AT-RISK ADOLESCENTS’ EXPERIENCE
AS PEER EDUCATORS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of at-risk students as peer educators. The purpose of this study was to gain insight and understanding into the experiences that at-risk students had as peer educators in a program based in an alternate school setting. By relating the experience of the participants in this program it was hoped that this study would add to the body of research on peer education. Kids teaching kids and older at-risk adolescents becoming positive role models for younger adolescents were some of the experiences that these peer educators described in this study.

This study examined a peer education program in its first two years. It was hoped that this study would provide information that would inform the practice of program planners and help to facilitate the development of peer education programs in schools and school districts. For this study, ten adolescents (15-20 years of age) enrolled in alternate secondary programs were individually interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and each student was asked a set of research questions. However, because the interview proceeded more like a conversation, there was opportunity for each student and the researcher to add questions or information.

The findings of this study led to these general conclusions (1) the experience the students had as peer educators was basically a positive one, (2) the peer education program described in this study offers some opportunity for skills development, (3) being trained as peer educators can provide at-risk students with the opportunity to learn more about themselves and (4) the peer educators can be positive role models to other peers. Implications for further research are included in the discussion of the results.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Good learning is a collaborative and social experience where individuals share one's ideas and respond to others' reactions (Dryfoos, 1990) and can improve one's thinking and deepen one's understanding. Today's educators are trying to encourage more of this good learning recognizing the efficacy of more cooperative and interpersonal learning approaches (Hymel, Zinck, & Ditner, 1993).

The present day educational system has assumed increasing responsibilities for not only teaching a variety of skills in addition to basic education, but also meeting a wider variety of needs amongst its learners. The practice of using the talents of parents, other community members and other students to share this responsibility is becoming more and more common. Parental involvement is not a new idea. In fact in the very early days of organized schooling parents and the community bore most of the burden of education. They hired the teachers, decided what would be taught and even supervised the teachers' personal conduct (Home-School Partnership, 1987). But economic and social changes brought on by the forces of industrialization and urbanization changed that relationship. Parents and the community became less involved in the schools. Now the task of policy-makers seems to be of making changes in our school missions which will "once again give parents, teachers and administrators the power to help students grow intellectually, psychologically and socially" (Cuban, 1989, p.30). Parents and other community members are becoming more involved as guest speakers, tutors, mentors, helpers, supervisors, activities coordinators and fund raisers, to name just a few roles. Their contributions can positively affect the quality of education today.
Students are also being given more opportunities to help their peers meet all the challenges of their increasingly more demanding world. Students are being utilized as tutors or peer counsellors and the literature supports the fact that they can be very effective (Fulton et al., 1994; Hamburg, 1992; Varenhorst, 1992; Dryfoos, 1990; Slavin, 1986). For example, Diane Hedin reviewed some peer-led programs for the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy in 1986 and called attention to "the powerful evidence of the value of one-on-one tutoring as a teaching method...when it is conducted by suitably prepared students" (Hamburg, 1992, p. 262).

Peer education is a process that involves training students to be teachers to other students. The students who are the teachers are children or adolescents who are of about the same age or maturity as their students. Students teaching other students is an instructional strategy that has been around a long time. The Talmudic study, for example, has traditionally been done by pairing students and making them responsible for each other's learning (Levine, 1986). Not only have different religions used this teaching strategy, but also universities, and many cultures. School districts have begun to recognize the positive learning experiences that are possible through peer education programs for secondary and elementary students. These districts are not only developing peer counselling and peer tutoring programs, but also programs which utilize the peer educator in other roles.

Background for the Study

A large school district in the Lower Mainland developed and implemented a Peer Education Program in the 1994-1995 school year. It was seen as an innovative program because it involved youth teaching youth; at-risk adolescents educating younger adolescents who are in a very important transition period; and students
being involved in all aspects of the program development and delivery.

The older adolescent students who are the peer educators are enrolled in alternative secondary schools and are considered to be at-risk for completing their secondary education. After having dropped out of school for a period of time they have returned to the alternative education program. The alternative education program involved in this study has been in operation since the 1979/80 school year. This program provides an alternative environment in which at-risk students can continue their studies toward completion of Grade 12, and in which dropouts/school leavers can return and attempt to reengage in the formal educational process (Lewis, 1994).

Originally, to qualify for this alternative program the students had to have been out of the school system for a minimum of six months and to be actively working or seeking work (Lewis, 1994). However, due to a large increase in the number of students in the regular system who were identified as at-risk and were referred to the Work and Learn Program the "must be working" and "six months out of school" requirements were eliminated in 1994. At this same time the name was changed to Learning Centres.

The goals of the Learning Centre program are to provide a variety of learning strategies, to foster responsibility, increase self-esteem and social awareness through provisions of mentoring and to prepare students for their emergence into society. Also the program aims to help the students to take their place in a rapidly changing society, through career preparation and the teaching of social skills, life skills, and job skills (Lewis, 1994). Because of these goals the students from these programs were identified as being good candidates for piloting a Peer Education Program for at-risk students.

The at-risk adolescent (15-19 years of age) students are recruited and trained
to become peer educators to younger adolescent (grade six and seven) students. In addition to utilizing students to both develop and deliver the program, school and community professionals are also actively involved. This peer education program is a locally developed course with approval from the Ministry of Education for graduation credits. The students receive credit through their career exploration program because the school district believes that the skills being developed as a peer educator are employability skills. As Fulton, LeRoy, Pinchney, and Weekley (1994) found, students as peer educators can learn or improve vocational skills, such as: punctuality, dependability, self-intiative, problem-solving, leadership, and work evaluation. They can also develop confidence in themselves as leaders among their peers.

In the beginning of the program the students participate in an intensive training course by community trainers. Then over the next few months they develop their own presentations on a variety of topics. These are topics they feel are important for the younger student to be better informed about, in order for the younger student to make better decisions on important life choices that can really impact on them. The goals of the program are to increase student self-esteem through helping the students realize their ability to be successful, be role models to other students and have successful mentoring experiences.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to provide insight and understanding into the experiences, of at-risk adolescents, as peer educators in a program based in an alternate school setting. Specifically, the students were asked to describe their experience as peer educators. Listening to the students' voices is the essence of this study. Their thoughts and ideas are the "data".

Since little research has been done on the evaluation of peer education
programs, in terms of the experience of the participants, this thesis hopes to add to that body of research. Because the program is primarily experiential its evaluation needs to include the understanding of the experience of the participants. This study examines the program in its first 2 years. It hopes to provide information on the peer education process that will better inform our practices as program planners. Also, it hopes to help facilitate the development of more peer education programs.

Specific Research Questions:

1. What is the experience of at-risk adolescents who act as peer educators in a peer education program?
2. To what extent do the at-risk adolescents experience the peer education program as providing them with the opportunity to develop new skills?
3. To what extent do the at-risk adolescents experience the peer education program as providing them with the opportunity to develop self-knowledge?

Rationale for the Study

As previously stated, peer education as an instructional strategy has been around for a long time. However, in educational settings, the most prevalent strategies utilize students as peer counsellors or peer tutors. There is considerable evidence that students of all levels of achievement can be effective as tutors (Fulton et al., 1994; Hamburg, 1992; Slavin, 1986). Hamburg (1992) explains if simple skills are taught, an age difference of one year works well and with more complex skills, an age difference of two to three years seems optimal. The other most common peer strategy is peer counselling. Training adolescents as counsellors to their peers has proved effective in helping young people develop the capability to choose positive ways of

Peer interventions are among the effective and natural strategies that can be used to influence student thinking and behavior (Varenohorst, 1992). "Peers can use credibility with fellow adolescents to help some young people who would be otherwise hard to reach" (Hamburg, 1992, p. 259). Research findings do support peer education as an instructional strategy that can improve academic and social skills (Fulton et al., 1994; Slavin, 1986). Also, peer education can enhance personal development and a sense of competency (Hamburg, 1992). However, these positive outcomes are generally described in the literature within the context of peer tutoring or peer counselling programs. There is very little research on the use of students as teachers using other educational strategies. These strategies can involve the peer educators choosing the subject matter to be taught; developing the learning outcomes; researching the information needed; planning the format and delivery of the lesson; teaching the lesson and participating in the lesson's evaluation.

While some of the literature (Dryfoos, 1990) indicates peer influence on adolescent behavior is important and "the most successful approaches use older peers to influence or help younger peers, either as classroom instructors or as mentors or tutors" (p.323); this literature is very limited. Thus, this study hopes to add to that body of literature. This study plans to interview students who are participants in a peer education program where they are accountable as the lesson planners and teachers. It is hoped that this study will provide useful information gathered through listening to students' perceptions.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review will discuss four areas of research: adolescence, at-risk adolescents, alternative education, and peer education. These four areas are seen to be significant in providing a background for a study on the meaning peer educators make of a peer education program. Adolescence is a time in one's life where a great deal of changes can be happening. Therefore, it is important to provide a context to understand how adolescents negotiate and deal with change. Research on adolescents and at-risk adolescents appears to be pertinent to understanding what meaning the students make of the experience and what opportunities for development of life skills the experience provided. The review of alternative programs suggests why the alternative education setting can be a contributing factor to the successful implementation of the program and the commitment of the students. The different types of peer education are also reviewed. Peer counselling and peer tutoring, which are the most common types, are explored in this study to help provide a background for the better understanding of the type of peer education described by the students in this study.

ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is the developmental period of transition between childhood and adulthood which involves biological, cognitive and socio-emotional changes. As Dryfoos (1990) states, children during this time present unique patterns of growth and development. These patterns are shaped by their genetic backgrounds, their family conformations, and the social environment in which they live. It is an important time for
adolescents who are trying very hard to develop their own identity. Erikson (1968) describes identity as the fifth stage of the developmental sequence. He believes that it is at this time that adolescents are finding out what they are about and where they are going in life. Erikson (1968) explains that some of the behaviors the adolescent may demonstrate at this time is withdrawal or isolating themselves from family and peers or "immersing [themselves] in the peer world and losing their identity in the group" (p. 331).

This search for identity at this point in the adolescent's development is complicated by the fact that the individual is undergoing rapid physical change while simultaneously dealing with many other aspects of his/her environment, for example, self-concept, broadening peer relationships, sexual contacts and roles, moral and ideological commitments, and emancipation from adult authority (Vander Zanden, 1985). On this complicated road to maturity it is important that adolescents have the opportunity to experience situations that enables them to use some of the cognitive processes involved in making good decisions. Adolescents are searching for self-understanding and trying to develop the cognitive capabilities to interact with their socio-cultural experiences to influence this understanding. Therefore the physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes of young adolescents require programs that address self-esteem, family involvement, age-appropriate sex education, substance abuse, continuation of basic skills, education for living and thinking in a computer literate society (Manning, 1993). Decision making and critical thinking are two cognitive activities that are very important for the development of adolescent's everyday cognitive skills. Offering adolescents more opportunities to practice realistic decision making is a learning outcome for which school curricula need to strive. Programs that encourage active participation by adolescents can be effective. These programs not only provide opportunities for experiential learning for the adolescent,
but also for demonstrating initiative and leadership (Price, Cioci, Penner & Trautlein, 1993). These opportunities provide for learning new skills as well as being more successful that those that just require passive learning and listening (Price et al., 1993).

Adolescents are victims of stereotypes that often describe them as rebellious, self-indulgent, and incapable of learning anything serious. According to Hamburg (1992), these stereotypes are wrong and most adolescents experience the transition from childhood to adulthood more positively than is portrayed by many adults and the media. Today’s adolescents, as stated by (Feldman & Elliott, 1990; Hamburg, 1993; Hechinger, 1992; Santrock, 1996) face demands and expectations as well as risks and temptations, that appear to be more numerous and complex than those adolescents faced only a generation ago. Yet “adolescents can learn that they are capable of control over themselves and influencing others in turn” (Santrock, 1996, p.218). They do need the opportunities to talk with peers and adults about their social worlds and the pressures that are involved in these worlds.

However, there are still far too many adolescents today who are not provided with adequate opportunities and support to become competent adults (Lerner, Entwisle, & Mauser, 1994; Takanishi, 1993). These adolescents are often provided with a less stable home environment than the adolescents a decade or two ago. Many different negative influences such as higher family divorce rates, more family mobility and increased adolescent pregnancy rates have all contributed to this instability in their home life. These personal problems can be independent of social class and family background (Terrace, 1991). Although with any of these factors present in their lives adolescents are still capable of achieving a responsible adulthood, it still is possible for these experiences to have a negative impact on their successful transition (Dryfoos, 1990; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Fine, 1986).
As children become adolescents they experience many transitions in schooling. The transition from elementary to high school can be very stressful because it occurs simultaneously with many other changes (Eccles & Harold, 1993). These changes include puberty, changes in social cognition, increased responsibility and independence and a change from a small, contained classroom structure to a larger more impersonal school structure. One factor that can lessen the stress of this transition is positive peer relationships for the individual. In the research reported by Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, and McDougall (1996), this transition from elementary to secondary is perceived by the students who have positive peer relationships to be easier than for the students who feel more isolated from their peers. At this time the peer group can play a critical role. Hymel et al., (1996) in their review of the literature on the influence of peers found that, “Although limited, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that peer relationships do indeed play a critical role” (p.4). Research by Bibby and Posterski (1992) found that about 85 percent of young people ranked first and second respectively as “very important” freedom and friendship (p.14). Bibby and Posterski quote a 15 year old from Calgary, Alberta, “I think the greatest value in a teenager’s life is friendship” (p. 9). It is a time when the adolescent is often breaking away from family and establishing an individual identity and “adolescents reportedly spend twice as much time with peers than with their family”(Czikzentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson & Richards, 1991, in press: Hymel et al., 1996, p.4). Hymel et al., (1996) also state, “especially during adolescence peers may be particularly important in providing an educational context in which the student can feel a sense of belonging and affiliation” (p.4).

It is at this time that family and school need to maximize the positive rather than negative influence of peers, especially with regard to school engagement. For the adolescent's healthy development a socialization process of supportive engagement
between adolescents and adults and/or peers needs to be encouraged (Adams & Gullotta, 1989) and this should occur in the social context of family, school, work and community. "The experiences children and adolescents have in this school society are likely to have a strong influence in such areas as identity development, belief in one's competence, images of life and career possibilities, social relationships, standards of right and wrong, and conceptions of how a social system beyond the family functions." (Santrock, 1996, p. 251). Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) specifically mention three needs that schools should help all students to meet. These are the "...need to acquire a personal sense of competence and success, to develop a sense of identity and social integration, and to acquire the socially useful knowledge and skills that make an individual a good worker, parent and citizen." (p.27). They strongly imply that students need schools and classrooms to be friendly, sensitive, accepting, safe, and responsive places. Wehlage and his co-authors also believe that students need schools to provide them with "...the stimulus of a personal vision that motivates the effort and commitment to achieve" (Wehlage et al., 1989, p.23).

Ryan and Powelson (1991) also discuss three basic needs that are necessary for the student to be motivated in school. The need to feel connected to school through a feeling of relatedness is one of these needs. They go on to say that when students feel that they have some control over what they are learning, and therefore some autonomy, they also are more motivated. The third basic need that they identify as critical to school motivation is the sense of competency. If the students' school environment encourages a feeling that they are capable and accomplished and they feel competent when challenged then they will be more highly motivated.

There is a growing interest in the settings in which adolescent development occurs. Identified as the socio-cultural context, it may include home, school, peer
groups, churches, cities, neighborhoods, communities. In our world today there is a growing awareness of the necessity of involving the whole community in helping to insure that our adolescents are prepared for the very demanding future they all face. As Goodlad (1984) suggests, “Education is too important and too all encompassing to be left only to schools.” (p. 46)

Adolescents have a special place in any society, for they are the society's future. An important concern is that too many adolescents today will not reach their full potential because of inadequate support. “Adolescents who do not reach their full potential, who are destined to make fewer contributions to society than it needs, and who do not take their place as productive adults diminish the power of that society's future” (Horowitz & O'Brien, 1989, p.443).

**AT-RISK ADOLESCENTS**

Who is at-risk? As cited in Dryfoos (1990) “approximately one in four children of the 28 million children in the U.S., aged 10 to 17, are in dire need of assistance because they are at high risk of engaging in multiple problem behaviors” (p. 245). Some of these behaviors are early unsafe sex, substance abuse, truancy and negative peer relationships. These behaviors and outcomes can not only have a long term and devastating impact on the at-risk adolescent, but also on society as a whole. For Dryfoos (1990) the term at-risk youth refers to “young people at risk of not maturing into responsible adults” (p.4). For the purposes of this study Dryfoos' definition of at-risk will be used.

Often the at-risk students are lacking the home and community resources to help them benefit from traditional school practices. A number of personal, social and academic factors contribute to a student being at-risk. Among the most significant are low achievement, grade retention, behavioral problems, poor attendance, cultural
background, low socio-economic status, family situation (Altierie, 1991). Wehlage and Rutter (1986) also identified low support for education in the home, peer pressure, substance abuse, and low self-esteem as some other common personal factors.

One of the common characteristics of at-risk students is low self-esteem (Uroff & Greene, 1991). Harter (1992) a self-esteem theorist, believes that programs for enhancing self-esteem need to help the adolescent recognize areas of competence. Schools must help students to see themselves as valued and capable. Both Harter (1992) and Uroff and Green (1991) acknowledge that achievement does not necessarily produce higher self-esteem, but higher self-esteem can produce achievement.

Pedagogical practices which contribute to a student not reaching full potential and leaving school before the completion of Grade 12 are the way the curriculum is structured, knowledge is valued, and classroom practices are implemented (Fine, 1986). These practices and the schools’ organizational structures and policies all have an impact on attendance and retention rates. There must be a reason for coming to school (Fine, 1986) and “modified pedagogies that value creativity, innovation, and collective work have been demonstrated effective in both the transfer of knowledge ...and generating energy rather than resistence” (p. 402).

There are many possible reasons for a student to be at-risk of dropping out of school. According to Glasser (1984) students give up on school because school has stopped being a “need-fulfilling experience” for them. Glasser says that many students cannot meet their needs for personal power, love and belonging, fun or freedom in school and therefore, seek to meet those needs outside of school. Fine (1986) states that if students are to value school and make a commitment to school-related activities they have to feel that they “belong” in the school setting. Wehlage and his co-authors, also believe that when this sense of belonging does not happen
with the school that the student views the school as "uncomfortable", "hostile", or even as a "hazardous" place. (Wehlage et al., 1989, p.27)

Once students have actually dropped out of school some of the more frequently occurring reasons they themselves give for why they left school are, failing grades, boredom, and school being seen as a threatening place by them (Hamby, 1989). Finding school a threatening place and feeling isolated can cause at-risk students' problems to grow more acute because they lack the skills for successful social interaction. "Many at-risk learners, like many other learners, simply do not have the social skills necessary for positive social interaction" (Manning, 1993, p.136). Their social interactions up to this point in their lives have often been lacking in basic understanding of what is good communication, effective cooperative learning or appropriate goal setting (Manning, 1993). Their achievements and behaviors have often been more criticized than praised and yet their need for acknowledgement of their accomplishments are greater than ever before in their lives. They strive for less adult control over their lives, yet they are in great need of the security and support that adults and role models can provide to help them through this very tumultuous time in their lives (Price et al., 1993). Hopefully some of these role models and supportive adults can be found in the traditional school system.

Why then do some of our young people drop out? If the at-risk behaviors actually result in the student dropping out of school this represents an incalculable loss of human potential and as part of the dropout rate a staggering economic cost to society (Hamby, 1989). In the1940's when 76% of the students failed to graduate it was not considered a serious problem (Mann, 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) but technological change and skilled labour demands have dramatically increased the necessity of grade 12 completion. A high school diploma is, from an employer's point of view, essential for being considered for even the most basic of jobs (Le Compte,
The School Leavers Survey (1993) estimates that 40% of the new jobs created between 1989 and 2000 will require more than 16 years of education and training.

The general descriptions for a dropout is identified as a student leaving school before graduation from Grade 12 without transferring to another school (Hahn, 1987). The economic costs of dropping out can be significant for not only these students but also for Canadian society. For example, students have a greater chance of unemployment and reduced life earnings. Additionally, the cost to Canada is estimated as high as 4 billion dollars per year. These dropouts are costly in terms of wasted potential and public expense; for as a dropout the guarantee to be equal is greatly reduced and the ability to improve one's economic state can no longer be assured (DeBlois, 1989). The "act of dropping out ultimately reproduces and exacerbates social inequities" (Fine, 1986, p.31).

What type of programs are successful for at-risk students? Dryfoos (1990) suggests that programs for the at-risk student should have broader goals than just retention. A successful program needs to have multiple components or incorporate more than one approach. Some of these components can combine an interest in life skills and personal planning, training in social skills and decision-making. Instructional strategies that make linkages with life experiences of students and encourage active learning are very effective for the at-risk student (Cuban, 1989). As individuals, the at-risk student often demonstrates some unique talents and an interest in artistic and oral expression, according to Alterie (1991), and so program components that encourage development of these talents and interests could be effective. Also Alterie (1991) goes on to state, "experiential education for gaining the necessary competencies to function in the adult world" is important for a program to be successful (p.267).
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Many school districts have developed alternative programs to provide the type of educational settings that will encourage at-risk students to remain in school or to return to school after dropping out of the traditional school setting. Many of these alternative programs have been created to meet the needs of at-risk students or dropouts. According to Wehlage et al., (1989) effective alternative programs are succeeding with some at-risk students because "...these programs have created a more embracing and supportive social environment that is appealing to the young people who have rejected the competitive and impersonal classrooms encountered during their previous education" (p. 218).

Often these alternative programs provide some basic needs that the student found lacking, for a variety of reasons, in the more traditional high school setting. Two reports have focused on this issue of the early "school leavers". In these reports, "A Platform for Change: A Study of Surrey Secondary Schools" (Wideen, Pye, Naylor, & Crofton, 1990) and "Dropping Out of High School: An Exploratory and Critical Analysis" (Naylor, 1990) there is agreement that the dropouts' dissatisfaction with the school system is the dominant reason for leaving before graduation. Students have indicated that the major factors causing them to leave school originate within the schools themselves. In the Wideen et al. (1990) report "dropouts describe a pervasive sense of boredom with teaching methods, a curriculum irrelevant to their needs, and an environment in which they feel physically and psychologically unsafe" (p. 138). This inability of the traditional school system to meet the needs of more and more students has led to an increase and ongoing support of alternative programs for many school districts.

In the alternate school setting, students often feel more like a member of the community and believe that they have been accepted into a program that expects
them to succeed (DeBlois, 1989). The students usually are presented with more of an individualized, self-paced and continuous-progressive mastery approach to the acquiring of basic skills. This has potential for not only meeting students' academic needs, but also for their need for personal power in increasing their sense of self-efficacy and in raising their academic self-concept (DeBlois, 1989). When the student has more control over the learning process because of its individualized and self-paced approach he/she can feel more involved in the decision-making. Also, with the continuous-progressive mastery approach to acquiring skills the student is encouraged to take more responsibility for learning.

DeBlois (1989) also believes that an effective alternative program should have a vocational component. This meets a need of students to see relevance in their school work. As they see the personal relevance of school to their lives, they may be more committed to school and be less apt to perceive it as "boring".

The long-term impact of the alternative programs is still unknown, as many of the programs are relatively new innovations. However, some studies have shown that some include common features seem to be effective in alternate schools. Some of these features are small size, teachers serving as mentors, and job training programs linked with academic remediation (Wehlage et al., 1989). Those educators who are involved in alternative programs are recognizing that successful programs build student choices into their pedagogy and curriculum and increase the number of choices that students are offered. They try to meet the students' needs for emotional security and social satisfaction.

To keep today's at-risk students from becoming tomorrow's dropouts, programs seek to deal with some of the adolescents' identified needs and help them to experience situations that make them feel competent, important and in control. As for other students, no one approach can effectively meet all the needs of at-risk students.
But making use of practices like cooperative learning and learning-styles-based instruction have proven to be successful (Altierie, 1991). According to Trevino (1991) "the best programs build self-esteem, structure work so it can be done well, and celebrate accomplishment of any kind" (p.32). Manning (1993) goes on to say that successful programs address the importance of self-concept and overall achievement and, of major importance, on improving self-esteem. Successful programs for enhancing self-esteem help the adolescent recognize areas of competence and do not just try to make the adolescent "feel good" (Harter, 1992). Harter believes that "emotional and social approval in the form of confirmation from others powerfully influence adolescents' self-esteem" (p.325).

**PEER EDUCATION**

Many schools are now implementing peer counselling and peer tutoring programs into their curriculum. The most effective programs involve peers that are at least two years older to help younger peers (Slavin, 1986), because when they are the same age the tutee may resist being taught by a classmate of the same age. In some cases the tutor is given special training and provided with materials to work together with the tutee on a well-specified activity. The peer tutors' role is to tutor other students in the school. This usually is in a basic subject area in which the tutee needs some extra help. Peer tutoring resembles cooperative learning because it involves students working with students. However, peer tutoring is different from cooperative learning, where all the students are learning at the same time, because with peer tutoring one student is teaching and one is learning (Slavin, 1986).

"Research on peer tutoring has consistently supported its use. Interestingly, the achievement gains for the tutors are often as great or greater than those for the tutees" (Slavin, 1986, p.13). Some schools use low-achieving tutors for young children to help
them with basic skills. These tutors end up reviewing material in a way that makes
them feel responsible and important. Such programs have been found to benefit the
older student and are not detrimental to the younger student's achievement. Many
educators use peer tutoring because they can see the social benefits and the
students' increased self-esteem.

According to Hamburg (1992) "adolescents can help their peers through
tutoring and counselling, provided that they have a modicum of preparation and
ongoing supervision from qualified adults" (p. 262). The training and supervision of the
students are important aspects of this process (Dryfoos, 1990). Being trained as
counsellors to their peers, students should participate in a training program that
involves communication skills, listening skills, conflict resolution and anger
management.

According to Varenhorst (1992) peer helping is a "potentially powerful tool that
can be used to teach values such as cooperation, acceptance of diversity,
commitment and responsibility" (p. 13). In Varenhorst's description of peer programs
he suggests that such programs can help youth develop a sense of individuality, an
ability to make friends and become group members, and gain a feeling of
participation in meaningful roles that contribute to others and society. The National
Peer Helpers Association has adopted five guidelines for the success of peer helping
programs, which include: 1. a defined purpose; 2. task-oriented training;
3. appropriate service delivery; 4. supervision; and 5. program evaluation.

One of the programs described by Varenhorst (1992) is "The Positive Peer
Culture" program in Omaha, Nebraska. This program "mobilizes peer power to guide
youth, beginning as early as fourth grade, toward positive solutions to a variety of
problems. These youths develop problem-solving and decision-making skills and are
provided opportunities to help one another. Youth are empowered to care" (p. 12).
Another program which operates in South Seattle, Washington is called "The Natural Helpers". This program primarily serves middle school and high school students who want to strengthen their communication and helping skills (Konet, 1990). An off-campus site is selected for the initial 30 hours of training on building listening skills, trust, decision-making and identifying crisis situations. Natural Helpers are students whom others can contact when they have problems.

Research has demonstrated that peer counsellors/tutors have shown gains in social, academic, and career skills (Fulton et al., 1994). More important, peer counsellors/tutors have developed positive attitudes toward themselves and others that cross home, school, and community environments. Fulton and his co-authors describe a Peer Education Program (PEP) at Hillside University Demonstration School at California State University San Bernadino, California which gives typical fourth, fifth and sixth grade students opportunities to share activities with peers with severe disabilities. These peers are first and second grade students with disabilities, including Down syndrome and severe cognitive or behavioral disorders. Outcomes for these students participating in PEP, identified by Fulton and his co-authors, indicated that all the students benefitted academically and socially whether they were tutors or tutees. Additionally, younger peers developed enhanced social confidence and the peer tutors learned or improved vocational skills.

Hamburg (1992) believes that there can be some dependable generalizations identified now with peer tutoring. This experience can enhance personal development and a sense of competence for the tutor. Also a rise in self-esteem can be one of the most noticeable effects of some of the tutoring programs. Hamburg goes on to say, "Altogether peer-led programs have great potential for strengthening school experiences for all kinds of students; and they hold special promise for fulfilling the potential of the most vulnerable ones" (p. 267). Peer education reinforces the
notion that when people share ideas and work together they can make a difference in their school and community. Also, because “teaching and learning are two reciprocal processes that mutually reinforce each other” (Keim & Zhang, 1993, p.290), students’ learning can be enhanced by this experience. Peer leaders can be very effective in teaching younger adolescents social skills to resist pressures to use drugs or help them identify and practice other healthful activities. According to Dryfoos (1990) peer led programs about substance abuse are often more effective than teacher-led, especially when older adolescent students are the leaders and role models for younger adolescent students.

As Slavin (1986) wrote, “In a time of increasing expectations and diminishing resources for education, we cannot afford to ignore a powerful, free instructional resource available in any school: The students themselves!” (p.13). So why are not more educators utilizing the students as an effective resource? For many teachers it is a time commitment to organize and supervise when teachers already have a very busy schedule. For others it means their being able to recognize the student potential and being willing to lose some of their teaching control. But more educators are beginning to recognize that “in comparison with other teaching innovations, such as reduced class size, increased instructional time, and computer-assisted instruction, peer education can have a greater effect on student learning and be more cost effective” (Greenwood, Delquadri, & Hall, 1989, p.289).

The individual who is instrumental in the initiation and implementation of the more successful programs is often identified as charismatic (Dryfoos, 1990). Concerns that arise from this is how much of the program’s success is derived from the personality of the individual and how much can be credited to the program? Research points out that means to develop the qualities of the program’s innovator is rarely addressed and that there is a real need for additional personnel to be
sufficiently trained to implement replications of the model. Also problems like low salaries, burn out and lack of prestige cannot be ignored and must be considered (Dryfoos, 1990).

SUMMARY

Many important issues are addressed in this review of the literature, but there are significant gaps in the research on peer education. More qualitative studies in this area are needed, particularly those that include the students' perceptions and ideas. It is because of this absence in the literature that this study was formed. It is a study that has focused on the actual language of the students and has recorded their informative responses to questions. Their valid and descriptive responses to questions formed the focus of this study.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This research study is an examination of student perceptions of the peer education program they participated in while enrolled in an alternative secondary school. The information gathered was on the meaning the students made of the experience they had as peer educators. Described in this chapter are the methods and procedures used to collect and analyze the data. Since data collection involved interviews, the interview protocol and interview procedures are provided. The participants and the program will be described in this chapter in order to provide a context for the study.

PARTICIPANTS AND THE PROGRAM

The subjects who participated in this study were from two alternative school sites in a large school district in the Lower Mainland. One site is in the north end of this district at the Barrett Learning Centre and the other site is in the south end of this district at the Mitchell Learning Centre. Each site enrolls approximately 400 students. Due to the school site size half of the students attend a morning session and half of the students attend an afternoon session.

For the 1994-1995 school year students from these two sites were recruited and trained as peer educators. From Barrett Learning Centre four girls and four boys (ages 15-19 years) participated and from Mitchell Learning Centre four boys and three girls (ages 15-18 years). The following 1995-1996 school year four students from the previous year were involved again in the program at Barrett Learning Centre
and four more students joined the program. In this same year at Mitchell Learning Centre two students from the previous year participated and four new students were recruited and trained as peer educators. Continued participation in the program for the 1995-1996 school year was available to all the students involved in the program from the previous year. However, two of the students from Barrett Learning Centre had returned to the regular secondary school to complete their grade 12, one student had graduated and was attending Kwantlen College, and one student had dropped out of school. Three students from Mitchell Learning Centre had enrolled in the regular secondary school and two students had dropped out of the alternative program.

This peer education program was first developed through grant funding under the federal government’s Stay In School Initiative. Grant proposals from school districts, identified as having some of the highest student drop out rates, were asked to have at-risk adolescents as the target group and the development of a program providing them with employability skills as the purpose. "Employability skills are the generic skills, attitudes and behaviours that employers look for in employees" (Conference Board of Canada, 1992). These skills are also seen as transferable skills. In other words, these are the skills that one needs to possess to be able to mature into a responsible adult and a successful member of the community. These skills are identified as academic (communication and thinking skills), personal management (positive attitudes, responsibility, adaptability) and teamwork skills. A profile of these employability skills are included in Appendix A.

This large Lower Mainland district wrote a grant proposing that a peer education program for at-risk adolescents could help these adolescents develop employability skills. The district proposed that the program would seek to reinforce these skills through utilizing educational strategies which allowed the peer educators
to choose the subject matter to be taught; develop the learning outcomes; research the information needed; plan the format and delivery of the lesson; teach the lesson and participate in the lesson's evaluation.

After this district received some of the federal funding it approached Susan Berg, who had originally piloted this type of project with older students at a university in Alberta, to help develop the peer education program with secondary students in the district. After Susan Berg agreed to be program coordinator and two alternate education sites were identified the pilot project was initiated in 1994.

At the beginning of the program each year one of the alternative program’s teachers, counsellors or students usually personally approaches a prospective recruit and indicates to the student that they might consider joining the peer education program. At an orientation meeting the program coordinator and the students who have been involved as peer educators outline the program. They explain to the prospective peer educators the program's goals and objectives and indicate how the students receive credit for the participating in the program. (Appendixes B&C)

There are three major components to the peer education program. The first is a three day training program that takes place off-site in office space donated by a community business. Generally this is the first time the students meet the students from the other Learning Centres. At this training the students learn about team building, conflict resolution, anger management, self-esteem, presentation skills and communication skills from a variety of community trainers. Most of the workshops are given by professional trainers who usually present these workshops to corporate employees. These workshops provide a foundation of core content which will help equip the students with the necessary skills to be effective and successful peer educators. (Appendixes D&E)
One important workshop teaches the students about communication skills. During this workshop the students learn that everyone communicates in a particular style which can be formal or informal and passive or dominant. These two main categories of behavior (with a long list of characteristics each) then combine to give a person one of four communication styles: controlling, supporting, analyzing, or promoting. Everyone, apparently, has a dominant style and a secondary/back-up style. These styles are presented as important information for an individual to learn about to help them communicate better, but also to bring important strengths to a team. Also, during this training the students learn more about the course objectives. They learn that they will be teaching other adolescents through presentations which they will create and develop over the next three to four months.

The second major component of the program happens over the next three to four months as the students develop their presentations. This component of the program consists of the students meeting two to three days per week for approximately four to five hours per week to partially complete their course work and course hours. During this time, the students receive job skills training, additional presentation training and begin to develop the presentations that they will deliver as peer educators. The students choose presentation topics which can be integrated into the younger students' curriculum, so that these presentations are not taught in isolation. Such topics as substance abuse, self-esteem, anger management and conflict resolution have been introduced to the younger students through programs like "Second Step" and "Skills for Adolescents". One of the students, Alex, describes this part of the presentation development, "everybody was just wondering what topic we were going to do. We had realized that self-esteem was sort of the building block to everything like violence and smoking and anger so we chose self-esteem".

The students then research the topic and create a presentation that will help to
educate younger adolescents about that topic. The most controversial topic that the peer educators chose was substance abuse. They wanted this presentation to give the younger students information on the dangers of smoking and drinking so that the younger students would make the choice to "say no". However, the peer educators experienced some conflicts, since some of them still did abuse substances. As Lauren explains, "but you know the information they get from us. They have to choose what they want to do with it and two people [in the peer educators' group] were saying, 'no, we have to say they can't do drugs'." As Lauren goes on to explain, the peer educators finally decided that they would just present the information in a way that did not require their dictating what to do to the students, "we're not saying no one's going to go through life without having one single drink - it's unrealistic - know your limits and set your limits and stand by them. Peer pressure is a very big thing at this age."

After the students have developed these presentations they then go into the elementary schools and present to grade six and seven students throughout the school district. This is the third major component of the program. These presentations are approximately two hours in length and the peer educators share their information on the topic through interactive games, visual aids and discussion. Sometimes the presentation is offered in isolation and other times the presentation is offered as a series in a school over a three to four week period. Evaluation forms are completed by all the elementary students and given to the peer educators after each presentation. Each group of peer educators averaged about twenty presentations to school groups and other community youth groups per year. Along with doing the presentations they also were co-organizers and presenters at several conferences for youth. These conferences were both school district ones and a provincial Drug and Dropouts Conference.
The Researcher

There has been one researcher involved in collecting data during the two year period 1994-1996. This researcher is the writer, who is a teacher in the district and was involved with the development of this program. This researcher wrote the grant proposal application for some funding from the federal government's Stay In School Initiative. This funding helped to develop the program in its first year (1994-1995). When the researcher was interviewing the students the following year the program was being funded by other sources.

This researcher was known to five of the interviewees as one of the people involved with providing some of the funding for the program in its initial year. This researcher had attended the three day training session in the first year (1994-1995) and had organized an end of the year pizza party for the peer educators involved in the program that year. The other five students interviewed knew the researcher only as a teacher in the district who was doing a study on their program.

The Description of the Study

The interview questions which provided the framework for this study included the following:

What is the experience of at-risk adolescents who act as peer educators in a peer education program?

To what extent did the at-risk adolescents experience the peer education program as providing them with the opportunity to develop new skills?

To what extent did the at-risk adolescents experience the peer education program as providing them with the opportunity to develop self-knowledge?

An appropriate design for the research questions was decided to be qualitative. Data was gathered through ethnographic interviews. As stated in Schumacher and
McMillan (1993) the purpose of the ethnographic interview is "to obtain data of participant meanings ... how individuals conceive of their world and how they explain or 'make sense' of the important events in their lives" (p. 423). These interviews consisted of open-ended questions. The intention was to hold a conversation with the student being interviewed. The open-ended question encouraged a greater richness in the students' responses, as their articulated thoughts began to build on each other. The qualitative research design allowed for this study to present the context and the quotes of the participants' language as the data.

**Interview Procedure**

After obtaining consent to initiate this study from the school district and the University of British Columbia, all of the students involved in the program (1994-1996) were offered the opportunity to be interviewed. Sixteen of the students attended an informational meeting and indicated an interest in being interviewed. They were all given a letter and consent form (Appendix F). The letter explained not only the interview procedure, but also the goals of the study and the confidentiality rights of the student. Ten of the students volunteered to be interviewed. Five of these students had been in the program for two years (Alex, Elaine, Lauren, Heather and Gus) and five had been in for one year (Diane, Erik, Casey, Nathan and Lynn). A letter and consent form, reiterating the same information the student received, were sent home to the parents or guardians to be signed at this time (Appendix G). All ten students consented to be interviewed by returning their signed consent forms and their parents' signed forms.

**Interview Protocol**

A schedule of interview times was completed over a three week period in May
to June, 1996. The interview times were prearranged through discussion between the researcher and the student. The interviews averaged about 45 minutes in length. A room was made available at both schools for the interviews. At the beginning of the interview each student was told that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the research. Each of the students was interviewed individually and informed about the purpose of the study and confidentiality and the general direction of the interview. The students were told that the interview would be audio-taped. The students were also encouraged to add additional comments whenever they wished and to be as honest as they wanted to be when talking about their experiences.

The series of questions used by the researcher were meant as a framework for the semi-structured interview and to encourage the discussion, rather than inhibit the responses. The interview began with “I would like you now to tell me about your involvement in the peer education program from the beginning until now as if you were telling me a story.” Probes were used to elicit additional information or to clarify a description of an experience. At the end of the interview the students were given an opportunity to make any additional comments. A list of the scheduled interview questions is included in Appendix H.

Data Analysis

The researcher felt that it was inherent in the analysis that the students’ language stand for itself with limited interpretation. The researcher was careful not to distort the students’ actual responses. Transcriptions of the interviews were made as soon as possible after the interviews (approximately one to two weeks) and the transcriptions were copied verbatim. This minimizes the level of inference and facilitates the construction and reconstruction of theory as discussed by Hammersley and Atkinson (1993). The students were each given a pseudonym during the
transcription process to ensure confidentiality.

This qualitative research integrated the organizing, analyzing and interpreting data as data analysis (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993). The analysis began with each paragraph of a transcript being read thoroughly. Each protocol was reread many times looking for significant phrases or similar meanings. Using the "constant comparative method" as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) code words were identified from these phrases or meaning units in the transcripts. In the initial identification and coding the researcher was not always sure what code would be grouped and what would stand on its own. Therefore, many codes were grouped and re-grouped and some were left to stand on their own. After consultation with the researcher's faculty advisor these codes were categorized into major groupings and sub-groupings. These were then examined for attributes that might identify a theme. Then each theme was given a possible name. Thus, themes and patterns were ascertained and developed from the analysis of the categorized responses by constantly comparing each meaning unit from the data. As each student's interview transcript was coded to identify meaning units that could be categorized under similar themes, sub-themes then began to emerge. Student quotes were categorized under these sub-theme headings using yet another set of codes or meaning units. Some of these meaning units were initially broken down into no more than a few words to identify a sub-theme, but as the analysis continued they were included back into the larger quote. It was frequently the case that a specific section would be given multiple codes or meanings. These major themes and sub-themes served as the framework for reporting the findings.

The researcher accomplished the analysis of this data by frequently revisiting the interview transcripts and sharing the analysis with the thesis committee for comments.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS OF STUDY

In this chapter the analysis of the data collected from the peer educators on their experience in a peer education program is presented in descriptive form. The information that was collected from their responses was analyzed as Lincoln and Guba (1980) suggest by "looking for recurring regularities in sources" (p. 53). Major issues were identified and sorted into categories or meaning units after extensive analysis of interview transcriptions. Comparisons were made between the different students' responses to specific meaning units that were developed. The meaning units were examined for recurring themes pertaining to the students' experiences. When a theme emerged from the data characteristics of this theme were identified and a possible theme name was given to it. All the emerging themes were then compared and categorized and common theme were identified. At this point commonality was the criterion used to establish main themes. In other words, the themes identified in this chapter appeared in the data of all of the study participants.

In this chapter the significance of each theme will be reviewed and interrelationships among themes will be explained through the students' responses. In examining the data, four main themes emerged: 1) Belonging; 2) Knowledge of Self; 3) Empowerment; and 4) Competence. Within these four main themes there are sub-themes also identified.

A brief introduction to each of the students is presented at the beginning of this chapter to help provide a context for the participants in the study. After the brief background information the students will only be described through a pseudonym.
Individual Student Descriptions

Diane

Diane is 17 years old and lives in a foster home. Diane has recently transferred to this alternate program from another alternate program because it is closer to her new foster home. Diane began grade 11 in a secondary school, but decided that “she could no longer cope with the structure of the regular system” and a school counsellor recommended that she investigate the alternate program. She has been in the program for one year.

Elaine

Elaine is 18 years old and had been a student in the alternate program for two years. She left the regular school system at the end of grade seven and did school by correspondence for two years before enrolling in the alternate program. She has now completed her grade 12 equivalency and is attending a college program.

Heather

Heather is 19 years of age and was living on her own when she was asked to leave the secondary school during her grade 10 year because of her attendance record. Three months later she enrolled in the alternate program. But after two months left the program and was out of school for a year before returning to the alternate program. She has now been in the program for two years.

Lauren

Lauren is 18 years old and lives at home. She attended a local high school in grade eight and then a high school in another province for grade nine. When she returned to this school district Lauren attended one secondary school for one month and then a second one for another month. After friends recommended the alternate
program to her she transferred to that school three months into her grade ten year. She has attended the alternate program for one and a half years now.

**Lynn**

Lynn is 16 years of age and lives at home. She dropped out of school during her grade ten year in a secondary school in another school district. Lynn was out of school for about 4 months before she returned to school in the alternate program.

**Alex**

Alex is 17 years old and does not live at home. He started having problems in school in grade five when there were some major disruptions in his home life. He then attended school out-of-district. When he tried to enroll in a district secondary school for grade eight he was told that because of his age (15 yrs.) and other unspecified reasons, "he would not fit in". The secondary school recommended the alternate program to him. Even though the alternate program was full at the time, he was able to "talk the principal into letting him in".

**Casey**

Casey is 19 years old and lives at home. After graduating from a small junior secondary school he lasted only one week at a large senior secondary school before dropping out. The reason Casey gave for leaving the secondary school was he felt the teachers really had a negative attitude. He then decided to enroll in the alternative program because of "its friendly atmosphere and the accessibility of the teachers".

**Erik**

Erik is 18 years old and living at home. Erik attended regular secondary school until grade ten. After dropping out he was out of school for six months before enrolling in the alternate program. Erik completed grade 11 in the alternate school and has returned to a regular secondary school for his grade 12 year.
Gus

Gus is 17 years of age and lives at home. He dropped out of a secondary school in March of his grade ten year. He quit because he was finding the school work difficult and was experiencing little support from the teachers. He tried to return to the same secondary school the next September. At that time the administrator turned down his request and suggested that he investigate the alternative program. He enrolled in the alternative program the next week.

Nathan

Nathan is 19 years of age and lives with his father. He was asked to leave a secondary school in grade nine due to poor attendance. He did home study for awhile and then attended an alternate program in another district. He returned to a secondary school in this district in grade 11, but then dropped out after a couple of weeks because of not feeling comfortable with the school's environment. He was out of school for the rest of that year until he enrolled in the alternate program near his home.

Summary of Themes and Sub themes

What follows is an explication of the themes determined by the researcher to be the most reflective of the experience of the students who participated in this study.

1. Feeling of Belonging
   * Joining the program
   * Spending three days together in the training program
   * Team building and teamwork
   * Having fun

2. Knowledge of Self
   * Learning about communication styles and skills
Learning about anger management
*Recognizing the type of student who is suitable for the program
*Self knowledge influencing change

3. Feeling Empowered
*Choosing presentation topics and researching the information
*Creating and developing the presentations
*Teaching and influencing kids
*Recognizing the importance of who is an effective program coordinator

4. Feeling of Competency
*Developing presentation skills
*Having fun
*Feeling competent because of training skills
*Feeling competent as peer educators
*Feeling competent as a role model

Theme: Feeling of Belonging

Belonging is one of the experiences identified by researchers and students that must be met in order for the student to see school as a “need-fulfilling” place. (Glasser, 1984, 1990; Fine, 1986). A sense of belonging happens to students as they feel more connected to a school; begin to relate to others there and the activities that are happening there, and develop bonds that will keep them involved in the school environment. Throughout these interviews all the students discussed experiences they had during the peer education program that appear to the researcher to be evidence of their feeling a sense of belonging. The experience of belonging is presented in the following pages through the words of the students in the study under four sub-themes.
Sub-Theme: Joining the Program

Sometimes the initial step to belonging, for an individual, is the 'giant step' of joining an activity or committing to being part of a program. All but one of the students in the study reported that joining the program was not necessarily a thing they did readily. However, joining the program was the beginning of many forms of belonging for them such as, meeting other students, making friends, team building and having fun. Seven of the students also indicated that they did not really know what they were getting into when they joined. Therefore, they might not have joined had they not been approached personally. That initial connection did make a difference. They were willing to take that “leap of faith” because a particular teacher or counsellor had approached them individually. As Elaine explains, “at first I was iffy about it because I didn’t understand what was going on. But my principal [of the alternate school] kind of said, ’come on you’re going right?’ He kind of signed me up and I went off.” For Alex even though he identifies part of the joining experience as making him feel uncomfortable, he still accepted the challenge after being approached personally:

One day our old counselor walked up to me and he said, ’heh, Alex, there’s this new program happening and you should be in it.’ So, um, I was pretty uncomfortable about what was going to happen...well was kind of tricked into it in a way...It seemed like a new experience to me. It seemed like it’d be a great opportunity um to sort of face the challenge, I guess um yeh it was cool.

For both Heather and Gus being approached personally really helped them with that first step to belonging. In Heather’s words, “Basically the principal [of the alternate school] and the counselor both came to me on separate occasions... and I said okay fine I’ll try it out and if I hate it I’ll leave that’s all. Because, really, I had no idea what I was getting into.” Then Gus explains his initial step to joining, “So I thought I was going into work experience...but the counsellor sent me into this peer
education program...so it was different for me and gave me a bit of a shock and... what am I doing here? What's going on? Then they started explaining to a bunch of us in the room one time and it was like, 'oh, this is cool, right on.' So I got into it little by little."

Either being asked to join or having it recommended to them by another student when they really did not know what it was all about were motivating factors to several other students too. This appears for many students in this study to have made a difference. As Diane says, "So I had no idea what it was and so one day I got a call and I was told to show up." For two of the students, when they were approached the training program and the food that would be there were what enticed them to join the program. As Lauren explains, "A teacher went around in mid-October and asked people if they wanted to be involved. Basically he talked about just the training session... and I thought well, heh, might as well give it a try." For Nathan, the recommending student knew what might appeal to him, "one of the other students that was in it from last year told me about it at the beginning of the school year and it sounded like fun. The first thing that mainly interested me was the training program and the food that was going to be there."

**Sub-Theme: Spending Three Days Together in the Training Program**

The training session is the first time the students are introduced to what the program will entail. It is the first three days of the course. It takes place away from the school and in a business setting. It appeared, through the students' interviews, to be one of the first steps in their beginning to develop a sense of belonging to a group. "Actually the training was really fun like ... I mean it was really interesting and it was fun cause we got to meet other people... people from my school but then there are all the people I didn't know and you get to know them because like they're all nice. I go to
school with them now they're all nice and it was really laid back and relaxed." - Erik

The students in the study shared a common experience of feeling that making friends during the training session that was really positive. Many of them described the bonding that happened amongst each other while spending three days together away from the school. As Lauren describes it:

Well, when we first went there I only knew one person there as a friend from before...I didn't even know she went to my school (giggle)...and then you become really close during the training session because you are there for the three days. You get to know a lot about the people which is good and get to meet people from the other school. Its really neat getting to know the certain other things that you wouldn't know, or find out about them, just from knowing them at school. So you learn a lot about people and come closer doing that. Heather's reaction to the training session was similar to Lauren's:

It was a positive experience to be taken out of the school .It was better to have it away from the school away from the distractions. I was actually really surprised at how well everyone got along. - no fights...I think that a lot of friendships developed in those days... we got along.. you find the people in the other Learning Centre who you can relate to. Okay they are not so bad. We can handle them. Then you get to know the people within your group too which is really good because you are going to be working with them for the rest of the year.

Alex also sees the training session as an opportunity to begin to make friends, but he talks about how it is not always an easy first time encounter, " it was kind of weird meeting them. But well it wasn't weird. It was just sometimes I have trouble meeting new people, but um they were really open. It was really good and after a while I became friends with about half of that group."
Part of making friends and beginning to form a group also can have its down moments when the experience ends and Elaine mentions that, "By the end of 3 days it was like, "oh, I don't want to go, let's stay...yeh, I'd known a couple of them, but you know after that we all started hanging out and playing pool and going to movies."

For some of these students making friends and feeling a sense of belonging has not been easy for them, as they have moved from school to school or dropped out of school. So the opportunity that the training session provided to make friends and to belong to a group was important enough to Nathan that he expressed a desire that the training session be extended by a day, "I wish the training was longer cause we got to meet people from the other group... and it was 3 days. But next year I hope that maybe it would be 4 days just to get know the people a bit more. By the time you get to know them after 3 days you've got to leave." Then Lynn is able to explain how it was for someone who had not connected yet with anyone at her new school until the training session:

When we first all arrived at the training...nobody really knew each other. There were a few people that knew each other from the previous year and other than that especially me - I didn't know anybody. It was my first year at a new school and in a new program with new teachers. I didn't really know anybody when I first got there. But by the time I left there I felt like I had made some good friends and made connections with people.

Heather also felt positive about making friends and wanting to connect with someone when she goes to school:

Of course, by then, a lot of friendships had developed. Susan and I remained close through that whole year and Elaine and I got close. Because if you don't go in [to school] looking forward to at least something. You've got to look forward to someone going to be there. That's great we can chat. We can work
For Gus, "training was extremely useful because if it wasn't this whole thing would have fallen apart in the first week and a half. Training is mandatory. Over the last two years with the different personalities if you didn't have the training you would not have known how to deal with it and now we can say well this is what is going on and let's deal with it.

Sub-Theme: Team building and Teamwork

During the training session the students being trained as peer educators were introduced to a number of team building exercises. The students stated that they not only learned about team work from these exercises but also that they felt they became more of a team during these activities. Eight out of the ten students described the team building activities as an integral step to their becoming a group that could work together. In Alex's words:

First we had this game it was something to do with name tags and what we had in common with everybody...it was a game about trust that stuck out the most in my mind because you know... actually people actually got the message and you could really see people who were trustworthy and who weren't. So that was really good.

Then Heather describes not only the positive effects of the team building activities, but also the breaking down of self-conscious behaviors that teenagers so often demonstrate:

...the first day we had a lot of different speakers, we got to know a bit about the other group... you know the little interaction games which we all thought were really cheesy but very necessary I know now... if you stick a bunch of young adults in a room... we are going to kind of stick in our corners and look at each other for awhile and um breaking the ice in some kind of a goofy way where we
all feel really stupid all together is a great thing to do (giggle) because then you are all stupid together ...and no one is feeling intimidated.

Along with these team building games that the students believed to be important for their development as an effective team of peer educators, they also mention the trainers. These trainers were described by four of the students as not only demonstrating good team building, but also for their good presentation techniques that the students were able to model when they developed their own presentations. Elaine describes the team building, "One guy he did team building with us that was so good and we had so much fun. You learned different aspects of teams and how to compromise and how to cooperate and how to communicate properly with each other. It really helped.” Heather also describes the training program and acknowledges one of the trainers and indicates how effective that aspect of the training was:

...he did the team work and he was really great. It worked in really well... the ice breakers and we all felt less intimidated by each other and then we went right into the team working. I think that was a really good thing to do because we'd decided that we didn't hate each other that we could get on and do the team work together.

While Erik describes learning something about presentation skills from the trainer, "There was one trainer...he did these games...around team building. He played them with us and it was just what pretty much stuck with me...was how easy he built everyone into teams and showed everyone what team was. It was pretty interesting."

Both the trainers and the team building activities they did with the students were effective in helping the students become more aware of the fact that these activities were not just "fun and games" but important for being able to work as a group and as a team. As Lynn describes it, "I liked the parts when they were really
interactive with us and got us up and involved in drawing and writing. I liked the whole thing... because we now sort of knew each other. We weren’t a total team yet but we’re starting to get to know each other.”

Sub-Theme: Having Fun

The students experienced the program as one where they could “have fun”. They mentioned this experience often enough during their interviews for the researcher to identify it as a sub-theme. They saw “having fun” as contributing to their experience of belonging. It appeared to help them to feel connected in the beginning during the training program; as they created their presentations; as peer educators; and finally when they chose to re-enroll in the course for the second year. As a result, this particular sub-theme will reappear under other themes. Nine out of the ten students used the word “fun” at least once during the interview to describe some aspect of the program. The first time it appeared in an interview was when a student was talking about the training. As Diane describes the training program, “it was unstructured. It was fun. It was not like memorize this or do this and stuff like that. I think they were really good...actually the training was really fun.” Then Elaine describes her experience, “the first year’s training program was fun, I mean, no one there was kind of like ooh, right because we all didn’t know exactly what to expect.” Erik goes on to say, “Actually the training was really fun like ...I mean it was really interesting and it was fun.” Also, Alex speaks about the training as fun and how he was able to see how it would transfer to other aspects of the program:

It was really fun like I know at first I didn’t know what to expect but every teacher that came in that was teaching us actually taught us what we know today...like what we teach in actual elementary schools. They taught us about group involvement and how to have fun even while you’re teaching. Additional
aspects of this experience of "having fun" will come to light under other themes.

**Theme: Knowledge of Self**

This experience has several components to it which are identified under sub-themes. These sub-themes emerged from the transcripts of the interviews as the students discussed learning about skills that helped them to gain a greater knowledge of themselves and others. The results of this study indicated that all ten of the students shared a common experience of feeling that their learning about the different communication styles that people possess helped them to begin to understand more about themselves. They realized how communication styles and skills can influence people's behavior and achievements. Learning about the different communication styles and skills is the first sub-theme; learning about anger management and how that helped them to learn more about themselves and others becomes the second sub-theme. Several other sub-themes emerged as the students demonstrated an ability to know themselves well enough, after involvement in this program, to be able to accurately describe what type of student would make a good peer educator; and how that knowledge influenced some changes in some of them.

**Sub-Theme: Learning About Communication Styles and Skills**

During several different experiences the students learned about communication styles and skills. The first time they learned about them was in the training session. This experience was described by all ten students. In understanding how these skills could help them in other aspects of their lives, and not just in their role as peer educators, some of them began to recognize them as transferable skills. As Erik stated:

You just learn so many skills from it ...it was all around people skills... that are
more than important they are vital. I’ve developed a bunch of tools... which I will use from now on for presentations and stuff... and my thoughts on communication with people and everything else about just communication styles. It was just like a huge lesson in like myself communicating with others. Diane, while explaining what she has learned about herself, demonstrated a real insight into how she could utilize her understanding of communication styles, too:

It’s been extremely helpful um because everyone basically comes down to four communication styles. Once you know those four you are able to deal with people. Like I’m really loud and I can get obnoxious. I’m like a total controller and for someone who doesn’t take the initiative or motivation to do anything I’d get really annoyed. Now I just say well you know that’s either an analyzer or supporter or promoter probably and I know how to deal with them because I’ve learned those skills.

As far as Elaine was concerned learning communication styles were not only important to know in order to work with other people but also to successfully interact with the students to whom she has been a peer educator:

We learned different things about people’s personalities... useful to know not only what different styles of the people you’re working with but the students you’re presenting to yeh, it makes a big difference. You’ll have where the kids are in those different group types - promoter, controller, etc. and you’d have the controller kids and if you didn’t understand what a controller was you wouldn’t know how to handle them, right?... because you wouldn’t know what they were wanting or whatever... it taught you how to handle them because of their personality type and what they would want.

Lauren echoed the other students in her thoughts on understanding herself better:

I learned a lot about myself. If you learn what communication style you are
... and about learning how to deal with other people better if you know their communication style. You avoid saying certain things or you can say other things to make them feel better.

While Lynn was able to identify what her communication style is and how to better communicate:

Communication styles were something we looked at quite in depth and it was something I found interesting. It wasn’t something I had ever really thought of before just like the different way people interact. I look at people now and say ah that person is an analyzer and that person over there is a promoter and me I’m a supporter and its kind of cool. You have an easier time looking at people and understanding why they’re behaving the way they are and why they are interacting with that other person the way they are because that other person that hasn’t got the same communication styles and maybe they are not a complimentary combination.

In describing how they developed greater understanding about who they were through recognizing their communication style and developing communication skills, three of the students were able to explain how this helped them to work together as a group. In Elaine’s words:

So if you had too many of one personality types [communication style] it just wouldn’t work. Like last year the other group had like four guys all outgoing and always joking around. If the girls wanted something serious and the guys just wanted to joke around...you have to have the balance. We had pretty much a balanced personality group and we had fewer problems.

Then Alex describes how it affected his participation in the presentations:

So we had organized our roles by our characteristics [communication styles]. Like for me I chose easier roles at first because I didn’t want to put anything out
on risk...but that was okay it was all fun it was good practice.

With far more blunter words Diane explains another aspect of the learning:

With out that training we wouldn't have had what we have now. We would have been fighting because you lock - what was in it in our group - 8 people in a room and expect them to come up with a presentation. They have got to have some communication skills. Otherwise you won't have 8 people walking out.

Sub-Theme: Learning About Anger Management

Knowledge about themselves and the development of communication skills have been recognized, by all of the students, as important for the group's cohesiveness and for their success as presenters. Often the topics they chose for their presentations reflected this growing awareness of who they were. Also, the topics provided them with the opportunity to learn more about things that would provide them with positive social skills. Five of the students felt learning about anger management to be significant for them. Diane explains, “the anger management training we had was really helpful and it explained more things to me and like [when] we're doing the presentations... I find I'm using it and I don’t even know I am using it.”

Then Elaine goes on to say:

I use it everyday you look at people and they’re arguing and you sit them down and okay you ask why are you mad? You also learn a lot about yourself like you know. I have like a really bad temper but I’ve totally learned to control it and most of the time when I get angry I’m saying now why am I angry? Where before I would never have done that...It really helps you to analyze everything.

Then Lauren very honestly describes how she has transferred it into her personal life when interacting with her mother:

It really teaches you to control your own anger when you are teaching it. ... and
it helps you to avoid conflict...it really does. Like with the people in your home. Like with me and my mother we had a lot of conflict before and it taught me how to approach her and talk to her without it escalating into a fight. So it helped me personally.

Nathan’s better understanding of himself is reflected in how he describes integrating the anger management skills into his presentation and into his life, “well the training I got and actually it made me realize a lot of stuff about myself like I could like tell things about myself that I couldn’t tell before and doing the actual presentation...I find myself now using anger management skills without even thinking about it.”

Erik’s comments reflect how he sees himself much better prepared to deal with conflict in his personal life, not just using the knowledge of anger management as a presenter:

Well, I’d have to say it was some of the Anger Management information. It helped me a lot to deal with like in a situation like where someone is angry. It is now a lot easier for me to tone them right down than it was before. I wasn’t very good at dealing with other people’s anger or my own before and now its pretty much like simple. It’s a piece of cake.

**Sub-Theme: Recognizing the Type of Student Who Is Suitable for the Peer Education Program**

During the interviews, when commenting on what type of student would make a good peer educator for this program, five of the students in the study revealed a heightened self-awareness that allowed them to describe a good potential peer educator. As Diane expressed, “I think that it could actually work for a broad range of students. I don’t think that it could actually work for someone who’s in that stage that I was, you know, really low on themselves.” Then Elaine mentioned that, “it really varies. I mean cuz we had from the shyest people like me and Gus right up to...
outgoing people who just loved to do everything. There is really not a specific type...like all different personality types would take over certain roles." Nathan also states:

Basically anybody can do it like me and Casey we were like the shyest people before we started... we both stand up there trying to get all the attention but basically anybody can do it. You just got to be willing to be involved in it. I try to give it my 100% you know and I guess that basically that's it. You don't have to be like the best public speaker in the group to be able to do this. You can be like the most quietest person in the world and you still can build up so much confidence you won't even realize it is happening.

Heather speaks to this same sub-theme in the context of being part of the different presentations. Since the presentations were on different topics chosen by the students she felt that knowledge of yourself was important in helping the peer educator to choose the presentation in which to be involved:

If you are working on the self-esteem presentation I think it should be somebody who should have had an experience with low self-esteem or something to that effect. If you are working with the substance abuse presentation maybe at least one person in the group who can give the people in the group something to relate to.

In this same sub-theme Gus felt positive about how a broad range of personality-types would be appropriate as a peer educator:

Takes all kinds, all different types - me the quiet one, Susan the super outgoing one, Brad more of the here and then not here...depends on how different people react to it. You can have this bad-assed kid who thinks, 'oh what a bunch of losers,' and then once he or she gets into it then they might think, 'oh, wow, I can't believe I've been missing out on this all this time.' But it can be the
other way around and a super good person gets into it and says, 'oh right on!' and then at the end says, 'oh it sucked!' Which, of course, they wouldn't because it doesn't! You can't recommend it to anyone it just appeals to people or not.

Lauren comments on who would be appropriate and her comments deal with not only the type of personality that is important to be able to deal with the different students to whom they may be peer educators; but also how this person will be able to work within the group's dynamics:

Someone who definitely has to like people number one and to like to perform in front of people. If you are really shy or withdrawn you are not going to want to stand up in front of people because in this you are totally exposed. Little kids they do take cuts at you here and there and you have to be able to deal with that. A pretty upbeat person, pretty happy... because if they are depressed or sad all the time you don't really want to work with them. They have to be able to know how to get along with people and they can't be too much of a power person. If you have one person in the group who wants all the power and wants all the main roles then the others won't get recognition.

Lynn just felt that really anyone could be effective and that it really did not require any special qualities to be a peer educator in this program:

You'll look back at yourself at the beginning and say was that really me? Have I really changed this much? So there's no special qualities - anybody can do it which is the neat thing about it because that's going to be a lot easier to like spread this around if anybody can do it.

Sub-Theme: Self-knowledge Influencing Change

Nine of the students' growing knowledge of themselves was also reflected in
their comments on their experiences in this program and how they felt it had impacted on them as individuals and caused changes in their behaviors. The sub-theme of better understanding of self and how it can affect change in oneself is reflected on by Diane:

I was pretty unstable I had actually just gotten out of the hospital. I was in the hospital for four months for depression. So I was pretty unbalanced ... but I think that with the peer education program, I finally found something I liked, so it stabled [stabilized] me. I met people that I normally wouldn’t have talked to and I really liked them...like my boyfriend, um he totally stabled [stabilized] me. How do I put this? It was something that I liked and the information that I learned was useful. I mean I learned information in the hospital but I mean [here] it was fun, it was relaxed. It wasn’t something that I felt pressured to do. I actually had models as to what had happened and that it could work.

Casey talks about this growing knowledge of self and how it helped him to become more confident:

Though it does help a lot to have an outgoing personality... for me I always had one, but I never had the confidence to be right there. You’d have to like talk to me to get me talking, but now I can sometimes just start the talking. So it’s helped me out that way. I can now just talk to anybody after this peer education program, right?

Alex’s comments also reveal how he believes he has changed:

I understand who I am more. I have more understanding of why I am the way I am. It sort of like a reawakening. I guess just sort of like a rebirth so that was it was like amazing. Of course it didn’t happen over night. It happened over like a long period of time through a lot of trial and tribulation. Um, it was great.

Yeh I’ve changed. The truth is before I started the program I looked at myself as
like a lost soul. I did not know what I wanted, didn't know who I was. All I know is that I was there and I was surviving but um now it is like way different. I'm more woken up to other possibilities because I don't have false beliefs anymore. I've broken down like a lot of barricades about what I use to think about the world. Who is somebody and who is trying to be somebody. That's most important to me because before I was totally hanging out with the wrong people and getting the wrong messages right? Now I'm able to recognize like a lot of things.

Another aspect of this experience is described by Heather. Although she initially expresses that it did not really change her, she does talk about maturing and developing leadership skills:

Because I was out of school for two and a half years before. It really didn't change my attitude. It gave me a bit more to look forward to...where it wasn't continuous math all day. My overall attitude really wasn't much different, but actually I've really had fun doing it this year. I've matured a lot and I think a lot of that has to do with the program. I've gained - I've always had some degree of leadership skills but I've gained a lot more in my leadership skills and definitely my speaking skills.

Then Lynn adds to this experience, "I've gotten involved in the various groups and meetings and you know its really good. I got involved with a lot of things through the confidence that this gave me."

The following excerpt from Gus' interview captures how he thinks he's changed:

Then I was shy big time. When I started here at the Learning Centre I'd walk in 8:45 and leave 3:30 and wouldn't say a word. I'd sit down do my work and only talk to the teachers...and when I got into the program I said, 'yeh, I'll give all my advice, opinions whatever. I'll help in any way but leave me in the back
corner. I don't want to be in the spotlight. You guys take it all. Now the
spotlights mine! You guys get in the back. This is my show. I'm running it now.
IIts been a major change.

**Theme: Feeling Empowered**

For all the students the experience of feeling empowered was evident in their interviews. The majority of them felt empowered through the autonomy they were given in developing the presentations. Nine out of ten of them discussed it in relationship to how they were treated by the project coordinator. Some of this empowering experience made them feel better prepared for what they were doing, for being able to have a positive impact on others and for being more successful in school and in life. As Gus explains:

> I think that its really good that they taught us this stuff so young. There is a lot of people out there that don't know all this stuff. I think its awesome that we get to learn this now. Because when it comes to our future and later on some of us will go into business and university and it will be good that we know these things a head of time. So when that bonehead is trying to get in your face and stuff you know how to not let it get to you. Go stomp on someone else's parade leave mine alone.

There were four components to this empowering experience which are identified under the following sub-headings: choosing presentation topics and researching them; creating and developing the presentations; teaching and/or influencing the younger students; and identifying the importance of who is the project coordinator.

In the students' descriptions of their experiences they speak about having control over most of the decision making involved in the program which appears to be
an empowering experience for them. They explain how they were able to choose the topics for the presentations and do all the information research. They also made the choices around the format of the presentation and who would fill what role. Because of these experiences they take a lot of ownership for the success of the presentations.

Sub-Theme: Choosing the Presentation Topic and Researching the Information

Eight of the students mentioned the control they were given over the choice of presentation topics and what information they would gather and use. As Elaine explained being able to choose their topics not only was empowering but also reflected what they felt was important:

Susan got us all together and we sat there and we decided okay how many days a week do we want to practice? What our topic was going to be - that took about a week to get - cause everyone had a different idea. So we decided to meet three days a week for the first couple of months just til we got our presentation down. So then we decided to go to self-esteem since that is the core of everything. We wanted [to do the presentation on] drugs but why do people start drugs? Because they don't have a high enough self-esteem to say 'no' to them. Right why do people start smoking? All the different things that elementary and high school kids go through. Self-esteem went right to the bottom of it. So we decided to do self-esteem.

Similarly, Lauren, reflected on being able to choose the topic and why she thought the choice was important, "well, picking a topic was really easy for our group we all just kind of agreed on one thing the drugs and alcohol. We felt that in our community that was a big issue for young almost teenagers. Because it is getting younger and younger."

Heather's description of this experience shows that she thought it was an
empowering experience:

Susan got us on the topic of what we would like to present about. What did we think was an important thing to present about? So we threw around a bunch of ideas...alcohol and substance abuse, date rape uh violence racism and all these other things. Over the time we all discussed it and decided that self esteem was really the root of all problems. I mean everything pretty much covers it. I mean there's other things but self-esteem is the big thing. It really intrigued me once we got into it and um figured out exactly what we were doing. You know working together, picking the topic, picking the age group.

As each of these students described the experience of making choices they all appeared to feel positive about the experience and about the insights they were able to bring to the choices. As Alex explains:

We got back [from training] and everybody was just wondering what topic we were going to do. We had realized that self-esteem was sort of the building block to everything like violence and smoking and anger so we chose self-esteem and we had to think of a logo or group name for us... and then we had to just organize everything.

Sub-Theme: Creating and Developing the Presentations

All of the students' comments about creating and developing presentations reflected a real sense of empowerment for them. They speak of working out their problems with their groups, dealing with group dynamics and reacting to their first evaluations. For Heather it created a real sense of having some personal power:

Then we started developing the presentations and we got the information we wanted to give them but we couldn't think of any more games well um half way through developing the presentation. We actually worked a lot of our own
problems out. Well the very first presentation was to all the administrators. That was very nerve wracking, we have to present to a whole bunch of teachers, 'oh my god,' so that went well...but they served us a lot of criticism and uh I think because we hadn't had any criticism about it at all before because Susan just went along with everything we did. That was really hard for us. We kind of went, 'oh yeh, well screw them - forget it!' We did, we did. We went back in to our room and said, 'what do they know?' Some things we did change, but some things we felt really strongly about and we didn't change. The first presentation we did was like a breeze- once I got over the initial nervousness...and got everything in order. It went really smoothly. You know we'd practiced it until it just flowed out our mouths without even thinking. The practice is very important you must practice at least 50 times before you go out and present."

Casey's comments reflect that he and his group felt control over their presentation and proudly take responsibility for it:

After the training we got back to the school and we were all pumped and psyched and ready to go at it and we pretty much knew what we had to do... we decided that I was going to do this and Elaine was going to do that and Gus here. Then we practiced it and went over the presentation again and again so we'd feel comfortable talking about what we were going to talk about. Its pretty much as good as you make it...like there was four of us doing the self-esteem this year and um it was just basically up to each individual to make their portion of it as good as they can. If somebody felt that something could be improved then the next time we were meeting together we'd just bring it up.' Maybe we can improve it this way' and we were pretty much as honest as possible But we'd still be polite 'maybe you could do this, how about doing that?' Trying not to offend anyone and giving input and getting feedback. It seemed to me that
the presentation improved each time we did it because we were able to talk about how it went.

Sub-Theme: Teaching and/or Influencing the Younger Students

Whenever a person is in a position of influencing others they can feel empowered. As these students express in this experience, they felt not only some personal power, but also pride in how they could influence other students. As Casey states, "But when I was up there in front of the kids because I knew what I was talking about I was able to have fun when I was talking about self esteem. And I was with my friends doing it." Then Lauren adds to his remarks:

I feel that if we touch like if we get to one kid out there and they see an older brother or sister or whoever doing drugs and for most little kids they think it's cool because it's the popular kids who go out and drink and go out and party and party to anyone looks fun.

Five of the students talked about how the presentations were empowering enough that they felt they could really influence younger students to not fall into the same sort of traps they had. As Nathan says, "cause like I dropped out when I was like in my early years like in grade 8 and grade 9 and it kind of messed me up along the way. So I'd at least like to help other kids not to do that. 'Cause its not going to really get them anywhere." And Lynn goes on to say, "So I figure if I can touch one person and then I can touch more and I've learned my lesson and why can't I teach my lesson to someone else so they don't have to learn the same way I did."

Sub-Theme: Recognizing the Importance of Who Is an Effective Program Coordinator

A great deal of this empowering experience has to do with the type of project coordinator the students worked with for both years of this program. An important part
of the success of this program is that the project coordinator has been a person that is not only a good teacher and a mentor; but also someone who recognizes how important it is to make sure these students feel empowered. As Gus explains:

Susan started out as mentor but has become more a friend and mum to us. It will be different if Susan isn’t as involved next year. Whoever takes it over will be going book by book page by page and that’s well...we’ve done that we don’t want to do it again. You can’t replace your mum, you can’t replace your dad, and Susan become like that... like our parent and you can’t switch that role to someone else... like switching the character on a TV show - you can’t adjust! Someone else’s rules, ways you don’t know what to expect and the adjustment might be hard.

Then Elaine identifies an important quality for all teachers to possess in her remarks:

Susan didn’t act like a teacher but more like a mum right? or a friend? So if you were upset she didn’t say, ‘well, too bad, put your feelings aside.’ She’ll pull you out of the room to talk to you and stuff. So she was really supportive and she was mindful of every bodies’ different feelings. She didn’t just have this I’m your teacher and your learning this attitude. It was really nice.

Casey also saw that, “Susan will encourage you to communicate, ’well you guys have got to talk’ and...so it pretty much got to the point that Susan didn’t have to be there. We’d basically have these meetings going on by ourselves and the next time Susan came she’d be like, ‘wow’, kind of thing, ‘did you feel that you really listened to each other?’ For Diane the way Susan was able to give criticism was important because it was done in a way that never demeaned someone:

I got the impression that Susan... she thought we were doing well... like she wasn’t afraid to say when we did something wrong but she didn’t do it in a way that made us feel bad... I think one of the best things Susan did that other
teachers don’t really—haven’t really known to do—is she left us alone. She didn’t sit there and say, ‘you guys have to be friends or you guys have to work together. That was for us to work out.

Because of the way Susan always interacted with the students they felt pride in what they were doing. As Lynn says:

If people got off focus she would help us with a bit of that but more than anything we did it all on our own. She put a lot of time and effort and money um helping us but it wasn’t... all the work was done by us. I think the teaching style she gives us which is,’I am here to help you, feel free to ask me questions, but this is your thing, and I respect that. So that style of teaching is really helpful. Then it was our special thing. It became ours’ as a group instead of us doing work for her. We were doing work for us and that was really important.

Then Heather adds to this theme:

You’ve got to get someone Susan like and that is a really hard thing to do is find somebody who can be as Susan. She was always there for us um we couldn’t have done the program without her. She had all the suggestions that we needed she was always there for support. You know she didn’t put a whole lot into the actual development of the presentation. She let us do it...I look at that now but at the time we thought that she was doing everything you know.It is going to be really hard for the schools that don’t have somebody like that to keep it going. She will have to be a very strong mentor to whomever will take over the role. Susan has provided that for a lot of people. So not only has it helped with things like the actual presentation skills but its helped in other areas too. It has helped all of us in different ways I think.

Nathan is able to very succinctly add to this theme, “when I first met Susan she was like another teacher but now like she’s more like a mother than she is like a teacher.
Theme: Feeling of Competency

As the students' discussed their feeling of being adequate at whatever they were attempting to accomplish during the program an experience relating to a sense of competence emerged. This experience emerged frequently in the students' interviews as they described their sense of accomplishment about what they were achieving and the challenges they were meeting. Diane recognizes in her interview that just the involvement in the program can provide a person with motivation for learning:

I think it [peer education program] can work for a lot of people all you've got to have is someone who's not necessarily motivated because the program teaches them motivation. Just someone who's willing to learn. I mean that's everyone whether they know it or not is learning.

The students' interviews revealed that they felt that they were able to demonstrate a good ability to perform a task. Also, that they liked to know just how they were doing. These presentations provided these adolescents with some opportunities for self-reflection on how they were accomplishing their tasks as peer educators, team players and performers. It also provides immediate feedback in the form of student and teacher evaluations right after the presentation. As the students describe their experience presenting to the students they not only describe how they feel about their presentations, but also the students' reactions, evaluations and the impact they feel they are having. There are several sub-themes in this sense of competency theme that their comments indicated developed for them.
Sub-Theme: Developing Presentation Skills

The students talk about the presentations generally in a way that indicates to the study that they feel competent and influential. Even though, as reflected in Alex’s words, some of them initially did not feel that competent, but knew that they needed to gain some experience:

The first show was really uncomfortable. We went in and we didn’t know what to expect. I think we had forgotten some props here at the school too. So we’re like oh no what are we going to do? When we were giving the information it didn’t sound like we were that confident because we weren’t comfortable with the information ourselves yet. So it was really sort of experimental, I guess like definitely. But it was a good experience. I mean I would have rather gone through that than practiced it a 1,000 times with myself right?

Erik discusses the younger students’ reactions very descriptively:

I thought it was a well kept presentation. The kids liked it and we had a lot of good information, no scare tactics or anything like that. We told them in the beginning you know these are your choices here...but as soon as you get into the facts and everything they just open up and you can just see it in their eyes. Their eyes and mouths drop and wow!

Lynn clearly felt that the peer educators were competent in their presentations and influencing kids:

I think they are good presentations if I may say so myself (giggle). A lot of hard work was put into them. I think they turned out really well and I think that students and teachers of the students thought we had done very well and really liked our presentations. I received a letter in the mail which said thank you very much for coming to my school. So even just that you get that much of a good response from it. You have to be doing something right. They have to be good
or you wouldn't get that response. Even now I see some of the grade 6 and 7 students walking around or skate boarding-on several occasions they've recognized me, 'hi how are you? I'm being good today I haven't had any cigarettes (giggle). Yeh, I think we did a good job.

Another aspect of developing presentation skills is expressed by Lauren:

When you are up there the first time you get really nervous - they don't know it but we do and if you screw up you're a wreck for the rest of the performance... like when we did our first presentation I had had only 2 hours sleep and I was late and I get there and all I wanted to do was sleep. But I had to put on my happy face and go out there and you have to bear with whatever is going on in your regular life and just push it aside and deal with it. Next time I always got enough sleep because it is exhausting. You don't really realize how exhausting it is but you have to put out so much energy.

While Diane described the student response to one of her presentations, "the children responded excellently... but they actually sat and they listened. I thought that was excellent." Diane also wanted to jump right into the experience of presenting, " I mean we put a couple of games and stuff into it the day before and it was really rough. It needed some work but we wouldn't have known that unless we tried it."

Then Alex was made to feel good about the presentation skills they were developing when he was challenged:

The kids were totally eager for like what we were teaching. I noticed that there were like a lot of intelligent kids that were asking like so many questions that we didn't even have answers for the kids were pretty much great - um the first groups were an ease to go through. It was just our own way of presenting that we were looking after.

For Elaine the experience of feeling competent resulted from her realizing how
much the kids were getting out of the presentations:

Because you look at the audience and you just realize the kids are getting so much out of them [the presentations] so they’d ask questions about home and school. You’d explain it to them and they’d see their parents view a little differently too. After you see what the kids got out of it it made it a lot easier going out there.

The sense of accomplishment really energized Casey and helped him to enjoy himself as a peer educator:

The first presentation and then we went in there... the kids were absolutely great they were just like... you could tell that they wanted to be here probably because they were getting out of doing school work... but that’s beside the fact but...the kids were pretty much right into it. Well for the first little bit they were a little iffy about getting involved but after like a half hour or so they were like right in there jumping up and down getting a little hyper and stuff. We had lots of games for the kids...from there on it just got easier because you were more comfortable being up in front of the kids and just talking about what we had and it just got easier and easier and funner and funner and right now I feel good about it because I’ve done something. Yes, I’ve done it. I did it yahoo!...and um (giggle) it’s just a good feeling!

Nathan reflects the view that a teacher can be learning as much as a student, “it’s gotten better now and any of the material now I can fly through with my eyes closed because when I’m up there I’m learning as much as they are.” Then as Lynn relates the practice really does enhance performance:

I guess our first presentation was really really scary. The closest we’d gotten to performing in front of people was performing in front of a nice sort of quiet well-mannered group of teachers and two or three students in our school in a nice
quiet little room. We got to the school someone forgot this and someone else forgot that and only three of us had our t-shirts and we were missing one of the parts of one of our games. It was kind of hectic and the kids would not sit down. So it was learning to deal with the atmosphere more than anything. It was like shock. After a while we got the knack for getting them to listen to us and catch their attention right away. Then it was really easy from then on. It just took us a couple of tries and then we had it. It was great.

As Erik talks about the initial feedback you receive, he acknowledges that if it is positive it can really help you to feel good about the developing skills, "We did a trial run to teachers and students here and they liked it too. So we knew we were going out there already with a good presentation." Nathan also speaks to this experience and he describes how developing additional presentation skills can happen when you least expect it:

Working with the younger students is really good because they take well to you like um they sort of look up to us right cuz this is where they are going to be in a couple of years so they take really well to it. I guess though the only one presentation I had really like a hard time doing and it wasn't to elementary kids it was to teenagers my age...and they were a little more rowdy than we're used to and the material we have developed is made for elementary school kids so we sort of had to revise it like while we were doing it for these teenagers so that was like really being put on the spot... while I was doing it I was thinking this is not like you know what you want to be hearing about from other teenagers when you're dropping out ...if I was in their situation I'd just be sitting there gazing off into space right and that's what I figured they'd be doing. So I just sort of went through it and then during like the first half hour I noticed that they'd started to listen more and I sort of changed my language and sort of used
examples that were more to them than it was to elementary kids and they started to get interested.

Casey reflects on how a good presentation is constantly changing:

> It's really amazing how we were all able to communicate with each other and get everything out and dealt with. It seemed to work itself out and everyone was kind of thinking about it and we just took care of it. Things were changing or evolving throughout the whole year.

**Sub-Theme: Having Fun**

Another experience around feeling competent is when the students did feel good about their presentation and realized how much easier it was to enjoy themselves. They found you do not have to be totally serious to present well or present effectively. Other students have commented on their different experiences as being fun. Here two more talk about it when they talk about feeling competent.

Heather, “so we wanted to get in there and have fun with the kids and hopefully the kids have a lot of fun. We decided on [adding the game show type game] Family Feud because it was cheesy and it was fun.” Then Gus adds his thoughts, “the first time we went into a school that was pretty scary...I was so shaky, I was dehydrated. ‘Oh, my god, what’s next? Did they like it? Did it go good?’ When we finished it was like, ‘No problem.’ It was so much fun. We had a blast. Just to see those kids just staring at you.”

Then Casey explains how the program made the whole school experience more positive for him. “It’s just made school more fun. It’s taught me to make school fun ... before I was just coming to school and saying, ‘I want to be home and I want to sleep in and I don’t want to do this,’ right.” Lauren also felt a similar reaction to Casey’s, “The first year, the days that I had [the peer education] class that’d be the
only reason to get out of bed and get to school in the morning. I had my car then and it was too easy for me to sleep in and miss school. It got me out of bed and to school and once I was there I'd stay. So it helped me to stay in school."

Sub-Theme: Feeling Competent Because of Training Skills

The peer educators decided on the grade level of the students that they were going to teach and they describe that decision. Most of the students described feeling competent to teach students of this age because they felt good about their abilities and relating to them in an effective way. Over the course of two years they have presented in front of secondary students and adult groups. Generally speaking, however, the grade level has been grade six and seven students. Erik talks about teaching to the grade level and feeling effective:

Yes, really good [presenting to grade six and seven students] I think that if we had gone any younger they would have been harder to explain the material to and they would have been louder and a bit more obnoxious. And I think that if you went any older it would have been the exact same. Because when you get into high school and you think you're cool- I went through it- you say 'why do I want to learn from these people?' But the grade 7's we're still a bit older than them so it's not as little an age gap so that they don't feel, 'why am I learning from them?' It was really good because they were respectful and they liked the jokes and stuff. It was fun. I mean they didn't resent us being there and we didn't resent teaching it to them. It was kind of like they wanted to be like us.

The following excerpt from Alex's interview also discusses why they felt the grade level was a good choice:

Yes, that's the basic level of education that we had based our presentation on... cause the reason we did that was because when kids are in grades 6 and 7
and/or 7 and they go off to high school they usually drop because grade 7 is like the top of the line right? Then when they go to grade 8 they are like the lowest. So we thought it would be best if they had that knowledge so they wouldn't be affected by where they were.

Casey adds to this sub-theme by saying:

They seem to really like it that it is kids closer to their age teaching them this stuff. I remember like being in grade 7 we'd have like other teachers coming into the class and just talking and talking. We'd basically be sleeping in class but then the odd time we'd have someone come in who used games and they got you involved. Those are the ones that stuck in my head when I was that age so like I think that is what we were trying to do is make the presentation stick in their head with a couple of games and getting them involved. It seemed to really work they were right in there.

Sub-Theme: Feeling Competent as Peer Educators

One of the factors that certainly will encourage a person to feel competent is receiving positive feedback for whatever activity the person has performed. After each presentation the elementary students would complete an evaluation on the presentation. Eight out of the ten students talked about the evaluations in a very positive way. They discussed how they were so much better than they had expected and how honest and enthusiastic the younger students were. One of the students felt that the evaluations were not really honest and another student described how some of the responses could be negative but still effective. As Alex said, "some of the things kids write are totally self-supporting but then again also there sometimes kids write mean things also, but you don't take it personal right? I think the evaluations are great because they give us self-criticisms about our work." Elaine discusses the feedback from the kids:
Actually the evaluations were - well the first time we expected them to be really childish immature but they weren't. They came back and you'd swear it was high school kids answering the questions. They told you exactly what they didn't like and what they did like. They were really honest which helped a lot. They helped us out on that by letting us know exactly what we were doing wrong and what we were doing right...what was really neat...you'd see them after school or walk through the mall and they'd be like talking to us. It was great... they were really talking to us.

Then Lauren talks about them as a valuable learning tool and a motivator, "the evaluations - we all thought we'd get a lot of negative but we didn't so that was good. I'm glad we got them because what they critiqued us on we could improve on so it was constructive...makes you want to go on and do the next performance.

Casey felt that the evaluations reflected how much the students learn from the presentations:

We gave them evaluation sheets which they were able to fill out and um we actually got a lot of good responses like a lot of kids were it was awesome it was great. Some of the kids surprised us like they sounded like they knew what they were talking about. Wow did I influence that opinion? Kids can surprise you. That's one thing I've found our about this that they can really learn to know stuff. It's just like cool.

Heather describes their honesty and how even negative reactions can be a positive learning experience:

But you know what I mean it is a neat feeling to be able to read the good things and then the bad things are fine too. It's coming from the kids and most kids are pretty honest about it and you can say okay so they don't like this then we'll work on it.
However, Lynn talks about how there can be negative and positive reactions to the same presentation and that you just have to expect that sometime:

Then there was always two or three that said, 'I really learned this. I really liked having you guys here, thank you very much.' You know and those are the ones that made us want to go back again every so often you would get the one or two that said, 'you sucked. I did not like it and we'd rather be at gym'.

Diane was the student who expressed the concern that the evaluations were not necessarily a valid form of feedback because the younger students were not comfortable with being totally honest:

Okay, honestly I don't go very much by the evaluations because the kids had like what 5 minute to fill them out. They all put 'awesome' and if I was a grade 7 and having kids our age in there I'd feel a little...especially if they knew we'd be reading them. I'd feel a little pressure to say it was good anyways.

Sub-Theme: Feeling Competent as a Role Model

The following excerpts from several students' interviews captures the experience they had when finding that the younger students looked up to them as role models. Heather refers to this in a way that reflects an understanding of how one might be a role model:

You get a lot of feedback. The thing that sticks out most in my mind is that kids really like learning from us. Because we're not adults and we - well they think we know more of where they are coming from - and what they go through and um when you read something like that "why do you like learning from these people?"Well because they are cool. Well, of course, we are (giggle).

While Lauren reflects on how influential a role model might possibly be:

Like when I was in grade 7 I loved looking up to older kids. Everyone does
when they are younger and to me I just wanted to be a teenager so bad cuz they had so much fun...that’s why I’m glad it is us that is teaching them, cuz we’re in a way their role models. I never realized how much we were their role models. If I had a teenager come in and tell me all this in grade 7 I might have - my life might have changed back then too. That’s why I’m glad its us and not teachers. Teachers are there for teaching all the other things. But when it comes to something fun to do like this its better when the younger people do it.

Lynn in describing her experience refers to how important you can become to others if you are seen as a role model:

One very small little girl out of a class came up to me after we did one of our presentations and she looked up at me and tiny she looked up at me and said, ‘thank you so much for coming you guys are so cool. One day I want to be just like you. What you guys are doing is so good and so cool...and I was just that is what stood out to me like it was really obvious that we had really like touched her heart and she had really got our message and just being able to get to that one person was enough to keep me going for the whole year.

Gus shares a feeling of accomplishment and about the long term effect a role model is capable of having:

While we were packing up the room they’d come up and talk to us I really liked how you said this, that was really cool. It really did get through to them. It was an awesome feeling of accomplishment. It’s just an awesome feeling to go out there and to teach those kids. Its nice to know that when they come back like a few years later they could say oh when you guys said this it really stuck with me...like last year we did one presentation to a school and then we came back a second year and the majority of them knew us by names. They remembered. They take it and use it in life.
Nathan very enthusiastically describes his feelings of developing competency:

I guess that basically learning all this like before you had to push me to learn anything like my teachers always said, 'Nathan, you're not stupid you're just lazy.' I am. It's hard for me to get like really into learning something unless it interests me. But this actually... like I learned this without even trying! That's a total amazement for me (giggle).

Summary

This chapter has identified and discussed the common themes of ten at-risk students who are peer educators in a peer education program in two alternate schools. The experience for each of these peer educators was unique and the experiences certainly varied from one student to the next. However, there were common themes of experience amongst them, too. There were four main themes and seventeen sub-themes of experiences and each of these common themes were discussed in this chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

As attested by the findings in Chapter Four the students shared many similar and many varied experiences as peer educators. This chapter will review the purpose of the study and discuss the conclusions this research drew from the study's findings. The conclusions are discussed in detail in this chapter. Following this discussion will be the limitations and implications of this study. The last section will suggest recommendations for future research.

Restatement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand and to provide insights into the experience of at-risk adolescent students had while involved in a peer education program. This purpose was addressed by interviewing ten of the peer educators. Through their responses to the interview questions, this study focused on what their experiences were and how they felt about them.

Conclusions

Three research questions provided the focus for the study:

1. What is the experience of at-risk adolescents who act as peer educators in a peer education program?

2. To what extent did the at-risk adolescents experience the peer education program as providing them with the opportunity to develop new skills?

3. To what extent did the at-risk adolescents experience the peer
education program as providing them with the opportunity to develop self-knowledge?

The findings which address these research questions were presented in Chapter Four. There were a variety of experiences which at-risk adolescents had as peer educators to other adolescents. The researcher identified four major themes and 17 sub-themes as significant in representing the experience of the peer educators.

The literature on students actually being teachers to their peers is limited and qualitative studies that gather data from the students themselves is even more limited, so there is very little basis for comparison with this study’s findings. In discussing these findings the main themes and sub-themes will be discussed in the order they were presented in Chapter Four.

**Main Themes and Sub-themes**

The theme of belonging revealed itself in the students’ interviews many times and, in understanding their experience, the theme of belonging was related under four sub-themes: joining the program, participating in the three day training program, team building, and having fun. All of these sub-themes had an impact on the peer educators’ feeling a sense of belonging while participating in the program. As suggested in the literature, a sense of belonging is one of the basic needs that adolescents strive to meet (Fine, 1986; Glasser, 1984). When talking about joining the program, the peer educators all described how that initial connection was made. A number of the students mentioned that a significant adult had encouraged them to take the first step to joining the program. As Wehlage et al. (1989) indicated the support of a caring adult really helps a student to want to be connected or to stay connected. Other students explained that another student had encouraged them to join. This finding is in concert with research findings that highlight the influence of
peers especially in adolescence (Hymel et al., 1996). However, what is significant here is that so many of the students were willing to join the program not knowing what they were really getting into, which indicates that they must have been feeling that the environment they were in was a safe one. Wehlage et al. (1989) talk about how schools need to be friendly, safe and responsive places for students to want to belong.

Related to the above experience of belonging, the students described the new friendships that were formed during the three day training program. As the literature reports (Adams & Gullotta, 1989; Bibby & Posterski, 1992; Glasser, 1984), friendships are important to encourage a sense of belonging. The peer educators described friendships that were important to them and have continued throughout the program. They identified these relationships as not only important for the development of their presentation groups, but also as to how successfully their groups worked together over the months of the program. The students indicated that the group dynamics are easier to build and develop positively if you are forming this group with friends. The students described how this group identity helped them to stay committed to the program and, for many, commit to a second year in the program.

The sub-theme of team building relates to the experience of belonging. What became apparent during the interviews was that the students saw the team building activities as not only important to the development of an effective team, but also as a way to break down some of the barriers to forming bonds with others. Because the at-risk adolescent can sometimes remain isolated from the peer group, due to a lack of the social skills needed to begin to make those connections (Manning, 1993; Wehlage et al., 1989), the students saw the team building activities as an effective learning experience (Price et al., 1993).

The theme of knowledge of self was expressed by the students under these
sub-themes: learning about communication styles and skills, developing communication skills, learning about anger management, recognizing the type of student who is suitable for the program, and self-knowledge influencing change. As described in Chapter Four, the students learned about communication styles during their training session. The importance of this learning was identified by all ten students and they went on to explain how they transferred what they had learned to many other aspects of the program and to other relationships. In the literature review section of this study, the research indicated that at-risk students' understanding of good communication skills can be inadequate which often leads to problems that contribute to at-risk behaviors (Dryfoos, 1990). The results of this study reflect the students' understanding of communication skills that are not only helping them in many aspects of their lives to be more successful, but also appear to be skills that they perceived as transferable skills to the rest of their lives. In understanding themselves better through the learning of different communication styles and understanding better how others communicate, the students expressed a growing knowledge of self. The development of these better communication skills also helped them with their social interactions. Many of the students were able to very honestly describe how they did not always possess skills for positive social interaction. But that the communication skills they were learning were really helping them to develop some skills.

Another aspect of the peer educators' growing knowledge of self was expressed by the peer educators under the sub-theme recognizing the type of student who is suitable for the program. In the peer educators' ability to express an understanding of what type of student would be successful as a peer educator, a growing knowledge of self was reflected. The literature tells us that adolescence is a time for searching for self-understanding and an identity (Czikzentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Erikson, 1968). All the students in this study were able to express an
understanding of themselves which then enabled them to identify the type of student that would be appropriate as a peer educator. Over half of the students were able to give an informative description of what characteristics a peer educator needed to possess.

Related to the common theme of knowledge of self is the sub-theme of self-knowledge influencing change. As indicated in the literature (Fulton et al., 1994; Hamburg, 1992; Slavin, 1986) changes in behavior are a reasonable expectation for a peer education program. Nine of the students were able to describe in their interviews how they felt participation in the program had affected positive changes in their behavior or attitude. Some of the students discussed it in the context of how it has matured them while others talk about how it has given them more self-confidence or more emotional stability.

The theme of empowerment was expressed by the students under several sub-themes: choosing presentation topics, researching the information, creating and developing the presentations, teaching and influencing kids, and recognizing the importance of who is the project coordinator. In the students' comments on their experiences as peer educators, when they talked about being able to choose their own presentation topic, eight of them described it as providing them with a feeling of personal power. They felt that being able to choose their own presentation topics and then choose what information they would research to use in the presentation was an experience that made them feel some control over their learning. As previously stated in the literature, personal power is a basic need that should be met for someone to feel happy and healthy (DeBlois, 1989; Glasser, 1984; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). This personal power is not a power over others, rather it is seen that one has control over one's learning and can accomplish things. In describing how they created the presentations, the students indicated that they felt like they had learned important
information about these different presentation topics that would be useful for their own lives and also talked about how important it was for the younger students to learn too. As the literature indicated opportunities like that are important for adolescents to experience in order to develop their decision making and critical thinking (Price et al., 1993; Vander Zanden, 1985).

This sense of being in control of their learning was reiterated by all of the students when they described the autonomy that they felt in making the decisions about how their presentations were created and developed. This feeling of autonomy is supported in the literature as being an important component of school motivation (Ryan & Powelson, 1991). Although, realistically, the format and components of the presentations had to be ultimately approved by the teachers and the program coordinator before being presented; the peer educators still felt competent about what they were creating and control over this creation.

The sub-theme of teaching and influencing kids was identified as being important to seven of the students for encouraging a sense of empowerment in them. Two of the peer educators describe how much fun they had being in a position of influence and enjoying the positive reactions from the younger students. This is consistent with what Glasser (1984) had to say about personal power and fun. Then under this same sub-theme five of the students talk about how they felt they could truly influence the younger students so that the students do not have to learn their lessons the hard way. As Varenhorst (1992) and Dryfoos (1990) stated student-led programs can help the students to feel they are contributing to others and society.

The final sub-theme under the theme of empowerment is expressed by the students when they describe the importance of who is the project coordinator for this program. Nine of the ten students explain that a caring and supportive adult who is sensitive to people’s feelings is integral to the success they felt as peer educators. As
described in the literature by Hamby (1989), a key component to successful school
engagement is the feeling that the adolescent can connect positively with a
supportive adult. Dryfoos (1990) also spoke to the importance of the program leader.

The common theme of feeling competent was described by the students under
four different sub-themes: developing presentation skills, feeling competent because
of training skills, feeling competent as a role model, and feeling competent as peer
educators. Santrock (1996); Ryan and Powelson (1991); and Wehlage et al. (1989)
discuss the importance of the belief in one's competency for adolescents. The peer
educators described how they felt that their presentations were not only good, but well
received. They also felt that the younger students really did learn something from the
presentations. Several of the peer educators spoke about how much more effective
they were as teachers to these younger students because the students could relate to
them better than they could to an older adult. Slavin (1986) states in the literature
about the effectiveness of older students working with younger students. Dryfoos
(1991) and Manning (1993) also discusses how effective peer leaders can be in
teaching younger adolescents to resist pressures to use drugs. In this sub-theme, the
peer educators felt that it was much more likely that the younger students would listen
to their lessons on a subject like substance abuse than they would to an older
teacher.

As a sub-theme of the theme of feeling competent, the students spoke about
their feelings of competency as role models to the younger students. The students'
experiences, where this feeling was reinforced, was described by them as the times
while they were teaching; before and after the presentations; the presentation
evaluations; and when encountering the younger students in the community. As
Harter (1992) points out, this type of experience raises the at-risk students' sense of
competency and is a learning outcome for which schools need to strive.
Throughout the results the students mentioned having fun. This is, as the literature pointed out a “need-fulfilling experience” (Glasser, 1984) and one that was important enough to the students for it to emerge as a descriptive word numerous times in their interviews.

The findings of this study has led the researcher to four general conclusions. First, the experience the students had as peer educators was basically a positive one. The students clearly felt that their experience included positive feelings of belonging, empowerment and competency.

Second the peer education program described in this study offers some opportunity for skills development both for the older and younger adolescent. The program is made up of multiple components that encouraged many different types of skills development. The participants in this study uniformly agreed that the communication skills, team building skills and the presentation skills they developed were skills they saw as transferable to the rest of their lives.

Third, being trained as peer educators can provide at-risk students with the opportunity to learn more about themselves and some of their at-risk behaviors. Then as a result of their growing understanding of who they are, the peer educators are able to affect changes that may help them to mature into more responsible adults.

Fourth, the meaning the students made of their experience as peer educators is that they can be positive role models to other peers. Also, as students in an alternative school the involvement in this program enhanced their sense of being part of a larger community.

Limitations of the Study

This study was based on a phenomenological research design which utilized the participants’ ethnographic interviews as the primary source of data. These
interviews took place at the end of the second year of the program. Therefore, the study is limited to what the peer educators could remember and describe of their experience at that time. Also, because the data was gathered for this study only at that one period of time there is an absence of persistent observation. There may have been additional or richer descriptions to contribute to the analysis of the experiences if an interview protocol, involving the peer educators, occurred after the first year of the program.

Another limitation of the study was that it interviewed only ten students within a particular peer education program in an alternate school setting. As a result, the findings are not generalizable to other peer education programs or participants. However, as previously mentioned, detailed descriptions of the research questions and the context of the study have been provided to help in the transferability of the findings.

A third limitation of the study is that a unique experience be misinterpreted as reflective of the common experience of the peer educators. This possible limitation was addressed by placing emphasis on those themes of experience that were shared by many of the students. Confidence in the accuracy of a theme increased as it emerged in the experience of many of the peer educators.

Practical Implications of the Study

The experience of the ten at-risk adolescents who acted as peer educators attests to the peer education program being worthwhile for them. As stated in Chapter One, the goals of the program are to increase self-esteem through helping the students realize their ability to be successful, be role models to other students and have successful mentoring experiences. The students themselves voice experiences in this program which indicate that the goals are being achieved.
Emerging from the students' experiences are a number of program implications for the Learning Centres' Peer Education Program. First, how the students were first introduced to the program seems to be significant. It appears from the study that the students will not readily join the program unless approached personally. Only after they have been approached personally are they willing to take the next step. So how the students are recruited for the program appears to be important.

Once the students have agreed to join, the initial introduction to the program was through the three-day training. This component of the program appeared to be critical to the success of the program for a number of reasons. First, it took place out in the community which was important to the students' team building, bonding and self-esteem. Then, the training provided the students with skills and knowledge that were critical to their being successful as peer educators. They were presented with materials relevant to them and provided them with practical and skills building information. Also, the students learned that they could have fun.

A third program implication relates to the development of the presentations over the next several months of the course. The responsibility the peer educators take for working as a group and creating good presentations seems to be largely dependent upon the sense of control they feel they have. Their sense of autonomy and personal power are important to them and so the type of person coordinating this program is critical. The program coordinator certainly possesses the ultimate control over the decisions, but this person must be able to maintain that control without appearing to negate the decision making of the peer educators.

A fourth program implication is related to the ongoing learning for the students, teachers and program coordinator through continuous evaluations. The reactions and evaluations from the younger peers (the presentation audience) is important for the at-risk students' learning, feeling of competency and knowledge that they are role-
models. The time spent by the teachers and program coordinator giving feedback to
the peer educators after each performance, and setting aside time for self
assessments and presentation assessments seem to be important. The students
talked about the audience evaluations and their own self-reflections after the
performances as effective and important.

A fifth program implication relates to the students being a part of the broader
community. The experiences of a number of the peer educators indicated that being
able to travel out of town for the weekend for youth conferences or camps were really
significant and positive experiences for them. All ten students described those
opportunities very positively and expressed a desire for more of those opportunities.
However, this program implication is one that can be more costly than any of the
others.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study provides several ideas for future research. Further research could
include a study design that investigates peer education programs from the
perspective of other stakeholders such as program coordinators, school staff, parents,
administrators, community members involved in the training, fund providers and the
audience or learners.

As the sample size of this study is small (n=10) generalizability to population
would occur with a larger sample size, a cross-section of school sites and between
districts. Further research could make comparisons between the regular school
setting and the alternate school setting. Also further research could look at specific
populations in more detail. For example, peer educators who are positively engaged
in the school environment compared to the peer educators who have been so
negatively disengaged that they became dropouts for a period of time.
This researcher believes that many of the findings are worthy of further research. For example, the experience of belonging was an important component to how positively the participants felt about being peer educators and their commitment to the program. However, if the study were to continue after another year would the peer educators still feel as connected or as committed? Would the training program be as effective if the students were repeating it for the second or third time? Would the training program need to be revised to accommodate returning students and would those students need to be given more responsibility?

Further research could also include longitudinal studies which address issues specific to the peer educators' future choices. (1) Did the peer educators' experience influence their career choices? (2) What was their community involvement as adults? Were they pro-active in the community as a result of their peer education experience? In other words, did they give back to the community? It would be interesting to further explore some of these issues.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


# EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS PROFILE: The Critical Skills Required of the Canadian Workforce

## Academic Skills
Those skills which provide the basic foundation to get, keep and progress on a job and to achieve the best results

Canadian employers need a person who can:

**Communicate**
- Understand and speak the languages in which business is conducted
- Listen to understand and learn
- Read, comprehend and use written materials, including graphs, charts and displays
- Write effectively in the languages in which business is conducted

**Think**
- Think critically and act logically to evaluate situations, solve problems and make decisions
- Understand and solve problems involving mathematics and use the results
- Use technology, instruments, tools and information systems effectively
- Access and apply specialized knowledge from various fields (e.g., skilled trades, technology, physical sciences, arts and social sciences)

**Learn**
- Continue to learn for life

## Personal Management Skills
The combination of skills, attitudes and behaviours required to get, keep and progress on a job and to achieve the best results

Canadian employers need a person who can demonstrate:

### Positive Attitudes and Behaviours
- Self-esteem and confidence
- Honesty, integrity and personal ethics
- A positive attitude toward learning, growth and personal health
- Initiative, energy and persistence to get the job done

### Responsibility
- The ability to set goals and priorities in work and personal life
- The ability to plan and manage time, money and other resources to achieve goals
- Accountability for actions taken

### Adaptability
- A positive attitude toward change
- Recognition of and respect for people’s diversity and individual differences
- The ability to identify and suggest new ideas to get the job done—creativity

## Teamwork Skills
Those skills needed to work with others on a job and to achieve the best results

Canadian employers need a person who can:

**Work with Others**
- Understand and contribute to the organization’s goals
- Understand and work within the culture of the group
- Plan and make decisions with others and support the outcomes
- Respect the thoughts and opinions of others in the group
- Exercise “give and take” to achieve group results
- Seek a team approach as appropriate
- Lead when appropriate, mobilizing the group for high performance

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This document was developed by the Corporate Council on Education, a program of the National Business and Education Centre, The Conference Board of Canada, 255 Smyth Road, Ottawa, Ontario K1H 8M7, Telephone: (613) 526-3280, Facsimile: (613) 526-4857.

This profile outlines foundation skills for employability. For individuals and for schools, preparing for work or employability is one of several goals, all of which are important for society.
APPENDIX B

PEER EDUCATION

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

BACKGROUND

Research has concluded that exposure to a single peer education presentation (health related) is sufficient to produce a positive effect on knowledge and attitudes thus affecting behaviour. The reason cited for this is that a peer education setting encourages communication with others. The peer education process has demonstrated risk reduction behaviours by informed responsible decision making and is a reasonable expectation of the model.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the program are:

• to increase student knowledge regarding specific student identified concerns
• to increase personal responsibility for health and promote healthy lifestyles
• to have students act as role models
• to build self-esteem and self-confidence
• to improve personal interaction and communication skills

GOALS

The goal of the program is to educate a selected group of students on specific student identified issues utilizing a peer education model.
PEER EDUCATION

PREREQUISITES/RESPONSIBILITIES

PREREQUISITES

1. Must attend the training session: November 8, 9, & 10, 1994 and other training sessions as arranged. Refer to the training sessions as outlined by the school's peer education co-ordinator for times and locations.

2. Must be currently enrolled in the appropriate class:
   Co-op 11    Guildford Learning Centre
   South Surrey/White Rock Learning Centre

3. Your grade will be determined by your teacher and the peer education co-ordinator.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

While a member of your peer education team you will:

• function under the direction of your school and the peer education co-ordinator.
• present information accurately and within the training program guidelines.
• represent the peer education program in a professional manner.
• maintain accepted standards of confidentiality.
• encourage program awareness amongst fellow students.
• participate in presentations and/or promotions.
PEER EDUCATION
TRAINING SESSION OBJECTIVES

The training session serves three purposes:

- it provides information essential for program delivery
- it is the beginning of the team building process
- it will introduce presentation skills and techniques and allow time for developing these new skills

The objectives of the training session are to:

- introduce the peer education concept
- acquire the appropriate factual information
- introduce interactive techniques and teaching strategies
- team build and provide opportunities for interaction with each other
- acquaint the peer educators with appropriate internal and external resources
- allow time to practice newly acquired skills
- augment the personal planning of K-7 program
- focus on the issues as identified by a needs assessment done in June 1996

An unofficial objective is to "HAVE FUN"
PEER EDUCATION TRAINING SESSION OUTLINE

TRAINING LOCATION - B.C. HYDRO - 8650 - 124th Street
Tel. 590-7666

Contact: Roger Movold

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1994 - 9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.
9:00 - 9:45 A.M. - WELCOME
   - INTRODUCTIONS
9:45 - 10:00 A.M. - BREAK
   SUCCESS SKILL #1
10:00 - 12:00 A.M. - WORKING TOGETHER
12:00 - 12:45 P.M. - LUNCH
12:45 - 2:00 P.M. - SUCCESS SKILL #2
   INCREASING SELF ESTEEM/
   SELF-CONFIDENCE
2:00 - 2:15 P.M. - BREAK
2:15 - 2:45 P.M. - SUCCESS SKILLS continued
2:45 - 3:00 P.M. - WRAP-UP
   EVALUATIONS

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 1994 - 9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.
9:00 - 9:15 A.M. - OVERVIEW OF DAY
   SUCCESS SKILL #3
   COMMUNICATION STYLES
9:15 - 10:15 A.M. - I MAY NOT BE PERFECT BUT PARTS OF ME ARE EXCELLENT
10:15 - 10:30 A.M. - BREAK
10:30 - 11:45 A.M. - PARTS OF ME ..........Continued
11:45 - 12:30 P.M. - LUNCH
   SUCCESS SKILL #4
12:30 - 1:45 P.M. - COMMUNICATING ASSERTIVELY
   ........................................................................
1:45 - 2:00 P.M. - BREAK
2:00 - 2:45 P.M. - COMMUNICATING ..........Continued
2:45 - 3:00 P.M. - WRAP-UP
   EVALUATIONS

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1994 - 9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.
9:00 - 9:15 A.M. - OVERVIEW OF DAY
   SUCCESS SKILL #5
9:15 - 10:00 A.M. - WINNING AT INTERVIEWS
10:00 - 10:15 A.M. - BREAK
10:15 - 12:00 NOON - WINNING AT INTERVIEWS ....Continued
12:00 - 12:45 P.M. - LUNCH
   SUCCESS SKILL #6
12:45 - 2:00 P.M. - PRESENTATION.SKILLS
   THE LIVE PERFORMANCE
2:00 - 2:15 P.M. - BREAK
2:15 - 3:00 P.M. - WRAP-UP
   EVALUATIONS
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PEER EDUCATION PROGRAM

The following broad questions are intended to generate descriptions of participants' experiences in the peer education program. The content and structure of each interview will vary with participants' responses. Probes will be used where necessary. The interviews will be more or less structured depending on the information collected.

General introduction:
"Everything you say in this interview will be kept confidential. You may withdraw from the study at any time without being prejudiced. In the study you will be referred to by a pseudonym. You will get an opportunity to look at the data analysis. All audio-tapes will be destroyed at the end of the study. The research findings will be used to understand the experiences you had while participating in this program. The research findings will also be used to provide a model of a peer education program and to improve this peer education program.

You have been involved in the peer education program for _ months. I am interested in your thoughts and feelings about your experience. I have some general questions for you, but please feel free to add whatever you think would be important for me to know."

1. How did you become involved in the peer education program?

2. Tell me about the training program. Describe to me how you felt in the beginning and how you felt at the end of the training. What did you like/dislike about the training?

3. I would like you now to tell me about your involvement in the peer education program from the beginning until now as if you were telling me a story.

4. How did participation in the peer education program influence the way you feel about yourself?

5. How did participation in the peer education program influence the way you feel about school?

6. Describe the type of student you would recommend this program to?

7. Describe how you feel about the presentation you have been involved in as a peer educator?

8. If you think of all the things that have happened to you since the beginning of the program - can you think of one thing that particularly stands out as important to you?

9. What changes would you suggest to improve the program for next year?