TALES FROM THE EDGE:
PERSPECTIVES ON "AT-RISK" TEACHING

by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study provides entrance into the everyday experiences of a team of teachers working in an alternate program. The teachers' personal narratives of the daily, intimate and complex interactions between teachers and students are presented and probed for possible interpretations. Their anecdotes reveal that these teachers do not experience students' *risk*, in the usual negative sense of the word, but instead as *hope* for that which is not yet, and for that which might be possible. This hope is shown, for example, through teacher care and commitment to individual students, as well as through high teacher expectations and clearly articulated standards which the students must work hard to achieve. This study suggests that understanding what it is to teach well in a so-called "at-risk" setting is to increase our understanding of the greater question of what it is to teach.

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CHAPTER 1: A QUESTION EMERGES

Constituting and Re-Constituting an Identity of Risk

People upon meeting me often ask in casual conversation, "What do you do for a living?" After I state that I am a teacher, the most common query is, "What do you teach?" In the past, I often responded to that question by saying that I was an "at-risk" teacher, and, therefore, a teacher of many different subjects and grade levels. I felt disconcerted by these encounters for two reasons: one, because I sensed that my answer disappointed or at least puzzled my questioners by confounding their attempts to attach me to a single subject, grade, or other familiar category; and secondly, because it caused me to wonder about the significance of this self-identification. What did this naming say about how I understood my teaching and my students, and what deeper understanding did my naming give to others?

In naming myself an "at-risk" teacher, I had chosen to emphasize the risk associated with my role as teacher. I wondered about the nature of this risk, and how it was that I was understanding it. On one hand, the description "at-risk" might point away from Self, to Other-- the students whom I teach. As a teacher in an alternate program in a public secondary school for the past three years, all of my students, for ease of identification in the larger school population, wear the label "at-risk". A basic definition of an "at-risk" student is a student so disengaged from the process of schooling that dropping out of school is perceived by that student as a real and viable option. Clearly, the term "at-risk" is imprecise, not only masking the diversity of the youth described by this term, but resulting in a tendency to underestimate the number and the range and the complexity of students who could conceivably fall into this category, if even for a brief period of time (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). On the other hand, "at-risk" could refer to some aspect of the Self as a teacher. Perhaps, I am precariously positioned, in danger of an unfavourable outcome. In current research, the outcome referred to most often in this case is teacher burnout (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). A third way to think of "risk" might be as neither

dwelling solely in the bounds of the student nor the teacher, but in the space of interaction between Self-and-Other, between me, as teacher, and my students.

Uncomfortable with the "at-risk" labeling of my students, and knowing that I would not consider myself to be in a position of risk, my understanding of risk seemed to dwell in that third space, the space in-between teacher and student. However, teaching in any setting might be considered an endeavour of risk because "each time we invite the lived worlds of students into the dwelling spaces of our classrooms, we place ourselves in a position of uncertainty" (Chamberlain, McGrath, Richter, Stevens, & Timmins, 1993, p. 6). Therefore, how might a categorization of risk offer any greater insight into who I am as a teacher, or the program within which I teach?

It is this questioning that initially drew me to this research into the presence or absence of risk in the experience of teaching within an alternate setting. To look at this question, I enlisted the help of my two teaching partners who, in addition to myself, comprise the teaching team of an alternate program named Combined Studies at Boyd Secondary in Richmond, British Columbia.

Contextualizing the Research Site

In order to shed light upon the situatedness of this research, I will now discuss how I, and my partners, have come to be involved in teaching in this alternate program, and I will further elucidate the setting in which we teach. I openly acknowledge the inadequacies in these tellings. In conversation, my partners have each pointed to the shortcomings of language to give others a vivid, full, and accurate picture of this program, and of the complexity of our teaching selves living in relation to others. It is my hope, nonetheless, that this introduction will provide a context for readers that might support a richer understanding of this research and its findings.

A Call to Teach

I was packing up my textbooks, and dismantling my classroom in June, 1995. The students had long ago left the building for the summer, and the teachers, recently informed of our teaching assignments for September, were also now beginning to look forward to our summer vacations. Having just completed a rather harrowing first year of teaching, I was content in

knowing that the second year would have to be easier than the first. That is, until I heard my name called over the intercom, "Leanne Fukui, please report to the principal's office immediately." From that moment, a sequence of events unfolded that has brought me to where I am today.

It was this day in June, 1995, on which I was asked by my principal, Debbie Osipov, to participate in a teaching partnership to bring Combined Studies, an interdisciplinary program, to our school, Boyd Secondary. The Richmond school district had seen a need to expand the Combined Studies program already running successfully for three years at another Richmond high school, McNair Secondary, to a second site, and Boyd had been chosen to be that site. My principal described Combined Studies as being an academic program that welcomed "at-risk" students who had not experienced success within the traditional secondary school system.

The idea for Combined Studies was initially conceived by McNair's school principal and two elementary school teachers who, in 1992, envisioned creating a program for students described typically as "marginal" in their commitment and ability to function within the secondary school system. After much planning and administrative protocol, the program was officially granted pilot program status by the Richmond school district in May, and was slated to begin at McNair in the upcoming school year. The program had been given the name Combined Studies, and in September, 1992, it consisted of a total of these two teachers, and only 36 students.

Initially, the program encountered some resistance from other teachers and students at McNair. Others at the school feared that this program would attract potentially undesirable students to the school, thus changing the school climate. Perhaps more problematic was the fact that the teachers of this program, previously trained as elementary rather than secondary school teachers, were attempting to create something new and different, and yet still claiming it to be academic in nature. In a struggle to gain legitimacy in the school, the teachers of Combined

Studies fought hard to ensure that the mandated curriculum was being taught, and that expectations for students in the program were not being compromised.

The program survived its first, and then its second semester, continuing to increase in enrollment numbers, and in strength of reputation in the district. By its second and third years, Combined Studies consisted of four enrolling teachers, one being a principal who had taken a leave in order to work within this program. The list of names of students who had graduated from Combined Studies continued to grow, and their success in provincial examinations spoke in favour of the legitimacy of this program. In its fourth year of operation and on the verge of expansion to a second site, the Combined Studies program at McNair had grown to five teachers, and over 100 students. Furthermore, its success had generated much thinking and questioning by many parents, students, educators and administrators in the school district about the meaning of academic education in secondary school. Notions of what it meant to be "mainstream", "marginal", and "at-risk" were, and are continuing today to be, reconsidered and reunderstood.

When she brought me into her office, Debbie was clearly excited about the expansion of the program to two sites. She spoke of how wonderful an opportunity this would be for everyone involved; she said that if she were not in her current position as principal she herself would embrace a chance to be a part of the Combined Studies teaching team. I, however, was not as quickly enthused by the proposal. Initially, my reaction was to say a quick but emphatic "no" to my principal, and ease myself into a comfortable second year of teaching; I had never been someone who could find comfort in the discomfort of change and ambiguity. However, at the same time, I began to carefully consider the opportunity that had been presented to me. Firstly, Debbie had placed a lot of confidence in me to suggest such an appointment. Secondly, the professional development that could be gained from taking such a position would be invaluable to any teacher. Thirdly, it was clear that the support that was being offered to my prospective partner, Dave Anderson, and me to set up this program at our school was unheralded. The school district, in a time of great economic restraint, was willing to allow the two of us to take time away

from our own teaching duties to be mentored in the teaching, the philosophy, the curricula, and the structure of the Combined Studies program. The only possible answer to my principal's question had to be "yes". And, at the time, I really did not have any idea as to what the future would hold.

Embracing a New Way

In June, Dave and I began to meet with the McNair Combined Studies teaching team, the district assistant superintendent, and the principals of Boyd and McNair to begin plans for program development. It was clear from our very first meeting that something very special was taking place at McNair within the Combined Studies program. Dave and I could immediately see that the program was operating upon a different paradigm than the one to which we had grown accustomed in our secondary school teaching careers. There was an unfamiliar language being used within the Combined Studies program, and a very strong underlying philosophy that was being articulated in ways that were new to us. Translating this language and philosophy would be our goal throughout the following semester.

In September, 1995, beyond our regular teaching duties, Dave and I worked closely with the McNair team to attempt to understand the program and what would be involved in establishing Combined Studies at our school. It was interesting to be marginalized in our new roles as visitors to the McNair classrooms. From this position of being at the edge, we gained very new perspectives on teaching, on learning, on teachers, and on students. This process was scary, and exhilarating, and enlightening.

As an academic program, Combined Studies focuses upon creating spaces of possibility within the classroom, in order to acknowledge, honour, and support a diversity of individuals and their unique learning styles. Thus, individuals are valued for who they are and what they bring to the classroom; the vibrant pedagogic space within the classroom is not predetermined--it forms and re-forms in response to those who enter and dwell.

The program is based upon the underlying belief that students labeled "at-risk" are those "who most urgently require that elements of curriculum be embedded in rich, meaningful and academically complex content if they are to sustain the struggle required to develop strength" (Chamberlain et al., 1993, pp. 3-4). Thus, the Ministry prescribed curricula in this program are not modified in the sense of being "watered down" for students who are less able, but rather reorganized into interdisciplinary structures (i.e., Humanities 11 intertwines the curricula from English and Social Studies 11), and enriched in an attempt to create curricula that best engage students. Within these curricula, students are immersed in challenging academic content, and topics are studied in depth. "The program attempts to engage students in a rigorous praxis--a praxis that is mindful not to alienate the emerging adult..." while encouraging students to learn a great deal about a subject through interpreting and reorganizing it into personal knowledge (Chamberlain et al., p. 3).

Assignments are seen as ways to deeply involve students in the curricula that they are experiencing; assignments are open-ended in order to invite students to enter into tasks at their own levels of sophistication, with originality and creativity. Constructing artifacts in the form of major project books involves students rigorously processing, interpreting, and personalizing content in order to result in tangible evidence of understanding, growth, and commitment. Such concrete accomplishments develop student pride and confidence.

Teachers within Combined Studies, sustained by the paradoxical belief that each child in their midst "embodies the possibility that things can become other than what they have already become" (Jardine, 1992, p. 116), work to create "conditions that make it possible to learn, the creation of an original learning disposition" (Briton, 1995, p. 10). Teachers endeavour to provide a safe, secure environment where students are supported in their learning experiences. It often takes time for individuals who have felt inadequate as scholars for many years to summon the courage to care about their learning and to try once again.

In order for students to gain a sense of their own strength and potential, they must experience authentic academic success. It is necessary for students to venture beyond what they think possible for themselves. Thus, teachers must be careful to set high standards that are well articulated to students. The expectations of scholarly behaviour, and thoughtful, well-crafted assignments are continually made clear to students as they deepen their commitment to their roles as scholars within the classroom. Furthermore, because the teacher's role is to support the student, the teacher must also immerse the student in difficulty. "To ease the difficulty and remove the burden of the struggle is to eliminate, for the other, possibilities for authentic education" (Richter, 1994, p. 81). The teacher is responsible for maintaining the precariously balanced relationship between student and teacher. As Heidegger writes (1955/1971),

> Teaching is even more difficult than learning.... Not because the teacher must have a larger store of information, and have it always ready. Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn.... The teacher is far less assured of his ground than those who learn are of theirs. If the relation between the teacher and the taught is genuine, therefore, there is never a place in it for the authority of the know-it-all or the authoritative sway of the official. (p. 484)

A further dilemma of the teacher is to attempt to uphold the individual (a part) while considering the good of the program (the whole). Each student must be viewed as an individual of worth, and simultaneously, as one being in the community of the classroom. By virtue of entering the classroom and being scholars within the class, there are inherent responsibilities for all students to support one another, their teachers, and the entire program. In turn, teachers are responsible for doing everything in their power to protect the good of the whole.

The words "live(d) curriculum" became central to my understanding of the Combined Studies program. During our days at McNair, I truly learned how powerful the live(d) experience is to the growth of an individual. I never could have appreciated the Combined Studies program at McNair without first sitting in the classrooms, hearing the voices, engaging in the dialogues,

and reflecting on my days there. The human interactions, the use of language to communicate, and the contexts of situations determined my learning. This awareness emphasized to me that the experiences of students within the live(d) curriculum of the Combined Studies program are as important, or even more important, than the planned, and mandated curriculum that we, as teachers, have the responsibility to deliver to our students. Holding students within the live(d) struggle of the school experience, and upholding students within that struggle became the premise upon which we would build the Combined Studies program at Boyd Secondary.

<div align="center">Enlivening the Abstract: A Glimpse into Our Program</div>

The challenge for Dave and me, as learners of the program, was to take what we had learned at McNair and use it in order to breathe life into our own program at Boyd. We tried hard to ensure that our practice was aligned with our underlying teaching philosophies.

Because we continually make changes to the program, descriptions of the program are always in danger of being out-moded. However, the following description is one that I would apply to the present day, 1998/99 Combined Studies program at Boyd Secondary.

The Selection and Scheduling Process

All students who have been accepted into the Combined Studies program have gone through a selection process. Our program is usually filled to capacity; thus, space in the program is only made available by the graduation of students, or by students leaving the program, by choice or otherwise, during a term.

During the course of each term, a list of potential candidates for the upcoming term is generated. Parents, having heard about our program, may phone us requesting that their son or daughter's name be placed on this list. Students may also self-refer. However, for the most part, students' names are forwarded to us by counsellors and administrators from our school, and from other schools in the district.

Approximately two weeks are set aside for interviews prior to the start of each semester. All students on our waiting list are phoned and encouraged to make interview appointments via

our school's front office. Due to the length of our waiting list, only a limited number of interview slots are made available to students on a first-come first-serve basis. We have found that students who are most interested in the program will make the greatest effort to reserve interview times with us.

Potential candidates, preferably accompanied by a parent or guardian, are interviewed by the Combined Studies teaching team. At the beginning of each 20-minute interview, the program is described to students as an alternate academic program that leads ultimately to a British Columbia graduation certificate. This is important to emphasize because a common misconception is that the program does not enable students to complete "normal" provincial graduation requirements. Teachers then explain that this program embraces a different way of teaching and learning than was perhaps predominantly experienced by students in the past, using examples of completed student project books to illustrate what sort of work is done in our program. A basic description of the program is outlined (i.e., the size and location of the program, the student-teacher ratio, courses offered etc.), and then our core expectations are delineated on a sheet which looks much like a contract. As we go through each expectation, each candidate must sign his or her name beside each requirement to indicate that he or she has understood it.

These expectations are as follows: 1) Daily attendance and prompt arrival are considered to be essential when working towards credit in this program. Lack of attendance may lead to withdrawal; 2) Listening to lessons presented by the teacher is a critical part of the course and may involve dramatizing listening for long periods of time. Listening for 35 minutes per academic block may be required. This is required as the course does not use textbooks; 3) Completing assignments within the deadlines set by the instructor or remaining after class to do this is expected. As interviewing teachers expand upon these expectations, many of the differences between our program and the mainstream setting are explained, for instance: our emphasis upon attendance because no textbooks will be issued in lieu of teachers acting as "living

textbooks"; our requirement for appropriate and scholarly behaviour in the classroom which, if not adhered to, may result in student dismissal for a block, a day or longer; and the responsibility that we place upon students to complete all assignments, without exception, but our lack of formally assigned homework.

During these interviews, a few questions are asked of each student in an attempt to become familiar with the student's background and past experience with school, to gauge the seriousness of the student's commitment to school, and to find out why the student has selected this program to continue his or her education. The limited number of positions to be filled allows us to be somewhat selective in terms of who is accepted into the program. On one hand, this enables us to protect our program, but on the other hand, this also denies many students access to our program. Students are selected based upon their likelihood for success in this program, and on their perceived "fit" for the program.

We consider many factors in our admission of incoming students. Age is taken into account because all students entering the program must be at least 16 years old, and no older than 19 years of age. Individuals younger than 16 tend to detrimentally widen the maturity gap of students in the program, and detract from the academic atmosphere that we work hard to cultivate; students who are older than 19 no longer receive provincial funding to attend public school. Most students currently in the program are between 16 and 18 years of age, although some veterans who are finishing up the last of their graduation requirements may be 19 or even 20. Although age is a determining factor, previously completed grade level is not; students come into the program with credits ranging between grade 7 to grade 11. Though we teach to the provincially mandated grade 11 and grade 12 curricula, credit is based upon students demonstrating sophistication of understanding. Thus, in the same course, one student may receive a grade 9 credit, while another student may receive a grade 11 credit. What a student desires out of a school program is also considered in selection. A student may, for instance, want to take electives that we cannot accommodate, or a student may be primarily interested in gaining

work experience, something for which this program is not designed. Furthermore, a student who is committed to a full-time job may not be interested in a program that is so demanding in terms of attendance and completion requirements. Amount of time (months versus years) that a prospective student has spent away from school is also a determining factor because, in the past, we have encountered difficulty in working with students who have not been attending school for several years, and for whom the rigours of school have become distant and foreign. We have had much greater success with students who have only recently left school, or who are currently attending school elsewhere. Past histories are considered in extreme cases; for instance, we are careful not to accept students who have had histories of conflict with other students currently in the program. Students who are known to be deeply involved in criminal activities, i.e., drug dealing, that may affect others around them are immediately excluded. We are careful to think of the impact that students entering our program may have upon our present program, as well as upon our school. Learning disabilities are taken into account; however, we have found that in our small setting, we are often able to offer students enough individual support and flexibility for them to cope quite well, despite reading and writing difficulties for instance. References are considered as well; over time, we have come to realize that the good judgment of other professionals in the district can be of great help to us.

Ultimately, in choosing our students, our collective intuition is greatly relied upon. In our candidates, we look for maturity, a sincere desire to graduate, enthusiasm for a fresh start and an alternative to what has been experienced in mainstream schooling, and an ability and readiness to commit wholeheartedly to his or her education. Most times our selections are easily agreed upon by the entire team; however, occasionally, we dispute the selection of a particular candidate. This leads to further deliberation until we can come to a consensus with which we are all satisfied.

After making our selections, we phone all the candidates to let them know of our decisions. We make sure to ask those students who have been accepted whether, after gaining a

better understanding of the program in the interview, they still feel the program is a good choice for them. This is important because accepting positions with us means that they are occupying the spaces of others, who would also desire to enter this program. The names of those who were on our waiting list but who were not interviewed remain on the waiting list which will be kept until the time of the next intake of students. Any new names that come forward after our program is filled to capacity are placed on the waiting list.

Prior to the beginning of each semester, we need to schedule all of our students into courses. Our program operates on a semester system; there are two semesters in each school year, and the semester turn-around occurs at the end of January. A full day at our school starts at 8:15 in the morning. Each class is 70 minutes long, with breaks in between classes of five minutes in length. The morning consists of two classes, followed by a half-hour block that is used on alternating days for silent reading or a seminar class on career and personal planning, and then one more class before lunch at 12:24 PM. Last class begins at 1:24 PM, with the school day ending at 2:34 PM.

Students who choose to take Combined Studies courses for the entire day will be enrolled in four of our courses. Students who desire to take electives within the mainstream school will be enrolled in three Combined Studies classes, and two outside electives, from which there are many to choose. Popular student selections in the past have been courses such as Art, Drama, Physical Education, Technology, and Construction. Unfortunately, students who have not experienced success in the mainstream setting often seem to fall into old patterns when taking electives outside of Combined Studies. Although these students will choose to take outside electives, many will eventually drop those classes at some point over the course of the term. For this reason, after noticing such a trend, we may encourage students to focus only on courses within Combined Studies. Some students who do not feel that a full-time load is appropriate for them at this time, or students who have only a few courses remaining to graduate will be enrolled in only one or two Combined Studies courses.

Prior to the beginning of each semester, the Combined Studies team looks at the records of all of our students in order to schedule them into the necessary courses. In our programming of student timetables, we consider the core academic subjects of Math, Science, Socials and English to be of highest priority, and then work electives in around them.

In putting our Combined Studies class lists together, we try as much as possible to anticipate, and then separate any students whose combination might prove unproductive together in class. We also try to avoid placing any one student with only one Combined Studies teacher throughout an entire day in a semester because it can become tiresome for both the student and the teacher. Furthermore, we also try to evenly distribute the newcomers between Humanities and Math/Science classes. We have found that ensuring a mix of new and veteran students can allow the new students a chance to learn from the more experienced, and the more experienced students a chance to act as teachers and as role models. Based on what the majority of our students require for graduation, we then choose what Combined Studies electives will be offered in the upcoming term. In the past, we have taught courses such as: Media Analysis, Law, Marketing, Family Management, and Writing. These electives work to satisfy provincial graduation requirements in the areas of applied skills, and fine arts, as well as the requirement that students earn a specified number of grade 12 credits.

Scheduling our students into outside electives is a difficult and time-consuming process that occurs in June. It is a particularly strenuous task because while we operate on a semester system, the rest of the school follows a linear system. Thus, only students who are registered in our program for a September start have the option of taking electives outside of our program. After ascertaining in June what the school will be offering for the upcoming school year, we try to figure out how we can adapt our program to offer an optimal mix of school elective options to our students. Because we have the autonomy and flexibility to schedule our courses into blocks that we choose, we can work around the parameters that the school sets for us. Despite the scheduling difficulties that we encounter, we have found that some of our students excel in areas

that we are not able to teach in our program. We have also found that other teachers in the school can offer great support to our students, and make strong connections with our students that may not have otherwise been possible.

"The Two Portables Out Back"

Our program is situated in two portables in the student parking lot at the back of our school, approximately 50 steps outside the doors behind our school gym. That site was initially chosen so that this program would not be disruptive to other classes in the school. This isolation has been very beneficial in that it has allowed us to have a sense of professional autonomy as teachers. It has also helped alleviate the fears of students who have felt intimidated in the larger school setting. However, our separateness has also somewhat reinforced the negative stigma attached to our program. The distance from the school seems to discourage both student and teacher visitors, and hence, many in our school, who do not really know what goes on in our portables, assume the worst. Disparaging jokes about our program are often told, within earshot of Combined Studies students and teachers, by mainstream students and teachers.

The Combined Studies teaching team consists of Dave Anderson, Dikaia Vakakis and me, although for the past two years I have played only a minor role in the teaching of the program due to my work on my master's degree. Dave and Dikaia each have his or her own portable, which are situated side by side. In each semester, Dave and Dikaia each teach three courses independently. In addition, they co-teach one Combined Studies elective; this co-teaching accommodates a spare block which is used for administrative and planning purposes. Dave is responsible for teaching the Humanities courses (English and Social Studies), while Dikaia teaches the Science and Math courses. My role this year is to share the teaching of some classes with Dikaia, as well as to work together with Dikaia in leading a seminar for student teachers completing their practica at our school.

Classrooms are set up to accommodate class sizes of approximately 25, smaller than the maximum class size of 30 within the main school building. Pairs of student desks and chairs in

each classroom are set up in rows, with a teacher's desk either situated in the back, in the case of Dikaia's portable, or in the front corner, as seen in Dave's. Adjacent to each teacher's desk stands a table to support our paper cutters that, during class time, students line up to use. Each classroom contains metal filing cabinets; those which are locked store teacher files, while one filing cabinet in each classroom is for student use only. This cabinet is used for storage of all work-in-progress; each drawer is designated for a particular course. At the beginning of the term, the drawers of this cabinet can easily manage the amount of student work put into them; however, by the end of term, the drawers are visibly overflowing.

Prominently displayed on the walls of both classrooms are photographs of former and present students, colourful posters and maps, and many inspirational quotes on laminated paper. Posted on the wall near the teacher's desk in each classroom are calendars, and other school-distributed forms such as attendance slips, and library permission slips. Blackboards, which line two walls of each portable, are often completely covered with evidence of past class discussions, or formal notes for students to take down. A small section on the blackboards in each of the two portables is reserved for the names of students signing up to use the washroom. Below the row of windows lining the entire back wall of each portable stand shelves lined with stacks of construction paper of ten different colours, stacks of typing paper of four different colours, different sized sheets of lined paper, sheets of paper with fancy lettering to be used as stencils, and a collection of magazines for cutting up.

The set-up of each of the classrooms reflects the unified nature of our program and how we share space and resources. At the back of Dave's classroom, there is a computer room with two computers and one printer for student use. Dikaia's portable houses our storerooms equipped with extra paper, glue, pens, and other supplies, and a student cloakroom, often used as an area to park bicycles. Reference encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases, and thesauruses are available on a bookshelf in Dave's classroom. An old VCR and television stand on a dilapidated trolley in the

back corner of Dikaia's classroom. In order to access equipment, reference material, or supplies, both teachers and students will walk freely between classrooms throughout the day.

Reflecting the amount of paper used in our program, there are two garbage cans in each classroom, and two cardboard boxes for paper recycling. We also have extra recycling boxes in each of the classrooms, which are often filled and brimming over with pop cans. Because our students often eat lunch and snacks in between classes in our rooms, our garbage cans are also often teeming. We try hard to keep our classrooms as tidy as possible, making students accountable for their messes, however, this is an ongoing battle. Occasionally, students from the school will come to take away our recycling boxes, but often, our position at the edge of the school leads us to be easily forgotten.

The physical environment of our program shows evidence of how we are both simultaneously part of the school, and yet, very separate from the school. We have had visitors in the past comment on how our setting looks, surprisingly, like any other classroom. This is true in many ways; we are in typical school portables, we have standard desks and chairs arranged in customary ways, and we have familiar decorations and information posted on our walls. At the same time, it is also very evident that we are a very self-contained and isolated unit, which conducts itself in such a way as to require different materials and equipment than would be typically necessary in a mainstream classroom.

Constructing Artifacts

Perhaps the most obvious difference that one would immediately perceive as an outsider walking into our classrooms would be the work in which the students are engaged. The project books provide teachers with a structure around which our actions may be organized. For this reason, I have chosen to enter into my introduction to Combined Studies with this aspect of our program.

For each Combined Studies course taken, students learn content and skills in the prescribed subject area through their construction of one major product over the course of the

semester. It is named a project book because individual pages, made primarily of construction paper, are bound together in a book format. As teachers, we have developed each page of the book on a single topic or group of related topics that are grounded in the provincially mandated curriculum for the course. In our teaching, we try to make obvious the connections between pages, and the deliberateness involved in the progression from one page to the next. Ideally, the result, at the end of the semester, is that each page would be seen to be a significant part purposefully framed within the context of a greater whole.

We teach each page by delivering a single lesson or a series of lessons that centre upon the content to be represented in the page. This content may range from ethical dilemmas surrounding human reproduction, to themes in <u>The Odyssey</u>, to weaponry in World War II. Specific lessons are seen as purposeful leadings towards the completion of each student's personal construction.

Teachers make initial decisions about how the content will appear on each of the pages of the book. Representation of content may take an infinite number of forms including: direct quotations, detailed diagrams or maps, newspaper articles, descriptive passages, poems, investigative or opinion essays, lists, collages, tables, illustrations or graphics, stories, letters, and character profiles. In teacher-composed instructions for each page, we come up with a set of elements that we expect to appear on that given page, i.e., a biographical essay on the life of Homer, a title for the essay, and a portrait of Homer. We also sketch out a model of how those elements might be arranged on that page. Even so, our pre-planning often operates more as a scaffolding than a model for replication because students, especially those with experience in the program, will often check with teachers, and then slightly alter or completely redesign our arrangements, or the assignments themselves. Because we would encourage students to personalize their books as much as possible, we try to create assignments that are open-ended enough to create space for creativity (i.e., create a collage using magazine graphics, words, drawings or any other materials of your choice in order to depict the state of technology today,

and how you feel about it), and assignments that evoke the resonation of student voice (i.e., write a poetry analysis of lyrics of a band of your choice, making sure to address why this song is especially meaningful to you). We also attempt to be flexible with students as they invent and innovate. Still, each page element that we have included in our instructions must be recognized by students as an assignment that must be, in some way, addressed in their final product, in order for students to gain credit in the course.

We have observed the physical, hands-on construction of the books to be critical to involving students in the experience of school. Firstly, the creation of project books, for most students, is something very different from what they may have already done in secondary school classrooms and, thus, allows for newness of experience. Secondly, the books seem to encourage students to actively and personally interact with the subject under study. The books are very original and unique creations; no two books are ever the same. Lastly, the books are very tangible artifacts of what is currently being accomplished, and then later on, of what has been accomplished in the semester. As students progress, the sophistication of their books increases. As knowledge is built upon, the books physically take shape. The visible accumulation of work in the books seems to help sustain students, even when their commitment to their schooling seems to waver or wane. For some students, a finished book may reveal personal investment and success like no school assignment ever has in the past. In Dave's Humanities class, for example, we have seen students proudly show off finished books that stand more than 30 cm tall. As James (1996) writes, "Constructing... involves the student in rigorously processing the prescribed curriculum and moves him/her to a deeper understanding of content. Constructing allows for originality and diversity. Constructing builds commitment" (p. 19).

The Rigours of the Day

At the beginning of a semester, we outfit each of our students with a course schedule, new folders for each of their Combined Studies courses, and a "rigour pack", in other words, a zip-lock bag containing all the basic necessities for working on project books within our program

(specifically, an eraser, a pencil, a black fine-tipped pen, a black Jiffy marker, a pair of scissors, a ruler, and a glue stick). Because the items in the "rigour pack" seem to be reminiscent of days in elementary rather than secondary school, new students often look at these supplies with suspicion and uncertainty. Our more experienced students, however, usually examine more closely the quality of each item in the bag, and then criticize or commend us on our purchases. These students have been with us long enough to anticipate how these tools will impact their work throughout the term.

We also take time at the outset of each semester to go over our core rules and expectations, even though for all students, except for those newly incoming, this is a revisiting rather than a presentation of anything new. We talk about the need for prompt and consistent attendance, the importance of the demonstration of scholarliness in the classroom, and the value that we place upon students working hard to increase the overall quality of their work.

There is much structure evident in the day-to-day workings of our classrooms. At the beginning of each class, attendance is taken. Any lates are also recorded as students arrive. Each day, students who are not present and who have not informed the school about their absences are phoned in order that they might explain their absences. Regardless of their excuses for being absent, barring extreme extenuating circumstances, our students are required to attend 86% of the time for each Combined Studies course to earn credit. In courses for which they are earning grade 12 credits, they must attend 100% of the time. If attendance falls below these set levels, students must make up the amount of time missed at lunch hour. One class missed, or two lates, requires one lunch hour of make-up time. We have observed that achieving such a strict attendance requirement for some students proves to be one of the most challenging aspects of our program because absences have greatly hindered these students in the past.

When students enter a class, most immediately go to the filing cabinet where they pull out their appropriate folders, and then go to their desks to begin working on pages for their project books. After taking attendance, we may either give students the full class to work

independently, or we may use class time to make announcements, or present information or a topic for discussion. Students tend to think of our classes as being divided into "teaching" time, and "working" time. Prior to the start of a class, students will often ask us whether or not we will be "teaching" today, which might seem to be an odd question to an outside listener expecting that we, as teachers, should be teaching everyday without exception.

In our "teaching" time, we try to engage the students as deeply as possible. Some of the key techniques we use include: questioning and discussion, presenting visual aids such as films and videos, and the use of narrative. Opportunities for verbal communication in class is important for accommodating students who have difficulties in expressing themselves in writing, but who may be very skilled speakers. Visual aids are used to assist students who learn from visual images more easily than from written or verbal material. During our mentoring at McNair, we were encouraged to use narrative in our teaching, and we have been impressed with its results in our classrooms. Story, a literary structure organized into a beginning, an escalation to a climax, and a resolution, tends to hold the attention of students wondering, "What next?" The dramatic and descriptive elements of story also allow students to identify with others in "real" situations, and thus, encourage more personal and reflective responses from students.

The maximum amount of time we usually use to present information to the class is 35 minutes, or half a class. We have found that to exceed this time may not be conducive to the attention span of some students. We have also discovered that students seem to appreciate concentrated periods of time to work on their assignments, and become frustrated when they feel that we are monopolizing their time. While students work on their project book pages, teachers usually circulate around the classroom to gauge student progress, and talk to, encourage, and assist individual students. Teachers might also be occupied at their desks editing student assignments, or working to plan upcoming pages.

In our classes, students work on their books at their own speed. While there will be some students working on page seven, for instance, others may be working on pages four or five. We

pace the teaching of each new page in response to the needs of the majority of the students in the class. We also must keep in mind the broader picture of what is required to be covered in a semester.

As lessons on each page are delivered, teachers set out material needed for the construction of that page, i.e., instructions for page layouts, figures or tables, quotations, and notes. Therefore, students are able to help themselves to this material as they require it. As well, teachers try to keep lesson notes on blackboards for as long as possible in order to extend their availability to students. Furthermore, although students are not individually issued textbooks, teachers also usually maintain a selection of books taken out from our school library on current study topics for reference. These are useful for students who desire to supplement the information given in class, for those who have been absent and who have missed important lessons, and for those who need to be reminded of past lessons that they have heard.

Students who work more quickly than others are encouraged to be patient with us in our teaching, and to devise their own assignments which reflect their own personal interests. These students often ask to visit the library to do personal research. Students, on the other hand, who are not keeping pace with the rest of the class, are still expected to listen to lessons as they are presented. At certain times during the semester, however, teachers will make a deadline for the completion of a set number of assignments. When "book checks" take place, students are expected to be completed up to certain points in their books. Students who work at a slower pace usually come in at lunch to get caught up on their work, although some students may choose to take their work home to finish.

As students construct their books, teachers work together with students to ensure completion and success, and to help students to develop their potential. We try hard to discourage students from being complacently happy with mediocrity. Student apathy can be a great source of frustration for teachers when students say, "It's good enough," and withdraw their efforts, even when it is obvious that they can do better. We urge students to pursue quality in the

presentation of their work. At first, this usually requires teaching very basic presentation techniques. Script should be neat and legible. Bordering and underlining may be used to focus a reader's attention. Titles should serve a purpose to a reader. Colour may be used to enliven a piece of work. Leaving voids on a page or, alternatively, flooding a page with too much information, may be disconcerting to a reader. When teachers go through student books during periodic book checks, work that looks as though it has not received full attention is identified and returned to students to be redone. On a more regular basis, teachers help students improve their work-in-progress by editing all original pieces of student writing. We edit for spelling and grammar, as well as for larger structural concerns. We also encourage students to deepen their thinking, or to expand upon their thoughts in writing where possible. For students who lack confidence as thinkers or writers, for those for whom dwelling with a question or putting thoughts into writing demand true struggle, assignments may lead to feelings of hopelessness or avoidance. We have, on occasion, seen students, for as long as possible, leave gaps in their books wherever pieces of original writing were to be placed. But, we also have seen student difficulties ease over time with regular practice, and with the strengthening of courage, and of skill.

A high level of student focus is expected to be displayed in class. We justify our program decision not to assign homework by demanding that students work very hard during class time. For the duration of each block, students are to be working on their own individual project books, not talking to, or otherwise distracting others. The five minutes before the end of each class have been dubbed by students to be "pack up time" because they know that the expectation is that they work steadily until this time. At "pack up time", students will gather up their work, clean their working areas, put their folders back into the filing cabinet, and await the bell to end the block.

At the end of each class, teachers grade each student's appropriateness on a scale of 0-100%. In grading, we consider the demonstration of attentiveness in listening to the teacher or others within discussions or lectures (i.e., shown through eye contact, and physical position in a

desk), contribution to discussions, on-task behaviour, scholarly demeanour, and cleanliness of work area.

Appropriateness marks, as well as attendance, are recorded daily for each class on each student's record sheet that is known as a "wheel". For each Combined Studies class that a student takes, he or she is given a separate wheel that is divided into three sections: appropriateness, attendance, and completion. While appropriateness and attendance are marked down daily, the completion section is recorded only at the end of the term. By the end of the semester, all three sections in the wheel will have been filled.

Each wheel has been titled "The Way of a Student" in bold letters at the top of the page. This is very apt because a glance of a wheel can give students a sense of their progress in the term. Many students, who at the end of a term have become anxious about attaining credit in a course, may ask to see their wheels several times in a day. The wheels are very useful to teachers in that they illuminate patterns in a student's way of being in a single class, and, when all wheels of a student are considered together, in the program. Student wheels are very helpful when we need to consider whether or not this program is the best place for a student at this particular time.

Students understand that because they are all 16 years of age and older they do not legally have to be in school. Therefore, if students forfeit their privilege of being in the classroom, they may be dismissed by teachers for one class, or one day, or more. If students begin to exhibit ongoing trends of attitude or behaviour that would seem to be hindering their own or others' scholarly development (i.e., lack of scholastic effort in class, lack of attendance, swearing, smoking), a formal re-interview is conducted. In a re-interview, a student sits before the team of Combined Studies teachers who discuss the ways of being that are not acceptable in a senior secondary setting. The format of the re-interview is flexible; the process can take anywhere from ten minutes to one hour, the intended outcomes vary, and parents may or may not be involved. Teacher decisions are tempered by the recognition that bad habits are hard to break, that all human beings make mistakes, and that students may have outside circumstances that are

hindering scholarly growth. Usually, a re-interview involves the student making a commitment to change, followed by a discussion of plans to assist the student in amending the situation in question, and concluding with teachers outlining the consequences that will ensue if the student is unable to fulfill his or her recommitment to his or her position in the program. After the re-interview, parents are informed of what has taken place in the meeting, and notes are recorded in our student records. Lack of visible efforts towards behavioural or attitudinal change beyond the point of the re-interview indicates to teachers that the program is not meeting the needs of that particular student. A student will then meet for a final time with the team of Combined Studies teachers in order to dismiss that student from the program.

Project books are taken in for a formal evaluation only once, at the end of the term. When all the pages for the study have been completed, another four pages are added to emphasize the formality of presentation to which we encourage students to adhere in their work. A dedication page, a publishing information page, and a table of contents page are added to the front of each book, and a final page used for profiling the author is added to the end of the book. Finally, the spine of the book is reinforced and bound, and the cover of the book is entitled and illustrated by the student in ways that reflect his or her main impressions of the study. The book is then ready to be handed in for evaluation.

The last days of each semester are typically frantic with students rushing to get their work complete. Before books are accepted for marking, every single assignment is checked for completion. Students must complete any missing assignments before their books will be taken in. Any book that is not completed by the due date loses marks for lateness.

Final evaluation is based mainly on student performance on their project books, and on exams and quizzes that have taken place over the course of the term. While quizzes are written periodically throughout the term, there are only two formal examinations per course which take place at the middle and at the end of each term. Students who are taking provincially examinable courses must also complete those exams. In all Combined Studies exams, but not the provincial

exams, we allow students to use their books if they choose. The premise behind this is that if students have worked hard to put their books together then they should be allowed to use them as references. Exams, however, are carefully constructed in order to require that students demonstrate a personal synthesis rather than a regurgitation of the information that has been given to them.

We adjust final term grades for each course up or down based on students' attendance and appropriateness, as shown in their wheels for that course. For instance, a student who has a high B based on book and quiz and test scores may receive an A due to 100% attendance, and an average of 90% appropriateness.

Although it is common for us to communicate with parents during the course of the semester about a student's progress, and especially in times of concern or celebration, formal progress reports to parents or guardians only happen twice in a semester. The first report, known as an interim, is sent home after midterm exams have taken place. It is anecdotal, and does not include a letter grade because experience has shown us that letter grades may be predetermining of a student's success or failure in a term. The final report is written up after all requirements for the term have been completed; this report identifies the grade level that a student has been working toward, and includes a letter grade.

Our Beginnings and Our Continuing Evolution

Dave and I began the teaching of the Combined Studies program at Boyd Secondary in February, 1996 with one class each. We were equipped only with our experiences at McNair, a planned curriculum which we had put together based upon the Ministry curriculum, and the support of our school principal and our McNair mentors. In this first semester of Combined Studies at Boyd, we offered two courses. Humanities, was a bringing together of English and Social Studies, and the other, entitled Lifestyles, was a blending of Career and Personal Planning and Family Management. Dave and I relied heavily upon one another for support and to share practices, questions, dilemmas, and discoveries. There were days of commiseration; there were

days of celebration. At the end of the term, there was a shared sense of accomplishment between Dave and me, and our students. Indeed, there was some attrition in our student enrollment, a consequence of which we had been forewarned. Out of the 26 students we had enlisted in February, we now enrolled only 16 students. However, all the students who had endured the semester had earned credit in at least one, and in most cases, both of the courses in which they had enrolled.

In September of 1996, Combined Studies at Boyd enrolled 39 students. The program had expanded not only in number of students, but also in the breadth of courses offered; our course offerings included not only Humanities, and Lifestyles, but also Math, Science, Media Analysis, Writing, and Marketing. Furthermore, by allowing for flexibility in students' timetables, we created opportunities for our students to take elective courses within the school, and thus, to feel more connected to the school student body.

By this time, Dave and I both felt more comfortable in our roles as teachers within the program. Perhaps more importantly, our returning students had begun to feel more at home in their roles as students, and as members of the Combined Studies program. Just as in watching our students struggle, we saw them gain strength, in our own struggles we had also gained strength. As we embarked upon a new school year, it seemed that together, as teachers and returning students, we shared greater clarity about the expectations and the philosophy of the program. There was an increased sense of ownership of the program, and commitment to one another on the part of teachers and students alike. Though it was only the beginning of a school year, it felt as though we had already, as a united body, taken important steps closer toward graduation. The students who entered the program in September, 1996 were welcomed into a setting of greater focus and purpose.

Our relationships with our students by the end of the 1996/7 school year were very close. Together we had experienced failures and successes, disappointments and triumphs. Our understandings of each other as individuals extended beyond our understandings of the program.

When, in June, 1997, I announced to the group that I would no longer be teaching full-time in order to pursue a master's degree, I felt as though I were abandoning a family, despite the fact that my position was to be filled by someone who, in my eyes, was a very capable and caring individual. The students' reactions to my news told me that many of them felt the same way; I had never before identified myself as a "sell-out", and yet, that was what I appeared to be in the eyes of many of my students.

Today, the Combined Studies teaching team consists of three of us, Dave, myself, and Dikaia, a teacher whom I had the pleasure of mentoring in the ways of Combined Studies. There are 39 enrolled students, and the subjects taught this year are Humanities, Math, Science, Marketing, Media Analysis, Writing, and Law. In June, 1999, we will have had a cumulative total of 37 students walk across the stage at valedictory having successfully completed all the necessary requirements for graduation.

Even though I continue to teach part-time (one day per week), I am distanced from the program. Not experiencing the day-to-day interactions with our students, I feel somewhat like a caricature of my former teaching self as I return to make guest-appearances in the classroom. Nonetheless, I continue to worry about individuals in the program; I continue to be concerned about their lives inside and outside of the classroom. Reciprocally, my students frequently ask me how I am experiencing graduate school. On a day when I was feeling unusually downtrodden by my studies, one of my long-time students remarked that I was looking depressed. It was a nice reminder of our continued connection with one another.

I think that all of us who have spent time in the Combined Studies program have been affected by one another in significant ways. As Ted Aoki writes in his description of Combined Studies, "within such a site, teachers and students are doubly enactive, not only constituting understandings but also transforming their own selves" (personal communication, October 1996). I feel that as a teacher I have been profoundly affected by the experience of teaching within the Combined Studies program. The experience has caused me to rethink my own teaching and my

understandings of students and teachers and pedagogy itself. Today, as I continue to dwell in the midst of the difficulty and difference that is teaching, I am, as Burch (1994) asserts, a "being in transformation" (as cited in Hirose, 1995, p. 21).

Being mindful of the fact that my subjectivity continues to change, I do wonder about the meaning of my experiences as an "at-risk" teacher. I wonder how I have come to know myself, the teaching, the students, and the setting in which I teach. It is in this situational context of myself that I generate the central question of my study, "How does an 'at-risk' teacher experience risk in his or her lived-world of teaching, and how might that offer insight to teachers in other educational environments?"

CHAPTER 2: RE-CONTEXUALIZING THE QUESTION

Addressing the Literature

As I began to orient myself to my question, I immersed myself in the existing body of research that seemed to offer a context for my own research. I felt initially encouraged by the fact that there had already been a lot written about "at-risk" youth, and about teaching "at-risk" youth.

The concern for "at-risk" youth first emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s when "dropping out" of school was no longer thought to be a natural phenomenon. At this time, high school completion was, in itself, being lauded as a panacea for North American economic woes, and hence, individuals who were unsuccessful in high school were also viewed as potentially unemployable in a global economy and thus labeled "at-risk" (Anisef & Andres, 1996). By the 1980s, those at risk of dropping out of high school were regarded to be a major threat to the economic prosperity of a society.

Correspondingly, during the 1980s a large body of literature on the topic of youth at risk of dropping out of school was generated (Kelly, 1993; Wehlage et al., 1986). Predictive variables of early school withdrawal at the individual, familial, school, community, and societal levels were clearly delineated (Anisef & Andres, 1996). The identification of the myriad of variables contributing to school alienation highlighted the complexity of "at-riskness", and continues to indicate the need to further research all predictive variables and their interrelatedness (Anisef & Andres, 1996).

The majority of research in the area of at-risk students has, however, focused on the individual rather than the institutional factors which might lead to student disengagement from school (Dixon, 1996). The assumption fostered by much of this research is that dropouts are "aberrant individuals who are deviant, dysfunctional or deficient due to personal, family or community characteristics" (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 35). As a result of this focus upon intrinsic deficiencies, schools are somewhat absolved of blame; as Fine (1996) writes, "Institutional and

structural accountability seem to evaporate whenever rebellious or tragic individuals rise to the foreground in stories of schools' dropouts" (p. xi).

As one might expect, there is a lack of research that suggests actions for educators. Although much has been written about the problems of students at-risk of academic failure, historically, only a limited amount has been written about the school characteristics that contribute to the success of these students (McLean, 1991). Goodlad (1984) notes:

In particular, we know little about the styles of teachers and the kinds of classroom environments that work against student failure. Educational policy-makers have called for policy changes in dealing with these students, yet few recommendations are based on actual studies of successful teachers and classrooms of students at risk for educational failure.... A major question that remains unanswered is why some teachers are successful with students at risk, particularly minority students, while other teachers are not. (as cited in McLean, 1991, pp. 5-6)

More recently, however, researchers have shifted their focus away from the student to look at the characteristics of school itself that may contribute to creating students who are at-risk. As Goodenow (1993) writes, because education is fundamentally a social and interpersonal process, it only seems logical that greater research attention should be directed to the interactions between the student, peers, teachers and the school--specifically, to such factors as the social dimensions of self or identity, social support and belonging in educational settings, and group dynamics as influences on individual learning and motivation.

According to Goodenow (1992, 1993), humans motivate humans, and for students who are marginal in any way, relationships with teachers are of great consequence. Though the curriculum is very important for marginal students who often feel their lives and experiences are excluded from mainstream curricula (Fine, 1987), Christensen (1997) emphasizes that "the teacher is the most important element for success" of students at-risk of academic failure (p. 122).

The research that has been done in this area consistently highlights the need for personal relationships of trust and caring and connectedness between teacher and student (Christensen, 1997; Noddings, 1992; Goodenow, 1992; Farrell, 1990). Further research needs to be done in the area of relations in-between teachers and students. While teachers who care may be seen as "the crux of school reform" (Dixon, 1996, p. 59), how are teachers to understand students and foster these caring relationships? How do we as teachers understand the notions of support, risk, and autonomy?

"The few ethnographies and qualitative research studies done on dropouts or pushouts have highlighted student perspective and the immediate context within which these were shaped" (Kelly, 1993, p. 4). Perhaps it is just as important to consider the teacher's perspective, not only if we are interested in learning more about the pivotal role that teachers play in student success, but also if we have concern for supporting teachers who are working with increasingly alienated students. As LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) write, the reality of today's schools is that "teachers now work increasingly with alienated, uncooperative, and unsuccessful students... [and] the cost of maintaining morale and the desire to teach of educators already in the classroom is overwhelming" (p. 7).

A Personal Journey

As I waded through the indexes for research done in the area of "at-risk" students and teachers, I found many of the titles alienating: for example, "The dropout: Causes and cures" (Cervantes, 1965), "Tips for working with the at-risk secondary student" (Botwinik, 1997), "High risk teenagers: Real cases and interception strategies with resistant adolescents" (Farmer, 1990) and "Dealing with dropouts: The urban superintendents' call to action" (Paulu, 1987). Most of the existing research seems to have had an "ends-means orientation" whereby the dropout problem is explained through the relaying of "causal, functional, or hypothetical deductive reasons" (Aoki, 1988, p. 409). The underlying belief is "that subject and object are separate domains; hence, one is able to understand [and potentially "solve" or "fix" a] reality that is out

there and distanced objectively" (Aoki, 1988, p. 409). My personal belief, however, is that knowing is not acquiring facts but meaning making and giving, and that this is a subjective personal journey.

In this research, I did not presume to solve the puzzle of the "at-risk" student in order that I might expertly prescribe methods of teaching that would guarantee success for all teachers working with students "at-risk". Instead, I hoped to actively engage in a process of personal meaning making which would enhance my own pedagogy, and furthermore, would permit me to offer questionings, descriptions and interpretations to others who, in turn, might be journeying towards greater pedagogical mindfulness.

Underscoring this research is a belief that our inquiring and theorizing as educational researchers should be a way of orienting ourselves to the world we share with children, and to ways of being with children which are to their greatest benefit. Thus, the phenomenological style of research and analysis adopted for this study is intended to point readers to the lived experience of teachers in an alternate school setting in order to deepen an interest and a questioning into how we may best live in the everyday world as teachers of adolescents.

The Structure of the Study

In the words of Paulo Freire (1984), "Education is suffering from narration-sickness" (as cited in D. G. Smith, 1994, p. 181), or as Schubert (1991) writes, "Narratives of teachers and dialogues with them constitute a genuine and neglected form of inquiry" (p. 223). This void is surprising because many believe that teachers know teaching experientially, and that for each individual teacher "theory and practice are integrated through her or his narrative unity of experience" (Carter, 1993, p. 8). Indeed, as a reader of educational research, I find the real-life stories of other teachers not only to be the most compelling, but the most valuable to me in terms of practical applications to my own teaching.

When choosing a style for my own research, this personal predilection, as well as the desire to tell my own stories and the stories of my colleagues, led me to phenomenology. I was

encouraged by words such as these by phenomenologist Max van Manen (1982), "Pedagogy is not found in philosophy, but like love or friendship, it is found in the experience of its presence-- that is in concrete real life situations" (as cited in S. J. Smith, 1989, p. 27). Thus, as one of my earliest research decisions, I determined that I would set out in my research to retrieve the tellings of teachers about what they do and have done in unique, lived situations with students.

I realized, however, that I was unable to completely position my research within a phenomenological paradigm. van Manen (1990) also writes:

> The essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon. In other words, phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience. (p. 10)

Uncomfortable with the language of "essences" and "universals" which seemed to resonate with modernism and its desire for clarity and absolute Truth, I felt that I needed to blend phenomenology with a research method that was more supportive of ambiguity and situational, rather than universal, understandings. Instead of uncovering the Truth of lived experiences of teachers in an alternate setting, I knew that I preferred to dwell amidst their tellings of experience in order to draw out possible interpretations, and to generate further questioning.

Interpretive inquiry, or hermeneutics, seemed to step away from what Misgeld and Jardine (1989) describe as:

> research orient[ed] to that first articulation of what it means to be a child or an adult about which nothing more needs to be said. No further specification is needed or possible. Every variable has been controlled such that in the end, research dispels the need to say more. (p. 263)

Instead, interpretive inquiry offered room for flexibility and playfulness.

> Interpretive inquiry does not wish literally and univocally to say what this instance *is*. Rather, it wishes to playfully explore what understandings and meanings this instance

makes *possible*. It justifies this approach by harkening back to the fact that it does not

take up this instance as an 'object' with certain given characteristics. It takes it up,

rather, as something which evokes and opens up an already familiar way of belonging in

the world, a possible way of being.... This instance must be taken up as a 'text' which

must be read and re-read for the possibilities of understanding that it evokes. (Jardine,

1992, as cited in Richter, 1994, pp. 6-7)

Anecdotes of Live(d) Experience

Early on, I needed to make a decision about the kind of "text" with which I wanted to

work. Initially, I referred to the data that I wished to gather as, for lack of a better word, "story".

As defined in the Gage Canadian Dictionary (1983), "story" is a spoken or written account of

some happening or happenings, true or made-up, long or short, in prose or verse, intended to

interest another.

However, after spending time gathering data from my colleagues and putting my own

teaching experiences into writing, I came to understand that I was looking for particular kinds of

"stories" for my study; namely, brief narrative tellings of personal experience that offered

poignant glimpses into the lives of teachers. I desired to find out about particular experiences that

were somehow significant to the teachers in terms of professional growth or other personal

impact. Upon closer examination of the narratives that I had gathered from my colleagues and

deemed important to my study, I discovered that they often seemed to lack typical "story"

characteristics, such as rich description, character development, and beginning-middle-end

structure. Thus, I began to question whether or not the category of "story" was useful to me and

to others in understanding my research.

The narratives that are presented in my completed research are short and, in some cases,

lacking detail that readers might desire for greater clarity of understanding. I might have

provided readers with greater detail in the tradition of ethnography. I might also have ensured

that every narrative had developed characters and a true story-form structure. However, I chose

to leave the narratives as they appear because I wanted to acknowledge how these narratives were remembered, and how this team of teachers chose to articulate these narratives when talking to each other about their practice. In hopes of clarifying the type of data I had collected, I made the decision to use the name "anecdotes" to denote what I had previously termed "stories". Anecdotes are defined in the Gage Canadian Dictionary (1983) as brief stories about single actual incidents, usually funny or with an interesting point, often in the life of a famous person.

Some of the anecdotes that appear in subsequent chapters are direct quotes of transcripts. Presenting my colleagues' anecdotes as they were told to me, and therefore, as each speaker intended them to be heard, seemed to be true to my purposes for the research--that is, to present the world of the teacher as lived and as talked about by individual teachers. Nonetheless, readers should be aware that I also had to "write up" other anecdotes, going beyond the written record of what was said in conversations and interviews with colleagues. Indeed, this writing was difficult for me, making me feel uncomfortably powerful in the role of researcher, and prompting me to attend to the ethics of speaking for others. I was forced to confront the "multiple and contradictory" aspects of any participant's voice (Maher, 1996, p. 157). I had to take care against presuming to know too much. Mindful of preventing my voice from leaking into, and obscuring the voices of my partners, I knew, nonetheless, that I could never completely withdraw my authorial presence. It was an intense struggle to find a language that I could use to authentically represent another's experience.

My anecdotal "write ups" of my participants' experiences functioned in this research as an "authorial trick of representation". It was a way of telling that endeavoured to give my audience the best possible understanding of situations and events that took place, and were being referred to by my participants. In my interviews and conversations with my colleagues, I discovered that our shared understandings were not always fleshed out in a full descriptive fashion that could be recorded on audiotapes and in transcripts. Instead, in our conversations with one another, a name was mentioned, or an event, and we proceeded from there knowing

what the other person had remembered in just a word or a phrase. In such situations, it seemed to feel unnecessary and quite artificial to explain to one another what we already knew to have taken place and to be true. We had, after all, lived through these experiences with one another, and had talked to each other extensively about the people and the happenings in the program since its inception.

To push my colleagues to tell their anecdotes fully would have required me to more forcefully direct our discussion, both increasing the artifice of the situation, and emphasizing my role as researcher. Because we work very closely as a team of teachers in this program, I was very reluctant to hide behind the mask of researcher, thereby distancing myself from my colleagues, and denying my collegial role which was very significant to this project. My participants had allowed me entrance as a researcher into this site only because I was a colleague. In the same way, they talked to me openly and honestly throughout this study because I was a trusted and respected colleague.

Narrative derives from the Latin, *gnoscere, noscere*, "to know". Each anecdote is not only a personally live(d) experience of what an actual teacher has done in an actual situation with an actual student, but an attempt to reflect upon themes inscribed in the stories (Aoki, 1991a). The anecdotes presented in this research are thus grounded in the lifeworld, while simultaneously providing and giving rise to further pedagogical reflection. The anecdotes may be thought of as a foundation, and as a scaffolding for pedagogical theorizing. As readers reflect upon what a situation in an anecdote holds for a particular student and a particular teacher, they may, at the same time, be inspired to explore more general pedagogical theory by considering what similar situations might hold for other students and other teachers.

Conversations

The teachers who are the participants in this study are Dikaia Vakakis, Dave Anderson, and me, Leanne Fukui. I thought it was important to gather anecdotes from all three of us in order to explore the experiences of a team of teachers, rather than an individual teacher, in an

alternate setting. This decision was automatic; the three of us work so closely together that entering into any study that involved speaking about our program without my partners was unthinkable. Furthermore, because we operate outside of the mainstream, and are, consequently, marginalized by other teachers, I felt that our speaking as a group would grant greater legitimacy to the study. I hoped that our personal anecdotes woven together in a collective story (Grumet, 1988b) would be powerful and thought-provoking for readers. Furthermore, through having a team of teachers compile their experiences, perhaps the research would reveal "the differences in ways of perceiving and thinking about the world" (Matsumoto, 1996, p. 167).

Initially unsure of how I might accomplish my data gathering, I conducted three pilot interviews, each one of about one hour in length, with each of my colleagues in June, 1998. These were privately conducted in our program portables, during time set aside within the school day. Recorded and transcribed, these pilot interviews helped me to get a sense of what it felt like to gather my data, to see what themes might emerge from that data, and to plan for future data gathering accordingly. Some important research decisions came out of the pilot interviews. Because the traditional researcher-interviewee roles felt very awkward in these interviews, I made the decision that in future sessions I would not formally interview my participants, but engage in conversations with them. As part of a preliminary analysis of the transcripts, I discovered that in the pilot interviews I had succeeded in gathering many descriptions of lived experience from my colleagues. In preparation for future conversations, I planned to compile these descriptions and write them up as a collection of anecdotes which might then be used in the final presentation of this research. Consequently, I would be able to use our future conversations for confirmatory purposes, and to ask my colleagues to probe their anecdotes for deeper meaning. This process was supported by van Manen's (1990) guidelines for hermeneutic phenomenological human science, which contends that conversations/interviews serve two very specific purposes: (1) to explore and gather experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a

richer and deeper understanding of human phenomenon, and (2) to develop a conversational relation with a partner about the meaning of an experience.

Following the pilot interviews, I conducted three conversations with each of my colleagues individually. In addition, I engaged my participants in two three-way conversations, one in the midst of data gathering, and one at the conclusion of the write-up of the study. In these conversations of approximately one hour in length, my colleagues and I worked together to draw our experiences and understandings into expression. The two-way conversations took place over the two months of October and November, 1998, under the assumption that out of gradual impressions arise an understanding that is much more than the sum of its parts. These conversations were privately conducted in our program portables during time set aside in the school day, either at lunch, or during non-teaching blocks.

In the conversations, as opposed to the previous interviews, my colleagues were able to work with me and with each other in ways that paralleled how we daily work together. The conversations felt quite collaborative, as opposed to researcher-directed interviews. I felt freer in these sessions to enter into dialogue with my colleagues, talking through some of my own concerns and questions, and having my colleagues offer their input.

Ethical Considerations and Research Relationships

This research endeavour was one of risk. As my colleagues and I embarked upon journeys into and through the tellings and meanings of our experiences, we were exposed to the scrutiny of ourselves, and of one another. In this journey of sense making, research participants were vulnerable to feelings of "discomfort, anxiety, false hope, superficiality, guilt, self-doubt, irresponsibility" (van Manen, 1990, p. 162). However, as in any situation of risk, there existed the possibility for great gain. My desire was for all participants in this research to experience more fully who we are as people and as teachers--to feel "hope, increased awareness, moral stimulation, insight, [and] a sense of liberation" (van Manen, 1990, p. 162). Although telling and writing in some way may separate knowers from the known, these activities also allow us to

claim knowledge, and to create spaces for reflection, and thus, to encourage more perceptive and thoughtful pedagogical action (van Manen, 1990).

We, as the Combined Studies teaching team, entered into tensioned relationships as collaborators in this research. I hoped that this process was one that would nurture the sense of community amongst us. I was eager to dwell in this space of collaboration in which we, in all our differences, might braid our individual characters together to resound a polyphonic voice (Aoki, 1991e).

Throughout this research project, I was very sensitive to protect my working relations with my colleagues. Because we worked together as a team during the course of the research, and would continue to work together after the research was completed, I wanted to be as respectful of the working environment as possible. Furthermore, out of regard for my colleagues, I wanted their experiences with the research to be enjoyable, rather than burdensome, and worthwhile, in terms of being beneficial to their practice.

For the convenience of my colleagues, I conducted the interviews and conversations at school during the school day. Because our relationships are very much based at school, this setting seemed to be the most appropriate for the research to take place.

At the beginning of each conversation with my participants, I allowed time for my colleagues to discuss any research concerns with me. I was very open to the fact that the research as it was initially designed might need to change in response to how we were experiencing the research, and as I received feedback from my colleagues.

To give my colleagues the opportunity to choose to be anonymous in this project, I asked them to give their consents to being named at the start of the project, which were then reconfirmed once the final document was read at the conclusion of the project. Our school principal, McNair's school principal, and a school district administrator also gave their consents to my naming of the two schools and the district at the beginning, and at the end of the research.

After each conversation, the corresponding transcript was given to the colleague involved for his or her perusal. During each subsequent conversation, opportunity was given for participants to address any problems or concerns with the transcript from the conversation immediately prior. All anecdotes to be included in the thesis were individually read by me to my colleagues for their input. Furthermore, the final draft for this document was read and approved by each of my colleagues.

To ensure that participants felt comfortable with access to information gathered during this study, I let them know prior to our conversations that all transcripts made during the course of the project would be available to them upon request. In this way, I hoped to prevent either colleague from feeling that I was conducting covert conversations with the other team member. Furthermore, the two three-way meetings were conducted with all team members present in order to discuss the research together. In later reflection upon these three-way meetings, my participants described them as positive experiences because these meetings seemed to parallel the way that we work together, and they allowed us to establish further cohesion as a team.

In order to acknowledge and thank my colleagues for the amount of time and effort that they contributed for the purposes of this research, I volunteered a day's worth of teaching time to each of them, which they accepted.

Another primary ethical concern for this research involved the protection of our students. In accordance with Ricouer's (1992) notion of the "inextricability of Self and Other" (as cited in D. G. Smith, 1996, p. 8), a teacher is a teacher only because of a relation to an Other. Thus, in this research, as we, as teachers, talked about our experiences of teaching within this program, so were the experiences of our students necessarily named or brought forward. In choosing the anecdotes that would appear in this thesis, I left out all anecdotes that would strictly identify, or would violate the privacy of individuals. Similarly, within the anecdotes that appear in the thesis, information was omitted, or details (i.e., of gender, or circumstance) were altered in order to protect the confidentiality of students involved. In some cases, students represented in anecdotes

are composites of two or more people. All students' names that appear in this thesis are pseudonyms. To do this, I obtained a list of names of students who currently attend our school, but who were absent on one school day in May, 1999, and sequentially substituted each name in the thesis with a name off this list, regardless of gender.

In deciding upon a final version of this thesis, I revisited each of the anecdotes in order to confirm that all student identities had been sufficiently blurred. As part of this revisiting, one of the questions that I asked was, "If I were the actual student depicted in the anecdote, would I recognize myself?" For any one anecdote, many students may see themselves as the individual being described. Over the more than three years that our program has been in operation, many situations have arisen that are quite comparable, though never exactly the same, as past situations. By omitting, and changing information within anecdotes, I have ensured that no student's story is represented without being disguised. Thus, any student will only be able to speculate, without being certain, that a particular narrative addresses his or her experience.

Furthermore, I obtained consensus from my colleagues that, in their opinion, none of the anecdotes unethically expose our students to public scrutiny. In our final three-way meeting, my colleagues had, in fact, already helped to assure me of the degree of student anonymity in the thesis by playfully trying to name some of the students represented, without success in some instances.

Autobiography

Approximately one half of the data gathered for this study was elicited through conversations and interviews with my colleagues, while the remainder was obtained through my own personal reflections on my experiences as a teacher in an alternate setting. For five months, from May to September, 1998, I put concentrated effort into recalling, reflecting upon, and writing about my own experiences as a Combined Studies teacher, interrogating, as van Manen (1990) writes, "from the heart of… [my] existence, from the centre of… [my] being" (p. 43). I easily remembered situations of crisis and celebration because these exceptional experiences

seem to dominate memory; however, I had to work harder to recall the more mundane moments, the moments of day-to-day interactions with students. These ordinary moments, although more elusive, were more representative of our entire experience of working in this setting, and thus very important to me in achieving the purposes of this research.

Throughout the data-gathering process, I needed to be continually attentive to cues that might stir my memory. Hearing words spoken by my colleagues in interviews and conversations, and working with the data I was gathering from them often helped me to remember experiences that I wanted to put into writing. As I journalized my research concerns and questions, my journal writing often prompted me to write more personal anecdotes. Furthermore, my continued situatedness in the research setting as a part-time teacher of Combined Studies also roused me to write. This situatedness also proved to be very beneficial to me in encouraging new questions and understandings to emerge which could then be explored further in conversations and anecdotes. Furthermore, having the research site so accessible also allowed me a space in which to confirm interpretations.

Although it was difficult to write up my colleagues' experiences, to try and capture what another was feeling and the surrounding circumstances, it was equally difficult to enliven my own experiences in words. As much as it required immersing myself in the lifeworld through memory, it also required some distancing from concrete involvement in order to confront myself with what I knew, and what I might present to my audience. The tellings involved, to some degree, "practical theorizing" as I attempted "to uncover and describe... the internal meaning structures, of lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 10).

As Grumet writes, the "I" of autobiographical consciousness, the composing ego, is "an index to a subjectivity that is always open to new possibilities of expression and realization. The "I" is the location of a stream of possibilities" (Grumet, 1988a, p. 66). While aware of the possibilities in my words, I was also bound by wanting to remain true to what was "real". I found that dwelling amidst memory could often take one into places of uncertainty and doubt, where

one began to question how much of what had been remembered had actually happened, and what could be attributed to imagination, or to faulty recollection.

As van Manen writes, all recollections and reflections "are already *transformations* of experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 54). Indeed, there may be multiple layers of interpretation in each anecdote that appears in this thesis: the interpretation of the experience in the moment as it was lived out; the interpretation of the experience as it was remembered in a particular moment of time; the interpretation of the experience as it was articulated in a particular moment of time; and the interpretation involved in the authoring of the anecdote. With this in mind, perhaps fidelity to the pursuit of truth, rather than truth itself, is the measure of these narratives (Grumet, 1988a). While this might be seen as a shortcoming of my research, it also underlies the reason for the very existence for phenomenology and hermeneutics, namely, "the gaps, the contradictions, the leaks and explosions" involved in our ways of thinking about our experience in the world (Grumet, 1988a, p. 67).

This project was of great personal importance to me; in gathering autobiographical data, I invested a lot of myself. In hopes that readers would understand how I had been changed as a result of my experiences in this setting, I felt a weighty responsibility to use autobiography to cultivate attention "to situation as element of the self, to self as situation, and to [the] transformation and reconstitution of both" (Pinar, 1988, p. 148).

Interpretations, Writing and Re-Writing

By the conclusion of the three individual conversations with my colleagues, and one of the three-way conversations, I had amassed over 100 anecdotes of our team's experiences in this setting. I had already worked hard in the conversations to share my anecdotal renderings and early interpretations with my colleagues in order to solicit their input. And then, the time came for me to enter into a more rigorous analysis of the data that I had gathered, a time to begin a complex process of rereading, rewriting, rethinking, reflecting, and recognizing (van Manen, 1990).

First, I read and reread through all the transcripts of all the interviews and conversations, in addition to all the anecdotes that I had gathered, with the intent of coding them into categories. I was amazed by the vibrancy of the text, and how meanings of the text could be constituted and re-constituted with each reading. This emphasized for me how human meaning is dynamic and set in moments of time and space. Our understandings of our experiences teaching within this program are continually evolving; the understandings that I had after a first year of teaching in Combined Studies are very different from the understandings that I have now. Dwelling in the midst of writing this thesis has been enlightening for me, and yet the conclusions that I come to as I write this thesis may change considerably after another year of teaching in this program. As Jardine (1992) writes,

> This 'adding to the understanding of our lives' is not a matter of establishing once and for all what certain objective features of human experience are and are not. We cannot fully know once and for all what [an experience] *is*, because, so to speak, it is *not* yet. As something which forms a living part of our experience, we don't fully know what it is because we don't yet know what will become of it. We don't know this *because it is still coming*. (as cited in Richter, 1994, p. 7)

Nonetheless, "the fundamental human quest is the search for meaning", and despite the transience of sense making, I engaged in the rigorous process of coding in search of themes around which I could orient my study (Macdonald, 1988, p. 105). The word theme comes to us from the Greek root meaning that which is placed, from the stem of, to put, to place, case in which to put something (Klein's Etymological Dictionary, 1967). Some prominent themes of the experience of teachers in this setting began to emerge for me, namely: connection to students, separation from students, and negotiation of power with students. As an overriding, connecting principle, hope, rather than risk, seemed to dominate the landscape of teachers' experience. Identifying themes arising out of my data gave me a context in which to put, or to place my study. These themes later gave me structure for organizing the chapters of this thesis.

The next thing to do was to write. According to the phenomenological hermeneutic tradition, the process of writing cannot be distinguished from the process of interpretive analysis. I decided to begin my writing in the third chapter of the thesis. Whereas I saw the two introductory chapters as establishing context for readers, the final four chapters would be where the bulk of the analysis would appear. My writing of the final four chapters began with a stringing together of citations from outside sources. Due to our position of marginalization, I felt a great need to provide legitimacy for our program, and our experiences within it. Having outside sources reaffirm that what we are doing is not only acceptable but pedagogically sound gave me greater confidence in talking to others about our work, and, indeed, a greater desire to tell others about what we are doing in Combined Studies. This textual support created a framework for me to enter into with the voices of my colleagues and me, with our anecdotes and our analysis.

With this structure in place, I began to thread our anecdotes through the framework where they seemed appropriate, thus creating a stream of citations and anecdotes. This text, in Grumet's (1988a) words, then functioned like "a scalpel"--opening me up to meaning (p. 148). I read and re-read the text to see where analysis would fit, and what could be said in the way of interpretation of these anecdotes. As I composed and inserted my analyses, I continued to read and re-read the growing document, making revisions continually. The textual practice of writing my analyses invited me to play with interpretations, some which endured many revisions, others which were only fleeting. As Richter (1994) writes, "Reading and re-reading. Writing and re-writing. Each time different than the time before as we return to the text changed by the experience of previous journeys" (p. 31). Indeed, out of each reading of the growing document arose something different; there was, as there will continue to be, always something more to think about and say (D. G. Smith, 1994).

At first, I chose to include only anecdotes rather than any other direct quotations from my colleagues. However, I found that, in so doing, I was ignoring much of what was said in interviews and conversations. This was especially unacceptable because my colleagues often said

things that were very important to the analysis of our experiences within the program. Furthermore, I wanted to avoid monopolizing the space of this thesis with my own words, and instead, work to share the space with my colleagues, thus reflecting the cooperative nature of our working relationship. Recognizing this, I began to insert throughout the text direct quotes from my colleagues that had been gathered through interviews and conversations.

As the text began to lengthen and take shape, I began to engage in more intensive dialogues with the text. Reading the text aloud, and letting it resonate within me, I compared the experience of receiving the text to what I had experienced and understood as a teacher in the program, and what I knew about my colleagues' experiences and understandings about teaching in this program. As Grumet (1988a) writes, reading provides a passage between "being in the world and our encoded representations of that world" (p. 136). Because I saw my research as an attempt to allow readers to vicariously enter into and "live" out the program through engagement with the text, it was important for me to see the extent of resemblance between "being in the world" and reading the "encoded representation of the world". As I read the text aloud, I remembered the concerns of my colleagues who had each articulated that words could not really do their experience in the program justice, and that to gain a true understanding of teaching in this program it needed to be lived.

I faced many feelings of inadequacy throughout the writing of the thesis. With the inclusion of each anecdote and citation, so many other anecdotes and citations were set aside. With each entry of analysis came the accompanying feelings of how much more could be said, and how singling out only one of a multiplicity of paths of interpretation was somehow insufficient. So many times I wanted to extradite myself from the struggle. However, I had a true vested interest in this study, and I persevered. "Interest, *interesse*," as Heidegger (1977) writes, "means to be among and in the midst of things, or to be at the center of a thing and to stay with it" (as cited in Richter, 1994, p. 36).

In retrospect, I would compare the experience of writing the product of this thesis with composing a photo album, one of great personal significance to me, but one that I would eagerly share with anyone demonstrating interest or curiosity. In this album, I included many snapshots of experience. But, in my making my choices of inclusion, I had to be very selective. As album maker, I am aware that the subjects represented in my snapshots, both teachers and students, have had less choice than I. Trying to enrich the experience of others viewing this album, I provided captions that refer to one or more of the snapshots. These captions provide wider context for the snapshots, and try to point out interesting aspects of the snapshots. However, they are not meant to be fully explanatory or definitive; they are meant to start conversations and discussions rather than end them. It is my hope that all snapshots and captions may contribute well to the final impression that the album, as a whole, leaves upon the reader. The sequence, the framing of each snapshot by other snapshots and captions, and the graphic display of the snapshots on the page were all taken under consideration in composing this album. However, it should be noted that the album is not complete, only finished. The finished album that was created "always and by its nature refers to what is not seen" (Grumet, 1988a, p. 106).

The Text

A text full of living action and activity has resulted from my writing. It is my hope that the language of the text reverberates the world, and draws readers into the world sketched by the text. In the words, in between the words, and in spite of the words of the text originates a multiplicity of meaning.

Despite the opening two chapters which are intended to set the stage for what follows, the text of this thesis may appear visually different than that of a typical thesis. As Gadamer (1975) writes, an interpretation of the text cannot stand apart from the reader. Thus, in pursuit of reader interpretation, I wanted the text to be inviting and engaging for readers, as well as accommodating and supportive of interpretations. I wanted to create a text that both visually and

structurally beckons for a dialogic response, so that readers in their visitings and revisitings of this text might recognize aspects that might apply to them, and be somehow changed as a result.

Taken together in this text, our anecdotes of our lived experiences might seem to readers to resemble "a soap opera whose narratives are also frequently interrupted, repetitive, and endless" (Grumet, 1988a, p. 87). Just as there is no seamless, unified narrative of recollected experience (Britzman, 1995), so does the text appear with gaps or spaces. As author, I hoped that these fissures might signify the text's openness to reader response. The empty spaces in the text might be thought of as "spaces of tensionality, where... [readers] may be drawn in to constitute and re-constitute our understandings of education" (Chamberlain et al., 1993, p. 9).

I also hoped that this graphically alternative form of representation would speak to teachers who may have found educational research, steeped in traditions and language distant from the everyday world of the classroom, to be unapproachable, and therefore, irrefutable. Writing in a style and a form that does not preclude the reader, I have "sought to open a dialogue between scholars and practitioners, creating a forum where the hegemonic authority of scholars to say what things mean can be contested.... As [readers] read... [I hope they might] compose alternative texts, in their minds, reworking, recasting, [and] retelling" (Tobin & Davidson, 1990, p. 282).

The writing of this text, to some degree, was experienced by me as a poetizing project. The graphic placement of the anecdotes, citations, and analyses with spaces in-between evoked the sense that I was writing poetry. Furthermore, reading and re-reading the text aloud again and again with a hermeneutic focus on words drew my attention to the rhythm and musicality of the language in the text. Although I do not claim that this thesis may be usefully thought of as poetry, as the composer of this work, I have been attuned to the sound of the language in it. Assuming that poetry is a form of writing that invites audience participation and interpretation, this likeness to poetry would seem to comply with the purposes of the research.

In order that readers might sense the texture of the voices in the document, and gain greater context for the words read, I have used five different fonts to represent the voices in this study. *One font has been used for the voice of Dikaia.* *One font has been used for the voice of Dave.* *One font has been used for my "anecdotal" voice.* One font has been used when I have cited voices from outside sources. **One font has been used for my "analytical" voice.** My hope is that the different fonts might allow readers to better orient themselves to the research through greater connection to the voices used. Although readers might look for significance in my choice of fonts, for instance to establish a hierarchy amongst voices, none was intended. My primary concern was that the distinction between each font, and hence, each voice, be as obvious as possible. For my own writing purposes, the differing fonts helped me to see the proportions with which I used each different voice. This visual display especially helped me to see how successful I was in representing the voices of my colleagues.

Knowing that readers might have difficulties in maneuvering through the many voices of this thesis, I tried to attend to the structuring of the text. One space between lines in the text was used to separate one voice from another, or to signify when a single voice made a transition from one anecdote or comment to another anecdote or comment. Furthermore, shifting the justification of the text from the left to the right side was also used to distinguish changes in voice or subject matter. Centering of the text, and breaking lines prematurely were used to slow the reading of the text, and place emphasis on significant points.

<u>The Humility of the Research, and of the Researcher</u>

In this research, I have earnestly tried in words to bring to life this program and the experience of teaching within this program, in order to deepen an understanding of what it is to teach. In looking back at what I have accomplished, I know that I have fallen short. Like any research endeavour, this study has limitations and flaws.

In initially undertaking this research, I was aware of the seductive nature of narrative to masquerade as truth. In our stories, "every telling is a partial prevarication.... Our stories are the masks through which we can be seen, and with every telling we stop the flood and swirl of thought so someone can get a glimpse of us, and maybe catch us if they can" (Grumet, 1991, p. 322). However, as D. G. Smith (1994) writes, it is exactly the ambiguity of all narrative that renders it hopeful "because the imminent ambiguity held within them holds open a space for genuine speaking, holding out the promise that something new can be said from out of the mists of the oracle of our own flesh" (p. 182). Looking back on what I have done, I feel that in this research I have reaped some of the benefits of playing along with narrative's "masquerade".

In this study, I also inherited the dilemmas of language itself. In language, as Lacan (1977) noted, there is a world already constituted; we are not simply the creators of language; instead, we are born into a language system, and thus, in some ways, language creates us (as cited in Martusewicz, 1992). Although language facilitates understanding, characteristics of language may also limit understanding. For example, words flatten out life; "words are spoken, but they are dead words" (Grumet, 1988c, p. 537). Furthermore, as Derrida emphasized, the meaning of language cannot be assumed to be a stable, predictable entity. "Meaning is never immediately present in a sign. It is always what the sign is not and so in a way is absent from the sign, dependent upon its relation to other signs" (Martusewicz, 1992, p. 140). The effect of language then is that it is constantly shifting, and flickering in-between absence and presence.

I am also sensitive to the fact that in this research, by choosing to speak from the teacher's perspective, I have silenced my students to some degree (Fine, 1987). Admittedly, by making this choice, I "[put] up barriers between adult and child... [possibly] ignoring the very thing... [I was] trying to tease out in this study, namely, the relation between adult and child that is somehow defined by the notion of risk" (S. J. Smith, 1989, p. 61). However, I desired this research to speak from my own situatedness as an educator within the Combined Studies program. I feel profoundly transformed by my experiences vibrantly dwelling in tension amidst

my students, and my colleagues in all their irreducible differences (Richter, 1994). Our ongoing

dialogues with one another inspired me to passionately claim my voice as researcher and author.

As Goethe (1963) writes, "One learns to know only what one loves, and the deeper and fuller the

knowledge is to be, the more powerful and vivid must be the love, indeed the passion" (as cited in

van Manen, 1990, p. 6).

The roles of researcher and author situated me in a hierarchical position of authority

(Richter, 1994). Despite my attempts to free the informant experience from tampering by the

researcher, the research agenda was ultimately mine--all observation, questioning, selection, and

analysis were subject to my own strengths and limitations, and the language used in the

presentation of this study was under my jurisdiction (LeCompte, 1993). From this position of

power, I now choose to emphasize that what was (re)searched and (re)written in this study is

unfinished, and incomplete.

To do a full and complete interpretive description of the life-world of teachers in all its

complexity and ambiguity would be impossible. I could not fully capture, within the confines of

this thesis, the experience of living within this evolving, dynamic program. Like an artist of an

arrow in flight, I could only illustrate the happenings at one particular moment in time. In writing

this thesis, I felt at times as though I were struggling to see and to grab and to pin down a wildly

flapping butterfly before it took off out of my reach once again.

I would hope that readers would understand that the descriptions and interpretations of

our teaching experiences and of the program that are presented in this study are not to be taken as

prescriptions for how others might reproduce the site. This site offers one way of working with

students, and not the only way of working with students; therefore, this site is held up to readers

for interrogation, rather than duplication. In my experience, I have discovered that teachers who

are most effective at what they do continue to seek out what works well for them personally.

Furthermore, I also believe that while this study might seem to present recommendations for

teachers in working with all students in every setting, we should remember that at the heart of pedagogy is concern for unique beings in unique situations.

Dikaia so wisely pointed out to me when discussing the shortcomings of this research, "These are only the told stories. What about the untold stories?" Indeed, there was much that was not said in the interviews and conversations, and much that could not be said because it had already been lost to memory. There was also much data that was gathered for this study, but excluded from the pages of this thesis. In addition, no single interpretation of any of the anecdotes that appear in this research will ever preclude the need for another interpretation. This research acknowledges the need for "a sense of life in which there is always something left to say, with all the difficulty, risk, and ambiguity that such generativity entails" (Jardine, 1992, p. 119).

<div align="center">A Journey Imbued with Hope...</div>

As I embarked upon this personal journey, I embraced difficulty, and ambiguity that paradoxically threatened defeat as much as it offered possibilities (Chamberlain et al., 1993). Within this texture of risk, I mindfully entered the in-between, at once standing in the midst of things as they were experienced, and at the same time, interpretively probing the boundaries of experience. The journey was sustained by hope--a hope that this study would create opportunities for me and others to inquire into the responsibilities of educators thoughtfully walking with and leading young people in ventures of living and of life.

CHAPTER 3: CHALLENGING AND MOVING BEYOND THE LABEL OF "AT-RISK"

While standing in the middle of things, interpretive pedagogy looks to the margins of collective life for the oracular word of signification in the understanding that it is exactly at the boundary of experience, at the place of where we discover our limit, where we become available to that which addresses us. If we are at our wits end with a child in school, that is where we begin to interrogate most authentically our presuppositions about children and about our parental or pedagogic selves. If we feel threatened by new ideas, new political arrangements, and so forth, this is a sign that we are being extended beyond our comfort, called forth to a new ability to respond. (D. G. Smith, 1994, p. 176)

There is much to be learned at the margins.
(T. Aoki, personal communication, 1998)

Believing that the world was flat, there were still some who ventured to see what happened at the edges.

When I was asked to be a part of this program, my immediate reaction was to be petrified. As my principal spoke the words of invitation, my jaw dropped to the floor. I knew the kinds of kids the teacher of this program would have to deal with--the thugs, the bullies, the hell-raisers, the losers.... "Why would anyone in her right mind want to do that?" I asked myself.

Prior to teaching in this setting,... I'd think it would be the class hellion, the class trouble-maker, the kid who maybe sat at the very back of the class and didn't say very much... the scrapers, the kids who consistently score borderline pass, maybe between 40 and 50%, that don't go to summer school. I thought it would be that kind of kid. But it's not.

Those of us who share our lives with children know that neither the image of the corrupt child born in original sin nor the image of the innocent babe describes the wily, winsome, wise, wild, and whiny creatures who are our kids. (Grumet, 1988a, pp. 156-7)

"What are they like?" It is a question that is asked of us often.
How can one describe our students in words?
How do you flatten out *one* living multi-dimensional being into a pat description-- let alone a diverse *group* of people?

There aren't the words. Only if you prefer to know our students from a distance.

What I can say is that they are not who I first expected them to be.

It was one week before the school year was to begin. One week before my debut as a teacher in the Combined Studies program. I sat in a movie theatre watching Dangerous Minds*--a movie about a young woman beginning to teach in an alternate program in an inner-city Los Angeles high school. Suddenly, I began to feel hot and anxious--suffocated despite the carefully modulated currents of air circulating around me. I twisted in my seat, looking around for exits.*

The Combined Studies program is unique in that it welcomes a wide range of students typically described as "marginal" in their commitment and ability to function within the secondary school system. These students bring with them multiple histories--of involvement with the courts, of difficult family situations, of street life, and more. They include students considered intellectually or creatively gifted who have displayed an inability or unwillingness to conform to the demands of traditional secondary expectations. They are students who, for one reason or another, have been *alien*ated from the "mainstream" of the secondary population. (Chamberlain et al., 1993, pp. 10-11)

The word *alien* originally comes from the Latin word *alienus*, meaning *belonging to another* (Klein's Etymological Dictionary, 1967).

When I think of students in the "mainstream", I think of those swimming happily along with the flow of the current of a vigorous river driving downward to the ocean. For these ones, the river is a vital, sustaining place. But how is the river experienced for the "aliens", those unlike the rest, who kick up and out of the water by choice or otherwise, at various places as the powerful river heads downstream? What is it to be left on the shore, to be told that you no longer belong with the rest?

On the other hand,
perhaps my question is futile
because, as Leggo (1995) writes,
we are, all of us aliens,
only seeking to mask our alienation.
(p. 10)

I stood in front of a Combined Studies classroom for the first time on one day in September--smiling brightly and feigning confidence and assurance. It was a different milieu than I had ever taught in before. First of all, they were a group primarily composed of young men. All of them were over 16, and virtually all of

these young men wore ball caps, and jackets. Most of them looked uncomfortable--like they intended to bolt from the room at the first opportunity. And the young women were far from the sweet young grade 8 girls whom I had taught in my previous year of teaching. Some of the faces looked hard--older than their years--older than me. I wondered how I looked to them. I was still being mistaken for a student in the hallways of the school, even with my pressed blouses and conservative blazers. My chunky platform heels only brought me to an intimidating five-foot-three. It took effort to think that these individuals in front of me were the vulnerable ones, the ones in need of my care and protection.

What of this need of a teacher to intimidate?
To strike fear into the hearts of students?
A fearful teacher feels the need to cultivate fear in her students.

... the Other [is banished] as enemy or potential enemy of the "I". (D. G. Smith, 1996, p. 11)

As a teacher, the question of "what is to be done" with respect to Others (a particular child, or group) depends on who I think the Other is, and who I think I am in relation to them. (D. G. Smith, 1996, p. 6)

This program was first described to Dave and me as an "at-risk" program. I can understand why; it is an expedient way to label the program, and in naming it as such, most people have some concept of what this program might be. Yet, perhaps, as Foucault would argue, in naming the program more is betrayed about our students than revealed (as cited in Fine, 1995).

Ironically, the most expedient explanation may be the most damaging.

The term "at risk" has... become a buzzword much like "diversity", "choice", or "privatization", and, like these terms, the assumptions that underlie its usage have gone largely unexamined.... The cultural construction of a group defined through a discourse of "risk" represents a "shaved and partial image".... Most fundamentally, the rhetoric of risk keeps us from being broadly, radically, and structurally creative about transforming schools and social conditions for today's and tomorrow's youth. (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995, pp. 1,7-8)

Rhetoric may bind us to history involuntarily.
And in this union, history is dragged into the present.

[People]... make their own history, but do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances directly chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in

revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that
has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary
crisis, they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to
their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and
costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in
this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language. (Marx,
1981, as cited in Britzman, 1991, p. 19)

I approached Dave with my ideas for my thesis, namely, how I intended to examine
the experience of "at-risk" teaching. He politely listened to me for a while, and
then said bluntly, "But I don't think our kids are 'at-risk'. I don't like the term.
You're going to have to find new language." I was a little alarmed, after all, a lot of
thought had already gone into this project. I explained to him that he need not
worry because I intended to use the word *risk*, not in a negative sense, but to mean
possibility. Dave only shook his head. We had worked together for many years, and
I could tell that he was not pleased.

As Lacan (1977) had asserted,
> the relationship between human beings and the world depends
> on the particular configuration of knowledge at a
> particular moment in history…. We are not simply the
> creators of language, we are born into a language system;
> on the contrary, language creates us. (Martusewicz, 1992,
> p. 135)

The word *risk* comes from the Latin word *risicare*, originally
meaning *to navigate among cliffs*
(Klein's Etymological Dictionary, 1967).

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily
into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is
populated--overpopulated--with the intentions of others.
Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions
and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin,
1981, as cited in Britzman, 1991, pp. 22-23)

"But 'glory' doesn't mean
'a knockdown, dragout fight,'" said Alice.
"When I use the word it does," replied Humpty Dumpty.
"The question," said Alice, "is whether
you can make a word mean anything you want it to."
"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty,
"Who is to be master--that's all."
(Carroll, 1973, as cited in Pagano, 1988, p. 517)

I struggled and struggled to be the master--to make the term "at-risk" perform
for me in the ways in which I wanted--to shake off its sinister implications of
danger and fear and failure, and to open itself up to hopeful connections to

potential and possibility. I kept hearing over and over the words of my colleague, "I can only agree to using the term if it embodies potential to change for the better."

Eventually, I realized that the term was more of a burden than a support to me in my work. Indeed, the language was too powerful--the words were simply too full of meaning. I began to see that the attention and focus upon how we as teachers experience teaching "at-risk" students instead needed to be directed to how we as teachers experience teaching students in an alternate setting.

Reflecting upon my own feelings of defeat as I succumbed to the power of language, I wondered about all my students who many would classify as "at-risk".

In being constituted as human subjects,
they are subjected to a naming that they find objectionable.

What of their struggle to heave off this label affixed to them?
Or else their efforts to try and transform pervasive understandings of "at-risk"?

The word, *stereotype*, comes from Greek origins meaning,
*firm, hard, solid, stiff, blow, mark of a blow,
impression, stamp on a coin, pattern, model*
(Klein's Etymological Dictionary, 1967).

In this writing, I wish to complicate and dismantle the ready stereotypes. I desire to expose the ambiguity, and complexity of my students, as well as the value in doing that.

Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Martuseciwz, 1992, p. 147)

To have those "at-risk" means also having those "not-at-risk", and thus, a tacit acceptance of a binary understanding of two discrete categories of students, in which young people are by and large the same.

May I suggest we dwell between the understandings of *thesis* and *anti-thesis* to have a *synthesis* of new and multiple understandings of students, and how we as teachers might work with them?

But not as a binary becoming one (a totality) rather, as a whole which is not a whole. (Aoki, 1995, as cited in Hirose, 1995, p. 6)

The "third space"... enables other positions to emerge.... This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Bhaba, 1990, as cited in Rutherford, 1990, p. 211)

They were supposed to be a class of non-academics bound for nowhere fast. And yet, today, as is often the case, without prodding, without encouragement, without direction from me, they enter into my classroom, grab their file folders, and sit down and get to work, before the bell to start the class even sounds.

"I hate this page," says Matthew as he rips out a page in frustration. I come over to take a look. It is beautiful work that clearly took time and creativity--fine borders and flourishes have been carefully added, titles have been done in stylized script. Now it has been crumpled up and tossed aside. "I have done this three times and I hate it! It is still not good enough!" he says.

Carolina shows me a set of cartoons that she has created to depict the different stages in the construction of a pyramid. Each frame has been beautifully drawn in black fineliner and then shaded with pencil. She has created a cute character whom she has threaded through each of the scenes. "That's great," I say. "Are you going to put them in your book now?"
"Oh no," she says, looking shocked that I would ask that. "They're not done yet."

"You have to read what I wrote!" Bijan bounds through my door and into the classroom at lunch, grabbing my arm, and physically dragging me into the portable next door. "It's SO GOOD. I didn't know I could write so good!" He hands the piece to me, and beams as he sits on the desk in front of me and watches me read. His knees are bouncing up and down excitedly; his eyes are sparkling as they eagerly await my reaction. It strikes me that it doesn't really matter what I say. He knows it's good.

"May I have the sample for the page that we're supposed to be working on?"
"Sure," I say. In order to help students get started and to understand what we have in mind for the various pages in their books, we create our own sample pages that students may use for reference. I pull out the desired one from my desk, and hand it to him. Ricardo takes it from me, looks at it for a moment, and then covers his mouth, while beginning to fake laughing hysterically.
"Is there a problem?" I ask confusedly.
"Only that I can do way better than this," he says with confidence as he walks away.

It is lunch hour, one of the final days of the semester. And, as is customary for this time of the year, more commonly known as "crunch time" to those in our program, my classroom is packed with students cramming to get their final assignments complete. There are not enough desks for everyone--students are in the midst of hauling in extra furniture from next door. As I listen to them, I hear brief conversations erupting here and there, but mostly there is just a feverish buzz of students hard at work. An anxious cry snags my attention, "Are you open after school?" I can see the question is all-important with so many eyes following his voice to see my response.

It is five o'clock... almost two and a half hours after the final bell to end the school day. The exam had finished for most of the students hours ago. Nilofar has remained. Although Math is one of her stronger subjects, she is slow and methodical in her work. She has just used my classroom phone to inform her uncle that she will be late for work at the family business. Nilofar works there diligently, without complaint, everyday after school. She knows that it is important to her family that she be there to help out. I ask her how much longer she will need. "Just wait," she says, "I need to check it one more time."

In these last days of the school year, I look out from my portable where I have a great view of the school's Smithrite garbage bin. The receptacle is getting dangerously high. Binders, paper, and projects are teetering atop the mound, awaiting their trip to the landfill.

In my class, I am asking students for examples of their work that I might display in my classroom for next year. Some students need to make sure that I will take care of their work. "I'll get it back after you're done, right?" they ask.

The entire school was virtually barren. Students had already begun their summer vacations, thoughts of school long behind them. Voices drifted into my portable window from volleyball players in a sand court outside. The thumping of a boom box in someone's trunk was reverberating throughout my classroom. The lyrics, in my opinion, were questionable, but I chose to ignore them rather than squelch the first days of summer vacation. My classroom was virtually empty, with desks pushed to the sides, and walls stripped of all decorations. Unlike other teachers in the building, however, I wasn't alone. Amanda had not yet completed her work for the semester. She worked steadily for the most part, and looked longingly out the window at times. I felt badly for her. Her work took more time than her classmates because she paid great attention to detail, and she refused to hand in second-rate work. Finally, Amanda handed me her last piece of writing for editing. I remarked, "Amanda, this is the longest piece of writing I've seen you do." Despite the date, she was still willing to give her utmost in effort. And it was not until the afternoon of the following day that she was able to join her friends in enjoying the freedom of summer vacation, content in the knowledge that she had successfully completed all of her grade 11 high school credits.

In reflecting upon these episodes with my students,
I see the "limits of language, that is, the resistance of... [beings] to be fully named" (D. G. Smith, 1994, p. 167). The name "at-risk" seems unbefitting for these students in these circumstances.

An article has been written about our program by a journalist from the school board. Entitled "Combined Studies: A Success Story", it is very complimentary of our teaching in this program, and has, I think, captured the basics of our program quite well.

My students gather around my desk to read, surprised at this rare public acknowledgment of our program. Immediately, however, attention is being drawn to a single line in the article, "Over 90% of Combined Studies students,

many of whom were chronic dropouts, pass the standard grade 12 provincial exams, and graduate."

Quickly sounds of incredulity and anger fill the room. "What? I can't believe this!" "It makes us sound like a bunch of losers." "Hey, Ms. Fukui. It says we're DROPOUTS. I never wanted to drop out of school. EVER."

Many of the students in our program have never been "dropouts". However, we also enroll many students who have in fact "dropped out"--some for mere days, others for over a year.

But, what is important to understand is that one cannot name those students "dropouts", and gain any better understanding of them besides being apprised of the fact that these individuals stopped attending school at one point in their lives for any of an infinite number of reasons.

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[A] deficit model discourse typically gets framed as private and
personal, often taking the form of blaming the victim--
particularly in a nation whose dominant culture perpetuates the
myth of meritocracy (McIntosh, 1988, 1992), in which all
privileges are assumed to be earned or deserved, a nation which
systematically denies or attempts to ignore the pervasive
exclusionary and oppressive practices in society. (Swadener &
Lubeck, 1995, p. 2)
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But I observe how <u>victims</u> don't survive in our program. The students who succeed with us in our program resist victimization.

Sean's father phoned the school early today in a panic. Apparently, Sean had just received a letter from his biological mother, someone from whom he had not heard in years. Sean's father wanted to make sure that he would be okay, and that we would treat him with extra sensitivity today. The day went as per usual, as did the next, and the next. In fact, Sean continued on his even keel right on through the semester, and sailed through his graduation from high school. Dave's comment on the situation was that perhaps we all were remiss in continually underestimating Sean and what he was able to handle.

Heath looked a little sheepish today. And yet he seemed to be garnering the admiration of his classmates, all of whom seemed anxious to talk with him. I wondered what was going on-- especially because over the course of the morning, he was beginning to look more and more uncomfortable with this flurry of attention. Eventually someone decided to fill me in. "Did you hear?" she asked in an excited voice. "Heath got into a fight over the weekend!" I was taken aback. Students usually didn't include me in these types of conversations. Looking at the puzzlement on my face, she was disappointed in my response. "No, you don't understand. It was over Combined Studies."

I went over to Heath to find out more. "Heath, what's all this about?" I asked. "I don't know," he mumbled looking down at his work. "I just got mad. He said it was cut and paste." As much as I condemn violence, I couldn't help it. I smiled; I was proud of him.

Show me other kids who are that passionate about school, or that loyal to their school.
Go into that population of 1150 or 1100 in the rest of the school, and see how many are willing
to lay it down somewhat to defend their school.
Our kids are loyal to the program,
and they are loyal to us as teachers.
I think we know that they would go to the wall for us if they had to.
It's just that they haven't been given the opportunity.

Other teachers, having formerly taught our students, complained that these students just didn't seem to care about anything.

Almost everyday, Troy would ask me if he could check his graduation plan. This was a form that we used to chart how and when students would graduate. It grew a little tiresome after a while; the graduation plan didn't change except when we moved from one semester to the next, but still Troy wanted to see it. I would make a joke out of it, saying, "Troy, it doesn't magically change from one day to the next. You actually have to finish a semester before it changes!" But in reflecting upon my annoyance, I knew I should have been thrilled. He had his eyes set on the goal. He was carefully cultivating it, so that it would continue to flourish.

Until his entrance into Combined Studies, one block of Derreck's timetable for three years was set aside for one block of learning assistance. As a result, a close relationship had developed between Derreck and the teachers and students in this class. One day in the middle of the term, he asked whether he could go visit his former class so that he could show them what he had done so far this year. After receiving my permission, Derreck took his books with him, and was gone for almost the entire block. When he returned, I asked him what the experience had been like. He said that the visit had taken so long because the students in that class had many questions for him. "You know what? They couldn't believe this," he said to me with a smile as he gestured to his book and sat back down at his desk.

"I need a coffee. I stayed up until one o'clock last night working on homework."
The voice sounded whiny and frazzled, emphasizing the sacrifice that had been made.
"Oh, yeah? That's nothing. I was up until three o'clock," someone else countered defiantly.

It is convenient to assume that those students
who have disengaged themselves from school
don't want to be successful,
don't care what others think of them,
and have *given up on themselves.*

However, over the time I have spent working with my students, I have seen over and over again that this is not the case at all.

Jarrit walked in and slammed the door behind him.
"Did you hear what those punks in the parking lot said?" he asked me angrily.
"They said that they couldn't believe that you left <u>them</u> to teach <u>us</u>--
as though we were the scum of the earth or something!"

Each week in the local paper, there is a section listing the schedule for upcoming court cases taking place in our community. I hesitate to look at this section of the paper because occasionally I see names that I recognize. Yet, often, the name that appears and the charge listed beside it seem so incompatible to me. I can recall more than one student who, despite being involved in criminal activities outside of school, worked very hard to be a model student in class.

Many of our students have to miss school in order to appear in court. For some, standing before a judge is a novel experience. For others, it is tiresome and meaningless, a regular part of life. Some students have no difficulty in telling us the reason why they have to miss school. However, there are others for whom going to appear before a judge is a shameful experience, or, at least, an event that is humiliating to confess to one's teacher.

One day, I saw Chelsea's name listed for a court appearance. On that same day, I can remember a hesitant young woman asking me if she could miss an upcoming class for a dentist appointment. Although I knew differently, I didn't question her about it.

Patrick was not going to graduate, not this year anyway. He had been having a very successful term, and should have been able to complete the last of his graduation requirements by June. At the end of the semester, however, he seemed to self-destruct in terms of his attendance at school. He simply stopped coming, and no number of concerned phone calls home seemed to make any difference.

Although we did not see him in person, we began hearing through the grapevine that he was announcing to others that he had been assured of graduation in June. We could only shake our heads. A talented individual, a thinker, a writer, and an artist. It just seemed like such a waste.

When the day of the graduation banquet finally arrived at the end of June, we hadn't seen Patrick for a month. Nonetheless, he appeared at the gala event, dressed in a dashing tuxedo, and looking as handsome as I'd ever seen him. We all knew it was a farce, his teachers, his friends. It was sad. The quest to be normal meant so much to him that he was willing to play a role tonight.

As part of gathering data for a presentation, I had taken an anonymous survey from one of the grade 12 classes in the main school to get a sense of outside perceptions of our program. As I was compiling data, I came across an interesting quote, "I don't think that Combined Studies should be allowed at our school. It makes our school look dum [<u>sic</u>]." When one of my own students happened to come across this on my desk, he demanded to know exactly who in the school had written this. "I don't know," I said honestly.
"If I find out," he said flatly, "I'm going to kick his head in."

Perhaps before now, they had not yet been ready to care.

Caring, after all, means summoning the courage to try wholeheartedly,
and with that, embracing the possibility of *real* failure,
failure that may be felt to the core of one's being.

Students before being admitted into the program must indicate to us that they do indeed care about school, and that they do desire to graduate. In their entrance interviews, we simply ask them why they want to continue their education in our program. The expected answers might seem obvious, but it is a question to which we have received some surprising answers, such as: "Because my mom says I have to go to school or I can't live at home", or "Well, what else am I going to do all day, when all my friends are in school", or "I don't know". These responses usually illustrate the fact that these students, at this time, do not see any real meaning in school, or perhaps, that they lack the focus or maturity necessary to have success in this program.

Students must continue to demonstrate their commitment to their education throughout the time they are with us. This is shown through attendance, and through what we term "scholarly" behaviour in class.

Everyone was working well in the classroom, except for two girls at the back of the room who seemed to have had exciting weekends that they wanted to share with one another. I was about to intervene when Ian turned around in his seat angrily to confront the talkers seated behind him, "Will you two just shut up!?!"
"Yeah!" piped up another disgruntled student. "We're trying to think and all you do is keep your traps flappin'."

"Well, how'd I do? Can I look at my appropriateness for today?"
It seems so incompatible.
This young man, Vincent, unshaven and wearing a ratty, green touque, might be someone to avoid outside of a 7-eleven late at night.
Yet, here he was, standing beside a teacher's desk after the bell had gone to end the day to ask how well he had performed in class today.
His question was almost child-like in nature.
And what made me happiest is that he wasn't afraid to show that he cared about school.

I had actually taught Vincent three years ago in a mainstream classroom. I can remember having to literally stand over him to get him to do anything in class. I could tell he was not getting anything out of his school experience, and it was not long before he stopped coming altogether.

When he came back to us in Combined Studies, he did not look much different. But, something had changed. Although it took time for him to get used to being in school again, soon he began to show that he was serious about his education. He became very conscientious about making sure that he completed his attendance requirements. He was dedicated to his work--each page of his book was done with care and detail. An artistic ability was revealed in his work that I had never before seen in him. Indeed, I have met few students as gifted as Vincent in so many different areas.

The precondition for the coming presence of anything is the absence of that very thing (Briton, 1995).

> From there it follows that the precondition then for a student's success
> is their prior failure.

It was a proud moment for me to see Vincent graduate. Vincent, someone who had made widely known his dissatisfaction with the rigid rules and formality of school, walked across the valedictory stage proudly in his graduation regalia. After the ceremony, Vincent came up to me with his family trailing behind him. "I've been looking all over for you. I wanted to give you this," he said as he handed me his single, yellow graduation rose. The act left me speechless, which is not an easy feat.
"Thank you so much," I murmured. His girlfriend and mother smiled as they watched the proceedings. I was so moved by this small gesture; it was one of the most memorable moments of my teaching career.

I think although we as teachers talk about how students can change over time--there is often a doubt underlying our speaking.

When I saw Christine's name on our incoming candidate interview list, I couldn't help it, I winced. We had already dismissed her from the program once, and I had no fond memories of our experiences together. Apparently, she had spoken to Dave and convinced him of all that would be different in this new, upcoming semester. I, on the other hand, remained skeptical. But, if Dave were willing to give her a chance, how could I, in good conscience, refuse?

Yet students can and do change. Time seems to make all the difference. That, and their being able to get a fresh start.

Really they're all geniuses, you know. It's all in the timing.
(S. Chamberlain, personal communication, 1995)

"I wonder what that says about us as teachers, that so many of the students that we have taught before are returning to us now?" Dave said to Dikaia and me. We laughed as each of us listed former students who had come to be with us again in Combined Studies.
I said, "I know that we have changed a lot as teachers, but I think that our students have changed even more."

I appreciate the chance to reacquaint myself with former students.
It is a chance for redemption in the cases of those with whom I know that I made real mistakes in the past.

"You hated me in grade eight, didn't you?" It is an honest question. Winnie has returned to our school this term, after spending a few years in alternate schools in the district. The last time I saw her was three years ago; Winnie was enrolled in one of my mainstream classes.

Winnie was a daily nightmare for me--loud, belligerent, abusive to other students. She regularly spent time in detention with me after school, that is, when she chose to show up. Winnie's father and I had spoken, both of us in exasperation, many times. Her father was trying to work with all of Winnie's teachers, many of whom were experiencing the same difficulties with her. Eventually, my tumultuous relationship with Winnie ended when our school counsellors and administrators intervened, changing her timetable so that she would have a fresh start with another set of teachers. However, after a month or so, this too proved futile, and Winnie was eventually placed in another school.

The Winnie who sits before me today is unrecognizable from the Winnie of years before. She wants to graduate. She is well liked by her classmates; she always has a hello for me in the halls.

I don't know how to answer her question. "I don't think I knew you well enough to hate you, Winnie." It's true. Now, as the words roll off my tongue, I can see that this is true.

"Hey, can I see my old records?" Jenny asks me during a break between classes. It is an unusual request. I had not looked at the pages and pages of incident reports that we had in her file since her last release from the program. Jenny was with us now on her third try, a completely different person than the one who was described in the notes that she had asked to read. I open up the binder and show her the pages. I shake my head, "It's pretty hard to believe, isn't it?" "I was a real bad ass, huh?" she laughs as we read together through what I had written.

In a discussion about multiculturalism, Aaron started talking about "Asian Malls". With venom in his voice, he began a rampage of accusations toward immigrants. Racial epithets were not filtered from his verbal deluge. Angrily, I shouted at him to get out of the classroom. I stormed out quick on his heels, and slammed the door behind us.

Once outside the class, I lambasted Aaron. My voice fast and shaking, I talked about what was appropriate in the classroom, and what was acceptable to me personally. I told him that I couldn't even look at him for the rest of the day, and that he should just go home. I was not only seething in anger, but I was hurt. Aaron and I had been working together for a long time; he was no stranger to my expectations, and knew my feelings on racism. Plus, I felt that he had come so far, and I was disappointed with this slipping back to old ways.

I was sitting alone at my desk later that day after school. The door opened quietly. I looked up wondering who it could be because school had already finished for the day. It was Aaron. "Look," he said, "I'm sorry for what I said earlier." I was shocked. I hadn't expected him to have the maturity or sensitivity to apologize. I didn't know what to say.
"That means a lot to me," I murmured. They were the only words that I could muster. It was a memorable moment. I knew no student with more pride than Aaron, and he had come back to say he was sorry.

> Identity is not a fixed thing,
> it is "negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous,
> the result of culturally available meanings
> and the open-ended power-laden enactments of those meanings
> in everyday situations"
> (Kondo, 1992, as cited in Hirose, 1995, p. 23).

There *is* a *given* human nature, a nature whose givenness we must accept: we cannot totally change this nature. But we must also recognize that, in many ways, the "nature" we are given is given (determined) as indeterminate--capable of further determination, further development. Society plays a crucial and decisive role in this further determination, for our given nature can and will evolve only so far "on its own". (Levin, 1989, pp. 133-134)

If I ever lost my belief that students could change, I would have to quit teaching. There would no longer be any point.

Bonsai gardeners clip and twist and pin their treasures to eliminate room for undesired change.

In our working with students, it seems so important to allow room for transformation--transformation that is not so pre-*determined* that it strangles the natural growth of the student.

> The word *determine*
> comes from the Latin word *determinare* meaning
> *to bound, to limit* (Klein's Etymological Dictionary, 1967).

Education is concerned with the "bringing forth" (*educare*) of human life. It is thus essentially a "generative" discipline, concerned with the emergence of new life in our midst, and what it is we might hope for this new life, what it is we might wish to engender. Ideally, each new child embodies the possibility that things can become other than what they have already become. What could be called a "conservative" reading of this ideal would be one that finds this ideal precisely the *problem* of education: How are we to educe new life in a way that conserves what already is? The opposite extreme is one that finds this ideal to be precisely the *hope* of education: How are we to educe the new? Underlying both of these readings is a more fundamental question: How are we to respond to new life in our midst in such a way that life together can go on, in a way that does not foreclose on the future? (Smith, 1988, as cited in Jardine, 1992, p. 116)

Recognizing and accepting students as they are at this moment in time seems to offer a place at which teachers might begin.

I was tidying up the backroom of the portable when Steven interrupted my train of thought. "I think every school should have a Combined Studies," he said as he put away his work for the morning, and closed the filing cabinet drawer. I was interested in what he had to say and asked, "What do you mean by that? What makes this place any different from what you have experienced in the past?"
"It's just different. In the main school, it's so competitive and stuff. I hated it. No one wants to open their mouth because they are afraid of looking stupid. Here, we already know we're smart. We don't have to prove anything to anyone."

To dwell in the world of human beings is not an easy thing. When the difficulty of living in the world grows unbearable, one longs to move to a more comfortable place. (Soseki, 1906, as cited in Hirose, 1995, p. 12)

We try to make our classrooms a place to belong for students in all their uniqueness. Although outsiders might assume that our classes are more homogeneous than other classes in the main building, I am continually amazed by the diversity of my students. There are gifted students and those who struggle academically; there are those who are considered to be ADHD and those who can sit focused on a single task for hours at a time; there are those who come from wealthy families and those who live in foster care; there are those who are smokers and users, and those who would never even consider smoking or doing drugs; there are poets, artists, writers, debaters, skaters, drag racers, snowboarders, football players, musicians, loners, ravers, McDonald's employees, petty criminals, and gang members, and the list goes on and on.

Perhaps, diversity is revealed because in this program I have had more of an opportunity to *know* students than I have ever had before.

The Question of Being keeps us alert to the dangers presently threatening the *being* of human beings, and that, among other things, serves to remind each one of us of the radical alterity, the dimensionality and profound otherness, which is the very essence of "other people". To experience other human beings *as beings* is to acknowledge, to recognize, the irreducible, unpossessable dimensionality they are; it is to see and hear them as radically and essentially other; it is to grant them an ontological difference that one cannot overcome--and should not want to attempt. (Levin, 1989, p. 64)

Ricky was leaving the program. He felt that school was simply not meeting his needs anymore. We had tried so hard to keep him with us. We offered him extra flexibility in completing his assignments; when his personal life erupted into disarray time and time again, we gave him extra attention and support. However, he had made his own decision to leave, and despite our concerns about this choice, he seemed resolved to see it through.
Ricky had decided to start up a new life for himself in a new city. On his last day in class, while everyone else worked away, he wrote a poem on the blackboard, and then signed his name underneath. He did it quietly, without anyone noticing him.

This poem stayed on the board untouched for an entire school semester.

I went to school.
They taught me how to read and write.
They taught me what was right and wrong.
They taught me that different was wrong.

Careful examination of the data about those who drop out of particular schools may reveal that many are students who have academic or other talents but who do not conform to certain school expectations and therefore do not succeed. (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 73)

Foucault points to the analysis and categorization of students into ranks and hierarchies and to the examination as procedures that prescribe what is to be seen. This look does… not search for the student's reality… for it… only examines the student before it to note the resemblance between the child and the image established for its development. The exercise displaces the dialogues as school identity is formed, not through symbiosis and differentiation but by mimesis and convention. Peer culture reinforces this surveillance, punishing nonconformity with exile and ridicule. (Grumet, 1988a, p. 112)

Having the choice between teaching unique, autonomous individuals versus what I would call sheep, I would choose the former.

I read and reread Ricky's poem over the course of the semester reflecting upon its meaning. The last line, "They taught me that different was wrong." made me very sad. Clearly, we had misunderstood each other.
In retrospect, I think that maybe we tried too hard to keep Ricky after all. In attempting to convince him that school was the only viable option, and that any decision outside of staying in school was foolish, our intended support for him was experienced as coercion, and perhaps even worse, oppression.
It could be that we failed to really listen to him.

Sometimes I wonder how we as teachers affected Ricky, as well as other students who have been in our midst, and who have graduated or moved on in their lives.

What I am continually reminded of by the students in my classroom is how we are historical beings, and how we can never completely escape our pasts.

In education, "everyone is always a late-comer and thus under the influence of what preceded" (van Manen, 1991, p. 16).

Perhaps as I reflect upon what I have experienced as a teacher in this program, my memory serves to distort reality.
Perhaps the shocking, the appalling, and the injurious etch deeper into one's psyche than the joyful, the edifying, and the triumphant.

> In our students, I see more collections of scar tissue
> remaining from past school experiences
> than treasured Hallmark card memories.

> All of us are walking wounded. Wounds are part of
> the human condition. (Coleman, 1995, p. 80)

Classrooms may be infirmaries or battlefields.

Daniel was afraid to be in our classrooms. Several times a week, he would experience anxiety attacks. Frantically, he would pull me aside and tell me that he just could not be in the classroom any longer, that he felt that others were looking at him, and that he simply had to go home for the day.

Frances couldn't function in the main building very well. In her first semester with us, we tried to schedule her into electives outside of our program thinking that it would be a great way to diversify her day. But, surprisingly, our actions were not realized in the ways that we had intended. Although she would consistently come to all the classes that she had with us, she would mysteriously disappear when she was supposed to be in her classes in the main building.

Marcus seemed so fragile. He could barely look us in the eyes in his interview to enter the program; instead, he fidgeted, and looked down at his hands. His youth worker did much of the talking for him--enthusing about our program, and saying how much Marcus would appreciate being accepted into the program. Marcus could only nod to indicate that what she was saying was in fact what he wanted. I wondered if it was. I wondered if he was really ready to return to school, or if his youth worker was the one who was pushing him in this direction.

Jason came with his mother for the interview. They looked tense, and nervous, as though they were expecting a final verdict from us to decide Jason's future. Both were really uncertain as to whether or not this was the right place for him because they were aware that this program was academic in nature. Jason had already been told by school counsellors that he would not graduate from high school academically, and that it would be a huge mistake to even attempt an academic program. Both mother and son looked desperate for some kind of hope, even a glimmer. We tried to make clear that we weren't interested in Jason's past diagnoses. We were more interested in what he could show us that he could do, and not what others had told him he was incapable of doing.

It was report card day at the end of our first semester. Dave and I waited inside one of the portables for the students to arrive. We were excited to hand out the envelopes because they belonged only to those who had survived the semester, and the report cards inside were ones of which to be proud. Nonetheless, as we looked outside the portable windows, we could see nothing but fear in the eyes of students who waited outside our doors. Whereas under normal circumstances they would have bounded through our open doors to simply chat or pass the time, today, they would not venture in.

When the bell finally tolled, they slunk in slowly, apprehensively, as though it were the first day of school and not the last. We handed out the envelopes, one by one. I was anxious to see them opened so that we could share in their successes, so I was surprised when some chose just to stuff the manila envelopes inside of purses or jackets. I watched as others tentatively opened their cards.

Soon I felt as though I were in an elementary school with the choruses of "What did you get?" and "Can I see?" buzzing through the classroom. "I can't wait to show my mom," said one. "She's not going to believe this." Before long, even the most wary students were coaxed by others to take a look.

The fear and uncertainty had quickly been replaced by exuberance and pride. I was shocked by the lack of assurance in themselves. After all, we had worked together all semester. The students had always been made aware of their progress. And yet, still, this was remembered as a dreaded judgement day, a day characterized by failure again and again.

In our classrooms, when students talk to one another about past experiences with school, I think they very purposefully conduct these conversations within a teacher's hearing distance.

"Yeah, I hated that guy. He called me an idiot. Right in my face."

"I was five minutes late because I had gotten the wrong binder from my locker. She yelled at me in front of everyone, and told me to get out. I mean, didn't she want me to have the right binder?"

"She hated me. So she failed me."

"Yeah. He was always out to get me."

These situations always feel very uncomfortable. The call to respond is subtly made. To say nothing seems to affirm the insult. To intervene, and say that you don't believe it, or that there must have been a misinterpretation, is to deny a personal experience, to silence a voice.

What is it, I wonder, to walk around and feel that everyone is "out to get you"?

I recognize that what I hear from my students is but one side of an equation.
I recognize that what I hear from my students is a construction of story, rather than what may have actually taken place in a given moment in time.
I recognize my own role in interpreting and internalizing their words.

However, what is most significant to me is that, regardless of Truth, in these tellings, I am given entrance into the student's truth, or at the very least, what the student has chosen to communicate to me as his or her truth.

Listening to my students makes me hostile to what goes on in school classrooms often time.

There are parents (and teachers) who are physically present but absent in spirit, given over to selfish wants and needs. There are also parents and teachers whose lives seem lived in competition or conflict with the lives and interests of their children. It is sad that adults can neglect children, turn deaf ears to them, be appalled or horrified by them, vilify and abuse then, disown and abandon them. (van Manen, 1986, pp. 14-15)

It is so much easier for teachers to look at what is manifested outwardly as symptoms to be *dealt* with, rather than to invest greater amounts of time and energy to search for the underlying factors that contribute to that outcome.

<div align="right">

I used to be like that.

For example, if homework was not done,

then clearly students should stay after school to get it done.

That way they would be taught a lesson,

and it wouldn't happen again.

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"You're not the same teacher you were back then," said Patricia, a student I had taught previously in a mainstream grade nine class before she left school for a time, and who now, two years later, had chosen to return to school to graduate. Patricia had been a terror, especially to substitute teachers. A colleague of mine had the unfortunate experience of her clogging a drain in a science lab and then running the water until it flooded the sink, and the entire laboratory bench. From my viewpoint, she had been the one to change. It surprised me that in her mind it had been me.
"What do you mean by that?" I asked curiously.
She had difficulty with the question. "I guess you're not as naïve."

Since becoming a teacher in this setting, I have learned a lot about what students' lives are like outside of the classroom walls. Some of what I have learned I might have rather not known. It is hard to hear about their outside circumstances and know that you are virtually powerless to do anything about it.

<div align="right">

You look at the backgrounds of a lot of these students
and they're coming from absolute, for lack of a better word,
shit.

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<div align="right">

When their outside lives do not support their schooling,

how much easier would it be for them not to try at all?

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"I hate her. I hate my mom." Before my eyes, an independent 17-year-old has crumbled into a vulnerable child.
"She always does this to me. She's never there when I need her. She was supposed to take me out to shop for my grad dress, and now she can't because

she's going to the bar." The words were spat out, each articulated with venomous effort. "I hate her. I'll never treat my kid like this."

　　　How does one as an educator help someone for whom disappointment seems to be a norm, a way of life? I could only let her unleash some of her rage, rage that seemed to have been nurtured over many years. "I'm so sorry," I said.

　　　There was nothing else to do but listen.

Adrienne comes in to see us, and asks if we have time to talk. She sits on the desk. Before she can get any words out, she starts crying. We haven't seen her in a few days. She looks a mess, like she hasn't slept for a while. After she composes herself, she manages to get out that her father has left the family again. She says that she feels as though she needs to tell us this in order to explain some of her own behaviour lately. We think it is a very mature decision. "I can't focus," she says, "I'm finding this so hard. I don't want to give up now. There's only a month left in school, and I've tried so hard." We tell her that we know how hard she's worked to come this far. We begin to talk to her about how we as teachers can accommodate her. She seems surprised. "But you guys have <u>rules</u>. Why would you want to adjust the rules for me?" she asks.

Dave and I look at each other, both of us clearly thinking the same thing-- why <u>wouldn't</u> we?

One thing that scares me is the ruinous influences to which some of these kids seem to be so susceptible. And it's not always their fault. I have had many discouraging conversations with parents who just don't seem to want to support their children's schooling. I remember one particular conversation with a parent who made it very clear to me that she wanted no part in encouraging her daughter to stay in school. It was so frustrating to me because up until lately the student had been doing very well. "She's old enough to do what she wants," she said gruffly. "I don't think it's up to me." I left the conversation with the feeling that this parent felt somehow threatened by her daughter's success in school. What chance did this child have I wondered?

Amy came to tell us that her mother was moving yet again. The two of them had arrived in the district just four months ago, and now Amy was excitedly saying that they were moving to another city once again. It was hard to know whether or not to take this announcement seriously; we often heard from students that plans were being made for a change which would uproot them. Rather than to begin making preparations for her to transfer schools, it would be easier for us to simply wait and see if these plans would materialize or not.

With a month left in the semester, and therefore a month left before Jobin's graduation from high school, his father was pressuring Jobin to get a job and move out of the house. I was surprised when Jobin told me this because his father had been so supportive of his education in the past. I couldn't understand it, and neither could Jobin. "I don't need this added pressure now," he said with frustration in his eyes.

Marcel's parents were off on another holiday. No one had formally informed us, but when we called his mother's office to notify her of his lack of attendance and inability to stay focused in class, we received the news via her voicemail. We phoned several times that week and then again the week after, but still received this same voicemail.

Marcel was on the brink of being removed from the program, but we did not want to take any drastic action without first consulting his parents. Marcel said he had no idea when they would be returning.

> Something was different about Taylor this year. After a very successful academic year last year, she seemed to have lost her drive, her desire. In class, her eyes were often distant. She gazed ahead, not even socializing with others. She sat through discussions without participating. She looked lethargic and dispassionate. She didn't seem to want to be here, which was confirmed by her attendance, or lack thereof. We had thought that perhaps she was distracted by the activities of some of her close friends who had recently graduated; we also considered the fact that maybe she had begun to believe that at 18 years of age she wasn't in the right place anymore. When we called home to elicit her parents' help in the situation, her father informed us that he and his wife were currently caught up in a messy divorce.
> Still, when talked to, Taylor didn't have much to say. She simply sat in front of us with those lifeless eyes, and said she didn't know what her problem was. She just wasn't ready to talk with us about what was going on.

And as I tell these anecdotes, I know that these situations are not unique to these students. I could easily replace the names and circumstances of these narratives with other students' names and only slightly altered circumstances.

Therefore, it seems unlikely that these experiences are particular to students in this program, and thus, evade all other students.

> There are many, many people living in private dungeons today,
> people who give no evidence of it whatever on the outside,
> where you have to listen very sharply to hear
> the faint messages from the dungeon.
> (Rogers, 1969, as cited in Levin, 1989, p. 88)

*It seems to me that all high-school students could be thought of
as "at-risk",
at least momentarily during the tumultuous throes of adolescence.*

And this understanding of students could be beneficial
if it meant that teachers would tend to feel a greater responsibility to *support*
students in the process of becoming adults,
rather than setting them aside to fend for themselves.

> At this age, 16 to 19 years, life or nature's purpose is to
> defend the young person's freedom to function separately and thus
> prepare the way for individuation…. Developmentally it is a time
> to take charge rather than to be an assistant.
> (James, 1996, p. 36)

They are not adults, yet sometimes they appear to be. That's one of the huge challenges of our job--respecting them as emergent adults, and yet caring for them as children when they need us to.

Hong and her boyfriend were waiting inside my portable for her mother to arrive. They were talking excitedly about the valedictory ceremony, now only a week away. "I'm going to look so good. You'll see!" she said excitedly. "But," and she paused as she lowered her voice and said with genuine dismay, "I don't have any shoes to wear. What do you think I should I do?"

Many of our students are very used to pushing people away and looking out for themselves, which can cause others to assume that they are no longer in need of care. Naturally, it can be hard to attend to their vulnerability immediately after they tell us to fuck off.

The in-between is a precarious positioning.

[Although diversity is critical] we must concurrently recognize that all adolescents share some common needs and goals that schools can help them meet. All youth--at-risk or not--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…. Efforts to retain at-risk students and to provide them with a valuable education must recognize the fundamental importance of these common goals, as well as respond to these students' more particular needs. (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 27)

CHAPTER 4: RELATIONSHIPS ARE AT THE HEART OF TEACHING

Key to thesis voices:
Dave Anderson
Dikaia Vakakis
Leanne Fukui (anecdotal)
Outside citations
Leanne Fukui (analytical)

We sometimes encounter people and things, and enter into situations, with great openness, eager to enjoy a fresh experience; at other times, we tend to encounter people and things, and enter into situations, with closed minds and deaf ears--anxious, tense, defensive, perhaps, or perhaps with our minds already set, our course of action fixed, and our experience prejudged, predetermined. We sometimes begin an encounter absolutely certain of our knowledge and understanding, absolutely convinced that we have nothing to learn from the encounter itself: we enter the situation totally under the spell of our stereotype, our preconceptions. We can hear only what we want to hear, or what we already know and believe; we can hear nothing different, nothing new. There are some things we can hear only with great difficulty, only with great pain. There are some things we *need* to hear, but probably never will. There are things we would *like* to hear, but we are also too afraid to listen. We are sometimes so defensive, so threatened or vulnerable, that we encounter people and things, and enter into situations, in a way that defers or postpones any genuine experience, any "real" encounter. (Levin, 1989, p. 19)

That we should as teachers interact with, and enter into relationships with students with humility, openness and care is neither new nor profound. In fact, one might say that most of what we have learned about teaching from our experience in working with students in Combined Studies seems to be merely common sense, and no different from what we have always known to be true about teaching. What has been transformative, however, for Dikaia, Dave and me, is that our change in milieu, from mainstream to alternate teaching, has caused us to reflect more deeply upon whether what we say about our practice is in accordance with what we do in our practice.

Because students in our alternate program are marginalized individuals, ones who have chosen to leave or who have been denied access to what is considered mainstream schooling because it has not met their needs, we, as alternate program teachers, have a weighty responsibility to continually question what has alienated these students from the mainstream, and then, proactively, to consider what can be done in order to meet their needs. In this questioning, it is essential to try to place ourselves in the position of our students, focussing upon their perceptions of

school, because even our best intentions may be experienced adversely. To do so, we need to take care to listen to our students.

Listening to students
is something that is central to what we as teachers do in this program--
a listening that is a hearing rendered through our ears and our eyes and our hearts.

Most of our listening, directed by the ego, obeys and conforms. We hear only what everyone else hears. We can hear only the prevailing discourse. (Levin, 1989, p. 77)

But what I really dislike in myself is when I cannot hear the other person because I am so sure in advance of what he is about to say that I don't listen. It is only afterward that I realise that I have heard only what I have already decided he is saying: I have failed really to listen. Or even worse are those times when I can't hear because what he is saying is too threatening, and might even make me change my views or my behavior. Still worse are those times when I catch myself trying to twist his message to make it say what I want him to say, and then hearing only that. (Rogers, 1969, as cited in Levin, 1989, p. 79)

Aware that we can be, in some sense, rendered deaf by the "prevailing discourse", we need to create the conditions to genuinely hear the voices of our students.

We need to cultivate stillness and quietness.
We need to provide protected moments of vacant space and time
into which students are invited and welcomed.

In the condition of stillness, it becomes possible to hear new sounds, or old sounds in a new way, appreciate tastes once numbed out by old habits of taste, see a child, spouse, partner, parent, in a way that honors them more fully, instead of constrained by the usual fears, desires and projections. (D. G. Smith, 1996, p. 10)

Through carefully listening and suspending judgement, we may attempt to understand people on their own terms (Belenky et al., 1986).

We sit, the four of us in a circle of desks--the potential candidate for the Combined Studies program, and the three teachers who are, in this meeting, acting as gatekeepers. The student sits back in his chair, hands clasped on his stomach. His dark hair is shaven close to his head. Many piercings adorn his ears. The edges of a tattoo can be seen under a sleeve of his T-shirt. Sunglasses are perched atop his head. He holds a defiant pose, not one that would suggest someone in need of help from anyone else.

One of us asks where he has last attended school prior to this interview. He answers, "London, but I got kicked out after I told my Math teacher he couldn't teach." He pauses. "Oh,

yeah, and people there hated me and wanted to kill me." He goes on to tell the story, almost as if to remove any doubt in our minds that we should not accept him here. We sat and listened wondering what stories were behind the one that he was choosing to tell.

Rather than a *separate knowing* of our students, "which is characterized by a distanced, skeptical, and impartial stance toward that which one is trying to know (a reasoning against)", we pursue a *connected knowing* of our students, "which is characterized by a stance of belief and an entering into the place of the other person or the idea that one is trying to know (a reasoning with)" (Goldberger, 1996, p. 5).

His morning had been characterized by inappropriate language, lack of focus, and distracting others. I had given him chance after chance to settle down, and now I finally felt like I had to pull him outside to talk. "What's going on with you today?" I asked in an exasperated tone.
"Nothing," he said, angrily looking at the ground. But he wouldn't look up, and I suspected that there were tears near surfacing. Clearly, there was something. My tone softened, "Do you want to talk about something? Because I can't have you back in the classroom unless something changes on your part."
He stood there, not saying anything. I waited until finally he began to speak. He went on to tell a story of how he had argued with his mother, and then not spent the night at home, and of how he was certain that he had made the situation even worse.

Often times, I have to simply let them voice their fears and frustrations, their anger and their stresses. Getting this out of their systems is necessary before they can even approach, let alone have success at, their academics.

"I hate this. I hate you guys. If I don't get this stupid book done on time, I'm going to have to kill you. No, really, I am."

Let us not forget that the *persona* is a mask that conceals even as it reveals, and that the human *face* is not a surface, but rather a depth, a dimensionality, the presence of an unrepresentable alterity and a very radical ethical demand for recognition. (Levin, 1989, pp. 99-100)

Nearing the final days of school, the classrooms are buzzing, full of students frantically working to get their assignments complete. Despite the busyness of this time of year, there are also feelings of accomplishment and relief. We have graduates for the first time this year, which seems to be contributing to a heightened feeling of celebration.
This lunch hour, I sense the positive energy of the room; the tone feels almost giddy. I hear light-hearted teasing flying across the room, perhaps in an effort to dissipate some of the stress and anxiety felt by those who are not yet complete. A jab is directed at Cheni; she is being called a slacker. "Are you joking?" I say, loud enough so Cheni can hear, "Cheni's a hero. Do you know how hard she's been working? Especially lately." Cheni doesn't look up, but continues to work as though she hasn't heard me.
Later on, a crowd has gathered at my desk. They are talking inappropriately, as they well know, about getting drunk on the weekend.

Cheni is the most vocal. "Cheni," I say, "how can you be talking this way when I've just been singing your praises to all these people." "Why do you think?" she says with a grin as she walks away.

It is easy for us to project our own priorities upon our students. However, sometimes we are reminded that concern for image and peer acceptance may take precedence over what we as teachers might consider to be appropriate and scholarly.

Sometimes it feels as though we are "'insect[s], vibrating at the frames of windows, clinging to the panes of glass, trying to connect' (Rich, 1979, p. 161). True connected knowing is neither easy nor natural" (Clinchy, 1996, p. 209).

Some of these students have erected impenetrable defenses around them because they have been burned so many times by so many people. They carry this attitude of if-no-one-can-touch-me-than-no-one-can-hurt-me. It can take time for these defenses to erode away to a point where we can productively work together.

One day early on in the term, I decided to give my students the opportunity to comment in writing about how they were experiencing me and my teaching. When I got their comment sheets back, I found the response of one particular student, who was new to the program this semester, to be very blunt. She described me as "nosy", "manipulative", and an "egomaniac". These descriptors, in my mind, could be no further from the truth. Although I was hurt, these comments were helpful to me--I had always wondered why this particular student and I were not able to converse in class. I discerned that she needed more space, and so I decided to make an effort to leave her alone.

In writing class, this student had been creating a personal writing portfolio. It was something she was keeping to herself, and, in light of the state of our relationship, I was very careful to protect her privacy. But, two weeks after Jacqueline had written down her impressions of me, she asked me if I wanted to read her portfolio. In that moment, she allowed me to enter into the teaching relationship with her. Now, we could begin.

Our acceptance of our students must be reciprocated by their acceptance of us as individuals, and of our roles as teachers.

When I was being mentored to become the newest member of the Combined Studies teaching team at Boyd, I was nervous. I wondered if I would be accepted as another teacher. I was a stranger to them; they had never seen me before. They already had two teachers whom they cared about and respected. I expected to hear them saying, "Who is she? And who is she to walk in here and think she can teach us?"

These students need to accept the pedagogue's charge as "teacher"; otherwise the learning process loses its footing. It needs to be realized that the pedagogical relation between teacher and student cannot be compelled or coerced.

A teacher cannot force the student
to accept him or her as teacher--
ultimately that recognition must be won from,
granted by the student.
(van Manen, 1991, p. 77)

Although Christopher was living at a foster home, lately it seemed that he was spending a lot more of his time downtown. Although he had started off the term strongly, his attendance had become erratic. When he chose to come to school, he would arrive hours late, and then often flop down on a desk to sleep. He had begun to look pale and undernourished, much older than his years. Occasionally, we would overhear conversations between he and his classmates about his extra-curricular adventures. Clearly, life outside of the classroom was taking precedence over his education.

We talked with him a number of times about what we could do to help him get back on track, but he continued to resist our help, and nothing showed any signs of changing for the better. We struggled to make a decision. We couldn't keep him, but we really feared for his future well-being if we were to let him go. Finally, we felt we had no choice. There was no chance of him being able to make his attendance requirements for his courses, and other students were beginning to question why Christopher seemed to be getting away with so much.

In our last meeting together, he sat before us--a shadow of the boy we had first interviewed to enter the program. Slumped in the chair, with a hat pulled down over his darkened eyes, he was pulling at the edges of the sleeves of the oversize sweatshirt that he wore. With tears in her eyes, the counsellor who had been working with him in previous years asked him if he knew that people cared about him, and that he could come to her for help anytime, whether he was attending the school or not. He only slightly nodded his head, and brusquely wiped at his own eyes as they began to well up. That was the first time I had ever seen him display vulnerability. Ironically, I felt most like a teacher to him on the day that we released him from the program.

Listening can help us discern not only who our students are, but what expectations they have for us as teachers, consciously and even unconsciously.

A group of boys were gathered near my desk talking about their impending graduation. Keith was going on and on about how stupid the graduation festivities were--how his parents could not care less about his graduation, and how he did not want to embarrass himself by walking across a stage with students who were so much younger than he. I could not help but overhear them, and with the volume and proximity of the voices I sensed that I was being lured to enter into their conversation. I looked up.

Although Keith had vocalized that he did not want to take part in graduation events, the overt bravado in his voice betrayed him. I took my cue. I spoke quietly, "I think you should go, Keith." He looked at me, and I saw that there was a smile in his eyes. Perhaps I even caught a glimpse of relief.

"I knew you were going to say that," he said as he rolled his eyes and continued his conversation with his friends.

```
             So I have learned to ask myself,
       can I hear the sounds and sense, the shape,
           of this other person's inner world?
         Can I resonate to what he is saying,
        can I let it echo back and forth in me,
           so deeply that I sense the meanings
     he is afraid of yet would like to communicate,
           as well as those meanings he knows?
        (Rogers, 1969, as cited in Levin, 1989, p. 87)
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"Hey, this is so EASY," Stephanie said as she worked on her page. She was 16, had been out of school for a year, and had only passed her grade eight courses for credit. Judging from the thickness of her personal file due to the pages and pages of reports and assessments, not much had come easy for her in the past.

I've just hung up the phone. It is lunchtime and several students are in my portable working on their project books. I am feeling rather drained after making our daily phone calls home to our absentees. I have heard excuse after excuse from students mostly still half asleep and weakly attempting to justify their absences. "I slept in," said one. "I didn't have bus fare," said another. "I worked so late last night," says yet another. After each excuse, I have tried to remind the students of their responsibilities to their learning. Each one of them has responded favourably to this reminder, despite the fact that for some of these students it is the third day in a row that I have had to phone home. I shake my head, and wonder if this is worth my time. As I ask this of myself, one of the students in the room, a chronic absentee himself who has overheard my phone calls, pipes up in an accusatory voice, "Hey! Why didn't you phone me yesterday?"

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        I was working with Lauren on algebra, a particularly difficult
math unit, one with which many students were struggling. As we sat
together, Lauren spat out in a loud voice at me, "I don't understand
this, and I hate working on it. Just leave me alone." Her comment
caught me off-guard and made me angry. I felt I was being very patient
with her, and her words felt like a slap in the face, like she wasn't
appreciating me at all. I felt I needed to take her outside to
continue the conversation privately. Outside, I said to her quite
bluntly that she should not take her frustration out on me. But,
pulling her out and talking to her in the manner that I did only
multiplied her frustration. When she burst into tears, I knew I had
made a mistake. Lauren had every right to be upset. I should have
given her the room to express her frustration, and had her return to me
for help later on, and on her own terms.
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Many times I have found that my impulse to resolve a situation immediately needs to be restrained. This urge is often a selfish one, rather than one that takes into account the best interests of the student.

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Our task is not just to push... but to become attuned to the way
in which she wants us to push her, which is to say, to the way in
which our pushing may eventually become unnecessary. We look to
a time when... [our student] can do better by herself. (S. J.
Smith, 1989, p. 134)
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We pedagogues (teachers and parents) willingly open ourselves to children. This means that we do our utmost to understand what it is like to be in the world as a child. More concretely, I do my very best to understand the situation of *this* child. How does *this* child experience life in its multifaceted dimensions? (van Manen, 1986, p. 13)

The other as an intercorporal intertwining of past, present and future, offers forth an infinite plurality of possibilities…. (Richter, 1994, p. 100)

Thus, it is an impossible task to understand fully another being. No matter how hard I try, I receive only partial understandings.

I am a foreigner to you, and you are a foreigner to me, and yet we play 'this game of deception and pretense that we are *not* foreign, that we know one another, that we understand one another, that we acknowledge one another. Let's confess our foreignness, our alienation, our separation, our lack of understanding. (Leggo, 1995, pp. 10-11)

> **Our limited capacity to understand one another must not, however,**
> **preclude our attempts to understand.**
> **Not, at least, if we desire to work well with students,**
> **especially with those who may have been considered to be unreachable,**
> **and hence, unteachable in the past.**

Our students are not "risky" to me, but rather kids whom other people haven't taken the time to understand or connect with.

The traditional classroom and institution of high school doesn't really lend itself to teachers making connections with a lot of kids. School is a big, unfeeling, uncaring institution.

Education is relational--a relationship that involves knowledge, attentiveness, and care; care directed not only at disciplinary material but to who students are and what they can become. It involves responsiveness and a stance of hopefulness. (Stanton, 1996, pp. 45-46)

We experience success with our students because they know and trust that we care about them and respect them as people, and they sense that school is something of which they are an integral part.

Within this atmosphere, they can open themselves up to learning.

Students learn best, are willing to extend and risk themselves in
an educational environment that is experienced as safe and
secure. (van Manen, 1991, p. 58)

Vulnerability seems to be a prerequisite to true learning.
True learning involves admitting our fallibilities, our shortcomings, indeed,
our very humanness.

Yet, this admission, "for many kids… [has been experienced as] a
no-win situation. They ask for help, they get **labeled**. They say
nothing and don't get help" (Gaines, 1991, p. 148).

Maryam had a difficult time with school before entering our program. In mainstream school, she had been told that she needed to have all of her academic courses completely modified, and that although she would be passed from one year to the next, she wouldn't be gaining any real credit for the work that she was doing. Maryam began to seriously question this, and opted for our alternate program instead.

This semester Maryam had all her classes with me, and gradually we started building up a rapport with one another. Nonetheless, though I could see she was completing her assignments, she continued to resist showing me any of her work. Although all the other students would have their work edited before putting it into their books, I would see nothing from Maryam. She would work on her own, and then quickly put her assignments away, out of my sight. I was concerned, and phoned her mother explaining that if Maryam did not let me see any of her work, there would be little chance for progress.

It took some time, but now Maryam is regularly at my desk dropping off assignment after assignment for me to look at. Maryam is no longer ashamed of her work-in-progress, knowing that it is only a step toward superior, completed work.

Learning is such a very painful business. It requires humility
from people at an age where the natural habitat is arrogance.
(Sarton, 1951, as cited in Belenky et al., 1986, p. 87)

It may seem strange to find learning described as painful. However, that is how it has been experienced by many of our students.

Education is not in reality what some people proclaim it to be in
their professions. What they aver is that they can put true
knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were
inserting vision into blind eyes.… But our present argument
indicates that the true analogy for this indwelling power in the
soul and the instrument whereby each of us apprehends is that of
an eye that could not be converted to the light from the darkness
except by turning the whole body. Even so, this organ of
knowledge must be turned around... together with the entire
soul, like the scene-shifting periactus in the theatre, until the
soul is able to endure the contemplation of the essence and the
brightest region of being. (Socrates as cited in Haroutunian-
Gordon, 1991, p. 1)

True education involves not just our eyes and our ears, not even just our minds, but indeed our souls. Not simply the souls of students, but of teachers as well.

> In spite of all similarities every living situation has,
> like a newborn child a new face,
> that has never been before and will never come again.
> It demands of you a reaction which cannot be prepared beforehand.
> It demands nothing of what is past.
> It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you.
> (Buber, 1939/1971, p. 494)

writing class had allowed students to explore very personally meaningful subject matter. An openness was built up in that class that I had never before seen. One day, Talia brought me a piece of writing, saying to me quietly that she had written it, and read it aloud at her grandmother's funeral. I thought back to when the funeral had taken place; it had been at least a month prior. Clearly, Talia had been waiting for the right moment to share this with me. As she walked back to her desk, I read the piece. And as I read it, I cried. The piece evoked strong memories of my own grandmother's death one year ago. In response, I wrote Talia a note, describing my reaction and thanking her for giving me the opportunity to share this experience with her. When I gave the note to Talia, tears welled in her eyes. We both knew in that moment that each of us cared a great deal for the other.

[I wonder what teaching essentially is?] The question... urges me to be attuned to teachers' presence with children. This presence, if authentic, is being. I find that teaching so understood is attuned to the place where care dwells, a place of engathering where the in-dwelling of teachers and students is made possible by the presence of care that each has for the other. (Aoki, 1991c, p. 3)

And so as students share of themselves so, too, must we as teachers also share of ourselves.

In deliberately choosing to present curriculum in such a way that encourages active student involvement, our class discussions often revolve around such controversial topics as racism and multiculturalism, addictions, parenting, discrimination against teenagers, abortion, AIDS, pornography, and the legal system. As teachers, we try to be as removed as possible, standing back so as to let the students sort through the issues on their own without our interference. But, eventually, students often want to know what we really believe. "It's not fair," they say. "You guys always want to know what we think. How come you won't take a side?" And then it does not seem enough to present them with multiple perspectives--not when we know that they will not be satisfied until they know where we stand.

The teacher is forced again and again to talk about the most sacred and most fragile matters to persons who will accept them in a manner that he cannot predict.... Talking about things with

sincerity and without an ironic overlay, he reveals his own feelings because his feelings are so much connected with his inner self. The educator simply cannot avoid this. It is the price he must always pay to achieve the risk of openness. (Bollnow, 1959/1971, p. 533)

As might be expected, the inherent and ever-present risk in *embodying* teaching is being *consumed* by teaching.

What is very apparent to us is that the teaching relationship, no matter how open or how reciprocal, demands restraint.

It's critical to have that balance between connectedness and separateness from students.

The one caring must restrain her impulses toward self-assertion, but complete identification with the cared-for is not conducive to effective caring. One caring must maintain a dual perspective—one part devoted to the appreciation of the situation of the cared-for, another grounded in her own cognitive and moral values. (Schweickart, 1996, p. 320)

Eden was going through a tough time. Although the school counsellor was of great support to her, it felt as though every few days I had to deal with her wanting to discuss her personal problems in the classroom. I could see she was miserable, and I too was becoming exhausted, and frustrated that I was neglecting my other students in order to spend so much time with her. Unfortunately, there were no easy solutions, nothing that I could say or do to help her, unless I further involved myself in her outside life, which I knew I was neither prepared, nor trained, to do.

One must continue a quest to… decenter the self, seeing… how selves are constructed variously in specific situations, how these constructions can be fragmented by multiplicity, contradiction, and ambiguity…. (Kondo, 1992, as cited in Hirose, 1995, p. 11)

The teacher should not become "submerged in the other" (Kohn, 1990, as cited in Clinchy, 1996, p. 231).

[As much as close relationships are a benefit of working in this environment,] I think that's part of the downside of this program as well…. Sometimes we know them too well. And then we take on too many other problems and that can lead to burning out.

Sometimes students want to experiment with the malleability of the student-teacher relationship by playfully drawing us into their lives, and by asking for wider entrance into our lives. This may cause us to question what it truly means to be a leader of these students.

"If I were to look into your car right now, what would you have in your tape deck?"

"Can I come to your wedding, PLEASE?"

"When are you going to bring your son to school again?"

"Hey, we're going to a rave this weekend. Do you want to come?"

"I know, we should have a Combined Studies keg party at YOUR house! Where do you live again?"

To be a leader you have to be one of those whom you would lead
and at the same time in a very real sense you have to be
apart from those you lead.
You have to live in their world
and yet be separate from their world.
(Thomas as cited in James, 1996, p. 41)

The barrier that stands between teachers and students seems to be experienced differently by students in this program, as compared to students we have previously taught in mainstream. Perhaps it is made of a little more porous material, and sometimes holes are poked through that we, as teachers, need to fill up again. It is all part of protecting our tension-filled, precariously balanced relationships with one another.

Yoshi continued to test my limits. It seemed as though he wanted to push me to more clearly define my role as teacher. By his tone of voice and body language, he would continually try to keep our conversation jovial rather than serious. Occasionally, he would tell offensive jokes to me and gauge my reaction, despite my reminders about appropriateness. On one occasion, Yoshi pushed a joke too far demanding that he receive credit for something that I knew he had not completed. When I stood my ground in front of an audience of his peers, it became a face-off between opponents. Someone had to be the loser. Finally, he angrily yelled at me, "You know where you can go!" and stormed out of the classroom, much to the aghast of onlookers. Our relationship was strained for a while after that. It took some time, but now we can finally laugh again together.

Since we are imperfect people, what else can we expect but imperfect relationships. (Coleman, 1995, p. 117)

Despite our times of tension and discord, I have found in teaching in this program that conflicts seem to heal more readily than in traditional classroom settings. Rifts are not left alone to deepen and widen. Small class sizes, and living with our students for hours at a time each and every day of the week means that we are forced to work on resolving our difficulties with one another.

Nonetheless, it still hurts when trust is broken, perhaps even more so than it would in traditional classrooms because of the closeness of the relationships that are established in here.

I had been taking photographs of our classrooms and our students for the past few days. I enjoy posting these photos on large placards on the walls. I want the rooms to look aesthetically pleasing, in the same way that we ask the students to make their work presentable. I also think it is important to post our students' faces in the classrooms to give them a sense of ownership of their classrooms, and of their program, and to remind them of their scholarly identities.
It was the middle of the day. I noticed that the students were working hard. It was a great chance to take a few more shots. I looked in my desk. The drawer was empty--my camera, there minutes before, was nowhere to be found. My heart sank.

It necessarily lies in the destiny of his profession that he may be disappointed in his trust. The trust may backfire, and the danger of becoming resigned or becoming bitter is always present. There is no way to avoid the fact that many educators are given over to bitterness and practice their profession as a mere external routine. The educator's function, however, is always to rescue himself from resignation, and renew the strength of trust in spite of all disappointments. This effort almost exceeds human strength, and one may say that the educator continuously asks too much of himself in the face of the demands of this trust. These excessive demands may be the ultimate reason why so many educators grow old before their time. (Bollnow, 1959/1971, pp. 531-532)

Together, Emily and I had worked so hard on a set of essays for Humanities. Each day, I would sit beside her for as long as other classroom demands would permit, and we would get through a bit more writing. Finally, after about a week's worth of toil, the essays were complete, and ready to go into her book. This was a great accomplishment; her determination and focus had prevailed at a time when I knew other tumultuous things were happening in the life of this young woman. Perhaps this work had allowed her to take her mind off of other things. Shortly after, however, Emily was no longer attending.
While marking books at semester end, I recognized these same essays, the ones that Emily and I had worked on so diligently together, pasted in another student's book. Apparently, though Emily was no longer with us, her work had mysteriously survived her, and another person had the audacity to take credit for it. I was livid--not only because this person was a thief, but also because this student had stolen from both Emily and from me.

In moments like these, "the space of in-between for dwelling together… close[s], leaving us with self and other sealed and separated" (Richter, 1994, p. 47).

And, sometimes, this may precipitate our reaching an ending point with students. It is probably one of the hardest things to do as a teacher in this program.

Yet, in order to protect the integrity of the program, it becomes necessary to part company with our students.

It has taken me a while to realize that we cannot experience success with every student. This is especially hard to handle as a teacher in this program because we know that for some students this is a last chance at academic schooling at this stage in their lives. But this program doesn't work for everyone, and having that understanding is really important to maintaining sanity.

When Farhad wanted to return to the program after a disastrous first try, I was open-minded. He convinced me in the interview that so much had changed in his life since the first time around, and that he really wanted to give this a solid effort. I wanted to give him a chance, despite the hesitations of my partner.

I ended up being really disappointed by Farhad. It turned out that his presence was a destructive one, and when he had used up his chances, I was glad to get rid of him. He was probably the only student that I have released with glee. Part of the reason might be that I felt he had personally let me down.

Michelle and I were on a roller coaster. There were days when she would give 100% in class, and other days when she would come with fashion magazines to read all class. Finally, two weeks before the end of the semester, it became clear that she was not going to be able to make her attendance requirement. We had to let her go.

Where is the place for **responsibilities as students** preceding a right to a place in the classroom? Where do we stand as educators supporting movement by refusing students a place within the classroom? Is not the allowing of students to continue to be in the classroom when the inappropriateness of their behaviour interferes not only with their movement, but also with the movement of others, a support of inappropriateness rather than a support of the becoming of others? (Richter, 1994, p. 49)

Clint knew that he wasn't living up to program expectations. He would arrive late, saunter in, and sit down without even making a motion to get his work started. He would often take time during class to sit back and brag to others about his weekend exploits, most of which were illegal in nature. He would bring food into class and leave the garbage for everyone else to pick up. His language often included racial slurs and other derogatory terms. He was encouraging others to reawaken old habits which they had fought hard to put behind them, and he was becoming a ringleader in the process.

His classmates knew what had to happen. I knew too. But, I had not yet come to terms with the fact that perhaps I wouldn't be able to help everyone. And, to make matters worse, I knew that releasing him from the program could result in a violation of his parole, and in his case, jail. I was uncomfortable with the thought of being the one to trigger a life-changing chain of events for this young man.

But over the semester my encouragement of Clint gradually began to be replaced by reprimands, warnings, and finally, ultimatums. Eventually, I conceded that nothing I did seemed to be working with this student. Every time we would move two steps forward, we would take another fall again.

As much as I knew I should be asking Clint to leave the program, I didn't have the heart to do it. I kept catching glimpses of possibility in him. Perhaps I saw more in him than even he saw in himself. Finally, I saw that I had no choice. When we did finally release him, others in the program actually expressed their relief. It

almost sounded as though they felt that we had let them down in some way by not acting sooner.

The presence of just one individual was enough to widen the chasm in-between

teachers

and students,

and in so doing, drain away some of the possibility of that space.

Teaching… involves not the *transfer* of knowledge
but the *creation of conditions* that make it possible to learn,
the creation of an original learning disposition.
(Briton, 1995, p. 10)

The conditions can only be known "in kind"…
because these conditions are… a whirl
of interlacing possibilities and parallels and implications
and innuendoes and evocations and suggestions
and half-truths and hints:
things, beings, are moving and living in this interlacing whirl,
coming and going,
always *right in the midst of being different in kind,*
being transformed.
(Jardine, 1992, as cited in Richter, 1994, p. 73)

Nonetheless, amidst this vibrant whirl, it is our responsibility, as teachers, to reach out to protect the fragile space of the in-between of teachers and students--that space of relation, the clearing where the teachers and students gather together.

Pedagogical reaching… [is] the bringing into being spaces of in-
between, where dwelling in the midst of differences, we may in
the inherent tensionality, experience possibilities for authentic
education…

Perhaps in the absence of pedagogical reaching there is no space
for teachers and students,
no being of the relationship shared by teachers and students
and thus,
no teacher and no students.
(Richter, 1994, p. 96)

CHAPTER 5: A LEADING THAT IS A FOLLOWING

Being placed in the position of teacher in the first semester of this program did nothing to allay my own self-doubts, or answer questions, such as, "Who am I to have authority over these students?", "From where does this authority come?", and "What is the nature of this authority?". This uncertainty was heightened by the fact that my students seemed to be wondering the same things I was.

"How old are you anyway?"

"How long did you have to go to school to do this?"

"Why are you here? Did you choose to teach the bad asses? Or did they tell you that you had to do this?"

What authorizes a person...? In the truest sense "authority" does not flow from assignment of position by powered people, nor from receipt of certified pieces of paper. Authority flows from being true to whatever phenomenon claims the person. (Aoki, 1991d, p. 11)

Authority in teaching then flows from being true to what education is.

Feminist[s]... concerned with "empowering pedagogies"... assert that the educational project in general should empower persons, all persons, to live their lives with integrity, with honesty, and in freedom to develop their full human capacities: capacities for creation, production, affiliation, and nurturance. Beginning from this point much feminist writing about curriculum and teaching addresses itself to a felt imperative of developing nonhierarchical, nonauthoritarian teaching. (Pagano, 1988, p. 526)

I would like to think that I believe in and practice empowering pedagogy. However, to deny our position of authority in the teaching relationship is disingenuous.

The idea of authority is easily associated with the notion of authoritarianism--which might actually be called the perversion of authority.... By its very essence authority refers to a certain asymmetry, difference, unevenness, inequality, dissimilarity in the relation between two or more persons. To be in authority is to be in a position of influence. This is precisely the relation between a parent or teacher and a child or youth. (van Manen, 1991, pp. 68-70)

> Must authority necessarily be a word of violence--vanquishing words such as empowerment, freedom, and nurturance?

Seeking a feminist pedagogy, Susan Friedman reports that, reluctant to identify with male authority, she turned to "facilitation", only to discover that she had muted the authority and energy that the nurturance and teaching of her students required.... Just as that abdication releases... [from] tyranny, it also relinquishes the power of pedagogy: the capacity to share the world that is the object of our scholarship, our concern, our passion, and our action with our students. (Grumet, 1988a, p. 115)

Reflecting upon my authority, rather than detaching myself from my authority, helps me to better understand the gravity of my moral responsibility for the welfare and development of children.

I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous.... In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized. (Ginott as cited in Christensen, 1997, p. 135)

Thus, teachers find themselves in a great position of responsibility.

One thing that we must continually attend to in our living with our students is our RESPONSE-ability.

By being in my... [class he] asks not only for a response that is mindful of the dangers to which he is exposed, but for a response that is mindful of his being a child and of the obligation that this fact places on me as an adult. How should I respond? (S. J. Smith, 1989, p. 90)

Our actions, our failure to act, our words, our silences, our presence and our absence are all experienced by our students in significant ways.

Our seeing, for instance, may be experienced as neglectful or hopeful.

Allan stands outside of the classroom door with me. He had initiated this meeting, and he looks clearly distraught, almost in tears, which is very uncharacteristic. "You are marking us on participation," he says quickly, "And today, when I had my hand up you didn't call on me."

"I apologize, Allan," I respond, "but I did see you. I know that you had things to say. It's just that there were so many other people who also wanted to contribute."

Being seen is more than being acknowledged. For a child it means *experiencing* being seen by the *teacher*. It means being confirmed as existing, as being a person and a learner. (van Manen, 1986, p. 21)

At its worst, our vision can become "super-vision" where teachers seeing students is experienced not as care, but as continuous surveillance, a strategy of domination (Grumet, 1988a, p. 111). At its best, our vision, in concert with all of our other senses, can help us to offer our students insight into how others are experiencing them, and, in so doing, help them to increase self-awareness, and "to heed the speech of their own body of experience... becom[ing], each one, the human being he or she most deeply wants to be" (Levin, 1989, p. 88).

It was a quiz day. Math quiz days were hard. For some students, no matter how successful they have been in taking Math with us, they still seem to dread being evaluated. On this day, as I was handing quizzes out, Brandi quietly said to me, "I'm not going to write this." I thought I must have misheard her.
"Pardon me?"
"I'm not going to write this because you haven't taught anything." There was no question in her voice, just solemn defiance. Rather than continue to carry on this conversation in the classroom, I pulled Brandi outside while the others continued to write their quizzes. We had a huge conversation out on the porch. We talked about how she might need to take a step back and look at her own actions in the class while lessons are going on. I don't know what Brandi experienced during that talk, but after that she was completely different in Math class. She found herself a new desk, right in front of mine. And she worked each day. Hard.

At times, it seems as though what we say to our students does not have any effect upon them whatsoever. At other times, it seems that our words, sometimes spoken so casually, can have powerful and lasting effects.

Two weeks ago, we had a long discussion with Eric. In all of his classes, he was pages and pages behind in his work, and he was using his class time to socialize rather than for productive purposes. In our meeting, we had been very blunt with him about how we viewed his contribution to the program as being very negative. I later overheard him describe the experience to his friends; in his words, "we all took turns yelling at him". It must have made an impression, however, because we saw a huge improvement in the days that followed.
*Today, Eric has worked especially well, and I commend him on his efforts. To my surprise, he responds with, "You see! I am not a **cancer** to this program." This was the word that had been used in the heat of the moment two weeks prior.*

"You won't believe what happened to me. I was working at my job at the mall, and one of my old teachers came by and he couldn't believe that I was working there—that I could get a job and that I could actually keep it! I thought it was so funny!" Hasan told me this story as though it were a joke, and waited for my response.

Even our physical presence may make a difference.

"I can't do it," she yelled out, dropping her pencil and throwing her hands up in the air. "I've been trying for an hour and I've got nothing to say!" She was working on an essay. It seemed that for many of our students the sheer amount of words required in a formal essay was enough to grind all thinking to a halt. Discovering a place to begin was a common challenge.

I sat down beside her, and suggested that we brainstorm together on the topic. As we began, I didn't say much, just listened to what she had to say, and recorded her thoughts in her own words as she spoke them aloud. At the end of it, she seemed surprised by the long list that she had generated, and my presence was no longer necessary.

It was five o'clock. We sat together in the classroom, each working quietly at our respective desks. It was Friday and I, tired from the workweek, would have rather been at home than at school. However, I felt that I needed to be here for him. My company seemed to be enough to hold him here, to help him focus on what needed to be completed, and to dissuade him from joining his friends in other after-school activities.

As an adult, I embody possible ways of being for the child. I see the child trying on my gestures, my ways of seeing and doing things, my ways of reacting, my ways of spending time. And as I see that happening, I am confronted with my own doubts. Is this the way I *want* my child to act and be? And if not, is it the way I want myself to act and be? (van Manen, 1986, p. 14)

The teacher is the teaching....
We seem to be advising through our every movement,
through our very way of being with students.
(Chamberlain et al., 1993, p. 36)

Good teachers model authentically what they teach.

Getting the child to do something that goes beyond what he or she is already capable of requires our showing the child something of ourselves. Like the child, it is not a question of showing off ability, but rather of showing we know how to enter the spirit of practice. (S. J. Smith, 1989, p. 177)

When it came time to make up the final exam for Writing 12, I decided to put in five poems that I had personally written for the students to interpret and analyze. This was a big step for me. I was far from a Whitman or a Dickinson, and uneasy about my presuming to call myself a writer, even if that was precisely what I was encouraging my students to do.

I think that in the heat of the examination few students actually realized that these poems were my own works. However, one student recognized them as mine, and in her interpretation she wrote a very personal message to me. "I didn't know how much you believed in poetry until I saw your poetry included in this exam. You actually write it, and let others read it."
I liked this comment. It confirmed for me how powerful it can be if students sense that we are what we teach. We are not separate from it.

Teaching is more than the authoritative implementation of mandated curricula. Teaching is more than acts of saying or doing.

[There is often a] forgetfulness that what matters deeply in the situated world of the classroom is how the teachers' "doings" flow from who they are, their beings.

That is, there is a forgetfulness that teaching is fundamentally a mode of being. (Aoki, 1991g, p. 7)

Occupying the position of teacher in the classroom automatically grants me a mantle of authority. Yet, I should not presume that I am automatically granted pedagogical authority over students just because I presume to call myself teacher.

Every child and adult, is always influenced:
by each other, by their cultural traditions, their language,
their own biography, their socio-physical environment,
and so forth.
But only a certain kind of influence between adult and child
is animated by an orientation to the good,
to what is good for this child--
meaning that this orientation has *pedagogical intent.*
And the intention is to strengthen the child's contingent
possibility for "being and becoming".
(van Manen, 1991, p. 17)

The kind of authority, for instance, that pushes a student to complete all of his or her homework, but at the same time causes that student to hate school and learning is not pedagogical authority.

But the adult can only have pedagogical influence over a child or
young person when the authority is based, not on power,
but on love, affection, and internalized sanction on the part of
the child. Pedagogical authority is the responsibility
that the child grants to the adult, both in an ontological sense
(from the viewpoint of the pedagogue) and in a personal sense
(from the side of the child). The child, in a manner of
speaking, authorizes the adult directly and indirectly to be
morally responsive to the values that ensure the child's well-
being and growth toward mature self-responsibility. (van Manen,
1991, p. 70)

Prior to his entrance into Combined Studies, Lev was renowned throughout our school, and especially throughout our staffroom, for being a troublemaker in class. Although we had never been formally introduced, at the time of his entrance interview, I recognized him as one of the handful of individuals whom I saw habitually occupying the chairs outside our school administrators' offices. This was regularly a holding area for Lev, a place for him to await punishment, or simply a space to exist after being exiled from an exasperated teacher's classroom. Lev was well known to the office staff, especially to our principal, who once said, "It was as though Lev was thinking, 'Go ahead. Just try and teach me. I dare you.'"

Satinder came to the program with just one goal--to finish grade 10, and then to enter the military along the path of least resistance. In discovering Combined Studies, she believed that she had found a program through which she would be passed no matter what. From the outset, it was clear that she thought that this was a program for losers and dummies, and that she didn't see herself in either category. I don't think that she believed she was going to learn anything with us; she saw us as nothing more than an expedient way to meet a future goal.

Although it was evident in her participation in class discussions and in her writing that she was a very capable student, Satinder often did not work to her potential at all. She would say that she didn't see the point of our assignments, and that she thought they were busywork. "Cut and paste is for kids," she would say, before sitting back in her seat to daydream, or before putting her head down on her desk to sleep. She had no pride in her work, often trying to pass off hastily scrawled, unedited work as complete. In efforts to test the integrity of my evaluation of her work, Satinder would hide offensive subject matter or language in her writing. Time and time again, I would have to speak to her about inappropriate behaviour in class. Often, I would have to return work to her to be redone.

It took Satinder a few semesters to realize that this was an academic setting, and that we were two bright teachers who could give her a run for her money intellectually. When she completed her grade 10 credits, she somehow wound up staying around for her grade 11 credits, and then her grade 12 ones. She never said anything to us about her decisions to continue; at the end of each semester, she always left it as though it were uncertain as to whether or not she would be returning. For this semester, her fifth and last, she has, for the first time, turned in a book within which every single page is of her highest quality.

Our position of pedagogical authority is one of vulnerability, rather than stability.

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Never sure how students will respond, we live in tension.
    The relationship seems to be of great importance,
a relationship with the authority situated in a position of
                    vulnerability,
        never certain what will come to be.
        (Chamberlain et al., 1993, p. 38)
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An exchange group from Japan had just arrived at the school, and all the grade elevens and twelves were being called down class by class to file into the gymnasium for a welcoming assembly. Most of my students were looking forward to this. It was an opportunity for them to take a break from class, and a chance to see some of their classmates perform in the drama that was being

presented. While students sat on desks and chatted with one another awaiting our call to the gym, I tried to do some bookkeeping, and ordering of my files. Above the rest of the voices in the room, Mia at the back of the class announced loudly, "This is stupid. I'm not going." I pretended not to hear the voice. Many times outbursts of this nature seemed to be only for the purpose of garnering attention. I went about my work. Mia walked up to my desk. "Did you hear me? I'm not going. You can't make me go." Apparently, this was more serious than I had first thought. So surprised was I by this conflict arising out of what seemed to be the most innocuous of circumstances, I was not sure what action to take. I looked at her and said, "Of course you're going. As a student in this program, and as a student in the school you are obligated to attend this assembly. It is not an option."

This moment with Mia later caused me to reflect upon what I believed about the social responsibilities inherent in being a student in this program and in this school, and the nature of my role in supporting students to meet these obligations.

There is a great professional resource in students who make us feel the most vulnerable--the ones who cry foul when they think that we stray from our responsibilities to them--the ones who question our pedagogical authority over them. These are often the students who most urgently confront us to define more fully our calling as pedagogues, and the nature of the pedagogical relation.

We were working on math problems together. I had made an error in demonstrating a question, which meant that we had to start again from the beginning. This was met with a look of complete disgust from my student. "We have to do what?! Start again?!" he railed. "This is a joke. You're a teacher. Teachers aren't supposed to make mistakes."

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Teachers are culturally constructed as "ones who know", as those
          who will fill a lack and thereby lead students
                    from ignorance to knowledge.
                    (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 80)
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Just as it is uncomfortable for students to move beyond the cultural construction of teacher as knower, it is equally disconcerting for teachers to relinquish their identification as knower.

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As a teacher I have felt the demand to be a knower, expert,
repository of knowledge, purveyor of facts and skills.  I have
pretended knowledge I didn't have.  I once found one of the
toughest confessions to make was, "I don't know".  But as a
teacher I knew I was an imposter, caught up in an imposter's
dream or façade, a communal con, a foolish farce.  But I wore a
necktie.  I had university degrees.  I was invested with
authority or mastery.  I could pretend that the emperor was
wearing clothes.  (Leggo, 1996, p. 238)
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But today, "I don't know" feels much easier to admit. Walking into a program that was completely new to me, and working with students for whom the "old" ways did not seem to work very well, quickly shook me off the omniscient teacher pedestal atop which I was so precariously perched.

It was a relief to show humility in what I claimed to know, and in who I claimed to be. And it felt truer to the purposes of education in society--to help students become learners of what could be, rather than limiting them to what already is.

> *Education* means, ["ex" out of; "ducere" lead] *a leading out.*
> Leading in education means, essentially, the leading of people
> from where they are now to new possibilities.
> To lead in such a way requires that
> *the leader follow the essentially true of what education is.*
> (Aoki, 1991d, p. 11)

> A leading which is a following....
> (Chamberlain et al., 1993, p. 25)

In the time of the apostle Paul, a family slave called a pedagogue led the child (Gr. *paidagogos*, *paidos*=child+*agein*=to lead) *to* the teacher. The pedagogue was not the teacher; the pedagogue was the one who led the student to the teacher. The pedagogue walked *with* the student, the two engaged in a journey, and in the journey, the real pedagogic relationship was exemplified. (Leggo, 1995, p. 7)

Teachers and students are in the journey together.

Teachers and students dwell in the same places, but often they operate like enemies (against) with no understanding of all the possibilities of relationship and connection that exist in the prepositions between, among, with, along, etc. Being a participant in the experience of a school means occupying embodied positions.... (Leggo, 1995, p. 7)

Occasionally, other teachers may walk into my classroom looking for me to sign a form, or to answer a question. Glancing around the room and not being able to see me, they will ask someone sitting in the back row, "Where is your teacher?" The student will, in turn, look around the room, trying to locate me. I am rarely seated at my desk at the back of the room; I am more often to be found sitting at a desk beside a student, or crouching beside a student's chair. As Aliez laughingly commented on one such occasion, "It's like she's one of us."

Like one of them, I, too, am a learner.

There are educators who believe that their own education is
complete. They will probably try to impose a taken-for-granted
set of beliefs and values. Inevitably such "education" turns
into a pedagogy of oppression--an authoritarian form of
domination of adults over children. The "completed" educator
tends to see children as incomplete. No need then to listen to
children. Impossible to learn from them. (van Manen, 1986, p.
15)

Ideally, as Lacan (1977) writes, teachers should never separate the identities of
teacher and learner (as cited in Briton, 1995). We must continue to know that we
are ever unfinished, that there is always more to be learned, and especially more to
be learned from our students.

A panel of students sat before us, their task being to engage with us in an
informal hour of discussion about school and teaching and learning. It was our
principal's idea to gather these students together to talk to our group of three
experienced teachers, and six pre-service teachers. Our principal felt that there
was no better resource for teachers who desire to understand and improve their
practice, and she hoped that in this hour the student panel would do most of the
talking.

Not one of the students was yet over the age of 19, and together they
represented many walks of life. Among them were an "actress", an "athlete", a
"student government representative", a "gifted" student, and an "at-risk" student.
Throughout the hour, they talked to us articulately and with sincerity about their
experiences in school, and about what good teaching was to them. The wisdom
with which they spoke was amazing. Sherry spoke words that still remain
imprinted on my mind, "Don't give up on students. Because the ones that you
most want to give up on have probably already given up on themselves."

If given the opportunity, students may teach us so much, and in the process,
students may come to gain a sense of how much they know, and the value of that
knowledge.

Often times we don't respect the fact that our students possess a lot of information. And it blows
me away continually. I'm teaching right now about Arabic cultures, about Islamic cultures, and my
students are volunteering information about holidays, for instance, and other things that they have
learned from friends who are Islamic. And I think, wow, great, I didn't know all that stuff. And I sit
and read and try to give them information that I think is important and they always come up with
more.

[If they believe] that truth comes from others
they still their own voices to hear the voices of others....
[They need to gain] a powerful sense
of their own capacities for knowing.
(Belenky et al., 1986, pp. 37-8)

In our class discussions, students draw upon their own experiences to direct our teaching, and their learning.

> As part of a study on the solar system, we were having a discussion on the earth and its atmosphere. One of the students suggested that the atmosphere wasn't really protecting us as well as it could because humans were still subject to burns from the sun. This prompted me to describe a documentary that I had recently seen televised on skin damage attributed to UV radiation, which in turn compelled another student to talk about skin cancer. This contribution led us into an animated dialogue about the more general topic of cancer, and how this disease had entered and affected our lives.
> At one point, someone asked in a perturbed tone, "How did we get onto this topic anyway?" For that student, the diversions were seen as distractions from what was really important, namely, our focus on the solar system; but for me, these detours did exactly the opposite--they led us into precisely what was most important to the students.

In our class lists are many students who have had chronic difficulties with consistent school attendance. Thus, we attempt to involve students personally as much as possible in their classes. What is the point of showing up if things are going to be the same, whether you are there or not?

> [In Combined Studies] teachers have attempted to re-constitute the combined subject area curriculum requirements in such a way as to consider deeply the place for, and the experience of, the student. The effects of understanding and the gaining of knowledge are produced through a constitution and re-constitution of ideas shared with others. Such effects are produced in the interplay amongst others. Understanding then, is not something to be recovered, re-presented or retrieved. Rather, understanding of knowledge is produced; meaning is negotiated between student, teacher and text, socially constructed within a dialogical space. (Timmins, 1996, p. 3)

In our program, I would say that the project book pages are the primary dialogical space within which student meaning is negotiated.

> One of our students once wrote that he has greater success in Combined Studies because of the construction of the books. In his words, "They help me learn because most of it comes from me, my thoughts of things, stories that come [from] my opinion of what we are learning about. [It's] just more easyer [sic] to understand because all the writing is coming from me."

On one hand, the books completed by every student enrolled in a single one of our courses taught in a semester are very similar. The general subject matter is the same; in accordance, many of the same statements, tables, lists, quotes, diagrams, and figures appear in the books. Furthermore, in theory, the assignments that each student must complete are pre-scribed by the teacher. But, the finished books are

always very personal and unique creations. And over time in the program, students tend to establish distinctive personal styles in their books, much like artists would.

Our *pre-scription*, our *pre-writing* of what will come to be is always *re-written* by the students presently in our midst.

In a dedication at the front of her project book she wrote,
"I dedicate this book to myself, for without me,
this book would never have come to be."

We often hear students asking us for the freedom to move outside the guidelines that we have given them.

"Can I do it in a poem instead of an essay?"

"What if I draw my own cartoons instead of using what you gave us?"

"What if I create my own assignment explaining why I think your assignment is not a good one?"

"Can I go to the library? You guys just didn't give us enough information."

"Is it okay if I create an extra page on this?"

I always say at the beginning of the year that if you can do it better than I can, then by all means do it. It will be reflected in your marks.

We provide students with access to a supply of typing paper, coloured construction paper, pencil crayons, black fineliners, and black Sharpie markers. However, each year, the list of materials that students utilize in the books seems to get longer and longer. We have seen metallic pens, confetti, wool, sequins, graphics downloaded from the Internet, stickers, glitter, and pinking shears used to create different effects in their books. Students take much pride in the originality of their presentation.

"Want to see what I've done? You'll never guess," said Rebecca. She pulled me over to demonstrate her personally designed pop-up model of the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Other students gathered around her book with me, so curious were they about what she had accomplished.

We try to support students' autonomy as much as possible, in hopes of bringing out their full potential.

Gunther Anders tells a fable of a young prince who was forever stepping off the beaten track to explore fields, woods and out of the way places where no path exists. But since it dismayed the king that his son, leaving the clearly marked avenues, made his way across meadows and fields in order to understand the world on

his own terms, he gave his son a cart and horse. "Now you no longer need to walk on foot" were his words. "Now you may no longer do it" was their intent. "Now you no longer can" was their effect. (Anders, 1902, as cited in S. J. Smith, 1989, p. 137)

I have learned that it's okay to let kids learn. It's something that people need to understand, that it's okay to give them time to work. You don't need to be in the kid's face constantly and yapping at them.

It is for him to know, as a sage knows, that as pedagogue, at times, he must take leave, that he must withdraw, such that in the very event of withdrawal, there may inhere a pedagogic creativity, a coming into being of a clearing that is vibrant with pedagogic possibilities. Hence, pedagogic withdrawal may, within a seeming negating of self, confer in the silence of the pedagogue's absence an opening wherein the student can truly learn what it is to stand, what it is to be in one's becoming. (Aoki, 1991f, p. 45)

It is one thing to withdraw from students when we see them blossoming in their autonomy, and quite another to hold ourselves back from intervening when we see students encountering difficulty. Because we are trained to help students, our natural instinct may be to ease the burden of the struggle, and, in so doing, unwittingly remove for the other the pedagogic possibilities of the situation.

Sometimes you really have to sit back and watch them fall.

He had been sitting there for almost an entire block trying to find ways to fit his work onto a single page. He looked deeply perplexed and I thought it was time that I should help. "Perhaps you should do it like this...," I said leaning over him. "See, like this," I murmured, as I moved pieces on the page into a formation that I thought would be suitable. He nodded, and I walked away. Minutes later, I watched from my desk at the back of the room to see him move the pieces that I had arranged back into place, the way they were before my interference. He moved them slowly, but deliberately.

When another student took my attention beside me with the question, "Should I do it like this?" I wondered how I should answer.

Though our intentions to offer support to students may be noble,
the end result might be that
"the child loses the freedom to ply his own way,
for now he can only re-ply to the challenges before him
in an adulterated sort of way"
(S. J. Smith, 1989, p. 137).

[But] it's hard.... It doesn't make you feel like you're doing your job.

Yet, this… is not a letting go of responsibility. Rather, it is a responsible letting go. A letting go of a need for clarity. A letting go of a dependency on the power that comes from the assurance of being absolutely sure. It is a decentering of the ego and its will to power, creating a space that calls upon us to listen to calls coming forth from the other and from the situation; calls that remind us of our humble stance as humans upon the earth. It is, at times, a call to withdraw and allow space for the other, for the becoming of others. (Richter, 1994, p. 40)

And so "we dwell in the tensionality in-between leading by persevering, by *getting in their face* and leading by withdrawing, by letting go" (Chamberlain et al., 1993, p. 35).

But, if curricular planning truly holds open the space for the other, I cannot plan exactly what will come to be in an hour, a day, or a week, let alone in the next semester, or school year. Instead, in each unique teaching situation, always we search for the appropriate way.

One begins to understand how pedagogical confidences learned in one's teacher training may have only limited application in the face of any classroom's true complexity; and that dealing with the complexity requires not yet another recipe for control, but precisely the opposite, namely a radical openness to what is actually happening therein, in the lives and experiences of both students and oneself, and an ability to deal with all of it somehow on its own unique terms. (D. G. Smith, 1996, p. 10)

In Marketing, the kids were just off the wall. I tried to settle them down, but nothing seemed to work. I needed to try a new approach, so I thought I'd sing some children's songs to them. I had quite a repertoire from my singing to my son, so I could have gone on forever if they'd have let me. At first, they weren't quite sure what to do. Once they got over the shock of me singing, they began to put their hands over their ears, and moan and groan about the noise. Once I stopped though, they settled right in. It was an off-the-wall approach that worked.

What would be the face of teaching for a teacher who is awake to what sustains us? In Sanskrit, there is a word, *upaya*, used precisely to describe the teaching style of an Awakened One. Literally it refers to "skill in means, or method". It also has the connotation of "appropriateness" of knowing exactly what is required in any specific instance. (D. G. Smith, 1996, p. 9)

Discerning what is appropriate for each student is helped by the fact that we spend long periods of time with only 50 individuals. In the cases of our most experienced students, we have been together for every school day for five hours a day, for more than two school years. This is in comparison to the average teacher in our high school who sees a total of 240 students for 70 minutes every other day of

each school year, before sending them off to another teacher for the next grade level. I think that our more intimate setting and our extended relationship gives us at least a fighting chance to know our students and their needs.

I can't say I am going to react when I'm dealing with Michael, the way I am going to react when I am dealing with Krista. It's going to be completely different. But that's something that this setting lends itself to. I don't have a lot of kids I have to worry about. They're a select group that I can worry tons about.

> Yet, still it is challenging,
> "because everyone is always in an amorphous state.
> And they're all changing so much all the time.
> What may have worked with one person five days ago
> isn't going to work with them tomorrow"
> (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 201).

We try our best to understand and act in ways that honor the unique needs and capabilities of each student. Sometimes this may mean appearing to be a bundle of contradictions because what is said to one student may be completely reversed in what is said to another. Sometimes this may mean deeply questioning what we have learned in teacher training, or what may have worked very well in the past with other students.

It was hard for me to put the way I had been taught to teach on hold… and to be more accepting or allowing…. I think there are times when we can't do things by the book. There are just not the rules to dictate the procedures we should go through for each individual case. In many ways, I think this may be part of the reason how these students have come to be with us. In other classrooms, they have been procedured to death.

The students often ask, "Why is such-and-such still here?" when they feel for one reason or another that one of their peers has relinquished the privilege of being in the program. I always need to explain and re-explain that we deal with all individuals according to their circumstances and needs. And the kids seem to accept that. But, if too many kids have a problem with equity in the classroom, then that brings the expectations of the program into question.

> This questioning by my students re-alerts me to voices that say:
> "To be fair we need to be consistent.
> We need to treat everyone the same.
> Kids this age have to be responsible for themselves.
> Credit the ones who complete their work on time.
> Punish the ones who do not.
> If they fail the failing is theirs"
> (Richter, 1994, p. 102).

But to uphold consistency in a mechanical fashion is to ignore everything that I have learned about my individual students through the hours that we have spent together, and to imply that the relationships we have cultivated with one another over time are irrelevant to my teaching.

Something I have learned while working in this setting is the value of hearing and giving credence to my own and to my colleagues' intuitions. Whereas in previous work with students, I might have often deferred to what might be considered to be school protocol, or to what I have learned from "experts" through reading or coursework, I now believe that our personal perspectives as teachers should not be discounted. Due to the fact that "traditional" ways have not worked well with our students in the past, and because our school administration has made us feel very professionally autonomous as program teachers, I have come to gain much more confidence in relying upon the collective wisdom of our team.

Thus, it would seem that, simultaneously, I have both acknowledged myself as a knower, as well as become more aware of how much I still do not know.

This setting, once again, seems to favour dwelling in ambiguities rather than certainties.

Students and teachers dwelling in… [the] vibrancy of tensionality experience life paradoxically, both exhausting as it is inspiriting, both threatening defeat as it offers possibilities for educational movement, both holding us in uncertainty as it offers openness to new possibilities in the now as well as the not yet. (Chamberlain et al., 1993, p. 7)

When I began mentoring in the ways of this program, I wanted someone to tell me how things were to be. I wanted a rulebook, a set of guiding principles. But what I found was that none existed. And the only way to learn about teaching in this environment was to live it.

What has to happen is somebody has to be immersed in it and learn it.

My process of becoming a Combined Studies teacher was/is enlightening, scary, and exhilarating. And I acknowledge that this "becoming" is not yet, nor ever will be, complete.

And this is where humility must come into play
because not only are students continually being transformed,
but teachers as well.

D. G. Smith (1996) tells the story of Confucius, who at the age of fifty-one, was not yet a teacher.

> One day he went to his Master, Lao Tan (Lao Tzu) who asked him how he had been spending his time. Confucius replied that he had been studying mathematics for five years, light and darkness for twelve years, and memorizing perfectly the *Six Great Books* called *The Odes, History, Poetry, Music, The Changes, and The Seasons Spring and Autumn*. Lao Tan then began to talk to Confucius about the way which upholds us, sustains, and carries. Confucius retired to his hut for three months, and then returned to his teacher, saying, "I have understood now. The crows and magpies incubate their eggs, and fish plan their spawning; the locust engenders itself by metamorphosis; the birth of the younger brother makes the older cry. For a long time now I haven't participated in these transformations." (p. 10)

> *The person who does not participate in transformation, how could such a person transform others?* (D. G. Smith, 1996, p. 10)

I don't think you could teach in this program if you didn't experience a change.

We are being asked to consider identity not so much as some*thing* already present, but rather as production, in the throes of being constituted as we live in places of difference. For example, according to this understanding, our identities as teachers or curriculum supervisors are not so much in our presences; rather, our identities, who we are as teachers and as curriculum supervisors, are ongoing effects of our becomings in difference. (Aoki, 1993, p. 260)

And as "selves in process, being constructed and reconstructed in the context of relationships" (Clinchy, 1996, p. 235), we must continually ask ourselves the pedagogical question, "Did I do the right thing?"

> *At the end of June, we had two students who had not been able to fulfill their attendance requirements. Dave and I weren't sure what to do with these students. At this late date, it would be such a shame to have the entire semester go to waste. And so, we decided that we would give these students a final opportunity to make up their time. For two full days, beginning at 8:30 AM and ending at 2:30 PM, these students would come into our classrooms to work. Ideally, we would have had them doing academic work, but by this time in the year, their books had long ago been completed, and final exams had been written. Indeed, all that was really left to do was run errands for us--cleaning desks, removing posters from the walls, and putting books in boxes. And so, though flawed as it may have been, this was the deal that we had struck with them. One of the students realized that this was an opportunity. The other saw it as the equivalent of detention hall.*

I knew that the situation wasn't ideal, but I hoped that the students would take advantage of our offer. What I didn't anticipate was the extent to which Mandy's pride would be injured by these menial tasks. The first day, she worked hard, and complained equally hard. I wondered if she would follow through with her commitment on the second day.

I arrived early on the second day at 7:30 AM, and waited for the two students to arrive. One of the students, as expected, showed up promptly and went to work. Mandy, on the other hand, was nowhere to be found. It wasn't until 10:30 AM when she finally appeared on my doorstep. I was sitting at my desk when she walked in. Her entrance wasn't at all apologetic, although I could see in her steely eyes that she knew that she had not lived up to her end of the agreement. I shook my head, and looked down. "I wish you hadn't done this," I said.

Perhaps I should not have opened up the offer to her in the first place, but I thought she would be able to do it. Now, she stood in front of me--chest out, hands clenched, not saying anything, and waiting for me to pass judgement. I paused, my head scrambling to find words. "I can't do it, Mandy. I can't give you credit for the term. You didn't fulfill your commitment." I wanted to say more--to make her understand my position--but she was already almost out the door. The door slammed, shaking the entire structure of the classroom, and me to my core. I was left by myself to wonder if the decision had been the right one.

I feared what she might do in the days following our interaction. Would she do damage to the portable? Seek revenge on me personally? But, I neither heard from, nor saw her again. After three years of teaching in this program, this parting remains the worst in my memory. And still today, I wonder what I might have done to prevent it.

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The genuine educator always feels a dissatisfaction within
himself, a dissatisfaction especially within the ethical centre
of his being.  You have not achieved what you could and should
have achieved, help this hopeful youth that he may succeed
better.  This must be your substitute for what you have tried to
achieve in vain.  (Spranger, 1958/1971, p. 546)
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We make mistakes all the time--mistakes that are sometimes difficult to live with-- continually reminding us, as if we could forget, that we will never master our chosen occupation.

There's so much that is not really touched on in teacher education programs. The amount I learned in five months of mentoring in this program was more than I ever learned in four years at university.... But three years doesn't make you an expert. Ten years doesn't make you an expert. I think anybody who puts that label on somebody else, or takes that label upon themselves, I don't think is truly looking at the entire picture of teaching or of working with kids. I mean, there are situations I still haven't encountered, that I haven't even thought of, that are going to happen to me. I don't know how I'm going to react to them. I haven't reacted to situations in the last three years in a perfect way every time. I've blown situations before. That's not, in my mind, someone who's an expert by any means.

The kids know we make mistakes.
They know we make mistakes, for instance,
when we interview and let people into the program
whom we probably shouldn't have.

But we are in this together. We try hard not to give up on our students, and I think they forgive us for our failings as well. They understand that we are human, and that we are genuinely trying to do the best that we can.

"I think you owe me an apology," Victor said. As I looked up, he turned away. This kind of comment was unusual coming from Victor, so I knew he was being serious. I thought quickly back to the morning's events, but was at a loss as to what could have prompted this.
"Could you give me a bit more?" I asked.
"Two days ago," he said, "you accused me of something that I didn't do. I'm still mad about it. If I had done it, I would have been man enough to admit it."
He was right. I did owe him an apology. Two days ago, in trying to catch a mischievous penny-thrower in class, I had mistakenly singled out Victor, and called him outside to talk about appropriate behaviour in class. Though I had later discovered the culprit, I had forgotten to make amends with Victor. He had remembered, however.

In my initial accusation, which was then magnified by my oversight, I had upheld a trend that seems to have occurred with these students all too often in the past, that is, teachers making the mistake of assuming the worst, and expecting little from students.

Establishing and maintaining high expectations for our students is critical to our teaching in this program. Both Combined Studies teachers and students need to experience that this program is highly academic in order to give legitimacy to our presence here in this alternate setting.

[Throughout our mentoring period], the teachers at McNair taught us about viewing this as a very academic environment. That [students are] learning to be scholars, that it is a fairly special place to be in terms of it's not watered down but it's rigorous.

> *This is an academic alternate program*
> *that gears them toward graduation.*

This is an academic setting.... This course material is not different. It's presented in a different fashion. But, it's as legitimate as any of those classes [in the school].... I think kids need to know that....

The program must battle to gain legitimacy when the popular belief is that *different* must mean *easier.*

Survey results taken from a mainstream grade 12 class provided interesting perspectives on our program. Some of the written responses were very blunt, as is evident in this statement, "It is for dropouts and students who fail so they can become slackers who cut and paste". Some of the students even seemed resentful about the program and the opportunity that it presented for their peers. In the words of one, "C.S. is far more easier; I'm in regular school and when these guys were in regular school they got worse grades than me and now all of a sudden because of an easy program they're passing."

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Ours is a tolerated presence.  Understanding that the program can
occupy a space that is both in and out of the mainstream is not
easily accepted.  We have a welcomed place within the system if
we are to be described as an alternate program for academically
at risk students.  We fall neatly into the variety of educational
offerings as do the Learning Assistance, Resource and Pre-
Employment programs.  Each of these programs works to support
students for whom curricular expectations are modified.  These
programs are considered less academic by definition and are
spoken of as necessary to ensure that the individualization of
student programming is offered.  Meeting a diversity of student
needs within this line of thinking is limiting as assumptions
suggest that it is the student who does not "fit" with the
presentation of the mandated curriculum as it is so understood...
[and] that there is only one understanding, a right way to
experience curriculum.  (Timmins, 1996, p. 4)
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Those who wonder whether we are an enriched, or a modified program may be disconcerted to know that we could be considered to be enriched or modified, but, more accurately, to be both. Each of the words, enriched or modified, by itself, falls short of capturing what we are. But, taking the two words together--we can be thought of as dwelling in between--we are neither wholly one, nor the other, instead we are bouncing back and forth between the two.

We are modified because our program is different from mainstream, challenging notions of what might be considered traditionally academic, and because our program has been created to accommodate those who have not been successful in mainstream schooling. However, we are enriched in that we try hard to present sophisticated and age-appropriate subject matter in depth and detail in order to best engage our students. This may need to go beyond what is taught in mainstream classrooms.

In our program, we attempt to teach in a way that elevates the students, pushing them beyond that which they think they might be capable. We believe we use our positions of authority to uphold and to empower, rather than to oppress or debase. In turn, we hope that our students experience us not as ruling over them, but as raising them up (Belenky, 1996).

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        If you treat an individual as he is,
     he will stay that way but if you treat him
            as if he were what he could be
            he will become what he could be.
                    (Goethe)
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Between both our classes and within this program... there is a common set of expectations. And I think that expectations within a traditional or a regular classroom are too low.... In this program, we expect more out of these kids than has been expected out of them before, at home, in any of their prior schooling. If you're not expected to do much in the first place then it's easy for you to fail.

On one hand, having strict expectations for students in the program appears at odds with our value for teacher flexibility and openness. However, we have found that a core of clearly articulated and enforced expectations initially gave us, and continues to give us a place at which to begin.

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                    Life is full of contradictions,
           which means that it is full of tensions
                    among contrasting principles:
                        freedom versus control,
                        security versus risk,
                            self versus other,
                            right versus wrong,
                            real versus ideal,
     the interest of the person versus the interest of society,
                                        and so on.
                        (van Manen, 1991, p. 61)
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In a world of contradiction, without something to stand on, without something in which to believe, we lack courage.

Before beginning our first semester at Boyd, we had to undergo the difficult task of interviewing potential candidates. I questioned how we were to choose individuals who would be right for the program when we felt so uncertain about what the future held for us as teachers. How could we discern in 20-minute time slots who were the ones on whom we should take a chance?

We learned from the teachers at McNair, and from our own initial experiences that the interviews themselves are not incredibly useful for selecting candidates. Yes, we can eliminate some students from our selection immediately: students who are too old or too young for the program; students who tell us that their parents or their probation officers are more interested in a return to school than the students themselves; and, students who hint that commitments to work or other outside activities will greatly hinder their schooling. But, initially, providing there is room, we give most students a chance in the program, anticipating that those who are unable to meet program expectations will make themselves known over the course of the semester. Therefore, rather than using

interview time to interrogate students, we use much of the interview to explain the program, and what the students can anticipate in the program. We go through a form with interviewees that clearly delineates three fundamental expectations: that students will attend 86% of the time, that students will listen to lessons and use time in class appropriately, and that students will complete 100% of their assignments.

In all our uncertainty, when we first began the program at Boyd, we were able to cling to the program expectations that we had emphasized in the entrance interviews. We placed assurance in them because we had seen them already working well at McNair, a program three years our senior. Today, now in our ninth semester, we still use the same form in our interviews with potential program candidates. In our day-to-day interactions, these same expectations provide necessary scaffolding for the program, providing a sense of structure to both students and teachers.

A program like Combined Studies offers a different style of structure. It offers one where they understand that they are allowed to be creative and to express themselves and that they're going to be treated in an adult fashion. But at the same time, they are going to have to live up to expectations, a variety of expectations that I think most of the kids need. Probably a lot of them, I wouldn't say all of them, but I'd say a lot of them want the rigid expectations, so they know the boundaries. I think a lot of kids outside of school don't have enough boundaries and I think they want them.

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[Adolescents] require the watchful eyes and the community
standards that provide greater stability.  (Hersch, 1998, p.
363)
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Adolescence,
probably more than any other time in life,
is a balancing act;
thus it follows that the teaching of adolescents
must also be a balancing act of sorts.

The expectations that we uphold are rigorous for any student, let alone for students who have had difficulty committing to school in the past. Nonetheless, we continually let them know what is required of them if they are to be successful in this program. The majority of them are able to succeed, and are very proud of what they have managed to accomplish at the end of it.

Occasionally, students bring their friends into our classrooms so that they can have a look around. Sometimes I catch snippets of their conversations. "Why are there so many people in here working over lunch?" a visitor might ask. Such questioning creates an opening for our students. "Oh, we can't even be away here. Or we have to make all the time up," a student might answer with heavy emphasis on all the right words. Another might add, "We work so hard in class. You have no idea what it's like." Which in turn might spur another to pipe up, "Yeah, and you know what?

If we even have <u>one</u> thing in our books missing, they won't mark it."

In our school, we do not have a time that has been set aside for recess. Instead, a half-hour block of the morning of each day is used for either U.S.S.R. (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading, otherwise known by students as "you-sit-down-shutup-and-read"), or for C.A.P.P. (Career and Personal Planning) classes. The lack of recess is a common complaint amongst our students. "I don't understand why we can't have a recess," said Annie, "even if no one else in the school gets one. It's not fair. We work twice as hard as anyone in there."

We try to keep ourselves cognizant of how students are experiencing the program. We ask them personally when it seems appropriate. We try to catch what is said in passing to other students inside and outside of the program. This awareness helps us to understand how we should be using our authority. If our goals for students are being experienced as impossibilities, or, on the other hand, if we have not set our sights high enough, then we are not doing our jobs properly.

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To be alive is to be appropriately tensioned and... to be
tensionless, like limp violin string, is to be dead.  (Aoki,
1991b, p. 18)
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"Aww, we did this in grade five," he called out, causing me to turn from the blackboard to face him and the rest of the class. I could see others in the room thinking about whether they too remembered doing this back in grade five. I quickly finished the lesson, and then asked to see him outside, so that I could get a better understanding of his point of view. In that moment, and then in the days following, I really began to question what I was doing as a teacher in this program.

Our expectations for individual students in unique circumstances continually require fine-tuning. Sometimes we need to increase the tension, in order to more fully immerse our students in difficulty. At other times, we need to release some of the tension, else risk having a student be pulled too taut, and snap under the strain.

In the larger picture, although our core expectations for students in the program have not changed considerably, how we work with these expectations most definitely has.

I think that's the nature of the program.
It's continually evolving.

I used to back away from emphasizing the notion of scholarliness in the classroom. I would do it a few times at the very beginning of the semester, and then not bring it up formally to the class again. I used to think that students, having been with us for a while, and having been in school for much of their lives, would already know about what it meant to be a scholar without me saying. But now, I think that reminders every once and a while are good, even necessary.

Remember how you and Dave used to come in everyday at lunch to try and make sure that students were coming in to make up time? Remember how your time was available for students in the mornings and after school? We've sure learned a lot since then. Now, only one of us has a classroom open at lunch each day. We just made things clear to them at the beginning, even in the interviews, and they now know what they have to do.

I think I used to have more doubts about how successful these kids would be. After all, some of them had only been able to complete their grade eights in mainstream, and now they were 16 years old and coming back to try again. Over time, I've been completely astounded by what some of these kids have been able to do. It's much easier to believe in them now that we have watched our own graduates walk across the platform at valedictory.

I think that over time the three of us have become more comfortable with our *authority* as teachers of these students. We feel more certain of what our responsibilities are, and how to work with those responsibilities in ways that are responsive to the needs of students.

We acknowledge our authority, and at same time, share *author*ship with each other as team members, and with our students. We are all together in this, and together we will write and re-write the present and future.

To awaken to life, even life with its uncertainties and blank walls, is what we want of our students and ourselves. It is important to communicate to young people that the world is an unfinished task.... An object, classroom, neighborhood, street, field of flowers shows itself differently when encountered by different spectators... the reality of that object or classroom or neighborhood or field of flowers arises out of the sum total of its appearances. Thinking of those spectators as participants in an ongoing dialogue, each one speaking out of a distinct perspective and yet open to those around, I find a kind of paradigm for what I have in mind. (Greene, 1992, as cited in Quintero & Rummel, 1995, p. 97)

Indeed, it is this paradigm that Greene (1992) speaks of that has helped me to understand authority in the classroom--"having a distinct perspective and yet open to those around".

CHAPTER 6: HOPE PROVIDES AN ENTRANCE

In thinking about possible topics for my thesis, I knew I wanted to somehow address my experience of teaching in Combined Studies. I sensed that teaching in this program had resulted in significant professional, and indeed personal transformations for me, and I desired a space in which to think more deeply about it.

Teaching in this program is not what I initially feared it might be, nor what I think many of my peers in the teaching profession would imagine it to be. Our teaching is not guided by curriculum so modified that it lays limp and lifeless, unresponsive to valiant attempts at resuscitation; our program is not overrun with expectations so compromised that they lack any real meaning to either students or teachers; our portables are not work camps dictatorially run by harsh rules and regimentation, and neither are our classes "zoo classes" where chaos holds reign; and, most importantly, our students are not threats to society, individuals for whom there is little hope for authentic success in life.

In reflecting upon my experience as a teacher of Combined Studies, I knew that my mind was fecund with stories that I thought needed to be told to other teachers, and anyone else with an interest in the teaching of so-called "at-risk" students. I knew very few teachers who had bothered to ask what we did differently in Combined Studies, or who had come to see for themselves what it was like to work with students who had not experienced success in mainstream schooling. Most teachers seemed to see teaching in this setting to be more of a punishment than an opportunity. I was excited to tell these stories in my research; but first, I needed a place to start.

In my preliminary search for a focus, my attention was immediately drawn to the notion of risk, so obviously central in the labelling of our program as an "at-risk program" for "at-risk" students. I began to ask questions about risk, and how we as teachers understood and experienced risk--the risk of our students, and the risk involved in teaching our students. I thought that examining risk would be a good way to initiate this research project, and indeed it was. But as my research proceeded, I discovered through introspection, and through discussion with my colleagues that although risk might be *part* our experience of teaching in this program, the experience is not best defined by *risk*, but by *hope*.

I think it's come around to this now, around to the idea of hope. I mean I wouldn't be teaching in this program if there weren't that. None of them would be entering this program if there weren't hope.

When I was asked to teach in this program, I was very hesitant. I saw this new path as a very risky venture. The risk lay in the fact that I felt I had a lot to lose--namely, the safety and security of a position in which I felt very comfortable and competent. As insurance against this risk, and as part of my agreeing to teach in this program, I confirmed with my principal that should I dislike my new role, I would be free to return to my former position in the school.

Our beginnings, most notably in our first semester and then to a lesser degree in the second, were filled with feelings of doubt, bewilderment, insecurity, and at times even dread. Indeed, it felt as though we could as easily fall flat on our faces as have great success.

The beginnings were a shock to me as a teacher. It was hard to wrap my mind around Combined Studies. It was a new language, a new way of seeing and thinking about kids, about school, about teaching itself.

Even though we had time to prepare, and went in thinking we were prepared, I still felt like someone feeling his way along a pitch-black passage. The light would flicker on for a moment to let me get my bearings, however briefly, and then it was back to the blackness.

As time wore on, and we became more experienced as teachers in this program, our anxiousness began to ebb. Although uncertainty was still present, a sense of comfort began to prevail over a sense of chaos. Our confidence in ourselves and in our students was no longer precariously fragile, but continually gaining more and more in strength and, thus, resiliency. Today, the Combined Studies program feels like home for us.

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When I'm driving to school, I don't dread coming to school; I look
forward to coming to school. And it's the kids that make the
difference.
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Today, I can't imagine myself teaching in any other way.

In a few months, when I resume my teaching career upon the completion of my thesis, I will tell my principal that the place to which I would most like to return is to my position within the Combined Studies program.

Put all of these kids together in a class, and it looks scary. But it's not.... Because I've been in it now [for a while,] I don't see it as a risky situation, or me as a real risk-taker. I did view it that way when I was mentoring at McNair, however.

Over time, we have found comfort in the discomfort. If risk exists in our teaching environment, as teachers, we are no longer suffocated, no longer paralyzed by feelings of risk.

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In reality,... risk will be an innermost essential
characteristic of education as long as education is considered a
form of association with free beings, who are basically
unpredictable in their freedom because they do not act
mechanically... To attempt to abolish the so-caused condition of
daringness in education, and in that way to avoid the danger of
failure, necessarily degrades the other human being to a mere
material for my manipulation and thus offends the dignity of this
other person and the dignity of education itself. (Bollnow,
1959/1971, pp. 521-523)

Thus, we could describe any teaching relationship as a relationship of risk, not just within a so-called "at-risk" setting, but in any setting. Our job as teachers is to inspire kids to the boundary of what might be possible and then to oversee what happens from there.

If that element of risk weren't there [in a classroom] then there wouldn't be any learning... But if you've created an atmosphere and an environment where making a mistake isn't the worst thing in the world... then it doesn't seem like that big of a risk. And it seems like a worthwhile risk to take because... you'll learn from it... There is so much possibility in risk.

In our program, we recognize the educational value of struggle, and know that in true struggle, the risk of failure is very apparent. However, we also believe that it would be very difficult, and very exhausting to sustain oneself as a teacher, or as a student over an extended period of time in an atmosphere laden with risk and anticipated failure. Thus, teachers in this program make every effort to ease the element of risk in our classrooms, or at least ensure that risk is experienced not as *peril*, but as *possibility*, and that it is accompanied hand in hand by hope for success.

I disagree that our program is a risky place. I think... [Combined Studies] is a very comfortable place to jump back into school.

We try very hard to make our program as welcoming to students as possible.

Ironically, our program is seen by most teachers and most students in the school as the jail that houses the criminals out back. I once asked a student involved in my Japanese exchange club to do me a favor and drop something off at my portable. Genuine fear leaped into her eyes. "I'm only going there if you're going to be there with me." What, I wonder, did she think was going to happen to her?

Contrary to public opinion, we are not a place characterized by foul language and raucous brawls, where out-of-control students regularly swing from the fluorescent lamps, set fire to our classrooms, and physically threaten the teachers.

*This whole program is set up with the idea that it is a caring place.
It's a place where kids feel comfortable in coming.*

Initially, upon Salina's entrance into the program, she was too overwhelmed by her new surroundings to call much attention to herself. But a year later, she is now a program veteran, and her comfort level has increased exponentially. She uses her quick wit, and offbeat eccentricity to establish herself as the clown of the program, and as a result, her loud and often outrageous behaviour causes her to be dismissed from class.

The funny thing about Salina, however, is that when you ask her to leave, she doesn't want to. Whereas most students, when given an opportunity, will leave school grounds immediately, Salina won't. She lingers about, waiting for a chance at the next block, or after lunch, to come back into the classroom. This is her haven.

If the school may be considered to be constituted of many mini-communities, ours is as cohesive a group as any of the others. Because our class sizes are too small to cultivate anonymity, everyone in the program has not only a name, but also an identity. Students have greater opportunity to develop friendships with one another in this familiar setting, and teachers have more time to spend getting to know individuals, and to better address their specific needs. Student labels are avoided. Just as our program is known as an alternate academic program, rather than an "at-risk" program, individuals are assumed to be scholars rather than "at-risk" students.

This program is geared towards helping people be successful. It's not judging them based on their past experiences. It's really giving them a clean slate and letting them try fresh and try anew and try to be academic.

In Combined Studies, we work together as a team of teachers to make and uphold consistent expectations for students. We continually dialogue as a team to devise and develop strategies of working with individuals. We outline clearly our expectations to students and we revisit them often. We try to involve students in their learning, and to be flexible in our teaching so as to encourage students to take control of their own learning. We very purposefully encourage students to separate their lives inside the classroom from their lives outside of the classroom.

I try to help them with that separation, checking their baggage at the door, coming in and trying to focus, which I know for a lot of them is very difficult to do.

We carefully cultivate and protect an academic atmosphere. We select students from a waiting list for entrance into the program, and we dismiss those who are not contributing positively to the program.

I ask them to leave if they can't focus, so they know that this is a serious environment where learning does happen.

In all these efforts, it is our intention to make this environment a place where students may be successful, even if it has been a long time since success in school has been experienced. Therefore, at the heart of what we as teachers experience everyday is not the "risk" of our students, but hope for our students. We hope that students will come, will learn, and will be changed for the better by their schooling experiences. It is hope that carries us as teachers into the next day of working with our students. Though this program was initially designed by two elementary teachers to keep kids in school, today, this is not our daily focus. Instead, we hope for students to achieve academic excellence, to become scholars, and to improve themselves as people.

Through our relationships with our students, we have come to realize that our students are simply individuals who do not quite fit the "mainstream" high school student archetype, and thus, encounter difficulty in the current traditional school structure.

I don't see them as "at-risk". I see them as students who have a lot of different ways of learning. I don't think I took that into account when I was teaching in a traditional classroom setting.

It's just that they are at risk of not succeeding within the high school mainstream context.... They are "at-risk" in that they haven't had success. And they will continue not to have success if... their needs aren't met.

Indeed, it cannot be ignored that many of our students come from troubled backgrounds and complex personal circumstances. But, we have seen that schools and teachers may respond in such ways that these factors need not preclude success in schooling. This is becoming more important for educators to know because the pressures of today's society seem to be eroding and buckling and fracturing the model of the typical, mainstream adolescent.

Wave after wave of children are growing up in this world of adolescence that surrounds them with risk--even the "regular" kids. They take this world for granted, as their stories have displayed. It is just the way the adolescent community lives. The developmental tasks of adolescence are consistent, but the context is remarkably changed. Denying the truth does not help. Even the very best kids are often in danger. Adolescence is rife with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, sex, lying, violence, unstable and broken families, and so on. This is the mainstream of adolescence today. (Hersch, 1998, p. 366)

I think risk is part of every kid. I think even kids who you would never think have any traumas going on do. They're just probably more able to cope with dealing with the traumas than others are.... When you think about it, you could consider all kids or most kids "at-risk" in some way or other.

Therefore, to think of our program or our students as being acutely "at-risk" may be somewhat of a misnomer, and may leave one with only a superficial understanding of what teaching in this program is like.

Focusing on hope, rather than risk, seems to provide greater entrance into understanding the experience of teaching in this program.

At this stage, I think... [hope] is central to this program.

"He who lives of hope, dies of hunger", says an old adage. Hope, it seems to say, conjures up, in the mind of man, deceptive, wishful images, thus preventing him from taking a clear view of the realities of life and turning him into a dreamer who fails to come to grips with the exigencies of life. (Bollnow, 1961, pp. 263-4)

Our hope for our students is neither artificial, nor feigned; we, as teachers, are not wishful dreamers with empty imaginings. Our students, through allowing us entrance into their lives, have shown us concrete examples of amazing resilience and strength and courage in difficult circumstances.

Labels so easily planted on teens obscure
their more interesting reality.
In fact, one of the most powerful themes
exposed through the simple act of taking the time
really to know these kids is that
they hold enormous potential.
Sometimes they have the internal fortitude to use it,
other times it languishes unappreciated
or becomes twisted into negative uses.
(Hersch, 1998, pp. 29-30)

Our students prove to us again and again that they are individuals who learn differently, rather than students who cannot learn at all. Though initially our hope for them might have been weakened by doubt in their capabilities, this hope has strengthened over time and through experience. Our hope is now very real, and urges us to act in ways that help these students to realize the potential that we now believe to exist.

Hope is not just a passive kind of optimism that somehow things will work out in the end. Hope implies life commitment and work. Even in the most absurd and painful of circumstances we cannot and must not give up on our children. How ironic! So much can go wrong in our lives, especially these days, and yet it is precisely in this time of hopelessness that the vulnerability of our children makes hope once again a possible human experience.

To be a parent or a teacher is to have expectations and hope for a child. But "hope" is only a word, and words have ways of becoming overworked, cliched, superficial, empty sounds. So we must examine how living with children is experienced as hope, how what we do is hope. The most important aspect of our living hope is a way of being with children. It is not what we say and do, first of all, but a way of being present to the child. We may say, "I hope that…" with reference to particular expectations and desires: "I hope that my child will do well in school," or, "I hope that he can do his homework," or, "I hope she'll get along." These are the hopes which come and go with the passing of time. But children make it possible for adults to transcend themselves and say, "I hope. I live with hope. I live life in such a way that I experience children as hope." … Hope refers to all that gives us patience, tolerance and belief in the possibilities for our children. Hope is our experience of the child's possibilities. It is our experience of confidence that a child will show us how life is to be lived, no matter how many disappointments we may have experienced. Thus hope gives us pedagogy. (van Manen, 1986, pp. 27-28)

<div align="center">

Our greatest job hazard seems to be losing one's sense of hope.

Without hope, one lacks a meaningful reason to teach.

Perhaps, what it is to experience teaching in an alternate setting

is to have a greater sense of hope for students for whom many others,

including the students themselves,

may have lost hope.

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My belief is that as soon as we lose hope and give up on the student whether it's in mainstream or Combined Studies, we've lost the kid…. If we have no hope… and the kid has no hope, then we're just wasting our time and their time. And that's not fair to them. Let's find another place for this kid.

In mainstream settings in the past, many teachers have experienced working with our students as futile, a waste of time for all involved.

I don't think I'm a labeller of kids but I can remember there were certain kids that I could just sense at first that they didn't seem to know what they were doing, and I marginalized them. I stuck them in the corner to try and keep them out of trouble. Or I put them right up by my desk and let the rest of the kids see that…. I bet there's not a teacher alive who hasn't taken a kid who they think is a… loser and just kind of isolated them somewhere and not worried about them.

It is a common technique to try

to isolate a variable in order

to solve a problem.

In this case, however,

the variable is a human being.

With what repercussions
are algebraic methods being applied here?

> When isolating students within a classroom does not seem to work,
> the next logical step seems to be sending them further away.
> Alternative school settings such as ours exist to accommodate these students,
> the ones who have been set aside.

Indeed, alternate programs work well for many students. This and other studies would confirm this. However, I think that we need to pay heed to the fact that we, as well as every other alternate program in our school district, do not have the room nor the resources to accommodate all the students who desire alternatives to mainstream schooling.

In our last semester, we had a waiting list of 28 names in comparison to openings for 12 students. What exactly happened to all the ones whose names remained on the waiting list, I do not know. From this data, it seems conclusive that alternative programs serve a valuable purpose. However, the question remains: can mainstream classes do things differently so as to lessen the demand for alternative programs? I believe the answer is yes.

Each of my colleagues and I have all previously taught in the mainstream school system. Since then, through our time spent teaching in an alternate setting, we all, without exception, would say that we as teachers have been profoundly changed, and that we believe ourselves to be better teachers from our experiences here. We have learned much from our mentors; we have learned even more from working with our students. If we were to go back to teaching in a mainstream setting, we would be different teachers than we once were. We believe that we would be more flexible in our teaching, more accepting of difference, more responsive to students, and more confident believers in the capabilities of students.

I wonder what other teachers would be like if they had the same chance to... set up the program and really get a chance to learn it and embrace it, and understand it.

Because alternative programs are seen as worlds apart from mainstream classrooms, my goal in this research was to open a window into the world of the teacher in an alternate program setting. Although what happens in alternative programs may be paid positive lip-service by other educators, it seems as though what works with marginal kids is seen to be only marginally important to mainstream teachers. It is my hope that a glimpse into our world might change that viewpoint.

In this whole year of teaching in Combined Studies, I have had only one fellow teacher who is not a member of our teaching team come down here to visit. What are they afraid of?

Opening up a dialogue I think is important. I think Combined Studies and many other alternative programs are kind of done on their own, separate from mainstream school, and laughed about and... joked about, and never really dealt with.

If we take the language of curriculum experts, child study people, educational planners, etc., as brute data, rather than as historically constituted interpretations, then we lock ourselves and our children into a cultural box in which there can be no conversation, no dialogue, no debate; only a mindless, ritual acting out of the working of other people's minds. And that is a form of madness. (D. G. Smith, 1988, p. 422)

Our progress only makes us ever more conscious of the inadequacies, the limits and the failures of the system. (Levin, 1989, p. 190)

"Alternatives", exceptions, or magnets are often wonderfully "successful" for the participants (depending upon measure of success). As a district policy, however, alternatives alone usually enable access for a limited number, resulting in the substantial neglect of that majority of students who remain in non-alternative schools. Further, they may necessitate waivers--rather than policy change--or require psychological (often racial) "assimilation" rather than institutional transformation.

All adolescents deserve and desire what are usually the conditions of "alternatives"--small, intact, and personal spaces in which to engage their peers, adults, communities, and texts. We know that the success of alternative schools is attributable, in part, to a small size which enables personal contexts for empowered and empowering teachers (Foley & Crull, 1984). But the proliferation of alternatives for "at risk" students simply removes a small group of students from large comprehensive high schools while, at the same time, preserving (bolstering) those schools. The question we are left with is how innovation and alternative models can saturate and transform the mainstream, thereby challenging and invigorating it, rather than supporting the mainstream from the problematic margins.

As in any area of innovation, the creation of alternatives, even positive alternatives, may accommodate a few, but it more fundamentally acts as a holding pond for the "mainstream" and thereby enables urban education to remain fundamentally unchanged. (Fine, 1995, p. 84)

In speaking with my colleagues throughout this research project, they have underlined the need for institutional changes in order to better meet the needs of all students. They suggest, for instance, smaller class sizes, and increasing teacher

time spent with the same students (i.e., continuing to teach students as they advance through grade levels). Nevertheless, sweeping institutional changes are slow to happen, and according to cynics, unlikely to occur at all. Therefore, rather than primarily being directed towards those who might affect change on an institutional level, this research is intended to speak to individual teachers.

The most significant reform… is not that there will be a structural change…. The most significant change is in the concept of what a teacher is. (Farrell, 1990, p. 162)

I am convinced that we need not concentrate so much on the structures within which we teach but more on the way(s) we understand and work with kids as they learn. (D. Osipov, personal communication, April 1997)

Our students have made us well aware that it is not enough for teachers to stand in front of a classroom, and tell students what to learn and how to learn it. Students desire us to reach out to them and to invest time and effort to know them as increasingly autonomous individuals. They desire us to build bridges across our differences, so that, dwelling together, we may embark on a journey of coming to know.

The turbulence of adolescence today comes not so much from rebellion as from the loss of communication between adults and kids, and from the lack of a realistic, honest understanding of what the kids' world really looks like. The bottom line: we can lecture kids to our heart's content but if they don't care what we think, or there is no relationship between us that matters to them, or they think we are ignorant of the reality of their lives, they will not listen. (Hersch, 1998, p. 365)

Teaching may thus require participation in the lives of students in complex ways.

A teacher does not just teach. A teacher teaches and counsels, and they listen, and they advise, and they are moral guiders, and they are all these things. It's not just teaching mandated content…. It's so much more than that.

I see myself as facilitator… encourager… mother figure… information giver, nag…. I see myself as a listener very much so.

I would say that I am part sounding board, part voice of reason… part meanie, part big jerk, part slave driver… part counsellor… and one of the few adult friends they would probably develop over a period of time.

To teach well is not an easy task because it ultimately demands knowing others, their needs, their wants, their hopes and fears.

Connected knowing "is a rigorous, deliberate and demanding
procedure, a way of knowing that requires *work"*
(Clinchy, 1996, p. 209).

As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz says: Comprehending that
which is, in some manner of form, alien to us and likely to
remain so, without either smoothing it over with vacant murmurs
of common humanity, disarming it with to-each-to-his-own
indifferentism, or dismissing it as charming, lovely even, but
inconsequent, is a skill we have arduously to learn, and having
learnt it, work continuously to keep alive; it is not a
connatural capacity, like depth perception or the sense of
balance, upon which we can complacently rely. (Geertz, 1986, as
cited in Clinchy, 1996, p. 209)

*Combined Studies isn't the way, but it is another way. You could do it
this way. It's doesn't mean it's the best way.*

In writing this paper, I have tried to avoid extolling the program and the teachers
of Combined Studies as ideals to which all should aspire. We are, after all, far
from experts, and continually work to improve the program and our own teaching.
Instead, this research has endeavored to show how one team of teachers has
experienced and continues to experience a shift in teaching to accommodate
students who have been set apart from the mainstream as ones who learn
differently. Today, teaching in this alternate setting is unanimously described by
this team of teachers as vibrantly enlightening, and rewarding, and not dominated
by risk.

The teacher who is awake
has recovered themselves from
the snares and entrapments of Self and Other thinking,
now accepting all others in the way a very young child does,
trusting the world as being the only world there is,
engaging it without fear.
(D. G. Smith, 1996, p. 11)

The Combined Studies program is not a teaching model, but
rather.. [it does] model… [a way of] relating to young
people which reflects a true connectedness and
responsiveness to them--it allows us to see all young
people as capable learners and allows them to move into the
spaces of their lived experiences. (D. Osipov, personal
communication, April 1997)

Though my research began with notions of risk at its focus, I have learned through
this research process that it is hope and not risk that is the most brightly coloured
thread that weaves together the pages of this thesis--hope for students to find
greater meaning in, and to achieve optimal success in their school experiences--

hope that greater attention might be directed to what teachers are doing in alternative settings in order to inform what teachers are doing in mainstream settings, and, in so doing, to challenge current understandings of what is considered to be "alternative" and "mainstream"--and above all, hope that teachers would continue to examine what they believe about teaching, and how these beliefs might transform their practice in order to better meet the needs of all students in an amorphous and unpredictable world.

AFTERWORD

To know how to finish this document was difficult. The word, *conclude*, comes from the Latin, *concludere*, meaning *to shut up, or close completely* (Klein's Etymological Dictionary, 1967). A conclusion, in the true sense of the word, thus seemed to be at odds with my purposes for this thesis.

The research and the writing of this paper have taken me on a journey of discovery. My opening words, with their emphasis on risk, were a trailhead marking the beginning of my trek; my last words, with their resonation of hope, display how far I have come. In between, reading through the text that so aptly undulates across the pages, I can see that there has been much movement. The journey, however, is far from over. My original exploration into the topic of "at-risk" teaching has spiraled outward into the more general questions of what it is to teach and to learn, complex questions that will always be open to further discussion.

When I first began this project, I knew that I had much to say to other teachers. I was not sure, however, what language to use in my speaking. Initially, my focus on risk pulled me towards the "at-risk" literature and its language of failure, retention, dropouts, and pushouts. As my study took shape, however, I could see that it was less about *"at-risk" students*, and more about teachers experiencing all *students*. The research began to gravitate towards the language of "educational caring" literature with its attention to teacher-student relationships, student engagement and empowerment, and building communities in the classroom.

My failure to provide a concise list of recommendations or implications for teachers may elicit a "so what?" response to this thesis. My omission was very purposeful; it was always my intention to raise questions and stimulate thinking, rather than to reduce teaching to a set of shining dogma and rules. However, I do believe that further thinking and questioning into the "so what?" of this thesis may usefully take place within the context of research done in educational caring and communities.

Nel Noddings (1992), for instance, has written much on transforming the current institution of mainstream schooling in order to reach all young people, not simply the ones who currently fit the popular notion of the academically able. Her suggestions include: that curricula be organized around themes of care rather than the traditional disciplines; that teacher education be redesigned in order to help teachers become better learners, and more attuned to the needs of their students; and, as these changes to curriculum and teaching are actualized, that we continue to challenge ourselves to discover new ways to evaluate their impact. Further research might involve implementing the ideas of Noddings, and other such "educational caring" theorists, in secondary schools and teacher education programs.

I believe there is greater urgency now, more than ever before, for schools and teachers to provide students with places of support and connection and hope. The silence that was once heard as students disengaged and slipped away from our classrooms has in recent days been shattered by shrieks of rage, and sounds of violence. We need to be innovative, continually reflecting upon our practice, and stubbornly "refus[ing] to accept limits on what... students can learn or what... teacher[s] can do to facilitate learning" (Kohl, 1998, p. 9). Indeed, the outside world today is harsh, and these are not easy days to keep hope alive. However, my teaching experience, though limited, has shown me that our hope can be renewed as we look openly and humbly to the young, perhaps especially to those who have been labelled "at-risk".

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