, and how they construct their identities based on these experiences. Learning in the ZPD contributes to children’s understanding of themselves, the world around them, the social practices of their culture, and the social

expectations of themselves as learners. In so doing, learning contributes to the construction of a child's identity. Keeping this in mind, although schools and other learning contexts typically contribute to learning the curriculum, such as mathematical concepts and grammatical rules, they are also contexts for the construction of identities.

The construction of identity, which parallels the construction of mediated agency (Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993), is defined socioculturally following the general genetic law of cultural development as a process that occurs initially in the social practices between people, mediated by cultural tools (Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). Over time, as a child grows, the process of identity construction becomes something for which the youths may garner or obtain more responsibility. However, identities are situated contextually. They must be constructed and re-constructed across contexts. The ability to construct a particular identity is always constrained by one's social others and one's ability to position oneself in relation to others through the use of cultural tools. Therefore, identities are never achieved, or universal, or static. Identity construction is a site of collaboration and contestation, involving both empowering and disempowering relations. Using a sociocultural approach requires that I, as a researcher ask, what identities are jointly constructed for these youths and adults in this particular context?

### **Social practices**

Social practices may be defined in terms of the activities that take place within a learning context. In mainstream school, there are various examples of social practices that constitute the learning context, such as, students raising their hands to gain permission to speak; disciplinary rules implemented by teachers; students remaining seated during lessons; and students needing permission from the teacher to leave the room. While Gutierréz (2002) referred to these as the dominant "cultural practices of the classroom" (p. 314), I emphasize the distinction between

social and discursive practices, and how these constitute classroom practices. These classroom practices then contribute to the culture of the school.

Brint, Contreras, and Matthews (2001) suggested that the dominant cultural practices embedded in classrooms, and directed by teachers, may reflect the school's interest in maintaining order, encouraging work, minimizing trouble, and creating identification with the school. Yet, as Thornberg (2007) argued, teachers are usually the persons charged with the duty of ensuring that these dominant practices are upheld, even if they themselves may be unaware of all the rules of their school.

Holland and Cole (1995) proposed that knowing what the expectations of behavior were in specific situations allowed the individual to know how to act and predict how others would act. In cases like the one above—where neither teacher nor student is fully aware of all the rules and expectations—the authority figure becomes the only person guiding the interaction. In this instance, teacher and student interactions may be more about direction and authority, than about guidance and co-constructing a ZPD.

Although both “social practice” and “cultural practice” may be used to denote identifiable practices and their constituent activities—including their participants and participation framework as well as other features—one component of social or cultural practices is the way that language is used to sustain the practice. Language use in social practices is often referred to as a “discursive practice” (Fairclough, 2001).

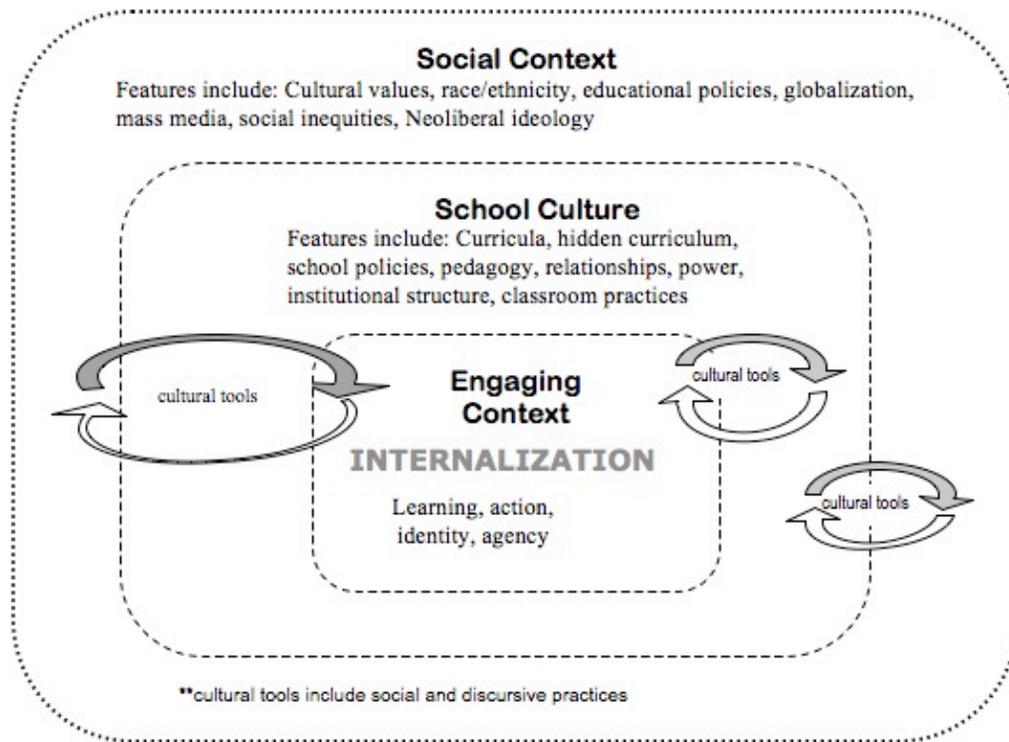
### **Discursive practices**

Hicks (1995) defined the term discourse as “communication that is socially situated and sustains social ‘positionings’: relations between participants in face-to-face interaction or between author and reader in written texts” (p. 49). Hicks also contended that language is socially constructed, and “its meaning is constituted relationally between speaker and hearer or between author and reader” (p. 52). This view reflects Vygotsky's (1986) proposal that words

only acquire meaning through social practice. Discourse may be identified as an aspect of social practices, therefore, attending to the words uttered, as well as the sequence of speakers in an interaction, establishes discursive practices that exemplify the culture of learning contexts and the social practices within them. For example, Mehan (1979) noted the IRE sequence—teacher initiation, student reply, and teacher evaluation—as a test-taking genre that located authority and control of knowledge in the teacher’s position, and relegated the student’s position to be the one of response. Wells (1999) expanded triadic sequences to include the IRF—teacher initiation, student reply, and teacher follow-up—in order to highlight ways in which teachers open the learning context for discussion while maintaining an instructional genre. Recording discursive practices within learning contexts may help to clarify how engagement in learning is jointly constructed.

Ideally, all participants in learning contexts must be recognized as potentially important for engagement. Vadeboncoeur and Luke (2004), for example, proposed that during discussions, responses and questions from both teachers and students become important in that, “building student to student dialogue is also crucial for classroom discourse to engage in possible topics, relationships, and positioning” (p. 218). Though the IRE sequence is one way for teachers to retain power, learning contexts have the potential to become more engaging when additional discursive practices are utilized (Vadeboncoeur & Luke, 2004).

Figure 1 below provides a visual representation of sociocultural concepts and related features. It also highlights how features of the social world and school culture may influence interpretations and expectations of youths, while at the same time youths take up and participate in school cultures and social worlds with cultural tools. This diagram emphasizes the transformation of both individuals and cultural tools through internalization, as well as the permeable “boundaries” between contexts.



**Figure 1. Constructing Engagement: A Sociocultural Approach.**

**Joint construction in the ZPD in the context of a re-engagement program**

Many youths in re-engagement programs have already had negative experiences associated with learning in their experiences in mainstream school (e.g., Davis, 2002; Epp & Epp, 2001; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). To overcome these experiences in ways that facilitate re-engagement in learning and maintain that engagement, learning contexts may be markedly different from mainstream school. Therefore zones of proximal development may take on different forms in the context of re-engagement programs.

Exploring disengaging from school and re-engaging in learning, along with the features of re-engagement that enable adults and youths to be successful, three aspects of learning contexts are discussed: relationships with teachers (e.g., Croninger & Lee, 2001; Klem & Connell, 2004; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Lee & Burkam, 2003); power dynamics (e.g., Vallerand et al., 1997) and; curricula (e.g., Bowlby & McMullen, 2002; Bryck & Thum, 1989;

Fallis & Opotow, 2003; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). Taking into consideration these findings along with those of researchers working with alternative programs (e.g., Kelly, 1996; Rumberger, 2004; Vadeboncoeur, 2005), engaging learning contexts appear to have three underlying features. These features may be reflected in constructions of the ZPD such as: (a) recognition of individual student interests and experience; (b) caring and committed adults, and; (c) flexibility in terms of time and space. These features—in combination with institutional characteristics including multiple routes to credentials, low student to adult ratios, staff autonomy and collegiality, and supporting services—contribute to learning contexts through which engagement may be facilitated and maintained. In this study however, only the three aspects of engaging learning contexts were observed.

Gutiérrez (2002) noted that areas where youths in school felt that their experiences and interests mattered were the types of the assignments they were expected to complete, the topics selected for discussion, and the type of assessment tools used to measure their progress. Researchers noted that adults in learning contexts who were encouraging, were available to students even outside of the learning context, kept track of their progress, asked about their personal well-being, and were as a result the most successful in keeping students engaged (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Kelly, 1996; Vadeboncoeur, 2005). Vadeboncoeur (2005) found that making allowances for negotiations of time and space were also central to the positive experiences reported by youths in alternative programs. In combination, the relationships between youths and adults, and the flexibility of time and space in alternative programs, may provide insight in how engaging learning contexts may be jointly constructed.

## **Section 2: Literature Related to Schools, Early School Leaving, and Engagement**

This section includes selected research from psychological to sociological studies, in order to represent the kind of work that has been done on the issue of early school leaving and school engagement. These works have, in their own way, examined factors affecting early school

leaving and routes leading youths to leave school before graduation. However, in reviewing the literature on what has worked in keeping youths engaged in learning, a more critical perspective is used. This approach situates early school leaving not as a singular decision of individual youths, but as a mediated process that includes teachers and educators and the wider social context. Schooling that engages youths, according to Giroux (1994), views “students as bearers of diverse social memories with a right to speak and represent themselves in the quest for learning and self-determination” (p. 279). This view contributes to the notion of the dialectical relationship between students and their social contexts, their joint construction of notions of engagement and learning, and their co-construction of the zone of proximal development.

### **The Purpose of School in Industrialized Societies**

Cole (2005) suggested that education could reflect three kinds of goals including: the enculturation or initiation of people into the specific cultural practices of their society; the deliberate instruction of people for specific skills, and; the means through which people are encouraged to achieve their full potential. While the purposes of education are multiple, he noted that the goals of school tend to be more limited. He listed some common features of mainstream schooling for educational purposes, though some contradicted the development of “the full potential of the individual,” including:

- (1) The school has been internally organized to include age grading, sequentially organized curricula based on level of difficulty and permanent buildings designed for the purpose of teaching.
- (2) The incorporation of schools into larger bureaucratic institutions so that the teacher is effectively demoted from “master” to a low level functionary in an explicitly standardized form of instruction.

- (3) The re-definition of schooling as an instrument of public policy and preparation for specific forms of economic activity—“manpower development.”
- (4) The extension of schooling to previously excluded populations, most notably women and the poor. (p. 202)

Cole (2005) noted that although many forms of schooling and enculturation exist around the world, the “Western Style” of school is based on a European model that “operates in the service of the secular state, economic development and the bureaucratic structures” (p. 202). While Cole’s (2005) purpose of education and redefinition of schooling may not necessarily reflect schools, the features of mainstream schools he highlights are by far the most prevalent around the world. For instance, in terms of pedagogy, Stigler and Hiebert (1999) compared Japanese, German, and U.S. classroom cultures and found that Japanese teaching focused on organized problem solving, German teaching focused on developing advanced procedures, and U.S. teaching focused on learned terms and practiced procedures. In effect, the classroom culture in U.S. schools seemed to focus more on procedures and regulations, rather than on instruction. This focus toward procedures and regulations also appears to apply in some educational contexts in Canada where regulations sometimes appear to be more important than actual students (Epp & Epp, 2001).

Furthermore, Cole (2005) argued that as the cultural diversity experienced within schools in the U.S. continued to intensify, four competing ways of dealing with this diversity that were previously used were returning under different guises. These four ways of dealing with diversity were: (a) the doctrine of separate but equal, for example, policies of separating alternative education programs from mainstream school; (b) building upon Indigenous enculturation practices to supplement standard schooling, by bridging the gaps by using first language instruction; (c) breaking the boundaries between school and community, for example, in

communities of practice, and; (d) denying any relevance of cultural variation in schooling, by mandating full immersion of immigrant children. While these may not embody exactly how diversity is experienced in Canadian schools, controversy over Aboriginal residential schools (Fournier & Crey, 1997) and afro-centric schools (Dei, 1998; Harper, 1997) does give insight into the debates around how diversity is being addressed in the Canadian context.

LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) discussed how the history of industrialization affected cultural expectations with regard to schooling. They suggested that although at one time attaining a particular educational level may have directly provided certain benefits, economic changes that have taken place have contributed to “educational ‘inflation’” (p. 29). This led to an increase in the number of individuals who attained higher education at a time when the economy could not sustain paying the salaries associated with these degrees. The result is a situation whereby higher educational credentials are worth less, yet cost more. At the same time, earning educational credentials is by no means an assurance of the entitlements previously associated with them.

In addition, in Canada, recent policy changes have brought added strain to the professional lives of teachers (Grimmett, Dagenais, D’Amico, Jacquet, & Ilieva, 2008). Grimmett et al. (2008), in a study of B.C. teachers between 2002 and 2007, identified various new policies, or policy changes that have directly or indirectly affected teachers in the classrooms. For example, some of these policies have affected teachers by increasing the level of parental participation in schools while reducing teacher autonomy (e.g., Bill 8, Protection of Parent Volunteers, 2001; Bill 34, the School Board Flexibility Bill, 2002), others by giving the district the power to determine class size, class composition, and staffing (e.g., Bill 28, the Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act, 2002), and some by influencing the funding formula that led to a reduction in human and material resources affecting many teachers (e.g., Naylor, 2001). This effect was identified as through increased workloads in terms of class size

and reductions in resources to deal with more diverse student populations, including students with special needs (Naylor, 2001). Other policy changes that have also impacted teachers include reducing the number of school districts from 75 to 57 (School Act, 2001), and policies that have affected the British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT). The latter have challenged the teaching profession by: making teachers an essential service with limited collective bargaining rights during labour disputes; legitimating spaces for parent volunteers; creating “school planning councils” that allow parents professional decision-making roles, and; allowing more power to school boards in labour disputes (e.g., Education Services Collective Agreement Act, 2001; Skills Development and Labour Statues Amendment Act, 2001; The Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2003). These changes are further aggravated by plans by the Liberal provincial government to change the BCCT to a College of Educators and reduce the voting power of the professional teachers within the council. The uncertainty of teachers’ professional status in the eyes of policy makers, combined with work-intensification associated with budgets cuts, as well as the perception of teachers in B.C. that their work is not being recognized and they lack community respect, tends to reduce rather than increase the capacity of teachers to jointly construct engaging learning contexts.

Yet it is within the context of these social conditions that the expectations of school completion for all youths continue to be harbored. From individual costs in loss of earnings, to social costs including tax losses, prison costs, and decreased civic contributions, each of these have been credited to individuals who do not complete high school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Jerald, 2006). Although these consequences may actually reflect a combination of other social and economic factors, policy makers continue to insist that by encouraging school completion in the majority of the population, these negative consequences may be abated (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). These views are now reflected in most of the general population, especially in post-industrial countries like the U.S. and Canada. As such, there is an emphasis

toward ensuring that students complete high school and, perhaps, continue to post-secondary education as noted in the Vancouver School Board District Plans for 2006/2007 and 2008-2009.

### **Factors Associated with Early School Leaving**

Many factors have been associated with early school leaving. The four categories identified by LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) refer to pupil-related factors, school-related factors, constructed factors, and macrosystem factors. These categories serve as an organizational structure separating factors influencing early school leaving and share both individual and social features. These shared features foreground the complexity of early school leaving and the challenge of trying to define distinct categories with which to organize school leaving as an object of research. These categories are consistent with a sociocultural approach to maintaining both individual and social features, and the relationships between them, as theoretically central. It is only by studying individual and social features in relation and by looking across these categories of factors that a sociocultural understanding of early school leaving can be attained. This study focused on the school-related factors associated with early school leaving in that it explored the relationships of youths and adults with school and each other. While this study acknowledges the importance of individual, constructed, and macrosystem factors, the focus of this study is on classroom social and discursive practices that encouraged youth engagement.

#### **Pupil-related factors**

Pupil-related factors relate to the factors that students bring with them and include experiences and characteristics that students have in their social world outside of school. These factors include such things as familial structure, economic background, social and cultural factors, peer-related factors such as peer pressure, poor academic performance; generally, any factors that lie beyond the control of the school. These are usually the factors most studies have pointed to as reasons for early school leaving. For instance, Van Steensel (2006) found that early literacy practices within the family were related to better school outcomes for children.

Ensminger and Slusarcick (1992) noted that a mother's educational level may predict her child's decision to leave or stay in school; the more education a mother had, the longer her child remained in school. While studies have provided mixed results concerning academic achievement, it is generally accepted that poor academic achievement has been related to early school leaving (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Rumberger, 1987).

### **School-related factors**

School-related factors are those related to the microsystem of the school, the characteristics of the school, the educational staff, as well as the district that serves the student (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). Two key descriptive words associated with these factors as reported by early school leavers are "boring" and "meaningless." Students do not report that they do not like to learn, but rather that they do not like school. Four aspects of school-related variables discussed in this section are teachers, policies and procedures, curricula, and peers.

Research indicated teachers are influential in a student's decision to leave school. For example, Dei (1996) found that students reported that teachers had preconceived and often prejudicial notions about them. Dei's (1996) study supported previous findings by Heath (1983) who found that teachers' tended to have varying expectations of their students based on their social class: teachers' had higher expectations of students from upper social classes. However, research has also noted that teachers may have a positive impact on a student's decision to stay in school (Davis, 2002). For example, teacher attitudes and beliefs about student success were found to be important in predicting early school leaving especially for minority students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Croninger and Lee (2001) found that students who reported feeling that their teachers supported them, and that their teachers were a significant source for guidance on both school and personal matters, felt more engaged in school.

In terms of policies, Epp and Epp (2001) found that schools with rigid policies and procedures encouraged students to leave school early based on what the school determined to be

absenteeism, habitual neglect of duty, or disruptive behaviors. An example, Epp and Epp (2001) described a student who was not allowed back into school when his guardian fell ill, was hospitalized, fell into a coma, and then, was unable to sign the student's admittance slip. Another policy exposed the school's apparent inability to prepare students for the transition to Grade 9 (Felner, Primavera, & Cauce, 1981), which was linked to course failure and eventual school leaving for these students (Roderick & Camburn, 1999).

What has also been captured by research is that students who leave school early often report being bored by the curricular content of classes. In this respect, Fallis and Opotow (2003) found that students intentionally participated in class cutting that they reported to be a result of boredom. Breidenstein (2007), in his ethnographic study of one classroom, found that boredom, in terms of detachment from classroom learning activities, tended to be communal and often lead to social activities that had nothing to do with classroom lessons. This study also shed some light on the classroom activities described by Willis (1977) that students identified as "having a laff" (p. 29): lads performed pranks and engaged in classroom activities that they found humorous, while taunting their teachers, and mocking school and classroom rules.

Other studies have noted that school-related factors are more than the school policies that push youths out of school, or faculty that do not relate to students, but also include peers (French & Conrad, 2001; Lock & Steiner, 1999; Woods & Wolke, 2004). Peers are individuals with whom interaction takes place. Peers may influence beliefs and perceptions of belonging (e.g., Radziwon, 2003; Ryan, 2001; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Although some research has advanced a perspective that foregrounds youth-subcultures as resisting larger social ideals and undermining the goals of school and education (e.g., Besley, 2003; Tanner, Davies, & O'Grady, 1999), Steinberg (1988) found that most peers encouraged academic success. Students needed to be accepted in school. This was important not only in terms of their academic performance, but also as it related to their sense of being a part of the community of school. Students who were

rejected by their peers presented decreased school engagement, and a marked increase in the risk of early school leaving (French & Conrad, 2001). Radziwon (2003) noted that perceived peer beliefs about school were important to a student's feeling of belonging within the context of school. Wentzel and Caldwell (1997) found a significant relationship between peers and academic achievement. In this longitudinal study following students through middle school, these researchers found that reciprocated friendships, peer acceptance, and group membership were all related to the academic achievement of these students. Furthermore, Ryan (2001) found that a student's peer group predicted how the student experienced change in how much they liked and enjoyed school through the school year, as well as changes in their achievement. These findings were reflected in Hanushek, Kain, Markman, and Rivkin's study (2003) that indicated that having friends who were relatively high achieving had a positive impact on student's grades.

Lock and Steiner (1999) reported that students' social acceptance may also be negatively affected if their peers questioned their sexuality, as this has been related to increased instances of bullying and to an increased risk of dropping out of school. Some studies have linked bullying to poor academic performance and eventual school dropout both for the bully, as well as for the victim (Woods & Wolke, 2004).

### **Constructed factors**

Constructed factors focus on how teacher beliefs and expectations associated with student abilities were socially constructed (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). For example, when issues of race and ethnicity were associated with early school leaving, teachers often treated youths as if their race or ethnicity was more important than youths' individual attitudes and classroom behaviors. Research has correlated race and ethnicity with other factors associated to early school leaving including that minority students in the U.S. were linked to low socio-economic backgrounds (Fine, 1991; Hauser, Simmons, & Pager, 2004; Sable, Gaviola, & Hoffman, 2007; Rumberger, 1983); negative perceptions associated with race for Black youths

in Canada were linked to students' reports that teachers had lower expectations of them due to their racial background (Dei, 1996); and as Griffin (2002) noted, differences found across racial groups were perceived to be attributed to the level of importance different races placed on academic achievement. White and Asian students were more likely to place a higher level of importance on education than Black and Hispanic students (Griffin, 2002).

However, Lew (2004) found that social class was also an issue among second-generation working class Korean students who perceived academic success as related to "whiteness" (p. 304). Relating academic success to "acting white" is a concept previously reported by Fordham and Ogbu (1987) who noted that Black students were more likely to undermine or camouflage their academic potential to avoid being accused of "acting white" (p. 177). Notwithstanding the prejudices behind the source of the perception—differentiated expectations according to social class, race, or ethnicity, for example—the assumptions made about students by teachers influenced the kinds of expectations associated with them individually and also the kinds of relationships they constructed with the teachers and administrators at school.

### **Macrosystem factors**

Macrosystem factors relate to the social, political, and economic contexts in which schools are embedded, including features of these contexts like ideology, cultural traditions, and values. Macrosystem factors frequently point to issues of inequity with groups who are in conflict with each other. Dialectical materialism identified these historic areas of conflict as reasons leading to change. Macrosystem factors that support hegemonic cultural practices exist outside of the student, but influence the student nonetheless. For example, LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) argued that macrosystem factors affect student life in the classroom, and are sometimes perceived to be student characteristics. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) suggested that the social context of school comes with the expectation that parents be active participants in the

school. When parents do not participate as expected, their children may be seen as academically or socially inept.

In the North American context, parents are expected to help with homework, act as assistant teachers, attend meetings during regular working hours, and any other school events. Yet, while this expectation remains, the world has changed. While this may have worked in the past in two-parent households when one parent was fully responsible for daily activities, in today's world when both parents work, and there has been an increase in single-parent families, this expectation is not justified (Coontz, 2000). However inaccurate the perception of parents who do not participate or do not dedicate their evenings to helping with homework, this perception frequently suggests to teachers that they have little interest in their child's education, and may be reflected in a teacher's perception of some children as less capable or underachieving within the school context. This example demonstrates that wider social expectations frequently influence teachers' perceptions of students in school when they attribute cultural values to students as individual characteristics.

Included with macrosystem factors are those such as poverty that are associated with a type of school, and the location of the general population it serves. Schools in urban areas usually serve higher populations of minority students, and have the highest population of poor students, but have the least resources to provide strong academic programs (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). However, within the same context of poor schools in urban areas, schools that have been reported to have the most success in retaining students were schools with strong academic programs, a strong sense of school identity, faculty support, and clear student expectations (Bryck & Thum, 1989). These successful schools were generally private schools, or Catholic high schools in the United States. Macrosystem factors reflect the wider social, political, and economic contexts of the cities and neighborhoods in which they are embedded. Therefore, while urban schools have fewer resources to provide strong academic programs, when the

schools had a more community-oriented philosophy, as exemplified in some Catholic high schools, this sense of community countered the impact of the wider social context. However, in most instances, the level of poverty experienced by the neighborhood is reflected in the level of educational funding and resources available to the schools in that neighborhood. Bryck and Thum's (1989) study demonstrated the relationship between individuals and society. In this case, though social issues reproduced the conditions that supported social inequities, they identified social contexts that provided support for youths to remain in school.

Another example of macrosystem factors is exemplified by Dei's (1996) study. Here, perceptions of teachers' low expectations of students, as well as students' lack of connection with the curriculum, was associated with high levels of absenteeism and reflected wider social issues such as racism and the hegemony of dominant school curricula. Social class and racialized expectations held by teachers—also found in dominant societal ideologies—and the absenteeism and boredom experienced by the youths, which on the surface appear to be pupil-related, were related. Ideologies, as cultural tools, are taken up by and mediate the experience of individuals while operating at the level of the macrosystem: a mutually constitutive and dialectical process.

### **Engaging and Disengaging from School**

Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) proposed engagement as a “meta” concept that may provide some insight as to how engagement is observed during learning activities. This review focused on social expectations associated with engagement in terms of how individuals and groups of youths interacted, and the purposes these interactions served within the specific social context of school. The literature included in this section focuses on youths, rather than on relationships between youths and adults in educational contexts.

Wentzel (1991) proposed that as individuals within groups interact, they must learn to relate to each other in ways that acknowledge the importance of the other person. These rules apply to the context of school. For example, in order to properly relate to each other, youths need

to learn to cooperate, to participate in the class, to complete activities and assignments, and to adhere to rules of social interaction, like speaking politely to each other, and other socially and culturally prescribed rules of interaction. This type of social conduct may promote academic learning and performance as individuals engage to become a part of a classroom community. As Wentzel (1991) suggested, it is typical to meet the goals of the learning process through these rules of interaction in learning communities. However, the ability of each student to act in ways that are considered appropriate stem from a variety of factors that come both from students' wider social and cultural backgrounds, as well as from their individual experiences in school.

As the ethnography by Willis (1977) indicated, the culture of a student's social class may be deeply embedded in their identity, and may in turn affect the way a student views the purpose of school and his or her place within it. Willis' study followed ritual practices in school and identified some students as countering, rather than conforming to, an institution that they did not feel was representative of their identity and culture. These youths challenged the organizational structure of school by intentionally challenging school rules and policies despite the consequences.

A similar finding was reported by Dei (1996). His ethnography found that students felt that the school stood for values that were inconsistent with their own, and felt that it was up to them to take a stand to keep their own sense of identity and history. Here, refusing to follow the rules concerning appropriate school behavior was seen as a higher moral path. Leaving school was interpreted as a courageous act, and those who managed to leave the school's conforming learning context were seen as heroes. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) reported similar findings in their study on how historical experiences of particular ethnic groups become embedded within the culture of school and are reflected in both how students are perceived by teachers, as well as how these students negotiate tasks required by the process of schooling. In reference to the experience of Blacks in the United States Fordham and Ogbu (1986) described how Blacks have

traditionally been limited in their status mobility, and how acceptance of this often leads youths to a collective oppositional social identity whereby they reject values to which they have not traditionally had access. In addition, they sometimes reject individuals in their group who try to access these values. This includes success in education and explains why to do well in school was perceived by some youths as “acting white.”

Although from the perspective of students who openly challenge school as a system, leaving school may be seen as something to be admired, not all students take this strong stand against it. Rather, as noted by Lan and Lanthier (2003), many students experience a less obvious process of slow disengagement that eventually leads to early school leaving. During this process, changes in the relationships between students and teachers and the context of school deteriorate.

Engagement in school is important because school disengagement has continuously been cited as a predictor of early school leaving (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Vallerand, et al., 1997).

While there is no one definition for engagement, a review of research has defined engagement as a “meta” construct involving three components: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). As noted by Fredricks et al. (2004), previous attempts to define behavioral engagement have done so in terms of participation in academic and social or extracurricular activities in school. This type of engagement was related to positive academic outcomes and keeping youths in school through student conduct and on-task behavior.

Emotional engagement was defined in terms of both positive and negative reactions to teachers, peers, academics, and school that contributed to students forming ties with school and influenced their willingness to do work, or school attitudes. Cognitive engagement was based on the idea of a willingness to understand complex ideas, master difficult skills, and was related to self-regulated learning and motivation. Fredricks et al. (2004) proposed that, in research, these definitions of engagement do not exist independently, nor are they consistent across various

studies, but rather they tend to overlap. As such, combining these three components of engagement under one larger “meta” concept may prove more useful to research. They proposed,

The study of engagement as multidimensional and as an interaction between the individual and the environment promises to help us to better understand the complexity of children’s experiences in school and to help design more specifically targeted and nuanced interventions. (p. 61)

However, no matter what definition is used for engagement, finding ways to identify engagement in school has been challenging, and has met with mixed results. As Fredricks et al. (2004) suggested, most studies conducted so far have focused on aspects of behavioral engagement, and have associated positive outcomes for students who follow the rules and participate in classroom activities. Few studies have looked at engagement using this multifaceted “meta” definition. In terms of early school leaving, what may need to be measured is not the students’ level of engagement through outcome measures, but rather, their levels of engagement or disengagement as a function of the social and discursive practices that take place within mainstream classrooms.

Vallerand et al. (1997) conducted a study of disengagement in students who left school and suggested that low levels of motivation usually accompanied feelings of disengagement, negative feelings of competence, and low levels of autonomy within school: all of which have been related to early school leaving. These factors in combination with the changes reported by Lan and Lanthier (2003)—specifically in this instance, their relationships with teachers, perceptions of school, and academic performance that continuously declined until these students left school—contributed to the students gradual disengagement from school.

In terms of the factors identified by Lan and Lanthier (2003) and Vallerand et al. (1997), an underlying factor that needs to be addressed is how the school context, more specifically the classroom context, contributes to student’s gradual disengagement from school. As Foley (2007)

described, “resistance/academic engagement is an adaptation/reaction to an oppressing, stigmatizing socio-cultural system” (p. 648). Three factors that underlie studies presented here are discussed in more detail including: relationships with teachers; power dynamics in school in terms of students’ autonomy and teacher willingness to share responsibility, and; the student’s perceptions of school, including the curricula and teachers.

### **Relationships with teachers**

While numerous studies have noted that teachers may have positive influences on students and their decision to remain in school (e.g., Croninger & Lee, 2001; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2003), the opposite may also be true. Teachers who are not supportive, are inconsistent with their treatment of students, and create learning contexts that promote social inequities may contribute to students’ decisions to leave school early. One article discussing this issue was an integration of three of studies by Panofsky (2003).

Panofsky (2003) noted in the studies she reviewed that teachers treated students differently in the classroom. Students who spoke a standard form of English, and dressed in newer clothing, were usually perceived as being smarter and received more attention from teachers. When students without these characteristics were faced with unequal treatment, they quickly learned “their place” in the classroom. Students from lower socio-economic classes usually learned that their place in the classroom was reserved in the back, and that students who spoke well received a different kind of attention. As noted by Panofsky (2003), students who were segregated to the lower ability groupings usually came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and were more likely to receive support that involved basic phonics drills, rather than semantics.

As students noted these differences in expectations and treatment, they may have internalized low expectations for their own achievement and reduced feelings of self-worth. For those in the high ability groups, it may have encouraged them and improved their confidence.

For those in the low ability groups, it may have undermined their enthusiasm and made clear that little was expected of them. In general, the teacher and student interactions that make up social and discursive practices may lead to feelings of engagement or disengagement. One of the outcomes of disengagement reported by Weis (1985) was that by high school, many low-income students expressed a “school rejecting” student identity (as cited in Panofsky, 2003). This “school rejecting” student identity was expressed by the students when they refused to complete assignments, participate in class, or even attempt to pass classroom assessments.

### **Power dynamics: Student autonomy and shared responsibility**

Drawing on sociocultural research, Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) proposed that, “power does not reside only in macrostructures, but rather it is produced in and through individuals as they are constituted in larger systems of power and as they participate in and reproduce those systems” (p. 4). The power differences experienced by youths in the classrooms reflected the social context outside of school and included inequality based on race and ethnicity, politics, religious affiliations, and other macrolevel structures. While power in the classroom reflects larger social systems, it also influences how youths construct their identities, and how they learn their place within the systems. Yet, it is within this atmosphere of complex power dynamics that society and teachers tend to expect youths to develop their own identities and to conform to the social practices of their culture.

As reported by Vallerand et al. (1997), students’ sense of autonomy within school was important to the students’ feeling of control when it came to the decisions they made about themselves and their future. These researchers suggested that students needed to feel some level of independence from their parents and teachers, as well as from the school, in order to be able to feel they had some control in the decisions that directly affected them. This did not mean that they did not want rules, but rather, they needed to feel they had some say in the kinds of rules

that governed their lives. They also wanted to know the kinds of options or opportunities available to them before any final decisions were made.

When students felt that decisions were made without any consideration of them, and they were placed in classes in which they had no interest, they tended to perform poorly. They did not feel “intrinsically motivated” to perform well, and so completed the course without becoming fully immersed in it (Vallerand et al., 1997). This research was supported by Newman, Marks and Gamoran (1996) who suggested that engagement in learning may be enhanced in classrooms when students are allowed opportunities for “actively constructing meaning grounded in their own experience rather than simply absorbing and reproducing knowledge transmitted from subject-matter fields” (p. 281).

School policies and rules also fall under this category. Epp and Epp (2001), for example, noted that policies concerning attendance and tardiness were quite unrelenting. Students’ who arrived late to school and were sent to the principal’s office often received suspensions making them absent from school and lead to lagging behind in lessons. The more the students fell behind in their lessons, the more likely they were to fail, and if they failed, the more likely they were to be held back a year. To avoid this lengthy process, most students in this situation chose to be completely absent, rather than to be late (Epp & Epp, 2001). In addition, policies that addressed incomplete assignments and lack of equipment, which in most schools were managed administratively, made clear the hierarchical structure of schools that put administrators above teachers and teachers above students. This hierarchical structure was reflected by Bowditch (1993) who found that school disciplinarians identified their own work as mostly concerned with regulating and controlling the students, protecting their own authority, and maintaining school authority. Despite the varying reasons for students to be sent to their office, the situation was dealt with in terms of consequences, rather than the reasons behind the initial referral to their office.

### **Students' perceptions of school: Curricula and teachers**

Fallis and Opotow (2003) noted that students who participated in class-cutting usually reported that school was boring, and reinforced LeCompte and Dworkin's (1991) findings: students reported that school was meaningless and teachers did not care. Lew (2004) and Toppo (2006) found that students who left school reported that school was not only boring, but also that it was not challenging. These results support Bowlby and McMullen's (2002) report that students who left school early indicated boredom as the primary reason for their decision to leave school, and also felt that learning in class was useless. These students were also less likely to report getting along well with their teachers (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002). These perceptions of school point to two important aspects of school that need to be addressed: curricula and teachers.

In terms of curricula, Heck and Mahoe (2006) noted that school absenteeism was not correlated with grades and they suggested that the reason for this may have been that the schools they studied were located in low socio-economic neighborhoods with poor academic programs. In this situation, the students' absence from school did not mean they were falling behind on lessons. When researchers looked at schools that were more successful in terms of attendance, one major difference was in the strength of academic programs: stronger programs were correlated with better attendance and vice versa (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Some educational policy reforms may hinder offering strong academic programs.

For example, LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) suggested that educational policies that have been implemented in the U. S., stress standardized curricula and standardized testing. This has led many schools and teachers to focus specifically on teaching to the curriculum and to the test, rather than teaching the students. The accountability that is coupled with standardization often requires that teachers maintain a schedule, and students who fall behind must fend for themselves while the teacher strives to meet exam deadlines. In turn, students may feel more disconnected from the curriculum and over time find school irrelevant. While the same may not

true in Canada, neoliberal influences in accountability policies that promote standards and testing, as well as the Fraser Institute Rankings that used sample student performance measures to rank schools, may heighten the fears of teachers that similar measures may soon impact Canadian schools (Grimmett et al., 2008).

Ideally, curricula need to take into consideration the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of students (Dei, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1985). A curriculum that ignores or intentionally excludes the experiences and/or history of particular races or ethnicities tends to isolate students from these backgrounds, and undermines their culture as part of their identity; historically investigated as a part of the hidden curriculum.

In general, the hidden curriculum is defined as “those unstated norms, values, and beliefs embedded in and transmitted to students through the underlying rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school and classroom life” (Giroux, 1983b, p. 47). The hidden curriculum is present in social and discursive practices in the classroom that legitimate social inequities. For example, teachers may have expectations of students based on race and ethnicity, social class, or other characteristics perceived to be a reflection solely of individual attributes. While the hidden curriculum may not be an intentional outcome of teachers or curricula, its effects appear to benefit the status quo and encourage conformity to prevailing social inequities. This may discourage the engagement of many youths (deMarrias & LeCompte, 1999).

In instances where the hidden curriculum may not be as “hidden,” students may actually rebel against the curricula and perform behaviors that may get them excluded from school (e.g., Dei, 1996; Lew, 2004; Panofsky, 2003; Willis, 1977). For instance, in Dei’s study noted earlier, Black students felt that the curriculum intentionally excluded their history and was trying to make them “White,” something that was disrespectful and demeaning. This behavior was referred to by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Lew (2004) as adopting an oppositional cultural frame of reference, and was associated with early school leaving in these studies. Furthermore,

Panofsky's (2003) review highlighted the issues associated with social class in terms of how students dressed and spoke English, as well as the consequences of not dressing or speaking "appropriately" given the middle class values dominant in schools. Under these circumstances students may be forced to choose between conforming to middle class dominant values and succeeding in school at the cost of losing their identity, or retaining their identity but being unsuccessful in school.

In terms of teachers, Michelson and Harvey (2000) noted that the majority of teachers' time was spent dealing with forms that they needed to complete, requests that they needed to make, and schedules and appointments to which they needed to attend. They conducted this bureaucratic work while trying to deliver a standardized lesson with a lesson plan they needed to have submitted the week prior. Under these stressful conditions, it may seem impossible for teachers to have time to give each student in a large public classroom the individual attention that he or she may need. In addition, teachers in many instances needed to consult with their department heads before making any changes to individual lessons: a procedure that required time. This time the teacher may have spent teaching the lesson and working with students, rather than waiting for approval. At the same time, teachers are still required to maintain school disciplinary policies inside the classrooms (Brain, Reid, & Comerford Boyes, 2006).

While similar conditions may not reflect those found in B.C. schools, or in Vancouver, recent policy changes in Canada do little to allay fears that these workload conditions may soon be a reality (Grimmett et al., 2008). In the meantime, B.C. teachers still need to deal with budget cuts that—when combined with increasing class sizes and increasing diversity—may leave teachers with fewer resources to properly meet the needs of all the students under their care. In addition, policies that encourage children and parents to make rank-based school choices, have led to school performance rankings of schools by the organizations such as the Fraser Institute (e.g., Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act, 2002). Such moves allow schools to be

ranked based on the performance of sample students on standardized exams, and consequently hold the teachers and schools accountable for these performance rankings.

### **Constructing Re-engagement**

Smith, Peeled, Albert, Mackay, Stewart, Saewyc, and the McCreary Society (2008) conducted a study of alternative schools in British Columbia. Their study indicated that youths attending alternative schools in British Columbia reported high levels of school connectedness. This connectedness to school was demonstrated in several ways. First, students reported positive relationships with teachers and support staff. Second, they reported skipping school considerably less than they had in mainstream school. Third, youths who reported higher levels of connectedness to their school were more likely to report post-secondary educational aspirations and more positive feelings about their life. Fourth, this study recognized that youths in alternative schools had varying levels of experiences and access to opportunities, for example, access to organized sports and access to specialist support services. Finally, this study reported that Aboriginal youths and youths in government care were disproportionately represented within their survey. Smith et al. (2008) concluded their report by stating that alternative programs appeared to serve a marginalized population of youths whose needs were not being met in mainstream high schools.

While Smith et al. (2008) report some levels of success for alternative programs in British Columbia, it also identified youths as marginalized. This report highlighted the complex process of leaving school that is sometimes “aided” through the practices of school administrators and well-meaning career counselors (Gilbert & Yerrick, 2001). As Gilbert and Yerrick (2001) found, sometimes students are selectively placed in remedial classes with the intention of “helping” these students by placing them in much “easier” classes that they can pass and therefore graduate. It is this perception of “watered-down” educational quality that follows many programs designed for “at-risk” students (Levin, 1992). In essence, Levin (1992) found

that many programs designed for students who were labeled “at-risk” had high failure rates and were widely regarded as less valuable by society and by youths who attended them. Sometimes these programs did not improve the outcomes for youths who participated in them and may have exacerbated youths’ perceptions of the lack of value of school.

Leaving school was also associated with the idea of student “choice”: a notion that constructs early school leaving as an individual choice and minimizes the social class, race, ethnic, and administrative contributions to school leaving. The challenge of implementing re-engagement programs is best exemplified by Kelly (1996) in her study on alternative education. In this study, Kelly noted that there were numerous programs designed for “at risk” students, including “educational clinics, opportunity classes, alternative education and work centers, community schools, adult education, independent study programs, teenage parenting and pregnancy programs, and partnership academics” (p. 118). Although this list is long, programs designed for these students have since grown. Kelly’s (1996) main finding suggested that students who were in alternative programs felt that the alternative program was the only option available to them if they wanted an education. In these cases, students participated in the programs not because they wanted to, or because it was their “choice” to be there, but rather because the high schools they had originally attended had made it clear that they did not belong and they needed to find another place to finish their education. These students had been “pushed out” of school. Kelly (1996) recommended that successful programs included dimensions of individualized attention, flexibility, and the brokerage of social services.

Research by Kelly (1996) identified the complexity of the issues surrounding “choice” associated with early school leaving, while earlier work (Kelly, 1993) noted the differences in engagement associated to gender. Girls tended to be more successful. She proposed three classifications for youths who re-engaged: the second chancers, who liked academic learning but had gotten derailed from school, yet had matured through “real life” experiences; the push

throughs, who appeared academically unmotivated but connected with school adults and were pushed through the program based on these relationships; and the pushout-dropouts, who behaved in ways that continuously got them into trouble, and did not connect with adults, demonstrate any interest in learning, or participate in extracurricular activities. For these latter youths, the chances for getting out of trouble were limited. Given the complexity of how youths in re-engagement programs responded to these programs, programs where youths are more likely to complete the programs need to be examined to help identify aspects of these programs that may help engage youths. In addition, Kelly (1993) noted that these alternative schools have the potential to become safety valves or way stations for youths whose emotional, psychological, and social needs are not dealt with by societal structures and that perpetuate cycles of poverty and reproduce class systems.

Levin (1992) argued that for programs designed for “at-risk” students to be successful, several things needed to be changed. The first was to change the use of the terminology “second chance” in reference to these programs since it carried connotations of failure. Levin (1992) proposed four program features he found to be most promising in terms of successful programs: (a) the availability of multiple programs leading to credentials including, but not limited to, magnet schools, alternative schools, work-study programs, apprenticeships models, self-study, and community education; (b) an emphasis on exit or graduation skills, rather than prerequisites; (c) a recognition of interest and experience within the context of skill learning, and; (d) multiple routes to credentials, in terms of demonstrating skill, or alternative forms of credentials.

Rumberger (2004) described examples of programs that worked—such as Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) in the U.S.—by making available a more supportive academic learning context for students. This program was found to be successful for the duration of the program, but it did not appear to have long-term benefits. As Rumberger (2004) suggested, the reason for this may have been because students needed the support for the

entire length of high school, rather than the two years the program was offered. Rumberger (2004) found that effective programs included:

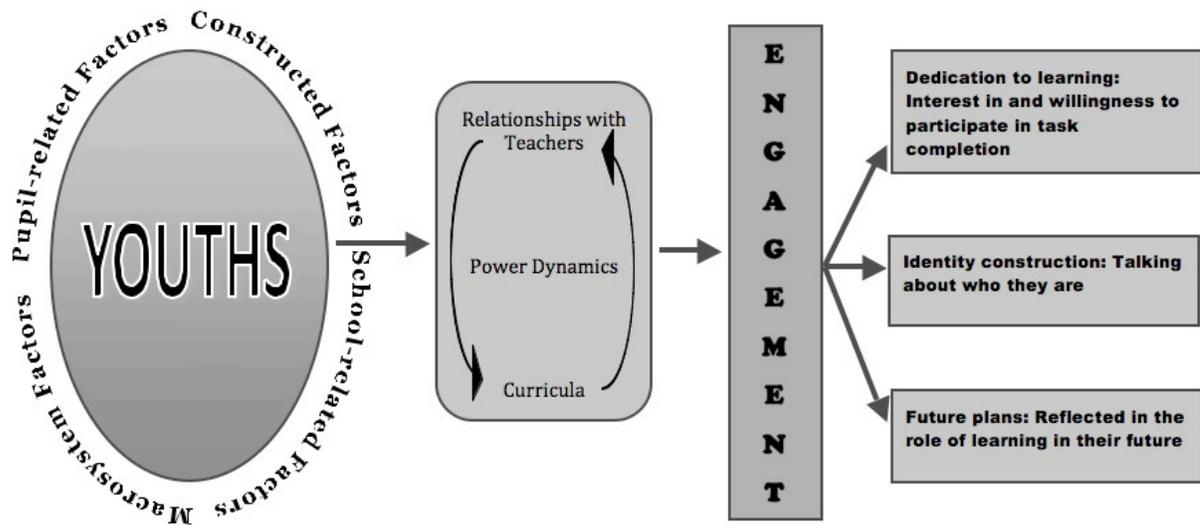
a non-threatening environment for learning; a caring and committed staff who accept a personal responsibility for student success; a school culture that encourages staff risk-taking, self-governance, and professional collegiality; a school structure that provides for low student-teacher ratio and a small class size to promote student engagement. (p. 247)

These recommendations reflect teacher/student relationships and student engagement, as well as recognition of the teacher as a professional.

Vadeboncoeur's (2005) study in one alternative high school program cited the importance of flexibility in terms of time and space in contributing to a more engaging learning context for youths. For example, when the distribution of time could be negotiated between adults and youths in this context, youths appeared to be more receptive of learning, even attending school on Saturdays. The same could be said when it came to the negotiation of space. When students were allowed to move out of one class when they completed their tasks, to another room to work on something different, they stayed engaged in learning. Rather than having predefined and rigid spaces for learning to occur, when these spaces were negotiated they became more accessible and, therefore, more engaging to the youths (Vadeboncoeur, 2005). This study also suggested the importance of relationships within learning contexts.

The current study drew from this literature review to construct a general model for the joint construction of re-engagement between youths and adults, including, for example, that youths who have previously disengaged from school may re-engage: if they experience a learning context where the teachers or adults have a genuine interest in them and respect them; if the power dynamics experienced in the learning context are flexible enough to allow for negotiation in terms of time, space, and tasks, and; if the curriculum takes into account youths' interests and experiences. When these features of the learning context are present, they may

contribute to youths' engagement in various forms, for example, dedication and interest to completing learning tasks, contributions to identity construction, and, perhaps, even youths' understanding of the importance of learning as continuous and, therefore, as part of their future (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. A Model for Re-engagement Drawing on the Review of Literature.**

### Summary of the Chapter

This chapter introduced a sociocultural approach for examining how youths and adults in learning contexts, through social and discursive practices, jointly construct engaging learning contexts. This chapter also provided a literature review of factors relating to early school leaving, engaging and disengaging in school, and re-engagement programs that have worked for youths. Although mainstream schools may be failing many youths, from a sociocultural perspective, engaging learning contexts may be co-constructed even for youths for whom mainstream school is not a fit.

## **CHAPTER 3: Methodology**

The research design for this study consisted of a qualitative approach using ethnographic methods to gather data. The design exemplified my commitment to take into account the experiences of my participants through active interviews and participant observation.

Ethnographic research emphasizes the culture and shared experiences of people in a specific time and place (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), and thus reflects my commitment to respect my participants and their experiences. A culture is constituted through its practices and, therefore, my focus was to observe social and discursive practices that promoted an engaging learning context. While research highlights the existence of social and discursive practices that may promote school disengagement, this study emphasized and exemplified the practices that foster engagement. This chapter presents the specific context of the research, participant selection information, a description of the data collection sources and procedures, and analyses, followed by ethical considerations. First, however, I begin with a statement of my position as a researcher.

### **Researcher Positionality**

In Belize, I started work as a high school counselor, and then spent seven years as a teacher. In my heart, even now as a graduate student in Educational Psychology, I am still a teacher. While teaching, I saw numerous talented and intelligent youths leave school before graduating. Watching youths leave school and enter a world with few qualifications and few skills—when a couple of more years in school may have proven more beneficial, socially and financially—became an important concern for me. I also recognized that school is not just learning academic information, but also skills that allow for youths to be socially adept and make positive contributions to society. While I recognized the importance of preparing youths academically, and I objected to the notions of standardized exams and curricula designed in ways that eliminated the need for prepared teachers—by suggesting that any person may pick up

a set of planning books, walk into a classroom, and “teach” a topic—I still felt that teachers needed to prepare youths for the societal expectations associated with “school.” As a teacher in a developing country, I recognized the advantages that education, or educational qualifications, provided to youths.

Although my study was located in Vancouver, based in the location of my graduate studies, I was interested to learn about the differences I might encounter compared with my experiences in my home country with youths who left school early but who re-engaged in learning. In this regard, I tried to locate a school that was dedicated to the education of the whole person in line with my Jesuit training, as well as one that catered to youths who may otherwise be out of school entirely. I also tried to conduct research at a school that would not turn away students based on financial need, race, or neighborhood of residence. My research, before starting my study, suggested that there was a similarly high value placed on education in Canada as in Belize. This knowledge encouraged me to look at schooling in Vancouver especially for youths who may not have fit in mainstream school.

Today, I am committed to investigating ways in which school contexts may be made more engaging so youths participate in school longer, and in the long run, benefit from the advantages of having that education. In my experience, youths leave school for a variety of reasons, but I also feel that some of these early school leaving statistics may be reduced if youths felt connected to and engaged in school. It is important to construct contexts within which youths connect and engage with the school community, with adults who care for youths. I believe that adults in learning contexts may provide relationships through which learning may be made more engaging. My commitment is reinforced through a sociocultural approach that suggests that relationships mediate the internalization process and, in the context of the zone of proximal development, they ideally allow for youths to become “intellectually and morally accomplished social being(s)” (Bakhurst, 2007, p. 56).

My study was, therefore, embedded with notions that learning is important, that we need to be able to have “societally approved qualifications” as evidence of learning, and that the schooling process has failed to meet the needs of many youths, but that there may be ways to make school and the process of schooling more engaging for youths. Previous studies used the terms "alternative" or "second chance" to describe various programs that were designed for youths who did not fit in mainstream school. However, I used the term "re-engagement" and defined it as situated contextually, documented through the social and discursive practices used by adults and youths. As Levin (1992) indicated, the term “second chance” emphasized the youths’ previous failure in mainstream school, and the term “alternative resource programs” as defined by the Vancouver School Board (2006) emphasized problems assumed inherent in the youths versus those rooted in wider social context

In addition, I did not use the “at-risk” label because it limits the options available to youths (Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). Once youths have been given this label, the learning contexts open become dependent upon that label and limit the kinds of opportunities made available to them by society as a whole. For example, the VSB uses the term “at-risk” to classify students as having “moderate” or “severe” behavior designations. With these designations, youths labeled “at-risk” have a higher chance of remaining “at-risk” within the school system. Kelly’s (1993) description of continuation schools as safety valves for “misfits” and “failures” who did not fit in mainstream school, may apply to programs designed for “at-risk” youths that serve only as a way station before youths leave school completely. Once in an alternative program, youths for whom this is not a good fit may either continue to adult education programs, or leave school, again.

In terms of the adults who participated in my study, I use the term “educator” to refer to any adult who, like the founders of Mountain High, expressed a willingness to take an active role in the learning of youths, but who might not necessarily qualify as teachers in British Columbia.

These adults, therefore, included the faculty of teachers at the school and the staff members in the form of the youth and family workers, the secretary, and other adults within the school who were actively involved in the everyday functioning of Mountain High. In referring to the people who impacted the youths in my study, I use the term “adult” to highlight the importance of the individual in the lives of youths, over the role, duties, or educational qualifications they held.

### **Context of Research**

Vancouver is a relatively young city with a population estimated to be just over 2.1 million (Statistics Canada, 2006). Data used for the report published in 2006 noted that 47% of people over the age of 15 were first generation immigrants. About 14% of the total population was between the ages of 15-24, of whom approximately 33% had no certificate, diploma or degree. In addition, although approximately 70% of the population spoke English, for over 41% of the population, their mother tongue was not English. Almost 42% of the population was considered a visible minority, with the largest percentages comprised of Chinese (18%) and South Asians (10%), followed by Filipinos (4%) and Koreans (2%). Other minorities were also present, but not in the percentages noted above. The Aboriginal population was estimated at about 2% for the Vancouver area, although this percentage was approximately 5% for British Columbia.

Data collected by the Vancouver Foundation’s Vital Signs for Metro Vancouver (2008), indicated that 25.8% of children in Vancouver lived in households that fell below the pre-tax Low Income Cut Off (LICO), compared to the national average of 16.8%. This number represented an increase of 106.4% in child poverty in Vancouver since 1980. Although the rates for high school graduation in B.C. have increased since 2001, as measured by receiving a Dogwood Certificate up to six years after starting Grade 8, the rates indicated that Non-Aboriginal and Non-First Nations students in Vancouver were 2.26 times more likely to receive their Dogwood Certificate than their First Nations and Aboriginal counterparts. However, it was

estimated that in 2006 only 25% of the total Vancouver population over the age of 15 had completed a post-secondary degree, and 17% of the population had not received a diploma, certificate or degree. These statistics indicated that, although there was some improvement in the number of youths who earned their high school equivalency, the educational system in Vancouver may need to be reexamined to improve its services.

At the time of this study, the Vancouver School Board (VSB) was responsible for 30 different alternative resource programs under the following categories: Intermediate Alternative Programs, Senior Alternative Programs, Aboriginal Education Programs, Adolescent Day Treatment Programs, and Adult Education Centers. The type of program selected for this study was a Senior Alternative Program under which fell three programs in different locations throughout Vancouver: Spacewalk, Journey and Mountain High. Of these, Mountain High was the largest. The proper names for these programs have been changed to pseudonyms. For this study, I selected Mountain High as the context for five main reasons: its focus was on senior high school; it had a concentration on the arts; it was located in Central Vancouver; it was the largest Senior Secondary Alternative program; it did not exclusively serve an Aboriginal or First Nations population, and; it was also one of the oldest alternative schools in the area.

Mountain High was designed to aid youths who experienced academic, social or emotional difficulties and who wanted to complete Grades 11 and 12 and earn a B.C. Secondary School Graduation Certificate (Dogwood Certificate). This program emphasized social development, lifestyles management, academics, and post-secondary planning. The program enrolled up to 115 students with a staff of seven full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers, three youth and family workers, one secretary, one cook, and one custodian. It also had a separate day-care center on site. Mountain High had two academic semesters beginning in September and February. Applicants who completed Grade 10 were eligible to apply or be referred to the program (VSB website).

A historical report of alternative schools in Vancouver by Rothstein (1999) traced the roots of this school in the 1970's and a movement to promote social change through practical education. This program was designed for youths who left school for more than six months, who believed that they did not "fit in" school, and who thought that there was no place for them in mainstream school. Mountain High began with 36 students in two different locations of Vancouver. Of these, 24 students who were from the Vancouver west side neighborhood of Kerrisdale were hosted in the basement of an Anglican Church, and 12 students who were generally from the Raymur housing project near Main and Hastings street—the "skid row" of Vancouver—were hosted in the second floor of a former noodle factory. Rothstein (1999) reported that what these youths had in common was that they all had experienced family instability. The program was an offshoot of a youth program hosted by two enthusiastic young educators who were committed to the belief that providing a caring learning context would make a difference in the lives of these youths.

Within the year, other educators who were also committed to social change joined the original couple and took over when this couple was asked by the church to serve in another program away from Vancouver. The location of the school has also changed over the years from the basement of the old church building and the second floor at the former noodle factory on Cordova Street, to huts on Vancouver School Board property at the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Cambie Street where it remained for over 15 years, to its present location in the building of a former elementary school. Over the years, this alternative school maintained its tradition of social activism with its students participating in political issues like the Amchitka nuclear test and the debate on freeways through Vancouver in the early 1970's. However, for the benefit of the school and its youths, it joined the Vancouver School Board by becoming an adjunct school to Signature High School a high school in the VSB.

## **School Board Report: A Description of Present Day Mountain High**

A newsletter provided by the Vancouver School Board (2007) on the various alternative resource programs for which it was responsible, described Mountain High as:

a district wide senior secondary alternative program. The program name reflects its philosophy that broader support for social development and lifestyle management enhances academic success. Teaching methods recognize individual learning styles and life experiences. Youth and family workers are available to provide further support to students, their families and social agencies. (p. 16)

It explained that this program was designed to provide a curriculum leading to a B.C. Secondary School Graduation Certificate (Dogwood). This certificate is designed to fulfill the entrance requirements of most post-secondary schools. The age of most of the youths in this program was between 15 and 19 years old. Seven staff members, three youth and family workers, a full-time cook, a secretary, and one engineer operated the program. The newsletter emphasized the availability of a Vancouver School Board lunch program.

This newsletter explained that although the program focused on Grades 11 and 12, it made “accommodations for Grade 10 courses” (p. 16). It noted that the “program is designed for youths who have experienced academic, social, or emotional challenges” and targeted “at-risk students with multiple social, emotional, behavioral, and academic barriers to success in mainstream school settings” who have accordingly “been out of school for long periods and have issues with poverty, drugs/alcohol, extreme parent/teen conflict, oppositional behavior and low self-esteem” (p. 16). Further, it described youths who were successful in the program as “living in a stable situation; motivated to graduate; strong in the arts; and looking for community (as opposed to self-paced learning)” (p. 16).

The newsletter reported that in the academic year 2004/2005 the number of “vulnerable students” supported by this program was 109; in 2005/2006, it was 114, and; in 2006/2007, it

was 97. The summary of grades achieved indicated that 83% of the courses offered at Mountain High were successfully completed. Of these, 21% were C-, 17% were C, 12% were C+, 23% were B, and 10% were A. Similar reports were made for all alternative schools under the jurisdiction of the Vancouver School Board in this newsletter.

### **Gaining Access**

In any study, gaining access to the research site is of the utmost importance. How this access is gained may influence how the data is collected and analyzed. The head teacher, the teachers, and the youths facilitated my study at Mountain High in the classrooms I observed. In this section, I describe how I gained access with each group of participants, and introduce a table with a list of all the participants in this study.

#### **Meeting the Head Teacher**

I contacted the head teacher, Jane, of Mountain High several months before starting my study. I presented a draft of my proposal to her as it was presented to my committee. The head teacher took some time to read through my proposal and we then had a meeting about how I might proceed in acquiring ethical clearance through the VSB by going through the principal of the high school that administered Mountain High. She helped me connect with the principal and verify the procedures I needed to complete to be granted ethical approval. Together, we estimated that the length of time to complete the study would be approximately one month.

After I received ethical approval from both University of British Columbia's ethical review board and the VSB, we met again to discuss possible participants for this study. During the period while we waited for ethical approval, the head teacher met with the other teachers at Mountain High and made them aware of my study. She invited them to read through my proposal and asked them to let her know if they were interested in participating. When we met after I received ethical clearance, five of seven teachers had expressed interest: three were

experienced teachers and two were relatively new to the school, having taught there two years or less.

During this meeting, we discussed the teachers who had expressed an interest and also looked at their class schedules for the current, as well as the upcoming, semester. Based on the schedules of these courses, and also because I wanted to observe one experienced teacher and one who was relatively new to Mountain High, together the head teacher and I selected two teachers from the five who had expressed interest. I contacted each teacher to organize a meeting to explain my study, including my interest in youths who had not “fit in” mainstream school, my experience as a teacher, and my research design in terms of how the observations and interviews were structured.

### **Meeting the Teachers**

When the teachers and I met, we discussed the study in detail, with a time allotted to communicate my commitment to sociocultural theory and what it meant for my data collection. We also discussed how I would spend time in their classes during the first semester, as well as the second semester. Both teachers had different reasons for their interest in my study. One teacher, Linda, was interested because she had worked in both regular and alternative high schools, and, as I later found out, by working in alternative schools she had begun to question what was happening with the youths and the educational system, and she needed a change. She had since enrolled in a Master’s Degree Program and was exploring educational theories in an attempt to align them with her experiences to try to find ways to use these theories in her every day practices. To her, the similarity between my study and her topics of interest was important, especially in terms of my concern with youths, and my research methodology.

The other teacher, Jim, was excited to participate in a study about teaching practices and felt that as a relatively novice teacher he might benefit from my study in ways that could help him engage more youths in his courses. Both teachers understood that my study was not intended

as an evaluation of their classroom practices. They were still interested in how their individual classroom practices might be interpreted by another adult learner, in this case, me. They did not feel threatened by my presence in their classrooms and told me so at the end of my study. At the end of the first meeting with these teachers we reviewed the consent forms, they signed them, and we made arrangements for a date to meet the youths and start the observations.

Both teachers agreed to talk to the youths in their classes about my presence in the class for the upcoming weeks, and to allow me to introduce my study and myself to the youths before starting the classroom observations. They also agreed to help me with collecting the parental consent and participant assent forms during classes when I was not present. They reiterated a sentiment that the head teacher had already expressed: that when youths at this school were given forms to take to their parents, they were hardly ever returned. They therefore felt that they needed to warn me that even with repeated reminders, the possibility of getting most, if any, of the parental consent forms back signed was not good. Their responses were justified. At the end of the class when I introduced myself and handed out parental consent forms to take home, many of these forms were left behind on the tables.

### **Meeting the Youths**

The day I spoke with the youths about the study was a Friday, allowing me to start the observations at the beginning of the following week. In both classes, the teachers gave me some time to describe my study. In one, I was allotted time immediately after the beginning journal entry routine of the class. In the other, I spoke to the students after the teacher had introduced the concept of conducting research and shared her experiences participating in and conducting research. In the first class, which was the first class of the day, I was the first to arrive, and was able to discuss with the teacher where I should sit to respect the “territory” of the youths. I did not want to sit in any seat that had been claimed by any of the youths. I was able to take a seat in the seat of a youth who had started at the beginning of the year, but who had left. Although he

was still on the roster, the teacher did not expect him to return. I was also able to sit in several places around the classroom during the study. In time, I learned where I could move. In the second class, I was assigned a seat to the back of the class, because, as the teacher explained, it would make it easier for me to observe the entire class. However, this assigned seat set me apart from the students, and did not permit me as much interaction with them as I would have liked.

Although the seating arrangement in both classes differed, I was still able to connect with youths in both classes. In the first, my presence was acknowledged as the youths walked into class. Only one youth had been in class when the buzzer sounded, but all made an effort to nod at me. The nod I understood as a basic acknowledgement that I was not invisible, and also, possibly, that they were not surprised to see me in their class because their teachers had spoken to them about my visit. The youths in this class actively asked me questions about my study, my country of origin, and my observations throughout the time I was there.

In the second class, I entered and sat in the class during the break. The youths looked at me as they walked in, set their books down, and walked back out. In this class, one student assumed it was my first day at school as a student, and encouraged me by saying, “Don’t worry, this is a good class,” (field notes, 01/10/08) before walking back out to the student area. When the bell rang and the youths entered simultaneously, they all sat in their seats in front of me and seemed to forget I was there until the teacher pointed me out halfway through the class. Afterwards, a few of the students asked me whispered questions about my study while the class was still ongoing. For the youths in my study, I appeared to be both an adult and, by virtue of still being a “student” as a graduate student, almost their equal.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants for my study were selected through a convenience sample of teachers and youths from two courses and observed during seven weeks. The observations occurred during the end of one semester and the beginning of a new semester. From the class observations, three

students, two teachers, one youth and family worker, and the head teacher were selected and consented to interviews. In addition, I also asked a recent graduate of the program, who still visited frequently, to participate in an interview. I selected students based on their levels of participation in learning activities, as noted in the observations, and also if they had parental consent, and had signed the participant assent form.

In total, I sent out 65 parental consent forms, of which 20 were returned, and 17 youths received parental consent. Of these, I invited seven students to participate in interviews, but only conducted three interviews. Two of the youths I had hoped to interview left the program during the study, one due to “life issues” and another to join another program. Two additional students did not want to be audio-recorded, but shared their experiences with me during the observations. As a result, while I did capture their voices and experiences in the observations, I did not conduct interviews with these two students. The two teachers were asked, and agreed, to participate in the interviews at the end of the observation period. I asked the head teacher of the program to participate in an interview to discuss the program and give insight into the goals and commitments of the program. I also asked one of the youth and family workers who was visible during my observations—and whom I noted to be an integral part of the school, important to the youths, and involved in many aspects of the classroom—to participate in an interview. See Table 1 for a list of participants in this study, including their role or position in the school, the time spent at Mountain High, and the level of participation in the study.

**Table 1. Participant Information.**

Pseudonym	Role/position	Time at Mountain High	Data collection: Participant observations and active interviews
Jane	Head Teacher	2 yrs as Head Teacher, 6 yrs at MH, and 8 yrs teaching.	Participated in an active interview, was visible during the observations.
Linda	Teacher	11 yrs at MH, 20 years of teaching in Canada. Had been Head Teacher at MH for 7 years (1999-2006).	Participated in the observations and in an active interview.
Jim	Teacher	First year at MH, 3 years of teaching experience.	Participated in the observations and in an active interview.
MJ	Youth and Family Worker (YFW)	18 yrs at MH, previously worked at another alternative school.	Was a visible figure during the observations: as a result, was invited to participate in an interview.
Dee	Recent Graduate	Graduated in 2006, enrolled at Langara, still visited MH to hang out with friends and YFW. Transferred to MH from a junior secondary alternative high school.	Participated in an interview.
Jon	Student	Attended MH for 2 semesters, needed 1 more course to graduate, was referred from a mainstream High School.	Participated in the observations and in an interview.
Donald	Student	First semester at MH, transferred from a junior secondary alternative high school.	Participated in the observations and in an interview.
Jenny	Student	Second semester at MH, referred from a mainstream high school.	Participated in the observations and in an interview.

### **Data Sources**

The type of data collected for this proposal was qualitative in nature in order to enable a rich description within the confines of the scope of this study. In this study, both what the participants wanted to share and how they shared this information were equally important. Participant observations and active interview methods of data collection were selected to enable the voices of the participants to be heard. At the end of the data collection using participant

observations, the data was organized using a participation framework, and was compiled to provide a rich description of my experiences at Mountain High.

### **Participant Observations**

Participant observations occur when researchers immerse themselves in the social context of the study (Patton, 1990). Researchers use this method of observation to be able to describe the social context in which people participate (Patton, 1990). Patton (1990) suggested that observations entail writing and capturing meaningful descriptions of the activities and the participants, in order to document the meanings of what took place from the perspective of the participants. While observations may be influenced by the experiences of the researcher, observations provide unique insight into how relationships are formed and the kinds of interactions that take place. According to Patton (1990), “the extent of participation is a continuum that varies from complete immersion in the setting as full participant to complete separation from the setting as spectator” (p. 206).

For the purpose of this study, the specific type of observation that was used was participant observation. Participant observation requires that the researcher become a participant within the social context of the study. This type of observation requires a field strategy that combines elements of document analysis, interviews, direct participation, and introspection (Patton, 1990). The advantage of using this type of observation is that it provides the researcher with an “insider’s view of what is happening” (p. 207). Patton (1990) also warned against interpreting participant observation as full and complete immersion in the social context.

The ideal is to negotiate and adopt that degree of participation that will yield the most meaningful data about the program given the characteristics of the participants, the nature of staff-participant interactions, and the socio-political context of the program. (p. 209)

In this study, participant observation was chosen as a sign of respect to the youths and adults in the program, and to allow for them to familiarize themselves with me, the researcher, and my

research. The degree of participation was different in the two classrooms based on the decision of the teachers. In one, the teacher, Jim, accepted me as part of the class, introduced me on the first day, and allowed me to participate in the learning activities and in some of the group discussions in class. For this class, I collected all handouts used when I observed, including in-class assignments for which the students and I had an unspoken agreement that I would complete as well. I also collected a unit test on short stories, and although there seemed to be no expectation of me completing it, I did receive a copy, and the students asked me what I thought about the level of difficulty of the test later that day. In classes with the second teacher, Linda, she seemed more comfortable with my presence as an observer, but not with my direct participation in class activities. The students, however, did on occasion try to use me as a witness when they were accused of distracting other students from the classroom tasks, and when they felt I could vouch for their innocence.

The level of participation afforded to me by the teachers was reflected in how quickly the students accepted me as part of their class, and in how they communicated with me even outside of the class. Students in the class to which I was introduced from the first day, and for which I was allowed a time to talk about my study, felt it their duty to inform me that paying attention in class was not something you can “just see” (field notes, 02/04/08), and that sometimes they pretended they were writing, but were actually doing something else. They asked me, “How would you make the distinction?” These youths also had no problem asking to check my observation notes, or asking me what I had written about them during several classes. Students from this class, in which I was more of a participant, who were also in the second class, extended their relationship to this second class. They sometimes discussed their views with me while class discussions were ongoing, and why they disagreed with their peers who were talking. At times these side discussions, I felt, detracted from the class. A few times I told them I wanted to listen to their opinions, and did not mind talking to them about it after the class was over. In the

meantime, however, I wanted to follow the class discussion. They generally respected my request and they listened to the discussion as well. Participant observations in this study allowed the participants the opportunity to decide for themselves if they wished to participate and how they wished to represent themselves. They did this by talking to me, and sometimes sharing their sides of the discussions with me inside and outside of the class.

### **Active Interview**

An active interview requires that the researcher acknowledge that the interview is co-constructed by the respondent and interviewer in the moment (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). Holstein and Gubrium (2004) defined an active interview as an “interactional and constructive” two-way conversation. These researchers proposed that as the interview takes place, “meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter” (p. 141). This perspective suggests that respondents are “constructors of knowledge in association with interviewers” (p. 141), and that the interview is a collaborative accomplishment of both the interviewer and the respondent.

Active interviews stress the importance of attending to how knowledge is assembled, as well as keeping in mind what is being asked and conveyed. This means that the interviewer needs to be aware of how the formulation, order, and delivery of the questions is interpreted and represented by the respondent. It also means that the interviewer needs to pay keen attention to what is being said and how this has been influenced by the participation of the interviewer. More importantly, the researcher must develop an awareness of how meaning is being constructed as the interview proceeds. For example:

The social milieu in which communication takes place [during interviews] modifies not only what a person dares to say but even what he thinks he chooses to say. And these variations in expression cannot be viewed as mere deviations from some underlying

“true” opinion, for there is no neutral, non-social, uninfluenced situation to provide the baseline. (Pool as cited in Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p. 149)

It is through the interpretative practices that are used to apprehend, organize, and represent reality that participants and interviewers are able to communicate with each other their perspectives and experiences. This allows for the *whats* of the interview, or the substance or data in reference to the study to be collected, as well as the *hows* of the interview, or the process participants use to construct their responses, to be made clear as the interview progresses. In combination, this allows for the experiences of the respondent to be reflected and re-constructed during the course of the interview. In this study, the initial interview protocol was used only for the first interview and was found to be limiting to the participant (see Appendix A). All other interviews consisted of only four basic questions, yet these allowed for the participants to contribute to the interview by deciding the aspects of schooling on which they wanted to focus (see Appendix B).

In the end, “the goal is to show how interview responses are produced in the interaction between interviewer and respondent, without losing sight of the meanings produced or the circumstances that mediate the meaning making process” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p. 156). Through interviews, the experiences of participants, how they think about their experiences, and how they narrate them, are gathered to allow for a deeper understanding of lived experience.

### **Organizing the Data**

The data collected was initially analyzed by looking for recurring themes and then organized using the participation framework. This tool allowed for a classification system that attended to major areas that needed in-depth analysis. The data collected also allowed for a description of the social context to be captured, and to provide some insight into Mountain High and the youths and adults who were present at the time of this study.

### **Participation framework**

My observations were organized using a participation framework in which five features of the context were observed (Vadeboncoeur, 2006). Specifically, these were: location, in terms of the material space; relationships, in terms of who the participants were and how they related to each other; content, in terms of the goal of the activities in which participants engaged; pedagogy, in terms of how the youths were engaged by the adults in the program; and assessment/evaluation, in terms of the formative and summative assessments that were required to assess youths' progress. Careful attention was paid to relationships and pedagogy that were fostered during the observations because these features were constituted by the social and discursive practices that grounded the construction of zones of proximal development. A copy of the observation analysis sheet with the features of the participation framework is included in Appendix C.

### **Context description**

After the scheduled observations and interviews were transcribed, a description of the study was generated. This description was written "to open up a world to the reader through rich, detailed, and concrete description of people and places" (Patton, 1990, p. 438). While it was intended to provide the researcher and the readers with glimpses of how the learning context at the re-engagement program was constructed, given the scope of this thesis it was not intended to provide an in depth description of the social world and its impact on this one learning context. The researcher interpreted the experiences and the events described, and used these interpretations to develop a set of recommendations for educators.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection procedures took into consideration how much time I needed to be present at Mountain High to be able to connect with my participants and, perhaps, to gain some insight into their experiences. It also allowed time for them to learn about me, and to make their

own choices about how much they were willing to share with me. For both my participant observations and active interviews, I made arrangements around the schedules of my participants.

### **Participant Observations**

The observations were made during two courses held two to three times a week during the duration of the study. During each observation session, I recorded field notes concerning the physical location in which the lesson took place, the number of participants present, where the participants sat, and key discussions between adults and youths during the time of the observations. I paid special attention to dialogue that was recorded during instances when adults and youths became involved in joint activities. I recorded these pieces of dialogue verbatim.

### **Active Interviews**

I arranged each interview at least one week in advance with each of the participants. These interviews were scheduled for times outside of school hours, but were held at school in a quiet, unoccupied classroom, or in the office of one of the youth and family workers who was elsewhere at the time. The questions posed in each of the interviews varied slightly depending on who was being interviewed, but in general consisted of four basic questions (see sample interview protocol in Appendix B). My questions focused on the experiences of both the youths and adults at Mountain High, and their recollections of their experiences in mainstream high school. I piloted the sample interview protocol and then created a more open-ended set of questions that allowed for the participants to focus on aspects of their experiences at Mountain High and in mainstream school that were important to them. I was not able to capture the diversity of their concerns using the initial interview protocol.

### **Data Analysis**

For data analysis, I used a constant comparative analysis to code for themes. While my data was organized using the participation framework, in this section I describe the procedure I

used to conduct my analysis, as well as the type of analysis that contributed to the findings I report in later chapters. I begin by recognizing that as a researcher, themes in data analysis do not emerge:

Like a mist rising from a lake of data bites; instead, they are part of the researcher's intuitive/cognitive perception and emanate from serious attempts to manipulate, explore, and organize sets of data. As such, the way we create meaning is both creative as well as analytical. (Mello, 2002, p. 235)

As such, before starting my study I did have a list of “sensitizing concepts” related to sociocultural theory and the literature reviewed that guided my research (Patton, 2002). These concepts helped to orient my observations and included concepts such as: alternative, engagement, negotiation, pedagogy, flexibility, and relationships.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Given my constant comparative analysis I moved between data collection and data analysis throughout my study. My analysis consisted of seven steps. First, I began by compiling a preliminary list of codes of themes based on the data I had collected after two weeks of observations. Second, I compared these preliminary codes to “sensitizing concepts” related to sociocultural theory. Third, in combination, the preliminary codes and the “sensitizing concepts” from sociocultural theory and the literature reviewed directed a second code list at the end of the first semester of observations. Fourth, this second code list was informed by the interview with the head teacher that made me sensitive to some features of adult/youth relationships for which I had not been aware, such as how these relationships extended beyond the classroom. Fifth, a third list was compiled at the end of the seven weeks of observations by which time five interviews had also been conducted. Sixth, this list informed my final interviews with the program teachers and the recent graduate of the program. Seventh, one more list was compiled at the end of the data collection process, with several changes to the organization of these codes in

terms of the participation framework. This was partly due to the emphasis on the relationships I observed at Mountain High, as well as my observations in terms of pedagogy.

### **Doing Analysis: The Puzzle versus the Lego**

As I was coding for themes in the interviews, steps four through six, was conducted to look for recurring themes associated with joint teacher and student interactions in zones of proximal development. My data collection at Mountain High and my data analysis were occurring simultaneously and informed each other. As such, some days I left the school with a sense of elation, thinking that I had figured out why the youths talked about how much they loved this learning context. Other days I left wondering why a school that was so structured called itself “alternative.”

In retrospect, my expectations that an alternative school had to look different from a mainstream school influenced how I perceived many of the social practices I encountered at Mountain High. These perceptions focused my attention on the rules and policies governing the classrooms, and I caught myself recording more social practices that resembled regular high school, and fewer that were distinct from the high school where I taught and attended. At this point, the shared experiences of other researchers became important. By collecting data and simultaneously preparing a preliminary coding scheme, I realized that my expectations based on the sensitizing concepts with which I had started might have biased the data I collected. With this in mind, I returned to my observations to ensure that I looked beyond the surface of what I had been recording.

In the course of analyzing my data, I referred to LeCompte and Schensul’s (1999) notion of identifying patterns in the data. Informed by sociocultural theory and literature, I looked for specific kinds of patterns in the data. For example in preparing my second code list in the third stage, I looked specifically for declarations, instances where my participants told me that I needed to pay attention to specific things. This was especially true when it came to the youths in

my study: both the youths who participated in the interviews, and the youths who spoke to me but who did not want to be audio-recorded.

In the fifth and sixth stage, I looked for instances when social practices were repeated frequently. I looked for similarities between the social practices jointly developed in the two classrooms I observed, and I paid special attention to things that I did not observe or record, but which may have been found in a mainstream classroom, or in my conceptions of an alternative school. Each new day of observations, I returned to Mountain High with a renewed sense of exploration. I also reflected on how my literature review had prepared me to look for some specific practices that were already identified as contributing to engagement, like flexibility. In addition, engagement occurred and was sustained through negotiation, and so practices that allowed or hindered negotiation were examined. Finally, sociocultural theory and my understanding of the ZPD guided my analysis within my data.

The participation framework that I used as a tool for organizing data allowed me to identify ways youths and adults constructed “negotiation” in this context and how negotiation contributed to enabling and sustaining engagement. It also facilitated the identification of other aspects of how the learning context was co-constructed by both youths and adults. I recognize that the same data may be analyzed from various lenses with varying results, and that my theoretical framework and my experiences in the classroom, as well as my commitment to my participants, influenced the interpretations of this data. In perspective, the process of data analysis was not like a puzzle with all the pieces fitting together in one specific way. Rather, data analysis was more like playing with Lego blocks and having many possible outcomes from the same blocks. The creation that emerges is in part, the vision of the person who constructed it. While this process may allow for many different outcomes, it is limited to the data collected; the blocks, based on who collected the data; the theoretical framework that sensitized that data collection; and the amount and time of data collection.

## **Ethical Considerations**

My experience as a teacher taught me that conducting research with adolescent participants, while fulfilling, may prove challenging unless I prepared for scenarios I might encounter. Many times youths have experiences that allow them to have insights about the world around them, but when these experiences are not recognized, these youths may become unwilling participants. I selected my research methods and kept them in mind throughout to facilitate my goal to capture their voices and their experiences. Ethical considerations raised by other researchers are noted here along with a discussion of ways to overcome these challenges.

### **Challenges**

Researchers found that by Grade 10 participants were likely to have an understanding of their ethical rights in participating in research equivalent to older adults (e.g., Bruzzese & Fisher, 2003; Hurley & Underwood, 2002). In addition, Williamson, Goodenough, Kent and Ashcroft (2005) found that adolescents had the capacity to challenge the authority of researchers in making decisions for them concerning the disclosure of harm. These researchers noted that youths had the capacity to understand the purpose and objectives of research and make informed decisions when asked to participate. Bruzzese and Fisher (2003) noted that by Grade 10, youths were also able to understand their right to withdraw from research, and were more likely to view adults as “cooperative equals” (p. 22). While parental or guardian consent is still required, gaining youths’ assent to participate involved treating them with respect while explaining to them their rights as participants, as well as the purpose and goals of the research.

In my study, the youths made it clear that they did not appreciate that I needed their parent’s consent for them to be in this study. A couple of youths commented that if their parents did not care what they did, why should I need their parent’s consent? To them, parental consent was infantilizing and infringed upon their sense of agency and freedom. In addition, one student told me directly that all she would do is sign the consent form herself, that her mom knew, and

would tell her to sign it herself if she wanted. So she asked if I wanted her to do that immediately, or to take the consent form and bring it back the next day “pretending” her parent had signed it. Another student told me he had been living on his own for over a year now, that he was 17, paid his own rent, and bought his own meals. Why, then, did he need a parent or a guardian to sign for his participation in this study?

Students’ questions concerning parental consent led me to numerous discussions about research ethics and the ethical review board to which I was obligated. The consensus from these youths was that they understood that I had to report to someone else and that they would take the consent forms and see what they could do, because they knew it was just something I had to do. One student, after completing the interview, told me “good luck with writing your paper, and good luck with **your** teachers” [emphasis added] (Donald, AI, 02/19/08). These youths saw me as a learner who had to respond to higher authorities, something to which they related. I was a “student” just like them.

### **Suggestions to Researchers**

Morrow and Richards (1996) suggested that the most challenging aspect of conducting research with children and youths was the power and status disparity that existed between them and adult researchers. One suggestion made to alleviate this was to encourage the active participation of children in research from the beginning to the end of the study (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). Thomas and O’Kane (1998) suggested that when children were given the option to actively participate in research, and felt their views and opinions would be respected, they more genuinely participated. This was especially true when youths felt that their voices and experiences mattered and could influence the direction of the study (Smyth, 2006). Smyth (2006) proposed that, “voiced research,” when data is recognized as “constructed” or “spoken into existence” and socially situated identities are constructed in the moment, may be useful for tapping into the experiences and understandings of youths (p. 37).

## **Addressing Validity and Reliability in a Qualitative Study**

Patton (1990) suggested that the goal of qualitative research was to capture an understanding of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants, and its social and institutional contexts. This study used a qualitative design and, as such, these findings were not expected to generalize to the entire population of youths and adults in all types of learning contexts. However, with respect to how this study was conducted, two measures were taken to ensure that the information that was gathered was as accurate as possible and reflected the experiences of the participants. These measures were triangulation and member checking.

### **Triangulation**

Gall, Gall, and Borg (2005) defined triangulation as “the process of using multiple data-collection methods, analysis, or theories” to respond to or address the same research questions (p. 320). In this study, two methods of collecting data were used: participant observations and active interviews. Gall et al. (2005) suggested that triangulation in qualitative research may point to inconsistencies in the findings of a study. In this instance, cross checking what participants reported during interviews with the notes of the observations helped to verify if the way these participants expressed themselves was reflected in their actual social and discursive practices during the observations of the learning context. Silverman (2001) suggested that, in qualitative research, using a constant comparative method while conducting an analysis might help to provide a more comprehensive data set. Following this suggestion, I did return to the data that appeared in my observations several times when creating the various code lists that I prepared as part of my analysis and these codes influenced my interviews. Doing this allowed me to note inconsistencies in how some of my participants represented their experiences and how I had recorded them during my observations.

My time at Mountain High continued after my research was collected as I returned for member checks. I was also present during a city wide display of art work by youths of alternative

schools from the entire Vancouver area. In addition, I was also present at the graduation ceremony of some of the youths who were part of the observations. While my continued communication with the school kept me connected with the school's commitment to its students, I reminded the head teacher, as well as the teachers who participated, that my study was not an evaluation of them or their teaching practices.

### **Member Checking**

Qualitative researchers are often challenged to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collected. In this study, one method that was used to ensure that the data collected reflected the views of the participants was a rigorous form of member checking the interviews, as well as a discussion with participants after preliminary results were available. According to Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002), member checks involved allowing the participant to look over the information collected by the researcher to verify if it adequately reflected their views and opinions. In this case, both adults and youths in the interviews were asked to review a list of specific quotes from their individual interviews that were used in the analysis, allowing them to weigh their words within the context that they were used. Preliminary results were also presented to the group of youths observed and discussed with this group to ensure that their experiences were authentically captured.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter presented, in some detail, my researcher positionality with key information about how this guided my research. It also provided details as to the specific learning context I selected for my study, from the city to the school, and how I gained access and selected my participants. In addition, this chapter also identified how my analysis was carried out, and various ethical concerns that may have surfaced in relation to my study. As such, this chapter provides some of the grounding information needed to understand the kind of data I collected,

how my commitments may have influenced my analysis, and how my commitments may be reflected in the findings and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 4: Mountain High “Feels like Coming Home”**

Based on a thematic analysis of the participant observations and active interviews that I collected at Mountain High, this chapter is divided into five sections focusing on different aspects of my analysis. First, I describe the time I spent at Mountain High by describing the participants in the study, how the schedule worked, and the classes I observed over two semesters. Second, I provide a description of a typical morning at Mountain High including the classes of the teachers who participated in my study. Third, I describe classroom practices I observed in at Mountain High and the functions they served. Fourth, I discuss different participants’ perceptions of community in the school, and how that contributed to the school culture. Finally, I discuss how the youths and adults translated their experiences at Mountain High to explain the relationships they formed with each other that fostered for them the feeling that Mountain High was like a “home.”

### **Research Time at Mountain High**

Mountain High was one of only a few alternative resource programs in British Columbia that used a semester schedule. As such, Mountain High offered a schedule that allowed students to take only four courses per semester, versus the eight in a regular high school, with each course meeting daily for about 75 minutes.

### **Participants**

At Mountain High there were approximately 97 youths and seven staff members; everyone knew each other. Although my study focused on two teachers and their classes for the observations, all students, staff, and faculty at Mountain High knew of my presence in the school. On observation days, I was present from about 7:30 am until after lunch, which was 12:40 pm on most days, or 12:15 pm on Tuesdays.

Each of the individuals who participated in the interviews also participated to varying degrees in the observations. One notable example was Jon who I interviewed at the end of the first semester, but who was not scheduled to be present in any of the classes I observed during the second semester. However, he signed up for the Media Literature course as an elective and continued to talk with me about his experiences throughout the second semester. Other youths who actively interacted with me during the observations did not want to be recorded, and so did not participate in the interview.

### **Schedule**

My seven weeks of observations were scheduled to occur at the end of the first semester and the beginning of the second semester, and during one week in between the two semesters. In conjunction with the two teachers who agreed to participate in the observations, the head teacher and I agreed that the morning blocks were more suitable for my observations since they allowed for me to continue on the same schedule through both semesters (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Class Schedule by Time Blocks.**

TIME (Tuesday Schedule)	BLOCK
8:55-9:00	Homeroom
9:00-10:15 (9:00-10:00)	Block A
10:15-10:30 (10:00-10:15)	Break
10:30-11:45 (10:15-11:15)	Block B
11:45-12:20 (11:15-11:45)	Lunch
12:25-1:40 (11:45-12:45)	Block C
1:45-3:00 (12:50-1:50)	Block D

**Note.** Weekly faculty and staff meetings were held at 2:00 pm on Tuesday afternoons.

This schedule allowed me to observe the beginning and end of an English 11 class with the same teacher, Jim. It also allowed me to observe Linda during a Socials 11 class that required

provincial examinations to meet high school graduation requirements in the province of British Columbia, as well as a Media Literature course that was an elective for youths (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Classes Observed at Mountain High.**

Time	Semester 1	Semester 2
Block A 9:00-10:15	English 11-Jim (9 youths)	Media Literature-Linda (16 youths)
Block B 10:30-11:45	Socials 11-Linda (14 youths)	English 11-Jim (14 youths)

### **Morning Routines at Mountain High: Life in this Community**

My experiences at Mountain High were a compilation of the daily routines and social practices in which adults including the teachers, youth and family workers, and youths in this learning context participated on a daily basis. In this section, I describe a morning at Mountain High. First, I describe how Mountain High came to life as adults and youths arrived before classes began. Second, I describe several common social and discursive practices in Jim’s English 11 class. Both of Jim’s classes were English 11, and his social practices carried through from the first to the second semester. Third, I describe several common social and discursive practices in Linda’s Socials 11 class during the first semester of my observations.

Linda’s Social’s class reflected an important difference from Jim’s English 11 class. Social Studies Grade 11 was a provincially evaluated course that was required for high school graduation. Media Literature, Linda’s second semester class, was an elective and not provincially assessed. The provincial exams that students sat at the end of Social Studies Grade 11 were Linda’s focus during my observation of her class. Linda’s Media Literature course did not have a provincial exam component, and more closely resembled Jim’s classes. The

descriptions I provide are based on my observations; they reflect my participation in these contexts and are also shaped by my participation in them.

### **Before the Beginning of Classes**

The first person I greeted every morning at Mountain High was David, the engineer. He seemed to be the first person to arrive in the mornings and he relieved the night guard who, to me, was veiled in mystery. Except for the cursory hello, the most I heard from David was the jingling of his many keys as he walked around the building with either a mop and bucket or a vacuum cleaner. New to Mountain High, the teachers and staff still kept him at arms length, mostly because they had grown attached to John, the previous engineer who had worked with them for only three months, but who, in that time, had managed to become like the “wise father.” John spoke to everyone, had the coffee and hot water ready when the staff arrived, and always had a minute to share an anecdote or listen to a suggestion. The teachers and staff still mused about how they had requested that John be kept permanently, but the “Board” had decided to move him elsewhere. In the last week that I attended the program, the secretary and cook went to visit John at his new work place during their lunch break.

Arriving almost simultaneously each morning were Lina, the cook, an energetic and talkative lady with a distinct Caribbean accent who was famous for her cooking, most notably muffins and butter-chicken, and the daycare ladies who I actually never met. Both adults and youths at Mountain High appreciated the cook because, as I soon realized, she took the time to remember each student’s face and food preference, especially if they were vegetarian, and the dishes for which they would request seconds. The young male students also learned quickly that flattering Lina’s cooking got them extras. So it was commonplace for the conversation on the lunch line be about how delicious Lina always made the fajitas, pizza, pasta, or anything else that was on the menu. Although there was a sign on the cafeteria door, which was also the gym, that students were only allowed in with permission to use the gym equipment, or during snack

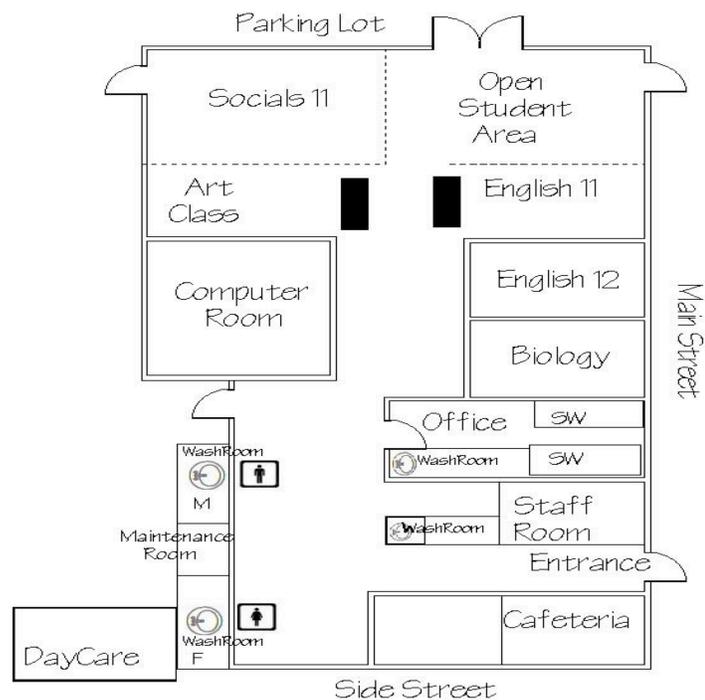
and lunch, there were students who, on their way in, poked their heads through the door and yelled, “Morning,” to Lina.

The head teacher, Jane, and the secretary arrived next, again within minutes of each other. They both entered the staff room first and prepared their cup of coffee or tea. Then they headed off to their individual work area: the head teacher to her classroom, and the secretary to the office. The next to arrive were the youth and family workers who always seemed to take about 20 minutes to get to their office because they stopped and chatted with whomever they met, and went to greet Lina in the kitchen. They had a story, an anecdote, or some piece of news they heard on the radio, TV, or read somewhere that they shared and, of course, they asked who else had heard it. With three youth and family workers with varying interests, one could, before the start of class learn about world affairs, political news, or social issues including anything to do with pets that was published in the newspapers, or announced on television news within the last few days. Teachers started arriving about 8:15 am. Some went to the staff room for coffee and then to their rooms and prepared for class. Most went directly to their classrooms. Most morning greetings between teachers occurred at the copy machine while they waited to make copies for their classes.

In the time I was there, although quiet, three students frequently arrived early, sometimes even before the head teacher. One helped Lina in the kitchen or worked out while Lina was in the kitchen preparing breakfast; the cafeteria had a designated area that served as the gym. One quietly waited in the student free area and read the daily newspapers he brought with him. The last student sat in her Block A class and read or wrote in preparation for classes. These three youths were unusual for two reasons: first, they arrived early, and second, they came in quietly and kept to themselves. Most other students arrived exactly for the 8:55 am buzzer, left their books on the tables of their Block A class, and went to the student area. They cracked open the

side door, and stepped outside to smoke on the walkway. Some students did not arrive to school until the end of their Block A class.

The layout of Mountain High allowed for two major entries into the school: the main entrance that led from the outside street in and was closest to the cafeteria, and; the side entrance that faced the parking lot and was most popular with teachers (see Figure 3). Adults and youths of Mountain High generally did not use a third entrance from the side street to the daycare center. Once a visitor entered the building from the main entrance, they walked a short distance to the end of the hall and a sign indicated for them to turn right toward the direction of the office. The first door on the right led to the male staff washroom. Then, after a short hallway that led to the staff room and female staff washroom, continuing a little further was a door that led to the school's office and the offices of two of the youth and family workers. This is where visitors were asked by the secretary to sign in, and were directed to any of the youth and family workers or the classroom of the teacher or student they were visiting.



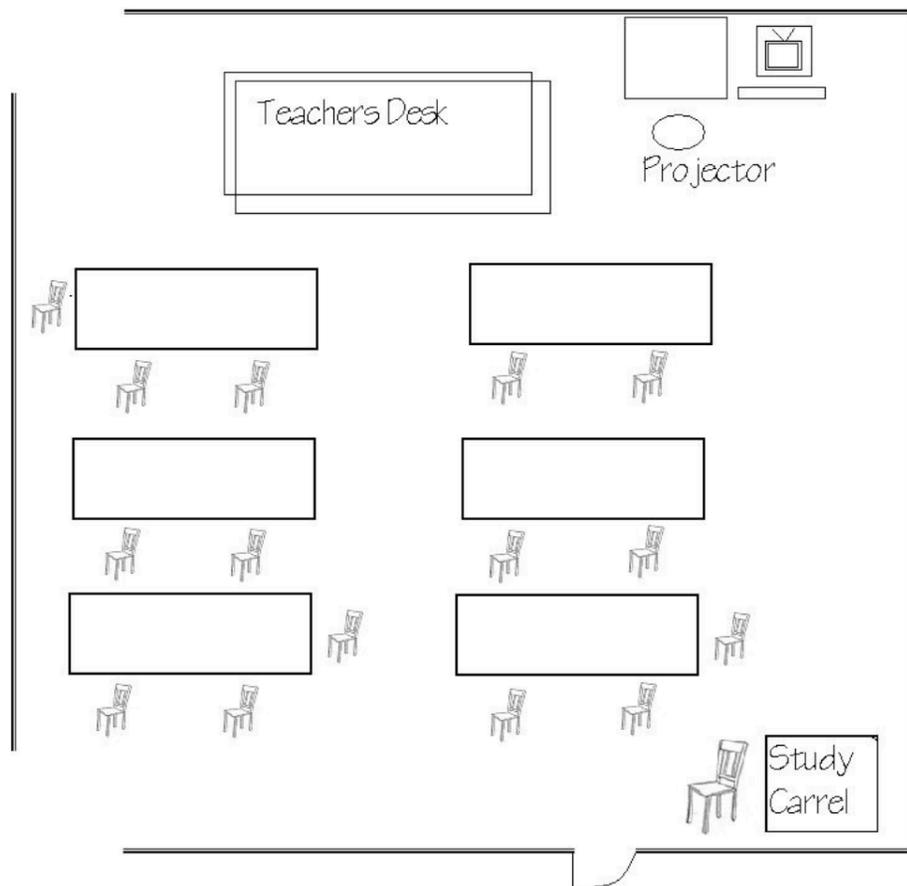
**Figure 3. Layout of Mountain High.**

The corridor continued beyond the office doors, turned to the right abruptly, and led to four doors, two on either side, that led to individual classrooms. Continuing even further down the corridor led the visitor to what appeared to be a large open area that used bookshelves and lockers to separate one large space into four almost equally sized spaces. Three of these were for classes taught by three different teachers: Jim, Linda, and Janet, the art teacher. The fourth space was a general student area that included the entrance from the parking lot. This fourth area was also filled with lockers along the sidewalls and also an emergency side door that led to the street. One key feature of this area was a metal angel that hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room. This angel was a gift from one student in memory of another student who had died while attending the school. The beam from which this metal angel hung had a small insignia with the name, date, and a brief description of the student who had died. Below the angel, there was a coffee table and three old, beaten, and mismatched couches used for lounging. Although the makeshift bookshelf walls afforded some sense of space, they did little for the noise levels in any of the four areas. Voices from each of the “rooms” traveled to any of the other rooms during much of the class time. However, it was difficult to identify from which specific room the majority of the noises came.

### **Jim’s Block A Class: English 11**

During my observations of the first semester, I participated in Jim’s Block A class. This class had an average of nine youths present during the first semester, and fourteen in the second semester. Jim arrived around 8:15 am daily, came in from the parking lot entrance, and went directly to his room. He generally had his copies for the day made and used this time to sit at his desk and fill out a crossword puzzle from the daily newspaper. He claimed that crossword puzzles helped him relax and focus for the day. Most of his students knew this was his quiet time, so if they arrived early, they said, “Morning,” left their books and backpacks on their table, and left again to chat with their friends.

This was Jim's first full year teaching at Mountain High, which may have explained the stark décor of the room (see Figure 4). One wall was made of bookshelves, and the books included many themes: a couple of bibles, old literature, and old science textbooks. The shelves had not been kept orderly until a day when Jim had been absent, and an on call teacher had arranged the books by genre. Jim had commented on this and that even his desk had been cleared. He joked that he should remember the name of the on call teacher, and have the program call her back if he was ever ill again. He seemed to be grateful for the help. The green chalkboards at the front and right side of the class were kept clean: only written on once during the time I was present.



**Figure 4. Layout of Jim's Classroom.**

The overheard projector and the screen were always set up and ready for use since these were Jim's tools of choice. So, too, was the stand with a TV and DVD player. This room had windows running on the upper left side of the wall, but Jim did not open these. He once remarked to one student—who on a sunny day pulled the drapes—that opening the windows and letting in the sun gave students far too much energy. He needed them mellow so they paid attention. The room during the first semester was organized with two rows of three tables parallel to each other. The back of the room was almost bare with only a clock and a set of printed progress report sheets taped on to the wall. Jim's desk however, was always covered with piles and piles of papers stacked over the top leaving none of the wood grain from the original table visible. As he worked on his crossword puzzle, Jim used a middle section of the desk and lowered the stack of paper to enable him to work there.

After Jim put away his newspaper, youths who were sitting at their tables waiting for class to begin took this as their cue that talking to him was now allowed. Conversations with Jim were generally about sports or movies. Jim had good rapport with the male youths in his classes because they knew he was an avid sports fan. During one class, while talking about perceptions and first impressions, one young male admitted that he initially thought Jim would be a “total ass,” but when he walked in and saw that Jim was wearing a Canucks shirt, he knew he would be a cool teacher. As a sports fan, Jim challenged the guys in class about their knowledge of sporting events, and, in response, it was common for these young men to walk in the day after an important game and taunt Jim about supporting the losing team. It was common knowledge among the male students that Jim was a fan of a particular college basketball team that, according to these youths, had been on a losing streak since the 90's. It was during these talks that any of the young men and women in his classes, who wanted to discuss a missing or late assignment, asked him for extensions, or provided excuses.

As the 8:55 am buzzer rang, Jim announced that it was about time to begin. Then he wrote the daily journal writing assignment on the transparency that he kept ready at the front of the class. This was also about the time one of the youth and family workers popped in to check attendance, chat a bit with individual students, and/or pass along messages to specific students. After Jim wrote out the journal question on the transparency and the youths read the question, they found paper, shared with whoever needed it, and discussed the question with Jim and their peers before starting to write. Although the 9:00 am buzzer sounded, it took approximately another five to ten minutes before everyone was writing. The questions usually initiated debates that Jim encouraged. Then he asked the youths to write their thoughts on paper. As they wrote, Jim walked around looking briefly at how much they had written, always asking for “a little more,” and telling them that two paragraphs would earn them a check-plus, one would earn them a check. He constantly reiterated that the assignment was not about the spelling or the grammar; it was about writing their ideas. Each paragraph was one idea, so two paragraphs were two ideas, and they all had at least two ideas.

As they started turning in their papers, Jim asked for any papers from the in-class assignment they did on the previous day, any assignment they did, but “forgot” to turn in. Every day he received least two papers from the previous day’s assignment. On days that the previous class had ended abruptly, he collected up to five or six of these in-class assignments. As he collected the final papers, Jim talked about what he had planned for that day’s class. Whether it was to watch a video or read a short story, youths always knew they needed to write about it at the end. Every day, they asked if the work could be due the following day, and everyday Jim told them, “No,” it was due the same day.

The video clips Jim showed during my observations were generally about popular culture. It was common knowledge among youths at Mountain High that he showed episodes of “The Simpsons” during class. The short stories were hand picked by Jim because he liked them

and he hoped “they like them too.” Of course, he was the first to admit that it was “hit and miss” and that so far, the choices he had made, most youths liked. He once recounted that his girlfriend had not enjoyed the documentary he had selected about pop culture, but that all but one youth had written that they liked it. To accompany every short story or video, Jim distributed a handout with questions that the youths answered as they watched along. He also indicated during the video when the questions he had asked were being answered. For short stories, every student was expected to read aloud, and, many times, the order in which youths were asked to read seemed random. When I asked about it, Jim responded that he selected shorter paragraphs for some people who were shy or needed to build their confidence. He also had deals with specific students about reading. Some were expected to read daily, while others were working up to reading every day. They started by reading every other day with longer readings on each occasion.

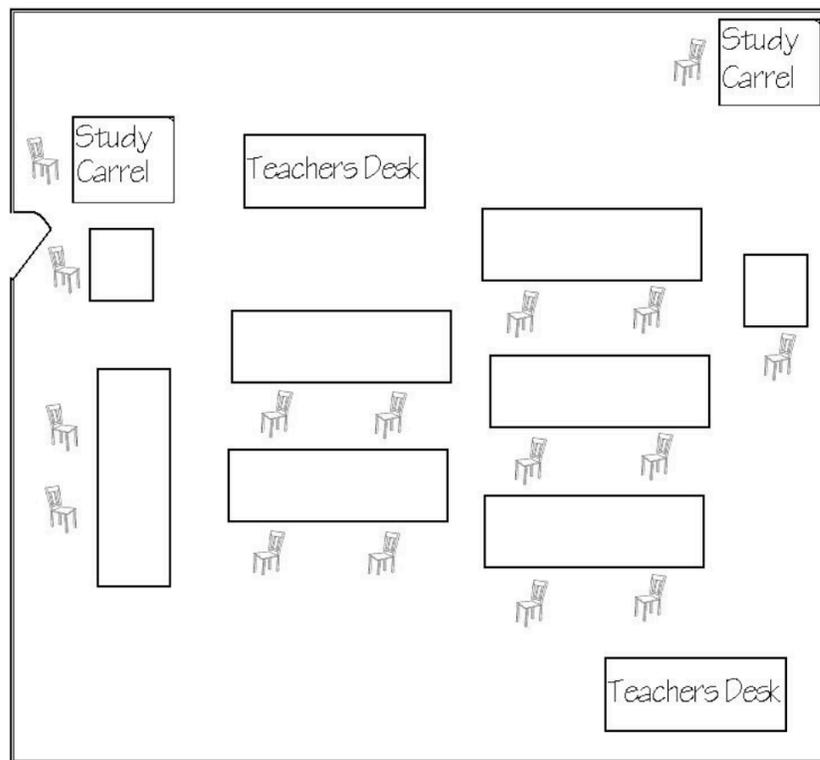
As the class proceeded, either during the video, or while reading a short story, one of the youth and family workers checked attendance for a second time. After the video or short story, Jim asked if they liked it, or what they liked or disliked about the activity. This led to a short discussion on the topic, with multiple opinions surfacing. Key to this discussion was that youths answered the “why” question that was sure to follow: If they liked the short story or video, why? If they didn’t like the activity he chose, why not? More specifically, what was it that they liked, or what was it that they did not like. Jim called youths by name and everyone was expected to have an answer. He also did this, he explained, to ensure that one or two students did not dominate the discussion. After the short discussion, Jim drew their attention to the questions on the in-class assignment he had already handed out. Each of these in-class assignments required some form of writing. This was the most time consuming part of the day, since Jim gave general instructions for the assignment, and then he repeated the instructions several more times. After repeating the instructions several times, new questions about specific questions on the

assignment surfaced. If Jim was asked the same question by more than one youth, he repeated the question and the answer to the whole class. It was during this second writing assignment that the bell usually rang, and while Jim tried to remind students to turn in their papers, he was usually only partially successful.

### **Linda's Block B Class: Social Studies 11**

Linda's Block B class was scheduled after the morning break and was the reason she claimed she had good attendance. There were on average 14 youths in Linda's Social Studies class. Since this class was scheduled after the break, it also contributed to Linda arriving late to class. As most of her student's knew, Linda blamed the clock in the staff room for being five minutes behind the bell, and consequently she was frequently rushing in with a cup of coffee in one hand, and a muffin in the other about three minutes after the buzzer.

Linda's room had two teacher's desks: one at the front of the class that was cluttered, and one at the back with a computer and printer set up and where she spent most of her time (see Figure 5). This room was filled with an eclectic selection of posters. While most of the posters were maps of different parts of the world, some were of Monty Python, Charlie Chaplin, and several posters including one that stated simply, "No justice, No peace: Send troops home." At the back left of the classroom there were also a few older industrial sewing machines. These, Linda explained, were from back in the day when the school offered sewing lessons. She used them periodically when students expressed an interest in sewing since that was one of her hobbies.



**Figure 5. Layout of Linda's Classroom.**

There were three chalkboards in the room: one at the back of the class and two at the front. The back chalkboard Linda used for reminders of activities, important events like provincial exams, and any assignments that were due. The chalkboards at the front of the class were usually filled with daily notes, maps, diagrams, and names of youths who were not participating in the lessons or were disruptive to the class. These two chalkboards were partially cleared to make space for new information when necessary. Hanging from the ceiling at the front of the class was one huge black cloth spider, and several cloth stars: remnants of a previous class decoration event that were never taken down.

Linda taught in this room for years, and the collection of posters, maps, and decorations from past events were evidence of that. Linda also explained that at one time or the other, she had attempted to have the students face different directions, so while now they faced east, at one time they had faced west. The room's right wall and back wall were loosely constructed of

bookshelves that separated it at the back from the art class, and that separated it on the left side with lockers from the student area. On these lockers Linda placed her printouts of progress report sheets. Linda updated these sheets almost weekly so students could refer to them to find what assignments they had missed.

During the breaks, Linda normally worked on her computer and prepared for class. She printed assignments, and then ran copies on the copy machine that was by the office while, of course, also getting a muffin from the cafeteria and a coffee from the staff room. While she prepared for class there were a few students who walked in, chatted with her, left their bags, and walked out again. More often than not, they went for a smoke outside. No matter what she was doing, if a student came in and had a question, Linda attended to the student first, or simultaneously with her work. While I was there, she did not ask a student to return later to talk to her. This particular practice was one that, for the youths, made her the “best.” Linda always listened, but if time ran out and the bell rang, she told them to come back and they finished talking later.

At the 10:15 am bell, generally, two youths were already seated in class and waiting. Linda gave quizzes at the beginning of each class, which the students knew would be directly related to the previous day’s lesson: something she repeatedly mentioned throughout the past class. Linda tried to remember to write the quiz on the board before the students arrived, but, on occasion, her students had to remind her that she had not written it on the board yet. She then went to the board, erased a section of the board large enough for her quiz, and wrote about three questions. She then handed out pieces of paper half the size of an index card on which the students wrote out their names and the answers to the quiz. As she collected these “quiz papers,” Linda walked around asking if anyone had seen her attendance book. On any given day, the attendance book was to be found on either of her two desks or on one of the student tables where she had set it down while talking to a student.

Students had a tendency to trickle in as the class progressed so Linda devised a system to keep track of these tardy students. At the back of the class, right at the entrance, on top of one of the shelves was a stack of little yellow papers that she called “late slips.” Students who arrived after the buzzer needed to complete one of these late slips by filling in their name, the date, and the reason for their tardiness. Acceptable reasons included, “I don’t have a reason.” After students completed a slip they walked by her desk in the back, or her desk in the front, and placed it there. As she talked about the day’s lesson, she periodically picked up these little yellow late slips and read them to herself. By the end of class she ended up with at least eight to ten of these late slips.

Every class started with a discussion of how Linda was feeling physically, how the students were doing, and what they had done the day before or over the weekend. While I was observing, Linda was suffering from throat problems and this had prevented her from attending class for a couple of days. The youths were all certain that Linda would only miss class if she was really ill, and on those days, they tried to “make her proud” by following the instructions of the on-call teachers (field notes, 02/04/08). Daily discussions in Linda’s class included a reminder of what they had done the class before, followed by a brief discussion about news events. Sometimes this was reversed, but introductory discussions always consisted of these two parts. Students were allowed to raise any topic they had found in the news and thought was interesting. It was usually about this time that one of the youth and family workers stood by the door to check attendance. On occasion, one of the youth and family workers asked specific questions about the news, and rewarded any student who knew the answer with a small prize, usually a chocolate bar. Although I knew the answers a couple of times and raised my hand, she looked at me, smiled, and called on a student.

After the youth and family worker left, Linda continued with her class activity, usually a discussion, or sometimes a test-taking practice class. If it was a discussion, she started by

providing some factual information about a topic, for example, television station ownership in British Columbia. Then she noted this particular issue was of interest to her, and the importance of knowing this kind of information when listening to any media. She asked if anyone else was interested in this topic and if they were interested in sharing their views. Most of the discussions Linda held in preparation for the provincial exams centered on globalization, consumerism, and global warming. Of the usual 14 youths who were present, four or five students usually dominated the conversation. Most other students seemed to listen, but sometimes had their own private conversations. Many of the conversations were heated. If Linda asked a question of a student who was not one of the four most talkative students typically leading the conversation, many times that student did not seem to know the original question.

For most of the topics Linda selected she also created handouts related to them. One or two students read these handouts out loud in class, and then the whole class answered the questions at the back of the handout. The due date for the handouts depended on how long it took to finish the discussion on that topic. So if a topic continued for three days, the assignment was due on the fourth day. The dates these assignments were due were written on the back wall. Linda and the other students often seemed to forget when assignments were due and some of the students reminded the whole class.

### **Familiar Classroom Practices at Mountain High**

The sociocultural approach suggests that social and discursive practices constitute specific contexts and mediate learning within contexts for each individual. This thesis focused on the social and discursive practices that youths and adults at Mountain High negotiated that fostered an engaging learning context. My observations, therefore, concentrated on identifying social and discursive practices that constituted the classroom practices at Mountain High as they influenced engagement. These practices—labeled passing the test, power in the classroom space, who is the boss?, and showing up and being on time—had varying social and discursive

practices associated with them and, in combination, provide insight into the culture at Mountain High.

Mountain High resembled a mainstream high school in several ways, including bells that kept the schedule and rules for being out of class during class time, but perhaps the most important way was that of enabling students to meet requirements to pass the provincial exams, as well as to earn their Dogwood. Both goals were historical ones that Rothstein (1999) referenced, and that Linda committed to when she said, “I think that the students are entitled to expect me to prepare them for an exam” (Linda, AI, 02/21/08, line 391). This goal contributed to why some youths chose to attend Mountain High.

Donald confided that he decided to attend this particular alternative school because he wanted more structure. He also wanted to know that his educational certification would be the equivalent to that of a student who attended mainstream high school. Jon also commented that his decision to leave mainstream high school and attend a more flexible alternative school was supported by his family and friends because staff in his previous school recognized Mountain High as having similar academic standards, similar courses, and similar rules. Realizing that the goals and structures of the school contributed to why youths came to Mountain High, I describe classroom practices that normalized these goals and structures of schooling. While these practices resembled mainstream classrooms, they made the goals of mainstream school attainable to youths who attended this “alternative school.”

### **Passing the Test**

Linda, whose Socials 11 class was required to take a provincial exam, engaged students in a social practice to prepare students for the test. The most common activity she used was to set aside days to focus on answering past tests. Each student received a copy of the test and spent about 20 minutes answering different sections. Then they reviewed the answers as a group. This

activity engaged students in the test-taking practices of mainstream high schools, and it also positioned the teacher as the most knowledgeable person in the room.

As evidence, some of the youths waited for Linda to give the answers rather than dedicate time to answer the questions. As one youth explained, why would he spend his time answering these questions, when he would most likely be wrong, and the teacher would give out the correct answers in the end? This was also exemplified when youths did not know the answer to a question. On these occasions they asked Linda, and while she encouraged them to look for the answers on their own, she simultaneously looked for them herself. Many times the youths just waited for her to find the answers. She then told them the page in their text where the answers were found. Although there were occasions when Linda did not know the answers, she used her computer while they talked among themselves to look for the answers. At the same time, Linda's willingness to search for answers to questions she could not answer, promoted a culture that made the youths aware that not knowing an answer was not a reason for not searching for an answer.

Another activity contributing to the test-taking practice of the classroom was that of key word searches. This consisted of going through the questions and answers in the past tests and using a process of elimination to rule out wrong answers. Looking for specific words in the questions gave youths a clue about which answers were the most wrong so they could then eliminate that answer, and move to the other choices. Key word searches promoted the idea of being strategic to pass the test, rather than memorizing facts related to the question.

While these activities seemed to promote a test-taking practice and youths expected Linda to teach them how to pass the provincials, they also needed Linda's constant support and encouragement. As Donald explained, "in the end, I know the information, so this kid that went to a regular school knows the exact same information as me, but, he was taught in a much harder way" (Donald, AI, 02/19/08, line 244). As far as Donald was concerned, the goal was passing

the provincial exam, and Linda was there to help them learn test-taking skills that would enable them to do that, even if it included strategies and shortcuts.

Discursive practices that contributed to the test-taking practice included encouraging the youths to examine the text of questions on provincial exams. Linda encouraged youths to concentrate on the questions themselves, rather than on only the answers. Linda asked them to think about why someone would want to ask that particular question, and to think about who decided that the answer in the text was the “right” answer. The discursive practice of constant questioning was common in Linda’s class, and it challenged the youths’ ideas about what was right, and who decided what was right. Textual examination and questioning seemed to allow the youths to more readily contribute to conversations associated with test-taking strategies, in terms of how they would have phrased the questions, as well as how they would have selected the multiple choice answers.

The strategy of examining and questioning texts was also brought into everyday verbal discursive practices. Based on observations of Linda, the youths in her classes, and at Mountain High in general, youths knew that Linda did not take “crap” from them. Linda challenged them when they did not support their arguments, made poor decisions about doing their work, or tried to derail classroom discussions. From an observational viewpoint, it may have appeared that Linda was harsh with them. On more than one occasion when a student interrupted a discussion, she asked, “Is it on topic?” If they answered, “No,” she ignored them and continued with the discussion. If they answered, “Yes,” and then attempted to change the subject, she immediately stopped them and turned her attention back to the class. It was not infrequent to hear youths’ grumble and chuckle simultaneously after she had chastised or ignored them.

Linda engaged students in ways that seemed, on the one hand to reify her authority, but also offered youths opportunities to think and talk through their own thinking regarding course content and topics of discussion. Her requirement for youths to provide evidence for their words

and perspectives seemed to help these youths formulate their ideas before voicing them. These youths also seemed to respect her ability to use words in many ways, for example, to bring order to the discussions, present novel ideas, and to encourage them to think beyond that which appeared in superficial ways.

### **Power in the Classroom Context**

The layout of each of the classrooms I observed was traditional: teacher in front, students in desks sitting and facing the board. In each classroom there was also an understanding that keeping order in that context during lessons was an important aspect of demonstrating respect to the class. Youths were expected to stay in their seats and wait to be called upon before speaking. To me, this bore a striking resemblance to classrooms in mainstream high school classes. In addition, setting aside desks at the edges of the classrooms as study carrels for youths who were being disruptive, and moving youths from one seat to another if they were being disruptive, positioned the teacher with more power and the students with less power, as frequently found in mainstream high schools.

Posture and non-verbal cues from the teachers also emphasized the differences between youths and adults. For example, during writing assignments, Jim stood with his back to his desk in front of the class. While his posture may have been intended to demonstrate that he was available if they needed help—with his legs crossed at the ankles and his arms crossed in front of him—he may have appeared more dominating than he knew. During writing assignments, few students approached him until he moved away from his desk and walked around the class, or went to the back of the class to sit.

Most youths who talked to me about Jim during the interviews, as well as during the observations, recognized that Jim was “strict,” but that, “some kids need that” (field notes, 02/14/08). So while Jim used “the look” to silence talking students, or called them by name to answer during discussions, the youths felt that this offered them a structure on which they could

depend. As one example, Jim gave the class an assignment to complete individually, but somehow the youths made it into a discussion. One youth, sitting beside me, kept looking to Jim who was reading at his desk. I asked him if he was okay, and he simply responded that he was waiting for Jim to do something so he could get back to work. To him, quieting his classmates was the job of the teacher, and he did not feel he could actually tell the teacher to ask the class to quiet down.

As noted earlier, the physical space of the classrooms was semi-opened with no doors. Both Linda's and Jim's classrooms shared the larger space with the art class and the student area, partitioned by walls of bookshelves and lockers. This made it difficult to identify the boundaries of the space of each of the classrooms. On a couple of occasions Jim had trouble keeping the youths within what could be considered "his room." This was probably made more difficult because there was no real door, and also because the youths seemed to constantly claim that the boundary of the door shifted. Sometimes, according to youths, the classroom extended to include sections of the hallway with the lockers. While Jim attempted through various methods to confine the classroom physical space, it seemed that once the youths completed their tasks for his class, negotiating the space became more difficult. In this way, power sometimes drifted from Jim to the students.

### **Who's the Boss?**

The staff at Mountain High tried to work as a team, but the reality was that, as far as the youths were concerned, the boss of the school was the head teacher. In the classrooms, the boss was the teacher. This hierarchy of authority closely resembled that found in a mainstream high school with a principal, even though Jane made it clear that her role was simply to deal with daily issues at the school. Indeed, both students and teachers recognized her as the one responsible for all of them. The use of Jane's name in the classrooms was one nobody took

lightly. Being sent to see Jane, or telling a teacher that they would be reported to Jane, had a strong impact.

Linda, who related incidents about when she was head teacher, recalled a time when her name was used the same way. By virtue of the title, head teacher, she had complete control over her classes. She also spoke about the transformation she experienced the year after she was no longer the head teacher. She started losing control of the class, and it surprised her in a pleasant way. However, when Jane came to a class in session and asked to speak to the teacher, the whispers among the youths suggested that the teacher was in trouble. The noise levels in the classrooms were quickly reduced by her presence, and this was especially notable during class discussions. While no one noticed she was at the entrance of the class, the discussions continued with full force. However, when they noticed, the tone of the discussions quieted down.

Although the hierarchy of authority figures at Mountain High seemed to reify the hierarchical system found in mainstream high school, the observations of the youths, and the power and use of Jane's name by both teachers and students as a discursive practice signified that they both felt that there was someone to turn to when they could not come to an agreement themselves. This knowledge appeared comforting and was one of the structures in place that students particularly seemed to appreciate. They knew who was responsible for them, and to whom they were made to answer for any kind of disciplinary issue.

While I was there, one youth lost his cell phone, but in such a small, close community, the youths soon knew who had taken it. The next day, while I watched some youths play cards during break, they discussed with this youth the various options available for him to recover his phone. Although my contributions to this conversation were minimal, they freely discussed several options for dealing with the student who had violated their school. As far as these youths were concerned, stealing was a crime against the whole school, not just the student suffering the material loss. It was finally decided that the youth who lost his phone should deal with the

situation through the head teacher. They conceded that taking the matter into their own hands would “mess up the school.” This comment seemed to suggest that the order of the school needed to be maintained, and they would wait on the authority to deal with the situation.

### **Showing Up and Being on Time**

Historically, the policy at Mountain High was that a student must be present 80% of the semester to be considered a full-time student (Rothstein, 1999). Dee, a recent graduate of the program, debated the necessity for having an attendance policy when, as she argued, “I wasn’t attending like, 80% or whatever like I was suppose to, but I still had the marks, and so I was always saying that if my marks slipped, then I think it’s a problem, but, if they don’t then it’s not a problem” (Dee, AI, 03/07/08, line 248). However, she recognized that at Mountain High she had learned how to be a better student and that this had helped her move on to college. While all adults at Mountain High tried their own strategies to encourage youths to attend school, the motivation seemed to be a concern for their well being, especially considering their sometimes-unstable home lives.

One of the girls to whom I had spoken and had considered for an interview, simply stopped coming to school one day. When the adults noticed, they informed her youth and family worker who made several calls to her family until they informed her that the youth had moved out of her family home and gone to live with her boyfriend in a different city. Although the details of why she had suddenly moved were not discussed, it was clear that her family life was one that made the staff worry. Dee, herself, admitted that having someone call home asking where she was, and how she was doing, was a motivation for her to take the many transfers to school every morning while she was at Mountain High. Jon also admitted that knowing that someone would call his house looking for him if he was ever absent was one way to get him to school. While it may seem like these calls home were a form of control, it seemed that the youths actually took it to mean that adults at this school cared enough about them to find out what they

were experiencing. To them, this was different from their mainstream schools where nobody noticed if they were present or absent.

Youths' conceptions of time at Mountain High seemed distinct from conceptions found in mainstream school. Roger, one youth in Jim's class, was not shy about relating the number of times that he knew he would be late to school and be sent to the principal's office, and so decided to cut school on those days. Tardiness at Mountain High, however, held different meanings. Different teachers dealt with tardiness differently, but all agreed they would rather have the youths in class, even for a short time, than for them to not show up for class. Teachers, therefore, tried various strategies to encourage youths to be on time. For example, some teachers had tried giving quizzes at the start of every class, but had soon realized that counting all these quizzes toward the final grade may have contributed to many more youths failing.

Linda recently started an activity that was becoming a common practice used by many teachers. She gave the points earned on these quizzes for extra credit. The objective, then, was to help them get to class on time, and not necessarily to test their memory about the previous day's material. Jim had found that allowing time at the beginning of class for journal writing allowed more youths to arrive by the time he started his lesson. Also, Linda's "late slip" system was adopted by other teachers with the idea that youths now had to justify why they were late rather than just showing up anytime during the class without a reason. Although the late slip system was still on trial while I was there, and the amount of youths late to class had not yet improved, it did appear that they were putting more effort into being on time. So rather than coming in 20 to 30 minutes late, they were now only 10 to 15 minutes late.

Most youths and adults at Mountain High admitted that many of the youths who came to Mountain High had such poor attendance at their previous high schools that tardiness was not considered an issue there. Here, however, most students did make the effort to attend, but still seemed to struggle with scheduling their lives to include school. In all, it seemed that the

traditional structure of high school present at Mountain High contributed to their respect for the program as a context for learning. In some way, they might have been comforted by the rules that governed the program.

The dominant structures in place, the general expectations of what school should be like, and the power differences between youths and adults and between the teachers and the head teacher, all validated Mountain High in the eyes of the youths. As a past teacher working at a mainstream high school, I was sensitized to a structure that came to mean “school.” However, in this study, I was surprised to find one that so closely resembled “school” in an alternative school. I assumed that for youths who were not successful in mainstream high school to re-engage in learning, the learning context had to be vastly different. However, the structure to some extent, offered the youths a sense of security and comfort. The social and discursive practices that adults used to engage youths contributed to a school culture that was both reflective of mainstream high school and distinctive to the community at Mountain High.

### **Defining Commitment to Community: The “Philosophy” of Mountain High**

The ideals of Mountain High noted in Chapter 3—including commitments to providing a caring learning context and “support for social development” for youths “looking for community” (Vancouver School Board, 2006, p. 16)—were the foundation for a broader school wide commitment to community. However, the definition of Mountain High’s commitment to community differed depending on who was speaking. This commitment was defined in six different ways: as a characteristic of staff and a function of how staff members treated each other; as a mandate for how to work with the youths in their care; as the importance of including the parents of youths in decisions associated with their children; as how the Ministry of Children and Families was perceived by the staff; as the vision of the head teacher, and; as how the staff introduced the rules and policies of the Vancouver School Board to the youths during the initial orientation.

### **A Commitment to Community: A Staff Characteristic**

One of the older members of the staff, MJ, a youth and family worker who was with the school for over 18 years, recalled how she was introduced to Mountain High and its “truly community base”(MJ, AI, 02/16/08, line 6). While MJ’s recollections were rooted in her experience, they were also influenced by her political commitments, her love for the youths under her care, and her memories of times of social and political upheaval. To MJ, the community base on which Mountain High was founded was most evident in how the staff showed concern for each other in the face of funding challenges. She related an example of when Mountain High had just started and the staff pooled their salaries. Although MJ admitted she was not present at the time the staff members pooled their salaries, she related the story of how the Ministry of Children and Families and the Ministry of Education jointly funded the program, but that the funds allotted were for fewer teachers than those needed for the program to serve the youths. To make up for the discrepancy, the staff agreed to pool their salaries. Each received approximately the same monthly salary and had to supplement their incomes with other work. Rothstein (1999) documented the time when the pooled salary system was employed, 1972-3, and noted that the average salary of each teacher was \$250 per month. Although this practice was phased out years ago, and now only the Ministry of Education paid the staff, the legacy of salary pooling remained as testimony to the sense of community to which the original staff was dedicated.

The dedication to community that was the driving force of the original staff was reflected in today’s staff in different but notable ways. The sense of community was ensured through the initiation of every new teacher to Mountain High. MJ related how her mentor had introduced her to this community almost two decades ago, Linda related her experiences as a new teacher to Mountain High, and Jane spoke about how Linda had helped her when she was new to the school. Now, one of the newer members of the staff, Jim, who participated in the observations,

acknowledged that the main reason he decided to apply to teach at this school was the staff spirit. He recalled that at the time the position was posted, he had already substituted at Mountain High and had found the staff not only committed to helping the youths who attended the school, but also dedicated to helping each other. He claimed that the staff worked as a team, or more so, as a family, to ensure that all the youths under their care received the care they needed.

For Jim, as a new staff member, the social practice of weekly staff meetings was like support-group meetings. The discursive practices shared during these meetings involved talking about what was happening in their individual classrooms, or with specific youths, and sharing advice based on their experiences. He also emphasized how open the more experienced teachers were to share their knowledge, listen, and provide advice and sometimes even suggest materials for making the courses more engaging to the youths. This discursive practice of sharing experiences and knowledge was one that he admitted the newer members of the staff had quickly appropriated. He explained that he and the other newer members of the staff had also started sharing with each other their experiences and constantly communicated any insights into what might help them with individual youths.

Staff at Mountain High also participated in the social practice of meeting for lunch. Although most members of staff met for lunch in the staff room, where youths were not allowed, they were not all there at the same time. For example, Jane, the head teacher frequently had administrative type duties to attend to during this time, the secretary kept the office open for youths, and some teachers used this time to prepare or meet with youths. However, they all came to the staff room even if only for a few minutes. The social practice of meeting for lunch encouraged the discursive practice of discussions about daily activities and provided updated information about youths that helped staff to get a better picture of how youths under their care were doing.

Keeping the lines of communication open, teachers were able to gather information about the lives of the youths, as well as issues that individual youths were experiencing. This helped them in making judgments concerning whether a student had to make up missed work, do extra work, needed extra time to prepare for tests, or even, needed someone to talk to about specific issues. This sense of community among the staff, for Jim, had made the experience of teaching at an alternative school manageable and therefore, rewarding. More importantly, knowing that there were people from whom he could ask advice, allowed him to be able to dedicate more of his time to each youth and address his or her individual needs.

### **Sense of Community: “Our Mandate to Our Students”**

During the interviews, MJ asserted that the adults who had worked at Mountain High throughout the years had individually concluded that, “the kids that came to Mountain High had too much personality for regular school” (MJ, AI, 02/19/08, line 302-303). As the interview proceeded, MJ brought out numerous newspaper clippings she had collected over the years with pictures or reports of youths who, while attending Mountain High, had participated in social activism. For example, youths’ participation in protests of funding cuts from the VSB, to poverty alleviation campaigns, and more recently, protests associated with the Olympic games and homelessness. “That’s them protesting, so it was that very, outspoken, left wing, free thinking kind of program” (MJ, AI, 02/19/08, line 66-67), MJ asserted, as she pointed to a 1995 poster of some youths with signs in protest of funding cuts for special education.

MJ explained that in the late 1990s, the VSB evaluated programs under their responsibility and followed recommendations for a name change from “alternative rehabilitation programs,” to “alternative resources programs.” However, MJ maintained, “we are about rehabilitation, they can take it out of the name, but that’s who we are...you know, we rehabilitate, we take kids, show them a different path, and get them back on track with what they should be doing” (MJ, AI, 19/02/08, line 190-192).

MJ also argued that youths in mainstream school were “silenced,” and this led to many of them losing their voice, feeling there was no place for them, and leaving school. To MJ, when these youths came to Mountain High it was like, “Oh my God, I’ve come home” (MJ, AI, 19/02/08, line 275). She explained that Mountain High provided youths with a safe learning context where they could be who they were without feeling that they would be judged.

Similarly, Linda, a veteran teacher with eight years at Mountain High referred to the mandate of the school as the socialization of youths toward “life-long learning and self-actualization” (Linda, AI, 02/21/08, line 246). In the interview, Linda expressed that although some students may not graduate, she was comforted by the idea that they, as a staff, may have succeeded in making them more socially adept. Linda also said that, “teaching at a school like this...the goal is multiple...not just socialization. I would like to see that some kid who is a fragile learner, who is really brilliant go to UBC” (Linda, AI, 02/21/08, line 251-252). For Linda, the objective was not only graduation, but also that the youths who came to Mountain High left knowing they could achieve their individual goals.

For Linda, one important lesson was teaching the youths that learning was not something that happened only in school. Indeed, every aspect of life was about learning: from reading the newspaper, to watching the news, and being aware of political and economic changes taking place around the world. One major social practice in both Linda’s courses involved discussions at the beginning of each class about world affairs. Whether they shared an event that took place in their neighborhoods, or something that took place across the world, this was the time they could make their classmates aware, discuss the issue, and gather either more information from other students, or listen to other opinions on the topic. Linda emphasized the idea that news is constructed; written by specific people, for specific purposes. The discursive practice of questioning how news was constructed, by whom and for what reason, fostered in youths the desire to look beyond the front page of newspapers. This questioning was in line with the

experiences to which MJ had referred when she talked about youths who did not conform to the status quo; youths who looked beyond constructed media representations of social issues, and who, through their participation in different types of social activism, tried to share their knowledge.

Both MJ and Linda also expressed how important it was for the youths to connect with the adults in the program. MJ felt that at this school “you have the emotional and psychological support” (MJ, AI, 02/19/08, line 184-185) and that is what makes the difference for the youths who attend. To her, it was important that every youth felt that they could go to an adult, and that that adult would listen. Linda felt that many of the youths simply needed some “TLC, ... a mother, a safe guide” (Linda, AI, 02/21/08, line 243-244). Linda stated that for many youths who attended Mountain High this kind of relationship was new, and something they needed. MJ also made reference to feeling that it was their job, to “teach kids to be accountable for their own behavior” (MJ, AI, 02/19/08, line 439). To MJ, this was the way to help these youths become more responsible adults: adults who were contributing members of society.

Although this sense of community and dedication to the needs of the students was reflected in how the adults in this program spoke about the staff and the students, they also recognized that it was becoming harder for them to provide the kind of attention and care they were committed to offering each student. Several times during the interviews, as well as during the observations, adults in the program reminisced about how times have changed. They insisted that it wasn't “the way it used to be” or that, “it's not like that now,” referring to changes in policies that made it harder for them to reach out to the youths in ways they had in the past. The changes these teachers referenced were specific to the funds and programs available to youths with special needs, for example mental health issues, learning issues, and economic programs to help youths who were on their own, or were transient. These concerns reflected the findings in

British Columbia that policy changes were having an impact on classroom practices (Grimmett et al., 2008).

### **Extensions of “Community” to Parents**

All four adults interviewed made reference to the importance of working along with parents and youths in making decisions concerning the experiences of each youth at school. To adults at Mountain High, social issues extended beyond the walls of the school and still needed to be addressed, even if not directly by them. For this reason, they were all committed to including the family in the learning experiences of youths at Mountain High. These adults recognized the struggles some of the families faced. For instance, one youth and family worker reflected on how lucky she felt that while her children were growing up, she had a job that allowed her to go to the school during the day. However, for some parents, leaving their minimum wage job to go to a school meeting in the middle of the day may mean losing their job. These adults also recognized parents as possible allies to help the youths come to school and remain in school.

For this reason, Jane, the head teacher, kept the lines of communication between the home and the school open, and tried to be in constant contact with parents from the initial interviews for enrollment. During these initial interviews with the youths and their parents, Jane and the youth and family worker together explained the school policies, the roles of the different adults at Mountain High, and the school’s expectations of the youths and their parents as they became a part of this community. Jane also explained that parents were invited to all discussions involving the youths, including those that related to behavioral issues, attendance, and grades. She explained that throughout the year, there were some parents with whom they needed to be in contact more than with other parents, but that ensuring that the relationship was open and maintained with all parents was important. Jane also explained that either she, as the head teacher, or one of the youth and family workers, communicated with youths and their parents, or

that at every meeting with parents, the youth and family worker was always present, even if she, herself, was not.

During my interview with MJ, she confided that her motivation for ensuring that parents were involved in the decisions involving their children was a result of having a son who had problems in mainstream high school. The school he attended had made decisions for him without ever consulting her. This experience occurred while she was already a youth and family worker at a different school, and even though she was in “the system,” she felt that the system had not worked for her. She also related that she had no control over her son’s refusal to attend school, and that the youth and family worker who was later assigned to her son helped her realize what a difference having someone acting as a liaison between the family and school made. It was this experience that convinced her of the value of keeping parents involved in the learning experiences of their children.

While the adults at Mountain High recognized the importance of keeping the parents involved in the lives of their children, they also understood that every family was different, and that they needed to make allowances for that. For example, one youth and family worker recounted the experience of one youth whose father suffered from mental health issues and the two had a strained relationship. The best way the school found to deal with the situation was to keep the father informed, but not have both father and youth present at the same meetings, especially since this youth no longer lived with his father. Jane also referred to a situation where the parents were not available, and so she was unable to contact them about the enrollment of their child in the program. Although these examples were rare, the variety of social issues that influenced youths’ engagement in school was quite varied and the school needed to deal them with individually. However, all adults at Mountain High recognized the importance of the school/home relationship, and were willing to work around their schedules to ensure that these relationships were maintained.

## **Ministry of Children and Families: Staff Perceptions That They “Dropped the Ball”**

The major change discussed by teachers and staff in the school was the reduction in funds available for various programs they had once had. Government departments that established policies were different from the ones that determined how resources are allocated. This situation seemed to have created tension among members of staff at Mountain High with respect to the reduction of resources for special needs programs. This was evident in the staff discursive practices. One of the most outspoken members of staff was MJ, one of the oldest members of staff.

MJ noted that the Ministry of Children and Families had originally employed and funded the youth and family workers and then shifted these youth and family workers to the Ministry of Education. Although reference was made to these changes in funding by all adults, MJ said that the Ministry had “dropped the ball” (MJ, AI, 02/19/08, line 330-331). To MJ, the recent changes both in policies affecting education and those influencing funding were the most detrimental to programs dedicated to helping youths outside of mainstream schools. She made reference to the fact that many social services were cut since these changes had taken effect. Of primary concern to her, was that the original budget with which she had started, which was over \$7,000 a year, had been reduced to an annual \$1,800, plus \$20 per youth and family worker.

Although I was unable to locate the official amounts identified in MJ’s argument, she was adamant about the effect of the reduced funds for the program. She explained that at Mountain High, there were three youth and family workers, each with about 30 youths under their care. Combined, their annual budget was approximately \$3,600, or about half what they were receiving ten years ago. MJ explained that this budget was what they used per student—when they had to go to court and when individual students needed immediate help with expenses for transportation or food—and it also funded many of the community development programs within the school. She explained that this budget also funded graduation celebrations, socials,

various clubs and activities, and in general, helped to create activities through which the faculty and youths could promote a sense of community.

MJ also made reference to other social programs that had been removed, and how that had impacted the youths they now served; the kinds of social issues youths now dealt with, and; the psychological and emotional baggage with which youths came. MJ traced many of these impacts to the removal of youth and family workers from the elementary schools, which seems to have made access to psychological help for children in schools more difficult. She felt that because the mental health issues youths faced in childhood were not being addressed, they were compounded by the time they were able to access youth and family workers or counselors in high schools. She also noted that in the past, a child who was in “care,” referring to a youth under the care of the Ministry of Children and Families, was cared for as if the Ministry was that child’s parent. Now, even those services were difficult to access.

Linda, who had served in the role of head teacher for seven years between 1999 and 2006, noted that over the years the school had moved further away from its original community philosophy, but she emphasized that it was not as a direct action of any one individual. However, rather, it was a result of various confounding social, economic, and political issues.

### **Vision of Mountain High by the Head Teacher: “The Whole Person”**

Mountain High fell under the jurisdiction of one of the larger high schools in Vancouver but was located off-site. My interview with Jane, the head teacher, focused on the administrative aspects of Mountain High and how it functioned, which she described as similar to that of a department of the larger high school. Jane explained that Mountain High was bound by Vancouver School Board policies, but historically, Mountain High tailored these policies to meet their own needs with the approval of the principal of the high school and within the framework set by the Board of Education. For example, Mountain High tailored their enrollment practices to ensure that parents were actively involved in the entire process, though she acknowledged that

some parents were not enthusiastic about this aspect of the program. These enrollment procedures involved contacting all previous schools attended by the youths and seeking information about specific students. Information was collected regarding attendance and grades, if some students should not be together, as well as information associated with behavioral problems, academic struggles, incidents of lack of behavioral control, and in some cases, although rare, restraining orders. The social practices associated with the enrollment of new youths seem to be rooted in the ones used when the program had begun, but were adjusted to meet the VSB requirements. Rothstein (1999) described the minimum requirements for youths to gain access into the original program: they had to have been out of school for more than six months, and they had to express a verbal commitment to finish school. Youths completed an interview, during which the staff made the decision as to whether their commitment was sincere, and at least one staff member needed to agree to provide support for that youth. When I observed, each new student was assigned a youth and family worker to serve the support role, and all staff members attempted to connect with youths on an individual level.

Jane also noted the role of the youth and family workers, their involvement in every aspect of the youths' schooling experience, and differentiated this role from that of the head teacher. She clarified that the youth and family workers were there to support the student and family and, therefore, their role included counselling, whereas the head teacher was responsible for discipline, attendance, and academics. She admitted that although their roles were different, the youth and family workers, the staff, and the head teacher, all had the best interest of the youths at heart.

The goal of the school of graduation was referred to by Rothstein (1999); he noted that the goal of Mountain High was to "make curriculum interesting enough to keep students in the program and to teach them enough to pass the Grades 11 and 12 provincial exams" (p. 362). To ensure that this did occur, currently, the school provided youths with a curriculum geared toward

passing all the provincial requirements leading to the Dogwood Certificate. In speaking of these requirements, Jane explained that the school's responsibility for providing the youths in the program with the courses and academic background to fulfill the requirements toward a Dogwood Certificate were at the forefront of her commitments.

Jane also clarified the attendance policies of the school that required that youths be present for at least 80% of class time, a percentage they had inherited from the beginning of the school (Rothstein 1999). Jane argued that, in her experience, she had found a correlation between attendance and success, and that this encouraged her and her staff to try to ensure the highest levels of attendance from youths. However, she recognized that lack of attendance was often a symptom of some other issue keeping youths out of school. Many of the youths who attended Mountain High were at risk of not graduating from regular high school, and had a record of high absenteeism. To her this was a "kind of criterion" (Jane, AI, 02/14/08, line 99-100) for being referred to Mountain High: the risk of not graduating.

Jane explained that, to her, this program was intended for "the whole person." She explained that the small size of the student population allowed teachers the opportunity to get to know students on a more personal level. For example, when youths in mainstream school "got lost," it was hard for them to find their way again. Although some youths did get lost at Mountain High, Jane noted that when the teachers knew the youths, they saw changes in youths' behaviors and that made it easier for these youths to get the help they needed. This program was also less formal than mainstream schools. For example, Jane identified the social practice of promoting a flexible context at Mountain High and how it was supported through the discursive practice of using only first names; from head teacher, to staff, cook, secretary, engineer, and also the youths.

Jane summarized the program as providing a "structure but not a rigidity in the classroom and in school" (Jane, AI, 02/14/08, line 319). This succinct explanation of how the school

worked reflected the historical view of the Mountain High culture. From its inception, the teachers at Mountain High recognized that these youths needed structure and daily monitoring, tempered by a “concern for the students emotional needs such as developing self-confidence and forming meaningful relationships” (p. 359). Even the founders of this program recognized that the mainstream school system was not flexible enough to meet the needs of some youths, and this may have been why some youths got lost there. Jane explained that in programs that opened an avenue for the youths to speak and, more importantly, to know that they were heard, the youths were supported to make better decisions about being in school. Jane emphasized that with youths in the program adults needed to recognize the struggles and loss of confidence they may have experienced, to be “really flexible and very patient and calm” (Jane, AI, 02/14/08, line 315), and to be encouraging but clear. Jane described this as:

Seeing it as a fluid environment that you have to respond to constantly, and every class might be different, and every day might be different, so just being tolerant of that kind of change and able to respond rapidly to some kind of change in the classroom or something that you realize about a student, so you can adapt... as a teacher. (Jane, AI, 02/14/08, line 307-311)

Jane emphasized that different students had different needs and that she felt that her responsibility in the classroom was to find ways to be constantly aware of the youths’ level of engagement and to “connect with the student in the classroom” (Jane, AI, 02/14/08, line 299). For her, this was done through various activities: from discussions, to group work, to individual work, to whatever was required for that specific class and specific youth. As the head teacher, Jane explained that she constantly had to try new things, and that she counted on the support of the other teachers in the program. Although each teacher had his or her unique teaching styles, the objective was always to try to engage the youths and to enable them to remain engaged in learning.

In recognition of the diversity of youths who attended Mountain High, Jane argued that most courses were designed in ways that required minimal homework, so that youths who had jobs after school were not burdened by it and did not fail to complete it. This flexibility toward homework was a social practice inherited from the original founders of the school who recognized that for some youths, with personal lives in disarray, rigid rules about homework would not have helped them stay in school (Rothstein, 1999). Youths entering the program also entered into a kind of verbal agreement to be respectful of other youths in the program. This ensured that both the adults and youths in the program respected the diversity of the members of the school community. To Jane, this was one of the program's contributions to social responsibility: that all individuals in the program treated each other with respect, were welcoming, and were polite. It was her hope that if the youths learned to be mindful of the people in this learning context, that it may be reflected in the relationships these youths had outside of Mountain High.

Jane, who had taught at a mainstream high school, was careful to point out that mainstream schools served a large portion of the youth population and served them well. She emphasized that mainstream schools tried to focus on the whole person, but they were larger, and this made it more difficult. For Jane, what differentiated Mountain High from mainstream school was that at Mountain High individual student needs were more easily met. In mainstream high school, where she had had over 180 students, by the end of the year she felt that she did not really get a chance to know all her students, or even know a few, well.

### **Orientation: Staff Introducing Youths to School Board Rules and Policies**

During my observation period at Mountain High, on the Friday before the beginning of the second semester the school had orientations for both new and returning youths to the program. In the morning of the orientation day, new students were introduced to the staff and the rules, and policies and expectations were explained to them. Jane, the head teacher, explained

that these rules, policies, and expectations were discussed with each student individually when they came in for their interviews along with their parents, and that they were reminded as a group so they knew they had all been introduced to the same rules.

All staff members sat in chairs positioned in a wide semi-circle facing the lunch tables where the youths sat. After the head teacher introduced the staff, she reminded the youths of the correlation between attendance and success in school. Then every staff member stood and spoke about at least two policies or school rules. These rules ranged from dress code, to visitors, to smoking, and almost every room had specific rules concerning their use. In all, over 15 rules were discussed during the orientation. These same rules were again discussed with returning students later that same morning. Some rules were more explicitly reinforced, especially, rules for excused absences, rules about garbage, and showing respect to each other and school property. In some instances it was clear that these rules were being emphasized for the benefit of specific youths, as the staff members sometimes looked in the direction of specific youths and whispers among the youths indicated that they all knew for whom that rule was being emphasized.

One common behavior among youths in all contexts was their inability to remain seated quietly and pay attention for extended periods of time. At Mountain High, this was dealt with by using “teacher looks” and by keeping the sessions short. Both orientations were about 15 minutes long, after which all the teachers quickly left the semi-circle in front to join the ranks of the youths seated in the lunch tables. The mainstream social practice of teachers remaining at the front of the group they were addressing did not seem to be one to which these teachers were accustomed, although they seemed to recognize the benefits of using it in addressing larger groups.

All members of staff were present at the orientations including the youth and family workers. In my interview with MJ, she introduced me to the handbook the school had used ten

years earlier and that included a total of five school rules. These rules were specific to topics such as respecting others, respecting the school property and learning tools, smoking, and illegal drugs or weapons in school. MJ reflected how disconcerting it had been to adapt to an increase in individual rules, but Linda acknowledged that sometimes you have to “cover all your bases” (Linda, Personal communication, 02/06/08). In her experience, youths who did not do well with rules sometimes dedicated time to searching for loopholes and this was when having clearly defined rules became important.

In terms of the impact of policy changes, one policy change that impacted Mountain High was with reference to admissions. Beginning in the 2007-08 academic year, VSB policies changed and Mountain High was expected to accommodate youths who needed to complete Grade 10 courses. The result of this policy change was that of the youths accepted into the program, many were accepted into the program needing different Grade 10 courses. For some of the courses youths needed, Mountain High did not have a teacher. This led to accommodations for some of these youths to complete these courses online during school time. The complicated schedules that arose to meet this policy change led to many changes in class schedules at the beginning of the semester, more changes than usual.

### **What is “Alternative”?: A Community of Difference**

A key aspect of what made Mountain High truly alternative was its teachers and their concern for the youths that extended beyond that of the classroom. This concern fostered a school culture through which the teachers at Mountain High acknowledged the opinions of the youths as important, and privileged their experiences in mainstream school. Many of the adults made reference to how the youths had been “silenced” in mainstream high school, and they felt it was their job to give the youths their voices. To the youths, it was about knowing that there were adults who cared for them. At the same time, the adults themselves admitted feeling differently than they had before teaching at an alternative school. They also spoke about how they felt

different or apart from mainstream teachers and mainstream society. This section highlights the notion of community based on respect and a pedagogy that is based on flexibility, and examines what made Mountain High “alternative.”

### **Relationships: “The Currency is Respect”**

Given the philosophy of the school, it was clear that treating each other with respect and understanding that everyone was different and unique was at the core of relationships that allowed for all youths and adults in the school to be members of this community. In this study, respect for all individuals was exemplified initially in how relationships were co-constructed between adults, and between youths and adults. These relationships then influenced how they treated the physical school building. Linda exemplified the philosophy on which the community at Mountain High was based when she explained that, “the currency is respect” (Linda, AI, 02/21/08, line 357).

#### **Relationships between adults**

Relationships between adults in the program, as captured in the social and discursive practices at Mountain High, started with the respect staff had for each other. Jim explained that for him to work with the staff at Mountain High was one of the greatest experiences he had had as a teacher. In particular, it was because the staff at Mountain High treated him as an equal contributor and respected his opinions and his ideas. He explained that he knew that the more experienced teachers would help him with advice and ideas. At no time did Jim express a fear of being ridiculed for his ideas or questions. He knew that if a colleague did not know how to help him, he or she would direct him to someone who did. The social practice of providing advice and support, versus monitoring and assessing, encouraged new staff members like Jim to explore their own weaknesses and strengths, secure in the knowledge that they had others to turn to when needed. As Jim continued at Mountain High, he internalized the practices to which he had been

introduced, and grew into these social practices in ways that allowed him to use them in similar ways to encourage and support other members of staff.

During my observations, I also noted that when students made negative comments about other teachers, neither Jim nor Linda allowed for them to continue. Rather, they asked the youths to talk to them about it after class. This indicated that although they did not directly ask the youth to refrain from expressing their opinions, they respected their colleagues enough not to participate in or encourage these types of discussions. Practices like these reminded the youths that respect comes first and talking about others without giving them an opportunity to respond did not contribute to the Mountain High community. It also demonstrated to the youths that they, the adults, supported each other, and would not allow the youths to speak ill of them or set them up against each other.

### **Relationships between adults and youths**

Respect was crucial to relationships between youths and adults in this alternative re-engagement program. For example in my interview with Dee, she stated, in reference to one of her teachers in this alternative program that, “she always talked to us like we were adults, that we weren’t just some teenagers, you know, she gave us respect” (Dee, AI, 03/07/08, line 501-502). To Dee, the knowledge that her opinions mattered and were heard by this adult was interpreted as respect.

When the adults accepted that youths had a life outside of the program—by treating them like adults, or discursively by asking and encouraging the youths to talk about their opinions and experiences—youths responded more openly. This was noted on various occasions, especially when classroom assignments involved dealing with topics of discussion, or writing assignments. For example, Jim constructed a discursive practice in the journal writing assignments. He allowed the youths to write their thoughts on paper, and then used these as the starting points of class discussions. Students quickly recognized these journals as valid spaces for them to

introduce aspects about their lives out of school that were important to them. One example of this occurred when one of Jim's students asked to write about drugs and alcohol, because to her, this was a relevant experience about which to write.

Another discursive practice that the adults used to acknowledge the lives of the youths was classroom discussions in Linda's class. For example, Linda allowed one of the youths in her class the opportunity to talk about his experiences in Kosovo, and another student the opportunity to share his experiences in Lebanon. Linda opened these discursive spaces by introducing her own experiences and inviting them to contribute their experiences. For these youths, this practice may have signaled to them that their experiences were as relevant and as important as hers, and validated each other's experiences and concerns as important topics.

In terms of assignments, Rothstein (1999) noted that from the inception, the staff at Mountain High recognized that frequently the youths who attended had home lives that were not conducive to doing academic work outside of school. For this reason, they had modified their teaching practices to take that into account. For example, both Linda and Jim made a concerted effort to enable the youths to do most of their work during class time. On one occasion, one youth had taken the worksheets that Linda had prepared for the entire week, and had filled them out overnight. He then came to class with all the worksheets completed, and as the class proceeded while his peers struggled with each question, he sat in the corner doing nothing. When Linda checked with him, she realized what he had done, and told the class that they should wait to do the assignments during class time so they could get the help they needed. Linda suggested that the reason she was not happy was because she wanted them to do the work together, while she was around to help them. Both Linda and Jim were flexible with due dates for assignments, as was sometimes necessary when youths explained, for example, that they had to take a late shift at work and had not had time to complete the assignment.

Other social practices that highlighted the relationships between youths and adults, included when teachers allowed youths as many chances as they needed to get something right: “you need as many chances as you need to get it right, so, sometimes people don’t learn from the first mistake, sometimes they have to make ten, but eventually they’ll learn” (Jenny, AI, 02/21/08, line 202-204). In this example, adults recognized youths as different and having different learning styles that required different kinds of encouragement. Adults recognized the potential of these youths through the practice of granting multiple opportunities to get something “right.” This practice demonstrated that adults at Mountain High believed in these youths and would not give up on them. Through the interviews it became apparent that some of these youths had not been granted such opportunities, nor had they received similar kinds of assurances of their potential in mainstream school.

Linda encouraged one youth who did not participate in classroom discussions, and did not complete assignments. As time passed, her attempts to engage him in the class discussions included strategies like calling on him directly to ask his opinion on the topic of discussion. Initially, he did not seem to be aware of what was happening when he was invited to participate. One day, when asked what he thought, he gave a response that matched the discussion and provided support for his opinion. Linda listened to his argument and kept the discussion flowing. At the end of class, she eagerly asked if I had noticed his participation. Based on both the interviews and the observations, youths needed these kinds of supports, and the adults in this program recognized that need and catered to them. While many other words could be used to describe this kind of relationship, these youths and adults used one word: respect.

Relationships, to the adults in this program, meant knowing each youth well enough to know when something was not right. Even if they did not learn it directly from the youth, and even if they were not able to personally address the issue, they at the least brought it to the attention of other adults in a better position to talk with the youth. For example, in the first

semester, Jim talked about how he knew that something was going on with one of the young women in his class, but he did not know how to broach the subject so he asked the youth and family worker to talk with her.

The meeting with the youth and family worker revealed that this young woman, who had started missing classes, was contemplating leaving the program. She had transferred from another alternative program of only 22 students. To her, Mountain High was too big and she felt disconnected. In addition, she worked late night shifts and was too tired to come to school in the mornings. In combination, feeling disconnected and being tired from work, she had simply stopped coming to some classes. Although she did leave Mountain High during my observations, the youth and family worker had helped her transfer to an adult continuation program that offered later classes.

Another example was reflected in how Linda spoke with one of the young men from one of her classes. Linda recognized that his behavioral issues in class were related to other issues from home, and she took him aside after class to talk with him. Linda later recounted how his unstable family situation had left him feeling “lost” and he had asked her to help him seek “spiritual guidance.” She had suggested he read specific philosophy books, and they discussed questions he had as he read these books. Both Jim and Linda took the time to know youths personally, without judgment, as a sign of respect to the individuality of each of the youths. While the respect found between teachers and students in the context of mainstream classrooms and that found at Mountain High may not be different, what this section highlights is that for some youths who left mainstream schools, the relationships they now formed with adults were characterized by respect. For some of these youths, Mountain High was a new experience because it was here that they had first experienced what they interpreted as respect from adults at school.

### **Extending the relationship to the institution of school**

Respect for the school as an institution was mostly evident in the behavior and attitude of the youths in the program to school as a whole. As discussed earlier, to these youths the structure of this school with its roots in mainstream school validated this school as a “real” school. As such, to them the rules were a necessary part of that structure. Therefore, they showed their respect for the structure and used the rules to their advantage. For example, to the youths who participated in my interviews, respect for school meant abiding by the rules and policies to which they agreed when they were accepted into the program. This included attending classes and being on time, no tagging in the building or on the tables, no smoking inside the school, using the gym equipment appropriately, and taking care of the building itself by properly disposing of garbage.

Respect for the school was also more about recognizing that the adults in this program had taken them in and they owed it to these adults to be mindful of school property and the youths and adults who shared the physical space. Respect for property was listed in rules and policies set by the Vancouver School Board. On the one hand, the youths respected the school as an institution, and, on the other, they respected it because the adults had opened this school’s doors to them and accepted them despite their past experiences in mainstream school. This acceptance led both youths and adults to reassess their own experiences and identities in ways that allowed them to participate in this community. This second aspect of respect that led both adults and youths in the school to form new identities also contributed to a unique “community of difference.”

### **Community of Difference**

Youths and adults at Mountain High used social and discursive practices to construct a unique community based on perceptions of each other, as well their own senses of identity. Adults spoke about the youths being different from youths in mainstream high school and they

spoke about themselves as being different from the mainstream as well. This combination resulted in a community that was grounded upon identities of being different: from other teachers, students, and learning contexts. For the youths, it was based upon not being able to and/or wanting to fit in the social structure of mainstream school. For the adults, it was about being on the “fringe” or being a little “left-winged.”

To both youths and adults at this school, learning was an expression of identity in the context of a wider, more conventional world. For these youths and adults, conforming to school was something they did only as a means to an end, not as the end itself. The adults in this school fostered this learning context, and the youths found a place where being different from the regular and the mainstream was acceptable. In this way, the school culture afforded to the youths at Mountain High was one that encouraged them to strategically follow societal rules and expectations in order to graduate or pass an exam, while at the same time it offered them a learning context that was more flexible and personal than mainstream school. The construction of this school culture was what the youths both internalized and contributed to as well.

#### **Adults: Mediating youths’ identities**

How the adults made reference to the youths played an important role in identifying how they constructed their relationships with the youths. Descriptors for the youths took on specific meanings and they began to influence how they were used and what they represented. In this way, words that started as descriptors became important examples of discursive practices. For example, adults in the program continuously used specific words to describe youths. These included words such as “silenced youth,” “detached,” “disengaged,” “reluctant learners,” “resistant youth,” and “fragile learners.” The descriptors used by these adults to describe the youths in the program also reflected the effort they put forth to re-engage youths who had disengaged given their experiences in mainstream schools. Of interest to note, Rothstein (1999) reported the use of similar descriptors for youths from adults who worked at Mountain High in

the past, "...kids were fragile, they just needed a place of acceptance" (p. 406). The adults seemed to use words that were both a descriptor and an explanation for how and why the youths did not fit in mainstream schools, and of how mainstream school had left these youths with bad experiences that they now needed to counter. The carefully selected descriptors adults at Mountain High used in speaking about youths offered insight into their dedication to provide these youths with better experiences in school. This dedication was evident in the relationships the adults formed with youths and was also the basis for their commitment to negotiation and pedagogic flexibility.

The descriptors used by the adults for the youths in the program indicated that they felt that the problem was the institution of schooling, rather than the youths themselves. Schooling had been most detrimental to the youths, rather than the youths resisting the concept or idea of learning. Adults at Mountain High through these descriptors, also recognized the potential of the youths participate in their social context in meaningful ways. The descriptors also indicated that the adults acknowledged the complexity of the issues associated with school leaving. This acknowledgment encouraged the adults to find ways to engage the youths by using learning tasks to which they could relate. For example, Jim brought in elements of popular culture into his lessons and Linda asked the youths for discussion themes for class. By including topics of interest, and themes that were important to them, the adults in this school were able to engage youths in learning the information necessary to pass their courses and the information on provincial exams. In addition they also supported youths in their attempts to learn outside the context of school.

While the words that adults used to describe youths guided the negotiations they made with the youths, they may have also had other effects. For example, Linda worried that youths who came from mainstream schools—where they were made responsible for work outside of school through home-work and take-home projects—may stop engaging in school work outside

of school while attending Mountain High. Given the range of learners that she needed to teach on a daily basis, Linda's courses were designed to make allowances for the most "fragile" learner. As such, Linda provided many of the answers to questions she gave in class. She worried that, as a result, more capable students may stop working to their potential.

Linda's fears about youths doing minimal work may have been well founded, given the example of the youth who waited for her to give the answers to the past provincial tests indicated. This example was not an isolated example. There were other instances when Linda's willingness to negotiate allowed for some youths to become students who did less. However, the instances when this same willingness to negotiate more actively engaged youths in learning seemed more prevalent.

Jenny, for example, explained that knowing that Linda allowed her to discuss topics she was interested in during class time motivated her to research these topics in preparation for class discussions by reading news articles, books Linda mentioned in class, and searching the Internet. The learning context jointly constructed between Linda and the students encouraged youths to make efforts to seek knowledge and prepare for class. Jon also spoke about how Linda's expectation of evidence for statements they made during class discussions encouraged him to research dates and events in preparation for class discussions. This activity, initiated by Linda in her classes, became more common among the youths. This was an indication that youths were engaging in learning and were more likely to make the effort to fulfill the requirements toward their Dogwood.

It was evident that, for the adults at Mountain High, their aim was to engage youths who had come from mainstream schools, who they saw as "silenced," and to help them regain their voices in a similar way as the junior alternative high school Donald had attended had helped him become outspoken and active at Mountain High. For this reason, the development of discursive practices that engaged—for example, in discussions or through their journal writings—

encouraged the youths to express themselves more and regain their voice. The combination of speaking and writing seemed to work together to help the youths gain confidence in themselves and in their abilities to communicate and to face their individual challenges.

### **Reconstructing identity: Youths**

It was clear from the self-descriptive words youths at Mountain High used that they differentiated themselves from youths in mainstream high school. It was also evident that the words they used stemmed from their lack of success in mainstream school. These words—including the labels of “freaks” and “screw-ups”—went beyond representing the societal perceptions of failure in mainstream school, to providing, for these youths, words representing a sense of differentiation from the mainstream and of belonging to Mountain High. They were “similar” because they had all failed in mainstream school, and that made them “equals” in this learning context. In taking on labels used by others and using these words to redefine their identities, the meanings of these words evolved and were used as self-descriptors in ways that were unique to these youths. These words were no longer just words associated with failure, but they were words that were infused with the struggles youths had faced in mainstream schools, as well as a sense of who they were and may become as a result of their experiences. These youths took on these descriptors and informed them with their own meaning as they reconstructed their identities as learners.

The self-descriptors used by youths initially influenced their negotiations with the teachers and staff at Mountain High, but they shifted as they encountered adults who treated them in ways that were different than they had experienced in mainstream high school. For example, these youths consistently remarked that, “here they felt respect”(field notes, 02/14/08), “here the adults were patient” (Jenny, AI, 02/21/08), and “here they fit” (Jon, AI, 02/05/08). While the self- descriptors like “screw-ups” influenced how they felt they should be treated, when they came to Mountain High and the adults encouraged them to express themselves, asked

their opinions, and heard them, these youths talked about feeling like they were “home” (Jenny, field notes, 02/21/08).

Youths’ self-descriptors, along with their remarks of how the community at Mountain High made them feel, suggested that words that were initially used as labels with a derogatory meaning, took on new meanings and provided youths with new identities that were contextually situated within this community. These new identities were associated with words that signified failure outside of Mountain High, but hope and a sense of community inside Mountain High. Words now used by youths, as self-identifiers, could only be understood through the experiences of these youths both in mainstream high school and at Mountain High.

### **Reconstructing identity: Adults**

The adults in this school admitted that they felt like they were different from other people and other teachers. They admitted that they felt it took a specific kind of teacher or educator to work at an alternative school. For example, Linda said, “I feel quite alternative myself, sometimes I wonder if it takes an alternative, you know sort of a fringy kind of a person to be able to put up with teaching here” (Linda, AI, 02/21/08, line 306-307). MJ and Jim shared this sentiment in different ways. For MJ, it was about educators who were more left-winged and controversial. For Jim, it was about other teachers who did not want to teach at alternative schools because of their preconceived notions of what it would be like. Jim reported that the idea that teachers always needed to be in control of the class was one idea that was emphasized in his teacher education. He had quickly realized, in teaching at Mountain High, that being in total control was not always possible or necessary, but that it was something some teachers would not be willing to let go. Linda made similar comments about when the youths took over the discussions, or were able to justify why they did not follow rules exactly. Although adults at Mountain High saw conceding power to youths on occasion as a necessary part of learning for

these youths, they acknowledged that not all teachers would be willing to permit this lack of control in their classrooms.

The notion of teachers at Mountain High as different from those in mainstream school was actually something that seemed to be embedded in the history of the school culture. Rothstein (1999) noted that for the couple that founded Mountain High, the Meakes, school should help students build their self-esteem. Completing Grade 12, or using school as a tool for political change, should not be the objective. The Meakes, and the volunteers who helped the first group of students, as well as the teachers and teacher's aides that followed, were social and political activists who were sometimes seen as too radical by the Anglican church that initially housed them, and the west side neighborhood from which they worked. Rooted in this kind of history, it was not surprising that being different from the teachers who taught in mainstream high schools was worth noting for Mountain High adults.

The identities formed by adults who worked with youths at Mountain High were both historically and contextually situated. For these adults, being a part of the community at Mountain High meant that they recognized the difference in their approach to working with youths at this particular alternative school from what other teachers may use in mainstream schools, and celebrated that difference. Adults at Mountain High managed to construct identities that reflected the historical goals of the school, and that recognized the importance of allowing youths to participate within this community of difference.

### **One alternative, one community**

At Mountain High, where both the adults and the youths felt different from adults and students in mainstream schools, it was easy to understand how their sense of difference contributed to their construction of a school community. For example, when I asked Linda to tell me about herself, she was unable to do so without starting by stating that she was a teacher who

worked at Mountain High for a long time. For MJ, it was about all the people she had known because of Mountain High.

For these adults, Mountain High was like a home and this was a large part of what made them who they were and why they were still there. Treating this school like a home was reflected in how they related to the space, the posters on the wall, and the pictures that lined the hallways. The mementos of life at Mountain High were clearly visible: Linda's sewing machines from courses no longer offered and eclectic posters dating back several years, and; MJ's photographs and newspaper clippings spanning the social activism of decades of Mountain High students, as well as old musical instruments and art work from past students. These memories were not limited to Linda's classroom, or to MJ's office. They lined the walls of the school in the paintings, the sculptures, and in the photographs of past graduates. This school was filled with the memories of all the youths who had spent part of their lives at Mountain High. This was what visitors were introduced to at Mountain High and what youths who attended took with them after completing the program.

For these youths, coming to a school where the staff worked together and treated each other with respect made them feel safe and wanted. This may have been what MJ meant when she said it must feel to youths "like coming home," and why the youths in the classes I observed quickly moved from being strangers, to sharing their personal experiences in class, to talking to their teachers in the hallways outside of class, and to hanging out with each other. The differences I observed from the first day of the semester when some youths stood alone and silent, to the third week of the semester when the youths hung out in groups in loud and avid discussions, was remarkable. The social network at Mountain High was one through which they quickly became a part of this community. The social and discursive practices jointly constructed with the staff infused the school culture and created a learning context that encouraged youths to do more than they did before. They were in a learning context with instructors who missed them

when they were absent, and who could be counted on when they were needed. This community of difference was co-constructed by youths and adults who came together because they, in some way, did not fit with the mainstream school system. These differences enabled a joint construction of an “alternative” learning community that was based, in part, on the experience of being different.

### **Pedagogy of Flexibility**

During the interviews with both Linda and Jim when they described themselves, it was primarily as a “teacher.” This is how they saw themselves even in their lives outside of Mountain High. Linda remarked that on occasion her friends still reminded her when her “training” [as a teacher] was “getting away” from her (Linda, AI, 02/21/08). To both of these teachers life was about being a teacher and being a “learner.” Both recognized that teaching was a life-long process of learning and they continuously needed to understand what was happening, to decide what to do about it, and then to act.

Linda, a teacher of more than 20 years, recently returned to school for her Master’s degree in Education and recounted how her recent experiences in teaching were influenced by courses she had been taking as a learner. Jim, a novice teacher, saw himself trying to negotiate his role as a new teacher while learning from his colleagues at Mountain High. To both these teachers, learning was a life-long process that constantly changed. This was reflected in their relationships with youths and their allowances for flexibility in the learning context.

The youths, during the interviews and throughout the field notes of my observations, all indicated one predominant descriptor for the adults in the program: “patient.” While this was interspersed with words like “non-judgmental,” “flexible,” “direct,” and “enthusiastic,” the theme underlying these descriptors was always “patient.” For these youths, knowing that the adults provided them with as many chances as they needed to complete a task, or learn a concept, was enough to keep them trying to succeed at a learning task. It was also clear that these

youths felt that if they tried something and it did not work, that the adults' would encourage them to look at things from a different perspective, and "never give up" on them.

How adults at Mountain High were perceived by the youths, indicated that the youths had observed that these adults cared for them. While the teachers like Linda and Jim stated that they cared for the youths and tried to connect with them, when the youths verified these claims, then the philosophical underpinnings of the adults became more real. It was evident that for the adults at Mountain High, youths were important. Three features of pedagogy these teachers attended to were negotiations of time, space, and learning tasks.

### **Time**

Time, as an important feature of a flexible pedagogy, took into consideration that conceptions of time, such as being on time, meeting deadlines, keeping to the schedule, and respecting each other's time, were jointly constructed. As such, how time and deadlines were negotiated reflected both youths' and adults' experiences and ideas associated with time. In many cases, it reflected youths' experiences in mainstream schools where schedules and assignments were more often assigned versus negotiated.

These experiences may have led to consequences, such as receiving a bad mark for turning work in late or being sent to the office for coming to school late. These consequences seemed to have influenced the youths in that they had practiced behaviors, such as not completing their work if they knew they would not be able to turn it in on time and not attending classes if they knew they would be late. Adults at Mountain High recognized that many youths had adapted these behaviors as common, and brought them to Mountain High. This was why they saw it as important to involve students in negotiations of time and allowed them to take responsibility for their actions, while knowing that their time was respected, and that youths in turn, needed to respect others' time.

One example of negotiation in relation to time occurred in the first class of Linda's I observed. Linda started the class by reminding the youths that they had an assignment due at the beginning of class, and that she had reminded them about it the day before. There was neither disagreement to her reminder that the assignment was now due, nor that she had previously reminded them. However, one of the youths was quick to explain that she had not yet completed the assignment and would rather give her a completed paper later in the day than turn in an incomplete assignment. Linda listened and asked her when she had in mind to turn in this paper. The young woman explained that she had time during the break and planned to turn it in after the break.

During this interaction, the rest of the class kept looking from the youth to Linda, to try to follow where this discussion was leading. When Linda recognized the argument presented by the youth as valid, it opened the discussion for other youths to join. At this point, another student raised her hand and said that she had also not been able to complete the assignment, and needed extra time, but that she did not have a free period until after the break. This led to a barrage of voices explaining that they needed more time as well. For some, they did not have time to complete it until after the lunch break. One even suggested he would not be able to complete it until the next morning. Linda asked them to quiet down while she considered the options. She then explained that she also had classes the rest of the day, and did not have time to mark the papers until that night. She therefore agreed that they could turn in their work when they were finished, but that she needed to receive them by the end of the day, and not the next day.

Another example of negotiating time was in Jim's class. Ten minutes at the beginning of class were designated for writing journals in response to daily question he placed on the overhead projector. However, over the course of the observations, I noted that Jim made allowances for extending the time for students who were having difficulties in expressing themselves on paper. For these students, Jim stated, "a couple more minutes... unless you need

more time of course” (Jim, PO 1, 01/10/08, line149-150). Time extensions for individuals were also applied to in class writing assignments. When the youths requested it, it also allowed them to continue working through portions of the morning break, or even portions of the lunch break, if they needed that extra time.

Time was also negotiated in relationship to school arrival. Jon related instances in mainstream school when he had made a conscious decision to cut classes, because he knew he would be late, and did not want to visit the principal’s office. At Mountain High, the head teacher and all the teachers accepted that they would rather have students arrive late than not at all. However, they did feel that youths needed to understand why getting to school on time was important, and this was one of the topics of discussion in Linda’s class. Linda suggested that she felt that when people walked in after the class started, it showed disrespect both to her and to the other youths in class. It distracted the people who were on time, and it conveyed the idea that persons who were late felt that their time was more important than that of the persons who were on time. This argument initiated a discussion as to how these youths felt when they had appointments and the other party was late.

While this discussion was held with the portion of the class that was on time, as other youths walked in, all the youths in class turned to stare at them as they found a seat. The behavior of staring for these youths appeared to be a challenge. In this situation, the person who was stared at, looked up, found over a dozen pairs of eyes on him or her, and seemingly intimidated, was forced to ask what was wrong. Another practice also initiated by Linda, was the late slips. Every person who arrived after the class needed to complete a late slip. While one of the excuses they could use was “no excuse,” it made youths aware that in being late, they needed to show respect to the class teacher by providing a reason for their tardiness. As the observations proceeded, the tardiness seemed to be occurring less frequently. This may have been an indication that youths’ notions of time and respect were changing and influencing each other.

### **Physical space**

The construction of and how space was used at Mountain High was complex. While walls and doors predetermine classroom space in most mainstream classrooms, the classrooms I observed did not have walls or doors. In addition, one of the spaces shared within the room that was loosely divided into four sections was a designated student space. This may have contributed to Jim's negotiations about the boundary of the classroom during those occasions when youths completed their tasks before their allotted class-time was over, and debated that the classroom space extended into the hall. It also contributed background noise that was relatively loud and competed with classroom discussions. The competition, brought about by the combination of external sounds, encouraged the youths to be louder in class, yet not take ownership for the noise levels. When told to quiet down by their teachers, they always claimed the noise was coming from elsewhere.

The use of space at Mountain High was negotiable. During my observations, youths freely engaged in negotiating how they used different areas of the school. For one class, Jim assigned an activity that required that youths plan and present their own commercial advertisements as a group. This meant they had to choose a product, design an advertisement, and plot a 30-second commercial. To youths, it was important that the other groups did not hear or see their commercials. So they requested permission to leave the room and go to the student area to practice their commercials before presenting them to the class. Jim agreed. So after each group completed their basic sketches of their commercials, they left the room to practice their commercials. Although the student space was beside this makeshift classroom and their voices could be heard, for youths, a different "room" meant more privacy.

Space was also negotiated in terms of seating arrangements during discussions and individual writing assignments. Linda generally allowed youths to choose where to sit during most classes. On occasion, she approached individual students, who may not have been

contributing to the discussions, or were having their own discussions and suggested they change seats. As Linda became familiar with her students she became more aware of which students, when together, were not able to keep track of the class. Knowing in advance whether the class activity was a discussion or writing an individual paper allowed Linda to speak to the youths individually as they walked into the room. She told them what the task was for the day, and reminded them that when they sat beside a particular classmate they had problems paying attention. She also gave them the option of where to sit as long as it was away from that classmate.

### **Learning tasks**

Gutiérrez (2002) proposed that, in the programs she observed, youths appeared more engaged when they participated in selecting the types of assignment they completed, were allowed to choose the topics for discussion, and had some say in terms of the type of assessment tool that was used to assess their work. Also important was that youths and adults kept continuous track of their performance. I was able to observe each of these social practices during my time at Mountain High.

During an interview with Jenny, one of the students in Linda's class, she explained that being able to negotiate the learning task was one of the things she liked most about Mountain High. She explained that when they were given an assignment, "if you have an idea that fits in there, then they're gonna let you go off on your own" (Jenny, AI, 02/21/08, Line 199-200). This was observed with both program teachers who participated in my study. For example, at the beginning of the second semester in the Media Literature class, Linda asked her new students to inform her of their preferred learning method, and to also write about it so she had it on file. Then, they jointly compiled a list of preferred learning methods. This list included: small and whole class discussions, individual writing assignments, and games like Jeopardy. The most popular learning method was whole class discussions and the least popular was individual

writing assignments. Only two youths identified individual writing as their preferred learning method.

This class also jointly compiled a list of topics they wanted to discuss for the course. Linda introduced this discussion during the first class by telling them that if they came up with the list together, then they would all be able to discuss topics that were interesting to them, rather than ones that were interesting only to her. The only criterion was that since this class was about the media, the topics they chose had to be related to the media. The list compiled with the youths included: politics, globalization, global warming, capitalism, terrorism, war, peace, and many others. Some topics were more popular than others.

One youth was especially passionate about the topic of the independence of Kosovo. He stated that he was born in Kosovo and that Western media had distorted the actual issues surrounding the war in Kosovo. While the rest of the class did not seem too enthusiastic about this topic, he insisted. Linda then suggested, as she made a schedule for the order of topics to be discussed, that every topic that had been suggested would be covered. She also noted that it was only fair that all youths came to class informed about the topic of discussion for any given day. The final agreement that was made between Linda and her students with reference to the topic of the independence of Kosovo was that, by the day of that discussion, all youths in that class needed to read on the topic, and needed to be able to contribute to the discussion in a worthwhile way. The same agreement held for every other topic to be discussed throughout the semester.

In Jim's class, negotiations on learning tasks were focused in the writing of individual students. Although Jim presented the class with a journal question at the beginning of each class, the objective of the question was "to get them to write." When students felt that they could not answer the question as it was asked, they asked Jim if they could answer it in a different way. For example, on one occasion Jim asked them to write about three events that influenced them positively or negatively. One youth asked to write about her experience with drugs and alcohol.

On asking, this youth explained to Jim that she knew they should not ordinarily talk about drugs and alcohol in school, but that this was one occasion she felt she wanted to write about this topic. Jim responded that he really wanted her to write, and if this topic motivated her to do so, then he had no problem with it.

In addition, both teachers updated the class grade lists for all their classes, and posted them visibly in the room. These lists used individual student numbers as identifiers, names were not on the list, and recorded assignment and attendance information. Linda updated her list approximately twice a week and for every assignment she collected. Jim's list was updated approximately every other week, or when he returned in-class assignments. Youths consulted these lists and used them to start discussions about how they were doing in the class with their teachers. The lists in Linda's class were close to her desk, and it was easy for youths to look at them and ask her questions simultaneously. Jim's list was at the back of the class. Youths looked at them first and then asked him to come over so they could ask about a missing mark, or any other question related to the list. In both classes, however, the teachers were always open to discussing the marks that appeared on the lists, and talking about what youths needed to do in order to make up for missing or incomplete assignments.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

In this chapter, I described the time I spent at Mountain High, the classroom practices I observed, differing definitions of community, how youths and adults redefined their sense of identity, and how this contributed to a new school community based on difference. Finally, I provided some insight into how this community of difference allowed youths and adults to redefine their identities and how this mediated the pedagogy of flexibility that contributed to youth engagement. This community of difference provided the foundation for the model of re-engagement, features of which may be useful in other learning contexts. This model is described in more detail in Chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER 5: A Sociocultural Model for Re-engagement**

This chapter proposes a sociocultural model for re-engagement based on the constant comparative analysis of themes from the data I collected during my time at Mountain High, and theorized with a sociocultural approach. First, this chapter begins with definitions of the terms engagement and re-engagement and proposes two dimensions of engagement. Second, I discuss a sociocultural model for re-engagement that includes how relationships mediated negotiation and participation of youths and adults in ways that fostered youth engagement.

### **Defining Engagement and Re-engagement**

The literature review in Chapter 2 drew upon previous researchers' definitions for specific concepts that I needed to conduct my study. However, these definitions reflected varying epistemological and ontological underpinnings, none of which were based on a sociocultural approach. In order to theorize a sociocultural model for re-engagement, I needed to return to central concepts and define them. A sociocultural approach emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the individual and the social context. Processes like engagement and re-engagement are the result of "individuals-operating-with-mediational-means" in social and discursive practices jointly constructed with other individuals (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 343).

The existing literature defined engagement as a "meta" concept with behavioral, emotional and cognitive aspects (Fredricks et al., 2004). However, the purely traditional psychological nature of this definition did not reference the social aspects of engagement that were apparent in Mountain High and assumed by sociocultural theory. Also, although this definition alluded to the overlap between the three aspects of engagement, it did not explain how these concepts previously studied separately may be studied in relationship with each other. Given the dialectical nature of human interaction, an individual's engagement in any context may only be understood within the social and discursive practices that constitute the context

itself. An engaging context enables opportunities for individual engagement through participation in practices. When constructed, each engaged person becomes essential to the context. Informed by sociocultural theory, multiple dimensions of engagement may concurrently be co-constructed. This study focused on the social and discursive practices identifying youth engagement in two dimensions: youth involvement in classroom practices, and youth involvement in the wider social context through social activism.

### **Social and Discursive Practices in the Classroom**

Empirically, the social construction of engagement was evident at Mountain High because what was being constructed was not engagement, but a re-engagement in the social context of school and of learning. Re-engagement must be understood by considering a student's initial disengagement from school. Youths at Mountain High readily admitted that they had had problems in mainstream schools. Jon compared his level of engagement in mainstream school and his engagement at Mountain High, "I use to skip a lot of school, and smoke a lot of weed, go to my classes baked all the time, but right now I'm trying to do my work, trying to be a good student, ...the teachers [at Mountain High] are more down for discussion, like its not just taking notes, the teachers' lectures, it's easier to get in to them" (Jon, 02/05/2008).

When youths at Mountain High encountered a learning context that enabled their participation, and they internalized the aspects of the social and discursive practices in which they participated, they became engaged in the context and contributed to making that context more engaging. The process of internalization, through the zone of proximal development, was evidenced at Mountain High. For example, Linda started each of her classes with something personal. Whether it was about her health, what she had done over the weekend, or what she had seen or heard that she thought was interesting, this social practice was one that engaged youths. To the youths, this social practice opened opportunities for discussion that turned academic work, mundane tasks, into tasks completed while talking about weekend activities.

Both Linda and Jim tempered the academic requirements of their courses by appealing to the interests of the youths at an individual level and this approach encouraged youths to re-engage in school. On the first day of class, Jim made an effort to learn the names of all his students by talking to each of them individually as they walked into class. By doing this Jim engaged youths in conversation with himself and with their classmates. Initially most students seemed to think this was a “lame” thing to do and, for one student in particular, that Jim was asking too many questions. Jim asked specific questions about interests they shared and complimented them or encouraged them to talk more about the subject.

As youths warmed to this activity, they admitted that these questions demonstrated his genuine interest in them. Making this kind of activity a social practice, Jim related youths’ experiences to some of his personal experiences. This opened the doors for the youths to question him as well. By the end of the first day of the new semester, youths in the class had engaged in a discussion about their memories of childhood fairy tales, and had also reviewed the course outline. By the end of the week, youths knew each a lot about each other, including their favorite childhood toys, and some of the fights they had had with loved ones. Jim recognized that sometimes the youths did not come to class specifically to do the work. Frequently, they came to class to talk to him and each other. Although they completed work, there were times when they did not even notice.

In Linda’s class, a social practice was to start each class with a discussion of weekend activities. This practice had originally taken place after the bell, but after a few classes, the youths started to get to class earlier each day to tell Linda their activities. It became almost competitive to have the first story shared in that day’s class. Youth engagement was exemplified not only by their attendance, but also by their willingness to share with each other their experiences. This practice validated for each youth that their experiences were interesting, and that they did “fit” in this social network. These youths talked about the rally they had attended

over the weekend, the money they had made by singing a cappella rap music/beat box on city street corners (about \$35 a day), the movie in the international film festival they had seen, or how they had customized their clothes with zippers and large buttons. These were topics that the youths claimed to have felt uncomfortable sharing their mainstream high schools. Here, however, they could finally talk about them.

Although re-engaging in the classroom context was apparent at Mountain High, I also observed that as these youths became more confident in their communication with their peers, they also began talking more about their futures. Jon, for example, openly questioned the usefulness of the graduation portfolio when he said that it “does not make them into more well-rounded individuals” and that, “work experience does not encourage any real growth because some jobs just don’t teach you social skills” (field notes, 02/18/2008). While initial conversations in class focused on things youths had done and experiences they had, the kinds of conversations that became more popular were conversations about what they planned to do after school, like go to university, or go to work. Introducing the future tense in their discourse with each other and with the adults at Mountain High was an indication that these youths were both engaging in their own learning, and planning to use learning for a future outcome. It also indicated that they were thinking about their futures in ways that they may not have been prepared to talk about before gaining confidence.

The concept of re-engagement based on these observations is best defined as a process whereby the social context provides opportunities for participation. These opportunities were initially directed by a more experienced instructor who opened the lines of communication and who assisted the youths to participate. Peers, overtime, played this role as well. In this context, these youths developed relationships and learned curricular material by participating in social practices. Through this process they became co-constructors of this engaging social context.

## **Social Activism: Beyond Classroom Practices**

Mountain High's history was steeped with stories of social, civic, and political activism. This history may have promoted a culture at Mountain High that challenged hierarchical and hegemonic social structures through youths' and adults' participation in social activism. As such, this community of student "freaks" and adult "fringers" was well placed to discuss social issues like poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, mass media representations of disadvantaged groups, globalization, consumerism, and the environment. Adults at Mountain High felt it their duty to "teach kids to be accountable for their own behavior" (MJ, AI, 02/19/08, line 439). They also felt that concern with local and global social activism was one form of social responsibility. Adults at Mountain High positioned youths as capable of effecting change in their lives and in their social context, and as having the potential to do meaning and important things. For youths at Mountain High who had disadvantaged relationships with societal systems, thinking through social issues through social and discursive practices in the classroom allowed for them to move beyond the classroom to issues of social activism. What followed from the engagement of youths in classroom practices and adult support was a second dimension of engagement, participation in social activism that might contribute to social change.

Thinking through social issues and participating in social activism was fostered by the school culture and was supported within various courses. Jane explained that while individual courses offered youths opportunities to think about social issues in class, they also provided opportunities for social action. Some examples of opportunities through individual courses included, an art exchange program with a school in Africa, a warm sock drive, and a food drive for Christmas. Youths also volunteered at the pre-school that shared the building, and some youths continued volunteering there even after they completed Mountain High.

Engagement in the wider social context also involved taking initiative and participating in social activism. While the discussions concerning world affairs, war, and misrepresentations

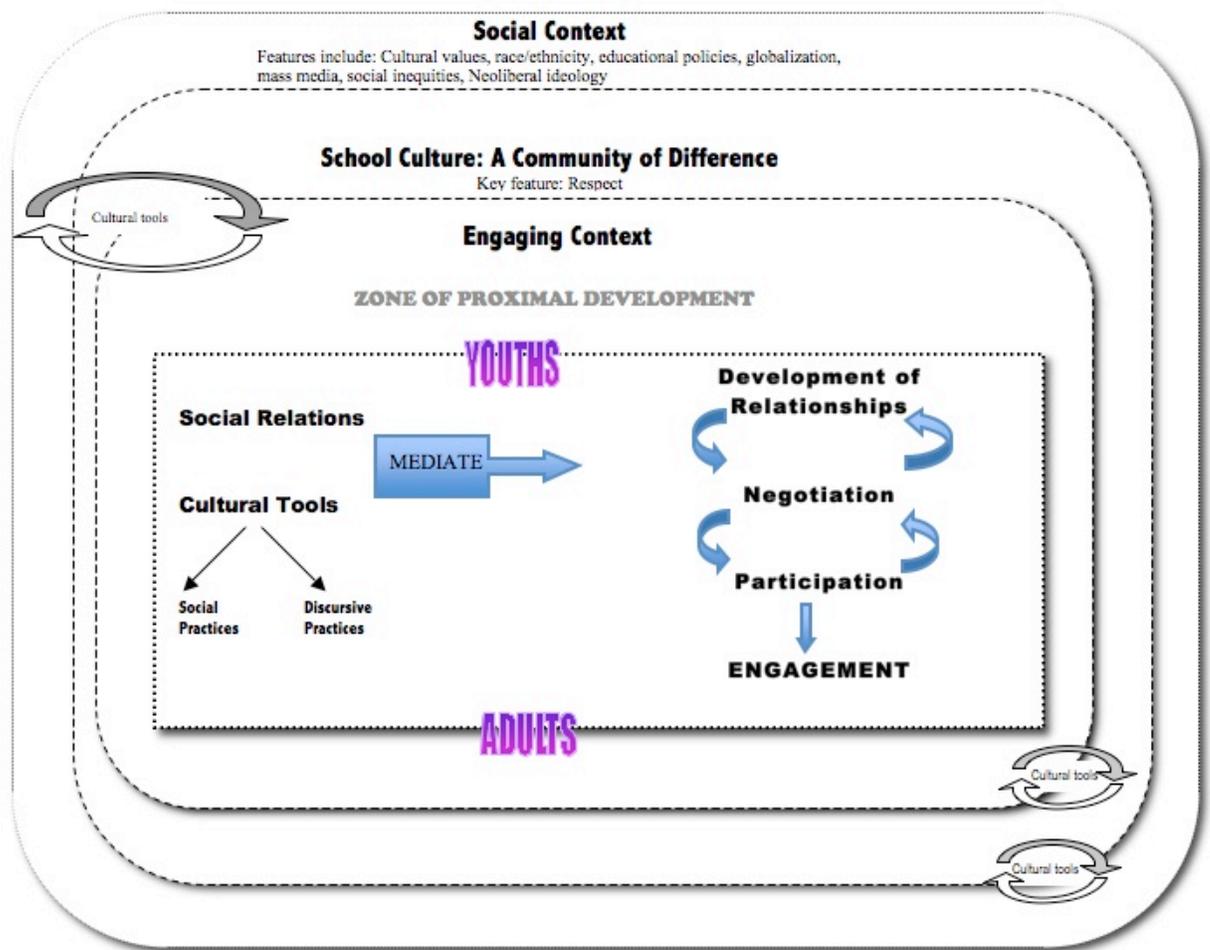
by the media were prevalent in Linda's class, Linda did not tell youths what to do. However, by the fourth week of my observations, I observed instances when two different youths returned from their weekend break and announced that they had participated in a protest. It was also during this time that I observed Linda and Jon in discussion about environmental issues. Jon's concern was that the school was not being environmentally responsible because he felt the water fountains available to students were inadequate.

The head teacher admitted that, "some students did not regularly use [the water fountains]...citing their low placement and stating that the 'water tasted funny'... Instead, some would go to the kitchen and ask for water in a cup" (Jane, personal communication, 9/21/08). Jon was adamant that this issue should be taken to the staff meeting, and that a step the school needed to take was to ban plastic water bottles from the school. He insisted that since Linda claimed to be environmentally conscious, she should take this issue to the staff. Linda responded by informing Jon that, if this issue was important to him, he should be the one to take the issue to the staff. During the final week of my observations, Jon started circulating a petition among the Mountain High community. In response to this initiative, at the beginning of the following semester, the staff had lobbied the school board and acquired two new water fountains for the school.

By responding to the initiatives of the youths at Mountain High, the adults acknowledged and supported the efforts of these youths. When both adults and youths jointly participated in social activism, they supported each other and strengthened their sense of community. Through participation in social activism, adults and youths explored their new identities and reiterated their community of difference. These activities also provided contexts for youths to engage in learning that extended beyond classroom practices, to participation in ways that impacted school and ultimate the wider social world.

## **A Sociocultural Model for Re-engagement**

The ultimate goal of educational practices grounded in a sociocultural approach is to promote the development of social beings who engage in and contribute to society in socially beneficial ways (Bakhurst, 2007). Sociocultural theory proposes that this development occurs based on the general genetic law of cultural development that assumes a dialectical relationship between the individual and society, a dialectical relationship between individuals and cultural tools, and that learning in the zone of proximal development facilitates development (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Sociocultural theory suggests that the individual and society interact across various domains, but that these domains of interaction occur simultaneously and should not be viewed as separate. In this section, I advance a model that includes the relationship between the social world, the school culture, and an engaging learning context. I provide a visual representation of the domains of interaction that take place. These domains are not nested contexts, but are instead related dialectically and are, thus, simultaneously and continuously mutually transformative (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6. A Sociocultural Model for Re-engagement.**

### The Social Context

Dialectical relationships begin in the social world and transform the individual; in turn, the same individual transforms society. Within the context of this study, the social world included the influence of social context in which Mountain High was situated. This included the world, Canada, and Vancouver, and how events and issues that arose within these contexts may have influenced the school culture at Mountain High, as well as how youths and adults co-constructed an engaging learning context.

In terms of world affairs, issues that were observed included those associated with the media, politics, peace, war, globalization, poverty, and the personal connections youths and

adults at Mountain High had to these issues. As noted, one of the youths was born in Kosovo and immigrated to Canada during a time of civil strife in Kosovo. Through class discussions he spoke about how other persons born in Kosovo, both those who were in Canada and who were in Kosovo, were affected by the declaration of independence of Kosovo that occurred during my research. Another youth had traveled through the Middle East and Africa within the last couple of years and brought with him experiences of war and poverty distinct from those of his classmates who had not traveled outside of Canada.

In terms of Canada and Vancouver, youths expressed concern that issues of drugs, poverty, and race and ethnicity in Canada were not topics they had talked about in mainstream schools. In addition, the physical location of Mountain High on the east side of Vancouver brought issues to the school that may not have been present in other areas of Vancouver. For example, on one occasion, a man, who was described by the youths as appearing homeless, had followed one of the young women to school. On another, a couple of the young men reported being mugged while waiting for the bus on Main Street. These incidents may have been related to neighborhood and social class issues, and also influenced youths and adults at Mountain High.

Two features that made Mountain High a unique learning context in Vancouver were: visible minorities and immigrant populations, and neighborhood representation. First, in comparison to the statistics of the Vancouver population, the percentage of “visible minorities” at Mountain High was smaller than that of the city. While there were two youths of First Nations backgrounds, two of Asian descent, and two more who were of African descent, the total proportion was less than what was suggested by the Statistics Canada percentages for Vancouver. However, during the observations it became apparent that many of the youths at Mountain High had immigrated to Canada in early childhood. Donald, for example, had moved to Canada when he was nine and Dee, when she was six. There were other youths whose families had also emigrated to Canada in the classrooms I observed. In Jim’s class of 14, four

were first generation immigrants with one additional “visible” minority. In Linda’s class, five of her 16 students were first or second generation immigrants. Culturally, however, most of these youths claimed to “feel Canadian,” and although their first language was not English, they only spoke their first language at home with their parents. As my observations continued, it became apparent that the religious, ethnic, and economic differences between the youths at Mountain High varied immensely, yet, as part of this community of difference, it was difficult to distinguish “differences” through observation alone.

A second unique feature of Mountain High was its physical location compared to the high school through which it was managed, Signature High. Signature High was a “west side” high school that served mostly middle class neighborhoods. Although Mountain High had originally occupied two locations, one in the west side of Vancouver and one on the east side of Vancouver, it was presently located just east of Main Street on the east side of Vancouver. Although the administration at Mountain High did not reject any youth who wanted to attend and met the admission requirements, in general, it served youths who had been referred from Signature High and, hence, west side youths. Historically, however, Mountain High seemed to experience shifts in its student population possibly as a result of changing demographics in Vancouver, and these shifts were partially reflected in the number of youths attending from the various neighborhoods in Vancouver. At the time of the study, there appeared to be an almost equal distribution of youths from both sides of Vancouver attending Mountain High, but the balance appeared to be shifting toward youths from the east side.

Other issues that were embedded within the social context included school policies and funding associated with neoliberal ideology that may have impacted Mountain High in ways of which youths and adults were only peripherally aware. While there may have been other issues from the social world that may have directly or indirectly influenced the interactions of youths

and adults at Mountain High, these features of the social world contributed in observable ways to the learning context these youths and adults co-constructed.

### **School Culture: A Community of Difference**

A sociocultural model for re-engagement takes into account the joint construction of zones of proximal development between adults and youths that fostered a learning community. In this research, it was their difference from the “mainstream” that contributed to their co-construction of a community of difference. This community and its culture of difference became a foundation from which adults and youths mediated the relationships they formed with each other and the pedagogy adults and youths jointly constructed at school. The community transformed mainstream classroom practices into ones that promoted youths’ engagement in learning. The engaging learning context, then, dialectically influenced the community that youths and adults co-constructed, and mediated student contributions to this community.

#### **The key feature: Respect**

Developing a model for re-engagement using a sociocultural approach involved examining the learning context of this alternative high school and identifying features of this context that helped youths engage. For teachers at Mountain High, teaching at an alternative school was about teaching “these types of kids.” The “types” they spoke about were the “fragile,” “resistant learners,” and “silenced” youths. Even the youths saw themselves as “freaks” and screw-ups.” This perception of “youths who attend alternative schools” allowed the educators at Mountain High to view the youths through the lenses of adults who wanted to help co-construct specific kinds of learning contexts.

In addition, the adults at Mountain High maintained that they themselves felt different from mainstream society, by referring to themselves as “on the fringe” or as “left-winged” or “free-thinking.” These adults separated themselves from teachers in mainstream schools; something that allowed for them to form their own community outside mainstream school.

Together, these two groups of people came together to form their own community: a community of difference. The labels of freaks and fringers became a point of access, but their importance was reduced. In this social context, they were youths and adults who belonged to a community of difference that was based on the concept of respect, which allowed youths and adults to negotiate and co-construct an engaging learning context.

The key feature of the community of difference at Mountain High was respect, which was modeled between the adults, and was then shared with the youths. The respect that the adults shared with each other enabled the youths to become a part of that school culture. Over time, the instructors developed classroom practices that reflected their respect for the youths and enabled them to participate in these practices. As these youths internalized the concept, they then reciprocated that respect with the adults and extended it to each other.

Classroom practices were built upon zones of proximal development that included something more limited in mainstream school contexts: negotiation. Negotiation in the relationships formed allowed for flexibility in the learning context, more obvious in terms of pedagogy. In combination, the relationships and the pedagogy that were negotiated within the learning context allowed for an engaging learning context. Negotiation in relationships and pedagogy made it possible for youths to participate in classroom practices that facilitated the development of moral and intellectual social beings: a commitment to social action in the world to promote a cause and intellectual deliberation and dialogue on the basis of evidence. In this way, the classroom practices reflected the goals of the school, and the purpose of education as proposed by a sociocultural approach.

### **Engaging Context: Shifting Power and Transforming Identities**

The process of constructing an engaging learning context required looking at relationships—between individuals, or social relations, and between individuals and cultural tools—to understand how the learning context was jointly constructed. Embedded within this

learning context was a reduction in the traditional power asymmetry between teachers and students, toward a less obvious and more balanced power differential. The extent to which this power was negotiable between adults and youths was, in large part, task dependent. Through the zone of proximal development, more experienced participants offered novices opportunities to transform themselves into intellectually and morally contributing members of society. In the zone of proximal development, the level of experience or expertise on a topic or task, at times, allowed for youths, as well as adults, to play the role of experienced participant.

Adults at Mountain High recognized that providing youths with opportunities to take on the role of expert was important in engaging youths in learning. Linda, for example, remembered when she left the role of head teacher to return to full-time classroom teaching. There was a time when she realized that she was losing control of the class, and her response to this loss of control was "pleasant surprise." She recognized that when she shared power in the classroom context with the youths, they were more willing to engage in learning. Jim also recognized the importance of sharing power in the classroom context, but also acknowledged that many teachers in mainstream schools might be unwilling to "lose control" of their classrooms.

The zone of proximal development was mediated by social relations between youths and adults, and cultural tools, like social and discursive practices, used by youths and adults. These social relations and cultural tools were contextually situated and, in this community of difference, they mediated the development of new relationships that facilitated negotiation and participation and that fostered engagement for youths. As youths and adults jointly participated in constructing an engaging learning context, they internalized social and discursive practices that transformed their identities in ways that appeared to influence their school culture and, potentially, their social world. The key feature of this engaging context was the interaction of negotiation and participation in promoting engagement.

### **The interaction of negotiation and participation**

Negotiation and participation were integral to learning within the zone of proximal development. Two key features of this interaction were extant at Mountain High: the focus and guidance provided by the adults, and; the participation of both youths and adults. Negotiation promoted the participation of both youths and adults and fostered the development of relationships in this social context. In conjunction, the relationships, the negotiation and the participation of youths and adults contributed to classroom practices that identified this alternative high school as a context for re-engagement.

The focus and guidance provided by adults at Mountain High enabled the joint construction of valuable learning experiences. Bakhurst (2007) proposed that:

For Vygotsky, educators must encourage in their students a critical, independently minded appreciation of whatever subject matter is before them, for the aim of education is not the assimilation of received wisdom, but its critical interrogation by each new generation. (p. 72)

For students to become critical and independently minded, educators needed to encourage them to engage in thinking and questioning. In the context of Mountain High, adults found ways to encourage youths to say what they were thinking, and to question what may have seemed normal and ordinary. In addition, the youths knew that their responses to class discussions were heard and valued. Linda encouraged youths' participation by saying things like "you may be right, but the example you are using is not a good one, think about another example" (Field notes, 02/18/2008). Linda's discursive practices acknowledged youths' attempts to participate and used these to encourage them to think more deeply about the issues they discussed in class.

Negotiation in this study also surfaced when youths and adults participated in practices that required dialogue to reach a general consensus. Although adults held the role of expert more often than youths, they used this position to guide and direct youths. By loosely maintaining the

role of expert, adults allowed for youths to participate in the negotiation of the learning context through their discursive practices, like their constant questioning, and through their social practices, like preparing for class by conducting their own research beforehand. Negotiations were frequently influenced by the power dynamics embedded in the position of “teacher” though the teachers created possibilities for youths to negotiate the balance of power in the learning context.

### **Examples of negotiation and participation**

Negotiations associated with the relationships these youths and adults shared sometimes appeared quite balanced even, approximately, equal. The extent to which equal relationships were formed was intertwined with the specific experiences of youths who sometimes took the role of expert on certain topics. Youths and adults recognized each other as experts in their own right, which influenced the kinds of relationships that were co-constructed between them in this learning context.

The relationships formed between youths and adults were sustained outside of the classroom. Youths approached Linda in the hallways or looked for her in the staff room to ask her if she had time to talk. Linda rarely said no. Even when she was occupied, she took the time to talk to the youths and to make other plans. The youths knew that she was there for them when they needed her, that she was willing to listen to them, and that they could approach her. The youths also demonstrated their concern for Linda, and asked her about her health and well being frequently.

Relationships with Jim tended to be more laid back, and the playful banter of the youths of Mountain High seemed to follow him to the basketball courts. The youths understood that out of class, he was a more relaxed person and they were not afraid to approach him. They also knew that if they had questions related to any of their lessons, they could approach him anytime. They knew that if they asked him something he did not know or was unfamiliar with, he would direct

them to someone who was able to help them. When adults allowed youths at Mountain High opportunities to negotiate, the youths' confidence in their abilities to contribute meaningfully to the learning context increased.

Negotiation of the pedagogy took place in the learning context of the class. In part, it was a reflection of how much the adult was willing to share the classroom power with the youths and allow them to demonstrate their expertise by participating in the negotiation of alternatives. For example, Linda allowed for various negotiations to take place in her classes, and she offered youths options thereby creating a context open to negotiation. Although Linda made the final decisions based on her experiences, she did so only after listening to the youths' arguments and suggestions.

While preparing for the provincial exams in the Social Studies 11 class, Linda once asked youths how they would like to review for the exam. They could either work on past tests individually, and then she would review the answers, or they could play a game of Socials Jeopardy, and review facts that would most likely appear on the exam. While the youths seemed more enthusiastic about the game of Jeopardy, at the end of the discussion, Linda recalled what happened the last time she tried to play Jeopardy. She had prepared all the questions, and even had props for the various points. However, on the day of the game, few youths appeared in class, and the few who did were not prepared. While she admitted that this incident had occurred with students from a previous year, she reiterated if that incident reoccurred, she would get upset. The youths did not object that a similar situation could happen again and Linda chose option one: they worked individually on past tests and she reviewed the answers at the end of the class.

Negotiation, within limits, was also observed in Jim's class, especially when deciding on test dates. At the end of each unit, Jim prepared a test consisting of multiple-choice questions, short answers, and one long essay of about 175 words. To help decide the day for the test, Jim asked the class for their suggestion. For the most part, the youths suggested Friday. Jim then

said, “No, not Friday” (Jim, AI, 02/18/02, line 40). When asked why, he explained that in his experience, the average rate of absences was higher on Fridays than on any other day of the week. He therefore excluded Friday from the list of options but allowed them to pick from the other days of the week. In Jim’s class, test days were Thursdays.

Although youths were allowed to participate in some negotiations, it was clear that the final decision still rested with the adults. It was also clear that these adults had veto power over most decisions agreed upon by the youths in class. Although adults rarely opted to use this veto power, when they did, they always justified their decision to the youths. The students themselves also called upon the adult’s authority, especially if they were not able reach an agreement among themselves. For example, on one occasion, Linda asked for volunteers to read an article out loud, but no one volunteered. As she cajoled and asked individual students if they would read, one student finally said, “Linda, you are the teacher, just point [at someone to read]!” (field notes, PO 11, 02/19/08, 120).

### **Internalization: Identification with and Contributions to this Community**

Youths who attended Mountain High had two things in common: they did not “fit in” the social context of mainstream school, and; they wanted to graduate with a high school diploma. These commonalities provide insight into what constituted an engaging learning context for these youths. In their interviews, Jon, Jenny, and Donald, noted that mainstream school had been “about popularity.” They noted that the “social networks” on which schools worked—which categorized groups of students based on hierarchical structures based on popularity—were superficial, and not about issues of value to the world. To these youths, the values that were fostered in their previous high schools kept students naïve to the social conditions of the world around them.

Youths who attended Mountain High believed that mainstream high schools were based on a social context that was limiting. For these youths, consumerism and global warming were

interconnected with homelessness and drug abuse. For them, there was no separation between post-industrialized and developing countries when they all shared one planet. For these youths, the clothing they wore, the hairstyles with which they experimented, and their piercings and tattoos were symbols of their separation from the youths attending mainstream schools and evidence of their alternative identity. At the same time, returning to school was their acknowledgement that they needed a high school diploma to have a voice in society. This alternative school, with its own community, represented an opportunity for them to gain that certification without having to deal with the superficiality of the social networks they had experienced in their past high schools.

An engaging learning context, to these youths, meant one where they were granted opportunities to talk about issues that mattered to them in a context that prepared them with what they saw as similar skills to the ones offered by mainstream high schools. These youths recognized that they needed to participate in learning so they could then pursue their passions. Mountain High was an engaging learning context to youths because they participated and they participated because they could identify with the community of difference and the social values inherent in it. These youths adjusted their lives to attend school, they tried to be on time, and they participated in the discussions and the learning tasks they were given. As youths engaged in the Mountain High community, they gained the confidence to express their viewpoints and opinions, and they talked about their future aspirations. Mountain High, for many youths who attended, offered a context where learning could be fostered through the relationships and the flexible pedagogy negotiated between adults and youths. Here the adults mediated the learning of these youths by allowing them to negotiate features of the learning context that fostered their moral and intellectual development, yet, still maintained the framework of the rules and policies of the school district.

Youths at Mountain High did not want to return to mainstream high school. They wanted to move beyond school to the rest of the world, and Mountain High was that first step into society for many of these youths. While some spoke about university and entrepreneurship, others developed their artistic talents and displayed them at art shows around the city. Still others spent their weekends protesting social issues. Others acquired skills they would need to keep a job, skills they first used at Mountain High. These youths internalized identities as life-long learners and developed an understanding that they impacted the social world through their contributions as much as it impacted them. Although my initial expectation that this school context would be quite distinct from a mainstream school was soon dispelled, the similarities with a mainstream high school may suggest that some features present at Mountain High may be useful in other learning contexts. If the practices at Mountain High were similar enough to those of a mainstream high school, yet engaged youths through graduation, then identifying features of the learning context that engaged youths may allow some features of this model to be useful in other learning contexts like mainstream schools.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter defined concepts of engagement and re-engagement as being dependent upon the relationships that foster them. It also proposed that the relationships co-constructed between youths and adults in this community of difference offered unique opportunities for youths to become socially responsible adults. A sociocultural model for re-engagement was proposed that took into account the key feature of this community of difference, respect, and explored in depth how social relations and cultural tools mediated engagement.

The sociocultural model for re-engagement also identified negotiation between youths and adults, and the participation of youths in classroom practices, as key features of an engaging learning context. This model suggests that within the zone of proximal development, youths and adults used social relations and cultural tools to mediate their relationships in ways that enabled

negotiation and the participation of youths, and promoted an engaging learning context. In addition, this model suggests that the engaging learning context that was jointly constructed by youths and adults in this context was internalized, influencing how both youths and adults participate within their school community and their social world.

## **CHAPTER 6: Mountain High a Community or Container?:**

### **Recommendations, Contributions, Limitations and Future Research**

This study explored how youths and adults used social and discursive practices to construct an engaging learning context in a re-engagement centre. Based on a sociocultural approach, with ethnographic methods to collect and analyze data, I suggested definitions for the words engagement and re-engagement. These definitions contributed to the development of a sociocultural model in exploring the features of an engaging learning context, and the key roles of negotiation and participation. In terms of methodology, I applied a participation framework to organize my data, and found that it provided useful ways to understand the relationships and the pedagogy at Mountain High.

In this chapter, I conclude my research at Mountain High and reiterate the importance of documenting classroom practices that promote engagement in youths. This chapter begins with a discussion of the role of Mountain High as an alternative school. Second, I propose recommendations for educators based on the social and discursive practices between youths and adults that promoted an engaging learning context. Third, I highlight the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study. Fourth, I address some of the limitations of this study. Fifth, I propose some directions for future research. Finally, I end the chapter with a summary of this thesis.

#### **Community of Difference or Container for Difference?**

Mountain High has now been in existence since 1970 (Rothstein, 1999). While this speaks to the success of this alternative program, it also raises the question of why some youths continue to need the kinds of supports offered by programs like Mountain High. As noted by Vadeboncoeur (2005) in relation to alternative high school programs in general, is Mountain

High a community of difference, or is it a container for difference? The second director of Mountain High, Larry Haberlin, stated in an interview in 1974:

Alternative schools can too easily become dumping grounds for kids who can't make it in the regular school system. [Alternative schools] can be regarded as solutions to the system's problems because they effectively remove the kids who don't fit in and make things seem to run smoothly. But they're really short term stop-gap solutions because the problems don't lie in the kids that fail but in the schools that let them. Alternative schools won't solve the system's problems until the regular schools start applying the lessons we learn here. (as cited in Rothstein, 1999, p. 409)

Throughout the study, adults and youths and Mountain High built upon their notions of difference to jointly construct a community based on feeling different from the mainstream. Respect for differences grounded their supportive relationships. In turn, it led to their willingness to negotiate and participate, features that contributed to a pedagogy of flexibility and to an engaging learning context. The quote from 1974 suggests that, from the onset, educators at Mountain High recognized that there was a need for programs that supported youths who did not fit in mainstream schools.

Haberlin proposed that there are lessons to be learned from programs like Mountain High (Rothstein, 1999). For example, I was able to identify emotional and psychological supports available to youths from the adults at Mountain High. Mountain High engaged youths and they remained in school. Although some youths left Mountain High while I was there—for a wide variety of reasons from familial reasons to other life issues—it was clear that for many of them, this school was a better fit than mainstream school had been.

Mountain High provided a supportive environment for youths like Dee and Jon who came to school, did the work, took the tests, and even showed up for the provincial exams. These were things they were reputed, and admitted, to not have done in their past high schools. These

youths, along with those reported by Rothstein (1999) who became active members of their communities, entrepreneurs and academics, benefitted from their experiences in Mountain High. They demonstrated that with an engaging learning context, youths in alternative schools could become engaged in the wider social context in ways that demonstrated thoughtful consideration of and responsible action on social and civic issues. These are the kinds of lessons that need to be taken from programs like Mountain High.

A problem arises, however, if educators from mainstream schools only view alternative programs as places to send youths who are different. Removing them from mainstream schools removes the need to deal with their “differences,” as well as the wider social issues that may contribute to these differences. Rather than a real solution, was Mountain High simply a container for differences? Was Mountain High serving as a container for both youths and adults who did not fit within mainstream schools? A container for adults and youths who self-identified as being different from adults and youths in mainstream schools, effectively segregating “difference”?

The fact that Mountain High works for some students, however important that is for each of them, does not erase the contradiction inherent in the existence of alternative programs. For example, in Canada, schools are generally conceived of as places that provide an education for all youths. If a segment of the school population is routinely removed, then schools as inclusive institutions are not meeting their goals. In addition, if the segment of the population that is routinely removed is diverse, and this “sorting” function removes diversity, then the institution of schooling has a mechanism that works to maintain its homogeneity. Over time, the diverse voices that may call for change from inside the school are effectively removed from it.

These contradictions were foregrounded in this study, in particular, because the community of difference was explicitly constructed by the adults and youths, on the basis of their differences from mainstream teachers and students. Their differences from the mainstream

were a large part of their identity as educators and learners and as members of the Mountain High community. As “fringers” and “freaks,” adults and youth came together and jointly constructed a community of difference based on respecting difference, and their identities as adults and youths shifted from “different from” to “belonging to” this community.

## **Recommendations for Educators for Constructing Engaging Learning**

### **Contexts with Youths**

This study highlighted the importance of recognizing that engagement is socially constructed and that both youths and adults play important roles. At Mountain High, engagement was rooted in the community that adults and youths co-constructed. Their perceptions of difference from mainstream schools allowed them to form a community based on respect for each other and each other’s differences. Respect fostered negotiation in the relationships and the pedagogy they constructed jointly enabled participation. This led to engagement in learning through the social and discursive practices that constituted the community at Mountain High. Theorizing engagement and re-engagement as a process of participation in social and discursive practices that enable learning, and that is mediated by adults, foregrounds several specific recommendations for educators. In this section, I advance four recommendations. First, to encourage relationships between teachers and students based on respect. Second, to create smaller class sizes within smaller schools. Third, to reduce teacher or adult/student ratios by making more support staff available to students. Fourth, to pay closer attention to student attendance policies as demonstrations of respect and concern, rather than as student control and monitoring.

### **“Rules Without Relationships Don’t Work”**

MJ mentioned a quote she had seen written on a wall somewhere to explain the importance between rules and relationships: “Rules without relationships, don’t work.”

It seemed that the adults at Mountain High understood the necessity of both rules and relationships in keeping youths engaged in learning. On the one hand, the rules allowed for structure. On the other, the relationships allowed room for negotiation and flexibility, in particular, in relation to individual interests and experiences. At Mountain High, youths attending high school were not just personal education numbers (PEN) on a grade sheet; they were unique individuals with their own unique lives and experiences.

For the adults, relationships were based on respect. From a sociocultural perspective, when respect is afforded to youths in zones of proximal development, youths learn to reciprocate that respect and follow rules and policies out of that respect. This finding is important when school boards promote rules and policies for every activity and every room in every school in their jurisdiction, yet they fail to create opportunities for teachers and students to form relationships with each other. As adults at Mountain High understood, rules may guide behaviors, but it is the relationships that provide enabling conditions for the rules.

### **Class and School Size**

As the head teacher indicated, one structural difference between Mountain High and mainstream high school was the size of the school and the size of the classes. Mountain High had an average enrollment of between 98 to 115 students between 2004 and 2008. This allowed classes to average about 18 youths. In the Vancouver School District, mainstream high schools averaged 1262 students (VSB, 2008), with most classrooms averaging over 25 students. The smaller class sizes at Mountain High may have helped instructors to form closer relationships with the youths under their care. It may have also allowed for youths to more easily connect with these educators. A smaller school community along with smaller class sizes may provide an organizational structure that allows relationships between youths and adults to be more readily formed.

Decisions about class size have historically been in the hands of individual schools and teachers. More recently, however, decisions concerning the size of the classes were placed in the hands of the managing school boards (Grimmett et al., 2008). Without the contribution of teachers regarding their own class size, they may be forced into a situation that hinders them from connecting with some students in their classrooms. Taking away the voice of teachers in matters that concern their classrooms points to a possible disregard for the professionalism of teachers, which may make teachers feel powerless and underappreciated. Negative emotions may be associated with teachers' perceptions that they are being treated unfairly and may influence the kinds of relationships they form with their students.

Decisions regarding class size and school size should be made in conjunction with the teachers upon whom society depends for the education of their children. Teachers need to be involved in the decision-making process that impacts their classrooms. Participation in the decision-making process is also important when other issues, like the number of course preparations teachers need to prepare, are taken into account. The more course preparations one teacher is required to complete, in addition to the number of students in each of these classes, may reduce the time a teacher has to make personal connections with students. Smaller class sizes in smaller schools may provide more opportunities for adults and youths to co-construct school communities that foster engaging learning contexts.

### **Human Resources: Adult/Youth Ratio and Support Personnel**

The community that was formed at Mountain High also relied upon supportive relationships formed between the youth and family workers and the youths. Youth and family workers, who supported the youths in a number of different ways, became important adult figures in the lives of youths. The formation of these relationships may indicate that key adult/youth relationships in school do not need to be limited to relationships between teachers

and students. Other adults in the school community may also form important relationships with youths that may also promote engagement in school and in learning.

While this appears common sense, Grimmett et al. (2008) suggested that changes in the funding formula of education have affected the human and material resources available to schools, in particular, affecting students who require individualized care. This means that youths who need the most supports are less able to access them. In schools, the changes in funding formulas may mean that human resources are being cut and there are fewer support personnel like youth and family workers, counselors, and school psychologists.

Fewer resources and fewer personnel limit the number of adults and the time available for youths and adults to interact. Reductions may also limit the quality of the social contexts where these interactions between youths and adults take place. As funding for human and material resources is reduced there are fewer adults in schools with whom youths may form relationships, and these adults are, perhaps, being stretched. The sheer number of youths for each adult may reach a point that inhibits adults from being able to maintain relationships with all the youths for whom they are responsible. It may even dishearten them from encouraging the formation of these relationships.

### **Attendance and Support Programs**

Many of the youths who attended Mountain High had a reputation for poor attendance in their previous high schools. At Mountain High, the head teacher, Jane, recognized that poor attendance was more than likely a symptom of other problems, rather than the problem itself. Dee and Jon admitted that they attended classes at Mountain High more than they had at their previous high schools. These youths reported that they knew that adults at Mountain High would worry about them if they were absent, and Dee mentioned attending school because if she was absent, the head teacher would “hassle” her youth and family worker. To avoid “stressing” her youth and family worker, she decided it was easier to attend class. These youths attended school

because they knew that someone was concerned about them and that they would be accountable for the time they were absent. Attendance was therefore negotiated through the relationships between the adults and youths at school. Similar relationships that foster attendance may also be encouraged in other learning contexts.

Other ways that learning contexts may support engagement may involve extra-curricular activities or after-school programs that promote a sense of community through informal learning experiences. Although adults at Mountain High had varying views on how to do this—for example, by promoting the Christmas sock drive or encouraging youths to become involved in civic activities—research has suggested that informal learning opportunities help promote learning, and contribute to a stronger sense of community among participants (Vadeboncoeur, 2006). These kinds of programs may help to support the learning that takes place at school and should therefore be considered an integral part of the school offering.

### **Contributions to Sociocultural Research on Engagement in Educational Contexts**

While this study may be able to provide multiple contributions to research, in this section I focus on two: the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study. First, I discuss the theoretical contributions of this study. Second, I discuss the methodological contributions.

#### **Theoretical Contributions**

Sociocultural theory suggests that the dialectic relationship between the individual and society is continuously transformative. As such, a word like engagement does not have a one-dimensional meaning, rather it needs to be understood within the contexts within which it is jointly constructed. Engagement as socially constructed neither looks the same in all contexts nor for all participants. At this one alternative high school with youths who did not fit in mainstream school, a combination of institutional history, social and discursive practices, and individual commitments joined with relationships to enable engagement. While this process may not look the same for all individuals, this model reflects the processes that lead to the joint construction of

engagement, or re-engagement more specifically. It presents a generic account that may be useful across multiple educational contexts.

Mediation, in terms of individuals-acting-with-mediational-means (Wertsch, 2007), is sometimes interpreted in ways that overlook the importance of people as mediators. In this study, the relationships that youths and adults formed were key to understanding the engagement of youths. In this respect, these adults were not only acting with mediational means, but were themselves mediational means. This concept of mediation is important to understanding the process of enculturation that occurs through education and how society offers opportunities to individuals to become contributing members based on different perceptions of their “individual” qualities.

In addition, the sociocultural model of engagement proposed in this study identifies negotiation and participation as integral features of engagement. Negotiation and participation extend through both the relationships co-constructed between youths and adults, and the pedagogy of flexibility that was identified through social and discursive practices in the classroom. In this study, as youths and adults formed relationships that were constituted by and constitutive of negotiation and participation, they were able to construct a community of difference based on respect. Through negotiation and participation, both the classroom and the school cultures were influenced, allowing for an engaging learning context. This model may contribute to further understandings of how other forms of learning contexts may be made more engaging.

### **Methodological Contributions**

This study provided an empirical application of the participation framework articulated by Vadeboncoeur (2006), which consisted of five features: location, relationships, content, pedagogy, and assessment/evaluation. This framework allowed the data from the study to be organized to focus on specific features of the learning context at Mountain High that contributed

to the re-engagement of youths. These features included the relationships between youths and adults, and the pedagogy of flexibility identified at Mountain High as a heuristic device organizing my observations on different features of the learning context. This framework provided a lens through which to explore the relationships that I encountered through the social and discursive practices of youths and adults. It also pointed to specific features of pedagogy that were prevalent at Mountain High that contributed to an engaging learning context.

### **Research Limitations**

In this section, I identify limitations to the study. First, I begin by reflecting on how my experiences in mainstream school may have biased this research through my data collection and data analysis. Second, I discuss limitations inherent in the research design. Finally, I discuss limitations with regard to the scope of this research and the implications this may have for further analysis.

### **My Biases**

Admittedly, my past experiences in mainstream schools as both a student and as a teacher may have influenced some of the ways I observed and interpreted my observations at Mountain High. These experiences influenced the kinds of data that I was originally collecting at Mountain High. While I assumed that alternative schools had to look qualitatively different from mainstream schools, I realized that I still focused my attention on social and discursive practices that were similar to those found in mainstream schools.

For example, I initially focused my observations on the rules and policies governing the classroom, and on examples of the academic expectations of teachers, by recording the amount of time students spent on and off-task, and identifying instances of classroom management. Given my constant comparative analysis, I was simultaneously collecting and analyzing data and this bias became apparent in the first phases of my study just after I had compiled my preliminary coding scheme. Although I became aware of my bias, and worked to overcome it, it

is possible that I may have missed practices unique to alternative schools that were also important.

### **Research Design**

This study was a qualitative study using ethnographic methods. As such, two issues arise. On the one hand, the number and selection of my participants, and on the other, the quantity of the time spent with the participants. As a qualitative study, this study had fewer participants which allowed for more in-depth participation by the youths and adults, however, the number of participants is relatively small in comparison to large-scale quantitative studies. Participants were selected using a convenience sample. The head teacher asked for volunteers from among the teachers. All the teachers were invited to participate and not all of them volunteered. Out of the teachers who agreed, the final decision was based on scheduling convenience. Five of seven teachers agreed to participate. In total, I invited seven youths to participate in the interviews; two refused to be audio-recorded and did not participate in the interview, but still shared their experiences with me during the observations. The number of participants in the active interviews and the process used to select these participants may have limited the data collected in ways that reduced the representativeness of the description of the culture of Mountain High. The youths who participated in the active interviews seemed to be engaged in classrooms practices on the basis of the participant observations, and were invited as result of this and having completed their consent forms. While the youths who participated in the interviews were few, many other youths and their views were represented throughout this study given my observations and field notes.

The second issue deals with the amount of time I spent with the participants of this study. While studies using ethnographic methods vary in time, most occur over an extended period. This study included participant observations approximately three times a week, over a seven-week period. I was not present every day, nor was I present all day with all teachers or all

students. For example, I was not present on the Friday afternoon of the mass skip out by the students, and was informed by the adults and youths on the following Monday morning of the event. By this time, the teachers had already decided how they would handle the situation, and the youths had already decided how they would respond to questions about the event. It is possible, because I did not attend Mountain High every day that my observations are not entirely representative of the culture there. It is worth noting, however, that because of the relationships I had formed with the youths and adults at Mountain High, they approached me on the occasions when I had “missed” something they deemed important and shared their experiences and perspectives. This research is not an ethnography, however, it contributes a partial description and interpretation of engagement at Mountain High.

### **Research Scope**

This study focused on the social and discursive practices of youths and adults that promoted engagement. This study foregrounded classroom practices jointly constructed between youths and adults, and how these practices contributed to an engaging learning context. The scope of the study, and its emphasis on a positive thesis, may have limited the sensitivity to the impact of social class, race, ethnicity, and gender on the co-construction of engaging learning contexts. For example, this study addresses the question—Engaging, for whom?—only in relation to particular participants. It cannot address the extent to which social class, race, or gender may have influenced engagement in this context. Although these factors may have impacted the kinds of relationships formed between youths and adults, these were not the focus of this study and need to be considered in further studies.

### **Future Research Directions**

This study used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of youths who were re-engaged in learning at an alternative high school program, and to observe firsthand a community based on the notion of being different. However, the longer I was at Mountain High, the more

questions surfaced. The questions that surfaced were related to three issues. First, a question surfaced related to the lack of quantitative data available concerning youths who attend alternative schools. Second, a question surfaced related to the social class system in Vancouver—taking into account race and ethnicity, the gap between the rich and the poor, and the gap between people with first degrees and early school leavers—and the ways that it impacted funding and policies that directly or indirectly affected educational programs for youths. Third, a question surfaced related to the lack of research that identified features of informal learning contexts that may provide insight on how to construct other forms of engaging learning contexts.

### **Quantitative Data**

Quantitative data regarding youths who attend alternative schools would have been helpful to my study. Further research on demographic information—for example, the high schools youths attended, the neighborhoods where these schools were located, racial or ethnic backgrounds, information associated to the immigration status of youths, information about students for whom English was not their first language, and even information about student socio-economic status—could be compiled to help in conducting research on alternative schools by providing more background to help in conducting research. When available, this data might be useful in identifying trends regarding the relationship between neighborhood and high school attended, and immigration and socioeconomic status, and may help to document where youths go once they leave alternative high schools or adult continuing programs. Quantitative data may also direct long-term studies of youth engagement in learning that extends beyond institutions like school. Quantitative data may also impact ways of assessing learning in multiple learning contexts.

## **Social Class**

Given the growing disparity between working and upper class families, the diversity of the population in Vancouver, and the percentage of the population that are first generation immigrants to Canada, there is a need for a study designed specifically to explore the impact of social class on education in Vancouver (Vancouver Foundation's Vital Signs for Metro Vancouver, 2008). As a young city, Vancouver may use this kind of study to avoid the pitfalls of larger and older cities in North America. This kind of study may help to assess the educational system in Vancouver and possibly recommend changes in funding allocations that may provide youths with better educational opportunities. In the long run, these recommendations may be used to implement preventative measures against the woes of extreme poverty, the costs in terms of social expenditure invested in crime, homelessness, and on the healthcare system.

## **Informal Learning Contexts**

One of the many issues addressed, both directly and indirectly in this study, was that of providing youths with learning opportunities outside of formal learning contexts like school. These include after-school programs, clubs, and other forms of group activity dedicated to learning, socialization, and even social activism. Research that recognizes the role of peers in the engagement of youths in school, including observations of how youths and their peers may co-construct zones of proximal development, may provide vital information about other ways in which engaging learning environments may also be formed. Informal learning contexts may offer unique insights about learning that may also be used in constructing engaging learning contexts within multiple educational contexts and, as such, need to be explored.

## **Summary of Thesis**

This thesis contained six chapters, each addressing different aspects of my study. Chapter 1 framed the study providing a context for the study. Chapter 2 provided my theoretical framework along with a literature review of various factors associated with early school leaving

and re-engagement. Chapter 3 provided a description of my methodological framework. Chapter 4 provided a rich description of Mountain High, classroom practices identified, and the school culture at Mountain High. Chapter 5 proposed a model for re-engagement based on extensions of a sociocultural approach and my observations of social and discursive practices between youths and adults in co-constructing an engaging learning context. Chapter 6 addressed possible contributions and limitations of my study and suggested directions for future research.

This study examined how youths and adults at one alternative re-engagement program used social and discursive practices to negotiate with adults in ways that enabled their participation and engagement. This study proposed that youths and adults in this learning context formed a community of difference as they created a culture of belonging based on being different and separate from the mainstream. Through this community, grounded in their ideals of respect, they negotiated their relationships with each other to co-construct a pedagogy that engaged youths in the learning context. Engagement dialectically fostered the sense of community and allowed youths to create identities as learners with the confidence to re-engage in learning and impact their social world.

Youths and adults at Mountain High, together, co-constructed a learning context that had features of a mainstream high school, but that allowed youths to participate more fully. While some may argue that the features identified in this study can be found in mainstream schools, what this research highlights is that these features are not available to all youths. The youths at Mountain High had to enroll in an alternative school to have access to features like relationships with teachers and to be allowed to participate in the negotiation of relationships and pedagogy within the learning context. Although adults at Mountain High provided youths with opportunities to re-engage in learning, alternative high school programs may be problematic if they only serve as containers for difference for youths who do not fit in mainstream high schools

Educators working with youths in all learning contexts must recognize the importance of their role as mediators in the joint construction of engaging learning contexts. At Mountain High, the adults were mindful of the negative experiences of youths in mainstream school, and made allowances to make this school experience different. The work of adults who work with youths in alternative learning contexts may be used to guide educators in all learning contexts. The sociocultural model of engagement presented in this study may provide insights into how learning may be made engaging in multiple learning contexts. Finally, this study highlighted that alternative schools like Mountain High provide youths with opportunities to engage in learning by recognizing them as unique individuals with valuable knowledge and experiences, by providing them with opportunities to co-construct learning contexts that are engaging to them, and by emphasizing the key role of adults in mediating the relationships that lead to the co-construction of engaging learning contexts.

## References

- Anfara Jr., V. A., Brown, K. M., & Mangione, T. L. (2002). Qualitative analysis on stage: Making the research process more public. *Educational Researcher*, 31, 28-38.
- Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Horsey, C. S. (1997). From first grade forward: Early foundations of high school dropout. *Sociology of Education*, 70, 87-107.
- Bakhurst, D. (2007). Vygotsky's demons. In H. Daniels, M. Cole, & J. V. Wertsch (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Vygotsky* (pp. 50-76). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Kim, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1995). Schools as communities, poverty levels of student populations, and students' attitudes, motives, and performance: A multilevel analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, 627-658.
- B. C. Progress Board (2007). *Seventh annual benchmark report*. Retrieved February 17, 2008 from <http://www.B.C.progressboard.com/2007docs.html>
- B. C. Progress Board (2006). *Building on our progress: Striving for excellence*. (Sixth annual B.C. progress board benchmarking report). Retrieved November 16, 2007, from <http://B.C.progressboard.com/index.php>
- Besley, A. C. (2003). Hybridized and globalized: Youth cultures in the postmodern era. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 25, 153-177.
- Bowditch, C. (1993). Getting rid of trouble makers: High school disciplinary procedures and the production of dropouts. *Social Problems*, 40, 493-509.
- Bowlby, G. (2005, December). Provincial drop-out rates: Trends and consequences. *Education Matters*, 2(4). Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-004 XIE.
- Bowlby, J. W., & McMullen, K. (2002). *At a crossroads: First results for the 18 to 20-year old cohort of the youth in transition survey*. Statistics Canada. Retrieved August 14, 2007

from

[http://cansim2.statcan.ca/cgiwin/cnsmcgi.pgm?Lang=E&SP\\_Action=Result&SP\\_ID=3073&SP\\_TYP=62&SP\\_Sort=-0](http://cansim2.statcan.ca/cgiwin/cnsmcgi.pgm?Lang=E&SP_Action=Result&SP_ID=3073&SP_TYP=62&SP_Sort=-0)

- Brain, K., Reid, I., & Comerford Boyes, L. (2006). Teachers as mediators between policy and practice. *Educational Studies, 32*, 411-423.
- Breidenstein, G. (2007). The meaning of boredom in school lessons: Participant observations in the seventh and eighth form. *Ethnography and Education, 2*, 93-108.
- Brint, S., Contreras, M. F., & Matthews, M. T. (2001). Socialization messages in primary schools: An organizational analysis. *Sociology of Education, 74*, 157-180.
- Bruzzese, J. M., & Fisher, C. B. (2003). Assessing and enhancing the research consent capacity of children and youth. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*, 13-26.
- Bryck, A. S., & Thum, Y. M. (1989). *The effects of high school organization on dropping out: An exploratory investigation*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Policy Research in Education.
- Cole, M. (2005). Cross-cultural and historical perspectives on the developmental consequences of education. *Human Development, 48*, 195-216.
- Coontz, S. (2000). *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Croninger, R., & Lee, V. E. (2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. *Teachers College Record, 103*, 548-581.
- Davis, W. E. (2002). Students at risk: Who are they? What do we know about them? How can we help them? *Institute for the Study of Students at Risk*. Orono, MN: University of Maine.

- Dei, G. J. (1996). Black youth and fading out of school. In D. Kelly, & J. Gaskell (Eds.), *Debating dropouts: Critical policy and research perspectives on school leaving*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.
- Dei, G. J. (1998). "Why write back?": The role of afrocentric discourse in social change. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 23, 200-208.
- deMarrias, K. B., & LeCompte, M. D. (1999) *The way schools work: A sociological analysis of education* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Ensminger, M. E., & Slusarcick, A. L. (1992). Paths to high school graduation or dropout: A longitudinal study of a first-grade cohort. *Sociology of Education*, 65, 95-113.
- Epp, J. R., & Epp, W. (2001). Easy exit: School policies and student attrition. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At-Risk*, 6, 231-247.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). The discourse of new labour: Critical discourse analysis. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor, & S. J. Yates (Eds.), *Discourse as data: A guide for analysis* (pp. 229-310). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Fallis, R. K., & Opotow, S. (2003). Are students failing school or are schools failing students? Class cutting in high school. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(1), 103-119.
- Felner, R. D., Primavera, J., & Cauce, A. M. (1981). The impact of school transitions: A focus for preventative efforts. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 9, 449-459.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Finnie, R., & Meng, R. (2007). Literacy and employability. *Perspectives*, 7, 5-13.
- Foley, D. (2007). Elusive prey: John Ogbu and the search for a grand theory of academic disengagement. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 18, 643-657.
- Fordham S, & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of 'acting white.'" *The Urban Review*, 18, 176-206.

- Fournier, S., & Crey, E. (1997). *Stolen from our embrace: The abduction of First Nations children and the restoration of Aboriginal Communities*. Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd.
- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 74*, 59-109.
- French, D. C., & Conrad, J. (2001). School dropout as predicted by peer rejection and anti-social behavior. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 11*, 225-244.
- Gall, J. P., Gall, M. D., & Borg, W. R. (2005). *Applying educational research: A practical guide*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Gingras, Y., Bowlby, J., & Pilon, M. (2001). *"The costs of dropping out of high school" in children and youth at risk*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada and Council of Ministers of Education.
- Gilbert, A., & Yerrick, R. (2001). Same school, separate worlds: A sociocultural study of identity, resistance, and negotiation in a rural, lower track science classroom. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 38*, 574-598.
- Giroux, H. A. (1983). *Theory and resistance in education: A pedagogy for the opposition*. Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.
- Giroux, H. A. (1994). *Disturbing pleasures: Learning popular culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Griffin, B. W. (2002). Academic disidentification, race, and high school dropouts. *High School Journal, 85*, 71-81.
- Grimmett, P. P., Dagenais, D., D'Amico, L., Jacquet, M., & Ilieva, R. (2008). The contrasting discourses in the professional lives of educators in Vancouver, Canada. *Journal of Educational Change, 9*, 101-121.
- Gutiérrez, K. D. (2002). Studying cultural practices in urban learning communities. *Human*

- Development*, 45, 312-321.
- Hanushek, E. A., Kain, J. F., Markman, J. M., & Rivkin, S. G. (2003). Does peer ability affect student achievement? *Journal of Applied Econometrics*, 18, 527-544.
- Harper, H. (1997). Difference and diversity in Ontario schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 22, 192-206.
- Hauser, R. M., Simmons, S. J., & Pager, D. I. (2004). High school dropout, race-ethnicity, and social background from the 1970s to the 1990s. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 85-106). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Heck, R. H., & Mahoe, R. (2006). Student transition to high school and persistence: Highlighting the influences of social divisions and school contingencies. *American Journal of Education*, 112, 418-446.
- Hicks, D. (1995). Discourse, learning, and teaching. *Review of Research in Education*, 21, 49-95.
- Holland, D., & Cole, M. (1995). Between discourse and schema: Reformulating a cultural-historical approach to culture and mind. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 26, 475-489.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2004). The active interview. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (pp. 140-161). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hurley, J. C., & Underwood, M. K. (2002). Children's understanding of their research rights before and after debriefing: Informed assent, confidentiality, and stopping participation. *Child Development*, 73, 132-143.
- Hymel, S., Comfort, C., Schonert-Reichl, K., & McDougal, P. (1996). Academic failure and school dropout: The influence of peers. In J. Juvonen, & K. R. Wentzel (Eds.), *Social*

- motivation: Understanding children's school adjustment* (pp. 313-345). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Jerald, C. D. (2006). *Identifying potential dropout: Key lessons for building an early warning data system*. Palo Alto, CA: American Diploma Project Network.
- Kelly, D. (1996). "Choosing" the alternative: Conflicting missions and constrained choice in a dropout prevention program. In D. M. Kelly & J. Gaskell (Eds.). *Debating dropouts: Critical policy and research perspectives on school leaving* (pp. 101-122). New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.
- Kelly, D. (1993). *Last chance high: How girls and boys drop in and out of alternative schools*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2004, March). *Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement*. Paper presented at the Tenth Biennial of the Society for Research on Adolescence, Baltimore, MD.
- Lan, W., & Lanthier, R. (2003). Changes in students' academic performance and perceptions of school and self before dropping out of schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 8(3), 309-332
- LeCompte, M. D. (1994, September). *How to build a dropout: New perspectives on at-risk students*. Paper presented at the Educational Leadership Institute, Fort Lauderdale, FL.
- LeCompte, M. D., & Dworkin, A. G. (1991). *Giving up on school: Student dropouts and teacher burnouts*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press Inc.
- LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. J. (1999). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research: Ethnographer's toolkit*. Walnut Creek, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lee, V. E., & Burkam, D. T. (2003). Dropping out of high school: The role of school organization and structure. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40, 353-393.

- Levin, B. (1992). Dealing with dropouts in Canadian education. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 22, 257-270.
- Lew, J. (2004). The “other” story of model minorities: Korean American high school dropouts in an urban context. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 35, 303-323.
- Lewis, C., Enciso, P., & Moje, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Reframing sociocultural research on literacy: Identity, agency, and power*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lock, J., & Steiner, H. (1999). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth risks for emotional, physical, and social problems: Results from a community-based survey. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 38, 297-304.
- Mehan, H. (1979). What time is it, Denise? Asking known information questions in classroom discourse. *Theory Into Practice*, 28(4), 285-294.
- Mello, R. A. (2002). Collocation analysis: A method for conceptualizing and understanding narrative data. *Qualitative Research*, 2, 231-243.
- Michelson, W., & Harvey, A. S. (2000). Is teacher’s work never done? Time use and subjective outcomes. *Radical Pedagogy*, 2. Retrieved May 15, 2007 from <http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/archives.php>.
- Morrow, V., & Richards, M. (1996). The ethics of social research with children: An overview. *Children and Society*, 10, 90-105.
- Naylor, C. (2001). *What do British Columbia teachers consider to be the most significant aspects of workload and stress in their work?* (Analysis of qualitative data from the B.C.T.F. worklife of teachers survey series: Workload and stress research report). Vancouver, BC: British Columbia Teacher’s Federation.
- Newmann, F. M., Marks, H. M., & Gamoran, A. (1996). Authentic pedagogy and student performance. *American Journal of Education*, 104, 280-312.

- Ogbu, J. U. (1987). Variability in minority school performance: a problem in search of an explanation. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 18, 312-34.
- Panofsky, C. P. (2003). The relations of learning and student social class: Towards “re-socializing” socio-cultural learning theory. In A. Kozulin, B. Gindis, V. Ageyev, & S. Miller (Eds.), *Vygotsky’s educational theory in cultural context* (pp. 441-431). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Plant, G. P. (2007). Executive summary: A new B.C. access and excellence strategy. In *Campus 2020: Thinking ahead: The report. Access & Excellenc: The Campus 2020 Plan for British Columbia’s Post-Secondary Education System* (pp. 3-5, 13-44). Victoria, B.C.: Province of BC. Retrieved from: [http://www.campus2020.ca/EN/the\\_report/](http://www.campus2020.ca/EN/the_report/)
- Radziwon, C. D. (2003). The effects of peer’s beliefs on 8<sup>th</sup> grade student identification with school. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 17, 236-249.
- Roderick, M., & Camburn, E. (1999). Risk and recovery from course failure in the early years of high school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36(2), 303-343.
- Rothstein, H. S. (1999). *Alternative schools in British Columbia, 1960-1975*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
- Rumberger, R. W. (1983). Dropping out of high school: The influence of race, sex, and family background. *American Educational Research Journal*, 20, 199-220.
- Rumberger, R. W. (1987). High school dropouts: A review of issues and evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 57(2), 101-121.

- Rumberger, R. W. (2004). What can be done to reduce school dropouts? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation crisis* (pp. 131–156). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Rutherford, R. B., & Quinn, M. M. (1999). Special education in alternative education programs. *Clearing House, 73*, 79-81.
- Ryan, A. M. (2001). The peer group as a context for the development of adolescent motivation and achievement. *Child Development, 72*, 1135-1150.
- Sable, J., Gaviola, N., & Hoffman, L. (2007). *Numbers and rates of public high school dropouts: School year 2004-2005*. US Department of Education: Digest of Education Statistics. Retrieved on December 21, 2008 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2008305>
- Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Smith, A., Peeled, M., Albert, M., Mackay, L., Stewart, D., Saewyc, E., & The McCreary Society (2008). *Making the grade: A review of alternative education programs in British Columbia*. Vancouver, BC: McCreary Centre Society.
- Smyth, J. (2006). Researching teachers working with young adolescents: Implications for ethnographic research. *Ethnography and Education, 1*, 31-51.
- Smyth, J., Hattam, R., Cannon, J., Edwards, J., Wilson, N., & Wurst, S. (2004). *Dropping out, drifting off, being excluded: Becoming somebody without school*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Statistics Canada (2006). *2006 Community profiles: Community highlights for Vancouver*. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/profiles/community/Details/Page.cfm?La>

ng=E&Geo1=CMA&Code1=933\_\_&Geo2=PR&Code2=59&Data=Count&SearchText=  
Vancouver&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=&GeoCode=933

Steinberg, L. (1988). *Noninstructional influences on high school student achievement: The contributions of parents, peers, extracurricular activities, and part-time work*. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Madison, WI: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools.

Stigler, J. W., & Hiebert, J. (1999). *The teaching gap: Best ideas from the world's teachers for improving education in the classroom*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Tanner, J., Davies, S., & O'Grady, B. (1999). Whatever happened to yesterday's rebels? Longitudinal effects of youth delinquency on education and employment. *Social Problems*, 46, 250-274.

Thomas, N., & O'Kane, C. (1998). The ethics of participatory research with children. *Children and Society*, 12, 336-348.

Thornberg, R. (2007). Inconsistencies in everyday patterns of school rules. *Ethnography and Education*, 2, 401-416.

Toppo, G. (March, 2006). Dropouts say their schools expect too little of them. *USA Today*. Retrieved November 21, 2006 from [http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2006-03-01-dropouts-expectations\\_x.htm?csp=34](http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2006-03-01-dropouts-expectations_x.htm?csp=34).

Vadeboncoeur, J. A. (2005). The difference that time and space make: An analysis of institutional and narrative landscapes. In J. A. Vadeboncoeur & L. P. Stevens (Eds.), *Re/Constructing "the adolescent": Sign, symbol, and body* (pp. 123-152). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Vadeboncoeur, J. A. (2006). Engaging young people learning in informal contexts. *Review of Research in Education*, 30, 239-278.

- Vadeboncoeur, J. A., & Luke, A. (2004). Who's/whose "at risk"? Answerability and the critical possibilities of classroom discourse. *Critical Discourse Analysis, 1*(2), 201-223.
- Vadeboncoeur, J. A., & Portes, P. R. (2002). Students "at risk": Exploring identity from a sociocultural perspective. In D. M. McInerney & S. Van Etten (Eds.), *Sociocultural influences on motivation and learning* (pp. 89-127). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Vallerand, R. J., Fortier, M. S., & Guay, F. (1997). Self-determination, and persistence in a real-life setting: Toward a motivational model of high school dropout. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 1161-1176.
- Van Steensel, V. (2006). Relations between socio-cultural factors, the home literacy environment and children's literacy development in the first years of primary education. *Journal of Research in Reading, 29*, 367-382.
- Vancouver Foundation (2008). *Vancouver Foundation's Vital Signs for Metro Vancouver 2008: Perceptions*. Retrieved from February 13, 2009 from <http://www.vancouverfoundationvitalsigns.ca/>
- Vancouver School Board (2006). *District plan 2006/2007: For student engagement, learning, and development*. Retrieved August 16, 2007 from <http://www.vsb.B.C..ca/districtinfo/districtpublication/districtplan.htm>
- Vancouver School Board (2007). *Alternative resource programs 2007/2006: Alternative Resource Programs Advisory Committee*. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver School Board.
- Vancouver School Board (2008). *District plan 2008/2009: For student engagement, learning, and development*. Retrieved August 25, 2008 from <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/districtinfo/districtpublication/districtplan.htm>
- Vancouver School Board (2008). *Ready Reference*. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver School Board.

- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Boston: MIT Press
- Weis, L. (1985). *Working class without work: High school students in a de-industrializing economy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic inquiry: Toward a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Wentzel, K. R. (1991). Social competence at school: Relationship between social responsibility and academic achievement. *Review of Educational Research, 61*, 1-24.
- Wentzel, K. R., & Caldwell, K. (1997). Friendships, peer acceptance and group membership: Relations to academic achievement in middle school. *Child Development, 68*, 1198-1209.
- Wentzel, K. R., & Wigfield, A. (1998). Academic and social motivational influences on students' academic performance. *Educational Psychology Review, 10*, 155-175.
- Wertsch, J. V. (2007). Mediation. In H. Daniels, M. Cole, & J. V. Wertsch (Eds.) *The Cambridge companion to Vygotsky* (pp. 178-192). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, J. V., Tulviste, P., & Hagstrom, F. (1993). A sociocultural approach to agency. In E. A. Forman, N. Minick, & C. A. Stone (Eds.), *Contexts for learning: Sociocultural dynamics in children's development* (pp. 336-356). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Williamson, E., Goodenough, T., Kent, J., & Ashcroft, R. (2005). Conducting research with children: The limits of confidentiality and child protection protocols. *Children and Society, 19*, 397-409.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Woods, S., & Wolke, D. (2004). Direct and relational bullying among primary school children and academic achievement. *Journal of School Psychology, 42*, 135-155.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**This study is not a program evaluation. It is a study of youth participation in school contexts and their reasons for re-engaging.**

1. How long have you been participating in this program (Mountain High)?
2. How did you come to hear about this program? Were you referred?
3. What was the main reason you applied to this program?
4. How would you describe the atmosphere here?
5. How is it different to your previous high school?
6. How is it similar to your previous high school?
7. Is there a difference between how you relate to the adults in this program and how you related to the adults at your previous high school? How so?
8. Are the courses offered to you in this program any different from the courses offered at your previous high school? In what ways?
9. Do you think you will continue in this program until you earn your Dogwood?
10. Is there anything that has made the difference in your decision to stay in this program?
11. Does the way in this program is run make it more appealing to you? The schedule? The courses offered? The faculty and staff?
12. Are there any specific aspects about this program that you think could be changed to make it more appealing to youth in general?
13. Is there anything else that I haven't asked that you think is important for me to know?

## **Appendix B: REVISED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. Please introduce yourself and provide a brief description of who you are, your interests, your background, or something about yourself that would help me to know more about you.
  
2. Tell me a bit about your experience as a
  - a. Teacher- (basics- training, where you have worked). Your teaching pedagogy- what you think teaching should be like.
  
  - b. Student- what was your previous high school like, what is Mountain High like? How are they different?
  
3. Describe your experiences at Mountain High. – What are the faculty, staff, STUDENTS, like?
  
4. What do you think learning is? Can you explain or describe this? Describe to me an example of learning in your life?

**Appendix C: PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK: Observation Sheet**

<b>FEATURES</b>	<b>OBSERVATION</b>
Location	What is the location? What are the features of the material space?
Relationships	Who are the participants and what are the relationships among them?
Content	What is the purpose of the activity: generally and specifically?
Pedagogy	How are the youths engaged?
Assessment/Evaluation	How are the learning activities assessed formatively and summatively during the course of the observations?

(Vadeboncoeur, 2006)