

**SECONDARY SCHOOL GIRLS IN CONVERSATION ABOUT SCHOOL SUCCESS:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY**

by

**CAROLYN JEAN FRASER**

**B.Ed., Simon Fraser University, 1987**

**M.Ed., Simon Fraser University, 1991**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION**

in

**THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

**(Educational Leadership and Policy)**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

**August 2007**

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## ABSTRACT

I sought to gain insight into the meaning of the term “success” as it related to three groups of secondary school girls. There were six girls who affiliated themselves with a Fine Arts group, five girls with an Academic group, and four girls with an Aboriginal group.

Utilizing a focus group format, each group met for an hour to have a discussion about what success meant to them. I analyzed the transcripts for themes that emerged, interpreting the girls’ views through a poststructuralist, feminist lens. The girls in each group were articulate, engaged, and reflective, able to deconstruct many taken-for-granted assumptions inherent in the dominant discourse on success, jointly constructing meaning on a number of similar themes. These themes included the importance of maintaining some balance in their lives, of making, monitoring, and assessing their own goals for success, and of the positive impact of support from friends and families. There were also some differences among the groups. For instance, the Academic group focused almost exclusively on achievement as a determiner of success, echoing the dominant discourse. They also expressed some ambivalent feelings about this focus. The Fine Arts group discussed the importance of following their passion for the arts as a way to express themselves and to contribute to society. The Aboriginal group deconstructed several notions concerning success, including “enough” money, the importance of developing strategies to overcome obstacles, and of having self-confidence.

I placed this study within the context of the Women’s Rights and the Aboriginal Rights Movements, examining the literature for the impact of these social movements on Western society generally, and on the education for girls more specifically. I also highlighted some contextual issues that may have affected the Aboriginal girls in the study.

I also examined the BC Ministry of Education Gender Equity Policy, including the context for its development, implementation strategies, and the exclusion of important voices. I discussed the tension between conflicting and contradictory discourses concerning the “accountability” agenda and the social justice movement within educational policy and practice.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank my thesis committee for their support and expertise in assisting me with the thinking through and the writing of this thesis. Dr. Joann Archibald, Department of Educational Studies and Dean for Indigenous Education at UBC learnt her particular expertise on the education and context of Aboriginal students. Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education at UBC, helped me with relevant resources. Dr. Deirdre Kelly, Department of Educational Studies at UBC, was my advisor and worked closely and patiently with me, as ideas took shape through to final editing. This has been an enriching journey of learning and I thank each of you for guiding me along the way.

I also want to acknowledge the help and support of my good friends and colleagues, particularly Sherilyn, who encouraged me and co-constructed so many of the ideas with which I have wrestled over the years as we walked and talked about our personal and professional pathways. Thanks, too, to Diana, who read all the way through my dissertation, editing, making suggestions, and asking me more questions. Terin and Koyali also helped me in formatting and editing. You all have helped me to find the vocabulary to express “in words that which [I] have always known in thought” (Gibran, 2000) and I thank you all. I see more clearly now where I can take the necessary actions which follow from these ideas.

Lastly, I need to acknowledge and thank my two daughters, Erin and Leah. They are each an inspiration to me to keep moving forward and to remain optimistic and hopeful for the future. Their constant love and support enable me to find and to navigate my path, to better understand what success can mean, and to take action so that more of us may feel success in our lives.

## Quotation

And a man said, Speak to us of Self-Knowledge,

And he answered, saying:

Your hearts know in silence the secrets  
of the days and the nights.

But your ears thirst for the sound of  
your heart's knowledge.

You would know in words that which  
you have always known in thought.

You would touch with your fingers the  
naked body of your dreams.

And it is well you should.

The hidden well-spring of your soul must  
needs rise and run murmuring to the sea;

And the treasure of your infinite depths  
would be revealed to your eyes.

But let there be no scales to weigh your  
unknown treasure;

And seek not the depths of your know-  
ledge with staff or sounding line.

For self is a sea boundless and measure-  
less.

Say not, "I have found the truth," but  
rather, "I have found a truth."

Say not, "I have found the path of the soul."

Say rather, "I have met the soul walking  
upon my path."

For the soul walks upon all paths.

The soul walks not upon a line; neither  
does it grow like a reed.

The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of  
countless petals.

Kahil Gibran, 2000

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION—LOTS OF QUESTIONS

*For Erin and Leah: May you always care enough to be curious*

I grew up a pleaser, an accommodator, a good girl. But, somehow it's never been enough. Now, I find myself a 50-something, divorced, professional woman, with two wonderful, accomplished, grown up daughters, and a few dear friends, wondering what it means to be successful, to have a successful life, to be a success.

This paper will be a vehicle for that wondering. My writing will meander over the past, the present, and the future, through memories, experiences, relationships, and hopes. My personal life will intersect my professional life, because they have become entwined and have formed the person I currently am. As I think about retirement in a few years, I reflect on where I have been, what I have done and with whom, and I ponder my future. I feel the need to define this "success" concept. What does it mean to be successful? Am I successful? Is it tied to that feeling of finding when and what really is "enough"?

In my professional practice, I and my educator colleagues toss around this "success" word easily, rather flagrantly: "students' success", "success for all students", "successful teaching strategies". What does it mean? Who is it that is defining success? What are the criteria? What are the assessment tools? Who decided on the "correct" definition? Is it the same definition for everyone? Is there a time frame to be successful? Do gender, ethnicity, social class, religion, age, sexual orientation, and/or other factors enter the conversation? Is there, or was there ever, a conversation about what constitutes success? Whose voices were heard and whose were excluded or marginalized? Is the definition frozen in time or is it open to scrutiny, deconstruction and reconstruction?

I will explore these and other questions in this paper. I will reflect on the experiences in my private life, in my public role as an educator, and within the spaces between. I am interested in examining these types of either/or dualisms so often used in education, such as private/public, subjective/objective, emotional/rational, different/equal, female/male, as well as success/failure. Is life really so black/white? What about the grays, the spaces in between? If one end of the balance scale is “right”, is the other always “wrong”? Can education, and life, be characterized by a linear scale at all? Are there other, more meaningful ways to describe experiences, learnings, knowledge, and success?

I see myself as having many overlapping roles and identities. For me, it makes sense to construct my sense of self not on an either/or balance scale nor on a linear, one dimensional plane, but as several, often shifting, multidimensional, sometimes overlapping circles, intersecting each other, more or less, depending on the particular context of where I am, as well as with whom, as well as where I am interacting. These multiple, overlapping identities include: woman, mom, partner, daughter, friend, educator, vice-principal, student, researcher, and citizen. In writing the list, it feels like I need to rank these in order of importance or from most to least important, but their importance to me, and to others, may be different, depending on the context, the time, the place, and the circumstances. With my daughters, I am mom first and foremost, but also a woman, as we discuss their various priorities in their lives and strategies to negotiate being a woman in the workforce. I am a student as well as mom with my older daughter, who is a student in Edmonton at the University of Alberta, as we discuss writing papers, meeting deadlines, and other stresses of campus life. I am a worker/leader as well as mom with my younger daughter, as we discuss her many accomplishments and pressures in her current career as a city planner.

Written language has built-in structures which limit how I am able to express myself and it tends to reinforce a linear, dualistic framework of “from/to”, “either/or”. I will try to work around these limitations. Spoken and written language also can have restrictions if the speakers/writers and/or listeners/readers have difficulties with language as Second Language learners, if they have learning disabilities, or an unfamiliarity with adequate vocabulary to express all their knowledge, thoughts, and feelings. The arts can be a more meaningful vehicle for these expressions. As an educator, I can see the benefits of students having access to quality programs from K-12 in choral and instrumental music, visual, 3-D, and graphic arts, dance, creative writing, and other forms of expression in order to find an effective medium to make meaning and to communicate effectively. I believe that these expressive forms of constructing meaning are important to include when exploring concepts like success. My research focus groups include secondary school girls who have found their sense of self, as well as their passion and direction in life, from the arts, girls who defined themselves as having Aboriginal heritage and girls who defined themselves as having an academic focus.

I will examine my various overlapping identities in this chapter and explore how they affect my perspective, my point of view about people and ideas, and my interpretation of events. I recognize and acknowledge that “the social world is an interpreted world, not a literal world, always under symbolic construction (even deconstruction!)” (Altheide & Johnson, 1998, p. 291).

I will utilize a poststructuralist conceptual framework as outlined by Kenway and Willis (1998) throughout this paper. With this framework, language, either written or spoken, serves to construct an individual’s subjectivity or sense of identity in ways that are dependent on particular contexts. Individuals can have several, sometimes competing and conflicting, discourses as dominant and influential in constructing their subjectivity. The discourses also can have very different meanings, depending on the time and place they are occurring.

Since language does not reflect a fixed social reality, but rather serves to construct that reality for us as we engage with it, I am hoping that writing this paper and analyzing both my own and others' research about the concept of success will assist me to gain deeper understandings of my practice and my own use of the term, success. It will also, hopefully, serve to assist my students, as well as any readers, to deconstruct and reconstruct new meanings, new realities, using their own interactions with the written language of this paper.

I have chosen a feminist methodology lens with which to analyze and interpret the experiences and research chosen for this paper. As such I will attempt to continually be aware of and explicitly state my own biases and positionality in all steps of the research (Morris, 2002; Wolf, 1996).

I believe that too much in current global society, as well as in our BC education system, is a taken-for-granted male norm for acceptability, the "right" way. The dominant discourses tend to be patriarchal and subordinate the interests and voices of women. I will challenge these discourses and expose the unequal power relations between men and women (Weedon, 1997). The purpose of my study is to give the girls a safe space within which to find and to explore their voices, to deconstruct some taken-for-granted assumptions about what success means, and to jointly reconstruct a meaningful sense both of themselves and of their place within the dominant culture. In addition to providing spaces for the girls to examine institutional and relational asymmetries, I will also suggest implications for practice and policy to facilitate the empowerment of the girls--and boys-- within and outside of the education system. I will stress the importance of educators strategizing and acting in ways that counter feelings of powerlessness in students who are marginalized from the dominant discourse on success in schools. More voices need to be heard regarding the many contested meanings of "success". The voices of families and community members also have an important role to play here.

In chapter 2 of this paper I will review some relevant research literature on feminism, poststructuralism, issues surrounding the education of Aboriginal students, and adolescent girls' perspectives about success. I will also briefly explore the influences of culture, social class, and the education process on girls' development of identity.

My research involves three different groups of female secondary school students in a conversation about the question: What is success? The girls volunteered to have an open conversation in focus groups about what success means to them with an experienced facilitator on a regular school day. One group of students defined themselves as "Academic", another as "Fine Arts", and another as "Aboriginal". Their voices have an important role in helping me to explore this topic of success--for myself, for them, and for other students in my school and in the province. I will describe the research methodology I used and analyze their conversations about success in the third and fourth chapters.

In chapter 5, I will examine the BC gender equity policy which was derived from The Sullivan Report as *A Legacy for Learners* (cited in The Report of the Royal Commission on Education, 1988). I will analyze it for the language the authors used to define success for BC students and particularly for female students. I believe that through these deconstructions of some of the language and with the addition of more diverse voices to the discourse, more meaningful and inclusive policies, content, and implementation plans can be developed to assist all students in their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development in the school system and in their own lives.

In my final chapter I will make some recommendations regarding policy, content, and implementation relating to the goal of assisting students to feel "successful" in their schooling. I will reconstruct this concept to be inclusive and meaningful for both students and educators. I also hope to be further along in defining success for myself.

I will start at the beginning, my beginning, and see where my wonderings take me. I will wander through my memories, experiences, and relationships with some of the people who have had the greatest influence on me and the person who I have become (so far). Through this process, I will position myself within this paper, my research, as well as my analyses and interpretations. This reflective process will also serve to assist me in clarifying what success means for me and the implications for my practice.

My parents lost a son, my brother, before I was born. He died of a virus, brought home to Canada by soldiers from the Second World War. My earliest memories are of visiting his gravesite and seeing and feeling the terrible pain of my parents. I grew up in the 50s in a quiet, white, middle class neighbourhood. I am an only child and came under the close scrutiny of both my parents all my life. I was a good student, an average piano-player, not very sporty or athletic. My friends and I played quiet, but imaginative games with dolls and small, porcelain animals. We read *The Bobsy Twins* and *Nancy Drew* and sometimes wrote our own detective stories. I was a “good girl”, trying to please my parents and teachers. I was encouraged to go to university to become a teacher (a “safe” career choice, in case my future husband could not support me). I am slightly embarrassed now, writing this, to have lived this stereotype of the middle class, white, privileged, suburban television family of the 50s and early 60s. While I didn’t question my parents’ wisdom and direction (out loud, anyway), I always felt that somehow, somewhere there must be more--more excitement, more interesting “stuff” to do and to think about, more challenge, more fun!

I spent a lot of time with my grandparents until my middle teens. They doted on their only grandchild. I could do no wrong. I remember it as a wonderful time whenever I stayed with them. They encouraged me to imagine. My grandpa and I danced like Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show. We went for walks and explored construction sites. Implicitly, I knew not to mention any

of these scramblings over 2 by 4s and up wobbly, temporary staircases to my parents, especially to my mother. I baked with grandma and it didn't matter if I put in extra chocolate chips, or ate some batter along the way, or even got flour on the floor. We played shadow puppets for hours on the walls of the then empty sawdust bin in their basement. It was fun to create, to imagine, to be silly. I felt like I could stretch a little. I felt loved and cared for and comfortable in taking a few risks with them. This was the beginning of my wonderings about what it meant to have "more".

My dad took an active interest in my life when he was home from work. He encouraged me to do well in math and he helped me with my school work when I needed it. He took accounting courses at night so he could "get ahead" at work. I wanted to be like him. He would take me to the Pacific National Exhibition every summer, just the two of us. We would eat junk food and then go on scary rides together. Again, I knew not to tell my mom about these out-of-the-ordinary escapades. These times were all the more valuable because they were out-of-the-ordinary! My dad and I would watch "Hockey Night in Canada" and cheer the Leafs together while my mom made dinner. We squeezed eating in between periods so we didn't miss anything exciting in the game, Frank Mahovlich scoring, Eddie Shack tearing up the ice, Johnny Bower grabbing a puck out of thin air! I learned about the game because it was a connection to my dad and to his world outside our home. He would tell me about his week at the office during a break in the action. He would also tell me about his past work experiences in the bank and in the car business. I could tell he was proud of his accomplishments, both past and present. He also made important decisions. I listened to him on the phone in the evenings with clients or co-workers. He was important! I wondered what it would be like to be like that. Was this some early modelling about what success could look like for him-and for me, too?

My mom was a stay-at-home-mom and I was her prime focus. She had, and still has a very clear idea of what good and bad was all about. There was little space in between the two opposites for her. She knew that a woman needed to be a “good” wife and mother. She was much clearer in her expectations for me and in what success meant to her than were either my dad or my grandparents, but oddly, she was, and still is, much harder to please. In reflecting on my uneasy relationship with her over the years, I wonder now if she was possibly discontent being a stay-at-home-mom (a necessary criterion of being a “good” mother) and was unable somehow to express this discontent. She did encourage me to be a teacher and to work until I too, could become a good wife and mother. But, as I mentioned earlier, this had more to do with me being able to support myself later in life if my marriage did not work out than me gaining any broader viewpoint or feeling of contribution by working outside the home. There was never any doubt that I must get married and have children; that was a prime ingredient for “success” for my mom, and for a lot of post-war North American society, as well. I will explore this societal trend in a later chapter.

I remember always feeling a tension between what my mother was saying she wanted me to do in preparing for these roles as wife and mother, and what she was doing in those roles, herself. Although she kept the house clean, the clothes washed and freshly ironed, and my dad’s dinner on the table as he walked in the door from work, she never seemed very happy. Was happiness not a part of success then? She kept herself busy shopping, meeting friends, volunteering, supporting my dad and me with “things”, if not encouragement and emotional supports, but what did she do for herself? Was she, too, trying to please her parents or live up to a manufactured stereotype of the successful homemaker/consumer of the 50s and 60s? Did she compare herself to my dad’s “important” role at work? Am I comparing her role and that of my dad, with her role coming out as “deficient”? Am I still thinking in an “either/or” dualistic scale

of what is “important”? At the time, I think I was. That was the template by which to judge “good/bad”. Looking back, it is difficult to step out of the times and to interpret feelings and thoughts using a different, developed over time, template of intersecting circles of shifting meanings and identities. However, the tension I felt from my mom’s actions and admonitions may have helped to create my own feelings of discontent at being at home and having to perform according to an outside set of rules for being a “good girl”.

There was also an implicit criterion for judging success with both my parents in the fact that my mom could stay at home and didn’t “have” to work. My dad made a sufficiently good wage for us to be financially comfortable and that also ensured my mother would stay at home. I remember their discussions about other women, recently widowed or “abandoned” by their husbands, who had to now work to support themselves, poor things! I wonder if mom ever wondered if was there “more”? Was she curious about different definitions of success for women and for men? Did she feel restricted by a narrow definition of success for a woman? Did she want to work outside our home? Would she have seen that as “wrong” or “bad”? Did she feel that success for a woman at home was not as recognized or important as success for a man at work? She certainly never let me in on any of her wonderings and still shakes her head sadly at my pursuit of yet more education and promotions at work, (“You’ll never get another man if you’re too smart!” she remarked to me over lunch one day a few years ago). I guess being “too smart” is not a part of my mom’s definition of success for a woman, or for me, at least. She continues to think in “either/or” terms, maybe that is part of her unhappiness with me and I think, with her own life.

I was married at an early age, right out of university, starting my first teaching job. I felt like I was following the expected plan. I remember enjoying the challenge of helping elementary students to learn. That felt important. I was making decisions. I was making a contribution (like

my dad). I also remember feeling good that I was running a home, cleaning, doing the laundry, ironing, and making dinner. I was being a “good” wife and I was working outside the home. It was a little scary teaching those grade 7 students, but fortunately, I had two other new teachers with whom to work, just down the hallway. We became fast friends. We supported each other and shared lesson ideas. We helped each other to figure things out. We had many conversations about how to teach, what to teach, how to survive, and even to feel good about it. We jointly constructed what it meant to be a “good” teacher. J and P are still my good friends today.

P was a “feminist”, a new term for me at that time. She had kept her maiden name when she got married. I remember wondering, “She can do that?” It was another step for me in being curious, wondering about this “plan”, these “rules” for being a woman. Who decided them anyway? In teaching, I had no rules or clearly laid out expectations for being a “good” teacher. In the 60s at Simon Fraser University, when I was a student in psychology there, the focus was on political unrest. A lot of us were asking questions. I remember my teacher training program as rather loose, not prescriptive, with a lot of “exploration”. I had always asked a lot of questions, (often not out loud), but I felt like there was more of a focus to my questions during these years. Why is it that way? Is it meaningful? Who decided that? The answers were left up to us, as students, to explore and construct.

I began reading “women’s lib” books like *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer (1971) and *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1962). Friedan wrote about “the problem that has no name” (pp.11-28) and a new vocabulary and way of expressing my feelings and thoughts about there being “more” slowly started to open up for me. I felt like I was not alone in my curiosity, my wonderings. In addition to the questions, I was starting to be able to explore some possible answers. Even through to this current Doctoral Program, I am still discovering new

vocabularies that enable me to explore and to express what is happening for me. I still struggle to find adequate words for the “in between” spaces in the either/or, good/bad dichotomies.

My new husband and I worked for a few years in the 70s and saved money to buy a house so we could have some children. This was part of the “plan”. My friends were following the same plan. It was a taken-for-granted plan. My first real identity “crisis” came as a new mother, at home, with a new baby. I was terrified! Where were the “rules”, the clear expectations, the plan, now? All I had were questions! There was no one “down the hallway” with whom I could share my feelings of inadequacy, of an incredible lack of relevant knowledge. How many times a day should I feed the baby? The baby books said, “On demand”. What did that mean? I was still not sufficiently confident or self aware or in possession of the vocabulary to be able to express these feelings coherently. I had no one with whom to construct some meaning, some common understandings, or some knowledge, on this critical topic. I also felt that I really couldn’t tell anyone or ask anyone; I didn’t want to let anyone in on the fact that I didn’t know, that I was possibly a “bad” mother. This was different than teaching, where there were no set expectations or plans for me as a working woman; that was new territory and I enjoyed the challenge. However, being a “good” mom was a very clear expectation for me. But, where were the details? How did I do that?

Through the stress, anxiety, and exhaustion, I worked by intuition, using some of my abilities in creative problem solving. I thought back to my experiences in teaching. Likely, my early experiences playing with my childhood friends and with my grandparents contributed to my abilities, as well. It worked. Time passed. The baby, Erin, grew, was happy and healthy. The “plan”, externally developed, with no input from me, did not work! I had to figure things out for myself! It was a shock! But, I was doing it! Erin has always been curious. She explored

everything in her environment and asked question after question. She and I discovered our worlds together, and separately, constructing meaning and new knowledge along the way.

When I had my second daughter, Leah, five years later, I thought I had this “good mom” thing pretty well figured out. I was wrong! Leah was a different child. While she also was fed “on demand” and asked a lot of questions, she responded differently from her sister. There was also a new dynamic in our home with two young children. Leah was, and still is, very social. She loved being around other children. Erin was content playing on her own or with one other friend. I had to figure out new ways to be a “good” mom with Leah, with Erin, and with them both at the same time. My husband had also been transferred to a new city, so I no longer had as easy access to my old friends with whom I had grown able to have conversations about my child rearing practices, as well as my growing feelings of isolation being at home, away from work, fulltime. Again I figured things out for myself by trial and error, by seeing what worked with both girls, by listening and watching their responses, by building meaningful practices and language that worked to keep us all happy and learning new things, most of the time. It was a much more interactive process--and it still is with my now grown up daughters--than I think my growing up was with my parents. While I certainly have expectations for my daughters, they are constantly being challenged and renegotiated. Each new context we are in together and separately, as we each grow older, represents a new challenge within which we construct meaning and relevancy in order to maintain the sense of love, support, and care within our relationship. I am constantly amazed at each of them and their accomplishments. They do not seem to be adhering to any “plan” preset by me or by their father or by the larger societal context within which they live. This feels to me like a “good” thing, to them it feels “natural”.

I have been a teacher of students from the preschool to the university level. I have been a counsellor of students from grades K-10. I have been a principal or vice-principal of students

from K-12. Over the years I have worked with students from a variety of socio-economic levels, cultures, and religions, with many different abilities, interests, and need levels. At all developmental levels I have seen these children and young adults struggle with issues concerning their identity. Who am I? What am I good at? What can I get away with? What happens when I do this--or this? At the older levels, in secondary school, often I see students, both girls and boys, who already think they have it mostly figured out. They have bought into the dominant discourse that because they have not "succeeded" in school, they are "bad", a "failure". Some of the students, particularly those sent to my administrative office for "fixing", wear "bad" like a badge of courage. They are usually not as happy with labels like "druggie", "loser", "failure", "going nowhere" (because they are often not on the Honour Roll, and therefore, not off to university). These students are often angry, resentful, lack self-confidence, and see no hope for themselves. They are also often quite talented or interested in other, less academic or non-academic pursuits like the arts, cooking, auto, or shop courses. I spend my time and energy listening to them, to their issues, their perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses, their hopes, and their dreams. I ask a lot of questions, deconstructing some of their taken-for-granted assumptions about success. I also hope to make them curious. I try to help them to reconstruct a new sense of identity for themselves, incorporating those strengths, hopes, and dreams through helping them to make explicit those taken-for-granted expectations, the "plans" of their parents, of the school, of society. If I can enlist the support and active engagement of their parent(s), the process of reconstructing a more meaningful sense of themselves seems to work best. It is certainly, at best, only a beginning, but I think, an important one. To question the dominant discourse about success and failure, to openly discuss the possibility of creating a new "plan", a new and meaningful identity for oneself, is powerful stuff!

My husband and I separated and then divorced a few years ago when our daughters were in their early 20s. Being the “good” wife was another of those externally set expectations that just didn’t work out for me. I had a new partner for awhile and I felt better able to figure things out as we went along together. In my upbringing, there was no “plan” for a second partnership. It was challenging, and a little scary, to be embarking again on uncharted pathways, but I employed increasingly utilized skills and intuitions about ways to construct meanings and understandings in our interactions, through my writing, and in conversations with my friends. He, too, did not have any plans for how such a new relationship would work. Together we worked on what our relationship meant and discovered new aspects of our own sense of ourselves as individuals, and as a couple, along the way.

My friends and I have also grown together, and separately, exploring, questioning, constructing meanings to make sense of our worlds, and of ourselves, over the years. My friend J, from my first teaching job, has had to deconstruct and to reconstruct her sense of herself and her social reality, too, over the years. We have spent a lot of time together, especially since the break-up of her marriage and my marriage, talking, laughing, crying together, trying to create some sense and some meaning from our lives as women. We have each had to deconstruct the “plan” to be a “good” wife and mother when we left our husbands. What does it mean to be a wife and a mother--a woman? What is “good”? Who decided the definition? We don’t think we were in on that particular conversation! We have had many conversations, reconstructing these terms in relation to our own and our joint experiences and knowledge. It is constantly evolving, these understandings of who we are in all our various roles during the day, the week, a lifetime.

My friend Sherilyn has been a constant source of support and care since we started counselling together in a new school nearly 20 years ago. Again, we have quite different life histories and circumstances, but we create meaning and understanding when we have

conversations together. Her life is not following a pre-set “plan”, either, and we work well together to make sense of whatever is happening to us. We walk and talk almost weekly, exploring our various identities as moms, partners, women, educators. It was with Sherilyn that this topic of success first became tangible for me. We talk about our daughters, our hopes and dreams for them, what it means for them to be growing up as women in these particular times, with many of the same, and some different, stresses and pressures than we faced growing up so many years ago. We talked about an article in her husband’s law magazine that mentioned the number of women lawyers was increasing and that most were going into family law instead of criminal law. We wondered together if those women were choosing family law because it was better for them and their interests and needs. Were they freely and knowledgeably making the choice, or were they being “encouraged” to do something easier, less time consuming, more in line with their “natural” tendencies as women? What real choices did we make 30 years ago to become teachers? Is the “plan” still there to push girls in certain directions? Were we, as moms and educators, somehow complicit in perpetuating this plan to keep women out of certain places and firmly entrenched in other, more “suitable” roles and identities? What obstacles do we, ourselves, reinforce to block our daughters, and our students, in making real, informed, explicitly thought about choices?

We reflected on our daughters’ “choices” of careers, their conversations about what was important. We wondered about the yearly Career Fairs at our schools, which we jointly organized; were we choosing a diversity of careers, of sufficient scope to meet the needs and interests of all of our students? Who was delivering what message in the talks to our students about careers and jobs of the future? How much of our choice in speakers and who came from which careers was a reflection of our own implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions about appropriate careers and roles for women and for men?

My other good friend, L, has a son. We often see each other, too, to walk, talk, and/or have dinner together. We also share many common interests, beliefs, values, and experiences. Like Sherilyn, L is a school counsellor, white, middle class, and middle aged, like me. Our conversations always also include some wonderings about our grown up children. L has been a single mom for many years and we talk about the expectations, not only for us as moms, but also for her son, growing up without a dad. What does it mean to be a young man today? Is it different than when we were young? Can we, as women, ever really understand "maleness"? Can all men be so easily categorized? Do men, like us and the women we know, struggle with taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to be a man? Is this new or has it always been there? How do men make meaning of their experiences? Was it through conversations? If so, with whom? Although I was mostly interested in the issues surrounding girls and women because I felt I could access and contextualize these within my own experiences, considering boys and men was important, too. We do, after all, interact with and against each gender in most of our daily lives. Then there are the perspectives and experiences of gay men and women and transsexuals. How do these individuals feel and think about success? What are the taken-for-granted assumptions that influence, and restrict, their lives?

My friend L has also had to reconstruct her identity as a single mom. Her experiences are different from mine, yet we create some common understandings when we have conversations about our work, our children, and our lives. She is an artist and we often speak in metaphor. These are meaningful conversations and they help me in expressing my thoughts and feelings in new ways. We talk of the interconnectedness of mind and body and of all things. We peel away layers, deconstructing and trying to make sense of many of the taken-for-granted discourses with which we routinely engage, the dominant patriarchal discourses of our Western culture, of the education system, of our families--past and present. We both find meaning and common

understandings through creating our own discourse together, from writing separately, and from art and music. These multiple media help us to each reconstruct a sense of ourselves as women, mothers, and educators, among other identities.

Sherilyn and I also worked on deconstructing many of our own taken-for-granted assumptions around our personal and professional lives. Within these conversations, the topic of “success” kept coming up. We tended to focus mainly on girls and women because that was where we felt the most comfortable, even though there was a lot to make us both feel uncomfortable, recognizing the vast individual differences within the category “female” in regards to age, cultural heritage, religion, sexual orientation, social class, education level, and more.

Did girls and women, generally, in North America, in today’s world, need to have a career, or to work at a job, in order to feel successful? Was it ok to be a stay-at-home mom? Sherilyn had not taken any time off from her career as a teacher and counsellor when she had her daughter. I had taken 15 years off from teaching and worked part-time in other areas (i.e. preschool teacher, drug and alcohol educator) while my girls were young. She was nearing retirement with a full pension. Her husband was self-employed and would not receive much of a pension at retirement. I would never receive a full pension because I had taken those years off to stay at home and to work part-time for non-profit agencies with no benefit plans. I had bought into the “plan” that my husband would “take care” of me. He hadn’t. We are divorced.

We talked about our own lives and the tensions we felt in living up to the expectations of our own parents and to our cultural and societal norms of being “good” moms, “good” workers, “good” wives/partners, and “good” women. Through our conversations, it became clear to me that I needed to figure out what success was all about, not only for my daughters, or my students, but also for me.

Many of these conversations with my friends included our challenges and feelings arising from others' expectations of us as women, as wives or partners, as mothers, as workers, as daughters, often seen as stemming from our common upbringing of being "good girls". We asked questions and explored solutions, answers, whatever worked, together, constructing new facets of ourselves, trying to understand, for ourselves, who we are and what matters in our lives. What is the common thread within all this "alternate" discourse?

We have each felt some happiness, contentment, achievement, sense of contribution, and feelings of "success" over our lifetimes within different aspects of ourselves, within different identities. We each have felt these within different contexts, in different times and places, doing different things, alone, with others.

I asked my daughters recently what they each thought success was all about. My younger daughter Leah wrote:

I think success has traditionally been defined by your income and career (things that have traditionally been "male" values). But today, with more women not only in the workforce, but in higher level management positions, I think that has expanded a bit to include more "female" values. I think this is true not just for women, but to some extent for men too...well, the younger generations at least. Career and income (level of education implied...) still play, and will probably always play, a part in defining success, but I think physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being always play a part of being successful. When it comes right down to it, no matter what you do for a living, I think if you're happy with yourself and your life, you're successful; the specific details are different for everyone...For me, career does play a role - I find it very rewarding to have a career that allows me to contribute to society, that gets me respect from peers and

the public, and that I find to be challenging and fulfilling...But, I consider myself a successful woman not only because of my career, but also because I have great friends and family, a loving and supportive partner (and dog!); I'm a physically active and healthy person, and while I'm not overly spiritual in the religious sense, I try to make the most out of every moment and live my life with a happy and positive outlook (personal communication, August 26, 2004).

My older daughter Erin wrote:

Being successful means living up to your own expectations that you have set for yourself. This can be in any area of your life that you deem important. That could include personal relationships, school, work, athletics, making money, whatever (personal communication, July 27, 2005).

The common thread between these seems to me to include a sense of agency for each of us. We are able to decide for ourselves our own definitions of success, as well as the criteria by which to judge. There also are different parts of this concept, "success" which involve different identities and contexts. This "success" is a complex concept. It is not simple, nor simplistic. There is not one "right" definition for an individual throughout their lives, let alone a whole gender or section of society. I also do not find the concept of "failure" very meaningful or useful in assisting me in thinking about success. This "either/or" dualism of "success/failure" is a framework held over from earlier, less meaningful and less useful times. Perhaps, it made some sense and was useful at some point, for some people (to whom and for whom, I wonder?), perhaps, it served a purpose; I'm not sure. I do know that it is not useful or meaningful for me any more, and possibly also not for my women friends, or for my students, and for my daughters within any of the current contexts of our lives.

I will explore the possible purposes that such dualisms in our language can serve and the harms they can also spawn. I think also that this concept, “success”, particularly in the school setting, requires further exploration, beyond my personal wonderings. In the next chapter I will develop a framework with which to continue these explorations.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW—INCLUDING DIVERSE VOICES

In this chapter I will explore some of the relevant literature on adolescent girls' expressions of voice utilizing a feminist, poststructuralist framework. I will also explore some of the influences of culture, race, social class, and the educational system on the development of girls' sense of identity. Rather than a simple, singular sense of self, I will argue for the importance of recognizing and including the consideration of many overlapping identities within each individual, as well as the diversity within the category "girls". Through engaging in an expanded, more inclusive discourse girls can begin to see themselves as active agents in challenging the status quo and in defining success for themselves.

The definition of success in schools typically revolves around high achievement scores on examinations. In this chapter the simplicity of this definition is contested by voices diverse in ability, social class, and culture. These diverse voices challenge the taken-for-granted dominant discourse in important ways, with equally important implications for educational practice and policy.

#### **Poststructuralism and Feminism**

The poststructuralist conceptual framework along with a postmodern feminist theoretical perspective (Weedon, 1997; Kenway & Willis, 1998) has helped me to conceptualize my work. Based on the work of Foucault, these authors described a theory where language served to construct an individual's subjectivity or sense of self in ways that were dependent on particular contexts. Discourse was the term used to describe the relationships between power and knowledge. Individuals can have several competing and conflicting discourses as dominant and

influential in constructing their identity. The discourses also have different meanings depending on the time, place, and audience where they are occurring.

Power is exercised, not possessed by individuals. Meaning, power, and identity are in a constant state of flux depending on different cultural and social factors. There are “power in” institutions, rules, roles, and structures. There are “power over” subordinates within a hierarchy and through a capacity to make and affect rules. There is “power as” strength, authority, force, stamina, and domination. There is also “power through” the capacity to effect change by collaborating with others. Powerful, dominant people gain power from the language they use and they can determine what counts as truth or knowledge. In a patriarchal system, like ours in education and more broadly in most global societies and governments, a few men tend to maintain their power and control through discounting or silencing alternate discourses. I will explore and deconstruct some of these power structures within schools and society which serve to marginalize and silence women and girls, as well as people from diverse cultural backgrounds. I will also attempt to create spaces for these girls to find their voices and to begin to deconstruct and reconstruct some taken-for-granted assumptions they may have about their own success within an alternate discourse at the school level. I also hope to use my knowledge, skills, and “power through” collaboration in conducting research in this area to effect some positive change and to share both power and knowledge in order to better reflect the needs of all students.

Language does not reflect a fixed social reality, but rather constructs that social reality for us as we engage with the language. We all function “within a complex web of discourses” (Kenway & Willis, 1998, p. xvii), consciously and unconsciously accepting and rejecting various positions as they emerge within the discourses. The dominant discourses in schools, as well as the systems and structures within which they occur, reflect the wider patriarchal discourse of dominance and difference where women’s interests and voices are subordinated to those of men.

Weedon (1997) also discussed the role of feminism as a political force directed to exposing and changing existing unequal power relations between women and men. The norm or standard for success in most arenas in our society is male and girls and women are constantly defined and judged to that standard (and often found to be lacking).

Walkerdine (1990) and Snitow (1990) also discussed the power of language to create and maintain power hierarchies. While they conceptualized women's and girls' subjectivities as not unitary and fixed, but as constantly shifting among different meanings and power relations, they stressed the need to deconstruct the taken-for-granted meanings and power hierarchies in institutions, such as schools, in order to understand that there cannot be a singular, simple reality or truth. Educators need to appreciate the differences in language and meaning and facilitate greater access for all women to the privileged, dominant discourses. In this way both women and men can more fully understand the complexities of language, power structures, meaning, and what constitutes knowledge and truth within various contexts.

Dorothy Smith (1987) outlined the importance of focusing our attention as feminist educational researchers on women as subjects, active agents in their own lives, as well as within the education system (p. 204). Her research methodology reflected this focus, as does mine, and she did not construct the women with whom she worked as variables or as a sample from which she generalized, but rather she sought "to explore how the institutional practices of the school penetrate and organize the experience of different women" (p. 187). She further asserted that the language the women used everyday reflected the social organization of their daily practices and that when we encountered a new social organizational setting, we needed to learn "correct" language vocabulary and syntactic structures (pp. 188-189) in order to make meaning. Women need the access to various vocabularies in order to develop a sense of themselves within multiple

contexts and to gather knowledge from multiple sources in order to fully participate in these institutions of power and influence.

Snitow (1990) described a “third way” in the feminism discourse between the dualistic divide of “essentialism,” which celebrated and promoted the differences between women and men, and liberal feminism’s focus on women achieving “equality” with men. While there are obvious physical differences between women and men, I believe that focusing on these differences and assuming that women are “naturally” or biologically programmed somehow to be on one end of the feminine/masculine dichotomy with stereotypical characteristics, such as needing to be focused on building and nurturing relationships, as well as being quiet, passive, and compliant, can be extremely limiting in what girls and women can do and think. On the other hand, liberalism in feminism, by focusing on “equal opportunities”, often misses the mark, in my opinion, by not clearly defining to whom women may aspire to be equal. Men are certainly not all equal in our, or any other, society, so how can we measure or conceptualize this equality, except in ways that create winners and losers? Often, too, the measuring stick of what constitutes “good enough” or “success” changes, leaving girls and women, and many men, trying to figure out what to do next? Also, in my experience in the public education K-12 system, simply providing “opportunities” for students is insufficient to meaningfully meet such common, externally imposed, and quite arbitrary measures of success such as an increase in enrolment in any given course (most particularly in mathematics or the sciences). Students, particularly girls, and non-stereotypical boys (not necessarily aggressive, always active, and independent) need to be actively encouraged and supported, specifically taught about the possibilities and relevance of the course content, be helped to feel capable and competent, gradually increase their overall self-confidence, be actively engaged with positive female--and male--role models, as well as learn the vocabulary of a course or program previously thought of as “too masculine” or “not

feminine” (auto mechanics, computer/information technology, or the “hard sciences”, such as physics), if they thought about them at all. The structures and systems within schools also need deconstruction and examination by diverse voices in order to determine what works for all students, not just the few who conform to the dominant discourse and expectations.

I believe that the third way suggested by Snitow (1990) between essentialism and liberal feminism offers some space for conflicting, alternate discourses about real people, within their own unique context, constructing meaning and knowledge together, asking questions, deconstructing taken-for-granted language and stereotypes, listening, creating new structures and systems, and sharing the power. We need to recognize, provide spaces for, and demonstrate that we value these alternate discourses within the education system if we hope to be relevant and to prepare students for meaningful lives beyond school, in my opinion.

Weedon (1990) asked of liberal feminists how they could hope to achieve equality without any significant recognition and transformation of existing social and political systems? I believe that these systems must be changed to better reflect the many differences in people--in age, social class, race, ethnicity, ability, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and others. As women, we too need to develop alternative senses of ourselves apart from the dualistic different/same conceptualizations dominant in our discourses and to explore the various identities we each assume depending on contextual factors. I believe that women also need to be aware of and to reflect on how social power is exercised through language and “how the social relations of gender, class, and race might be transformed” (Weedon, 1990, p.20). Through the inclusion of alternate discourses within the dominant patriarchal discourse, conceptualizations of knowledge and truth can be expanded to more accurately reflect people’s experiences as well as their needs. Meanings can be constructed and power can be shared so that our schools and our communities can function more effectively and individuals can feel included, contributing in

personally rewarding ways, celebrating and utilizing their particular strengths, not feeling it necessary to sublimate them to an arbitrary standard of what is “expected”, or “good”, or “successful”.

Kenway and Willis (1998) discussed the liberal feminism focus on removing gender barriers by encouraging girls and women to gain access to traditional male roles as being overly simplistic. They saw greater promise for more comprehensive models of gender reform which focused on offering alternate models of success more in tune with women’s and girls’ actual experiences in school and in life. They also discussed the importance of extending the current dominant discourses from narrow views of the dichotomy of femininity/masculinity to include different areas of social class, ethnicity, religion, and race, along with variations along each axis.

Much of the literature concerning gender differences and feminism considers such dualistic relationships as female/male, different/equal, private/public, emotional/rational, subjective/objective. While it is tempting to enter and support or attempt to work within these discourses and thus contribute to perpetuating this either/or thinking, I believe that meaning is constructed in more complex ways. It also frightens and angers me, in the current educational discourse on success at the school, district, and ministry levels, to hear so much about the girls, as well as the boys, who do not or can not “succeed” in schools with the current policies, systems, structures, and dominant patriarchal discourses, as therefore having “failed”. I will explore different conceptualizations of success as the female students in my study deconstruct what the term success means to them.

The girls in my study as described in chapter 3 will have the opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct new meanings, new realities, for themselves, as part of an “alternate” discourse at school, as they engage in a focused conversation on the topic: What is success? While their discourses may not be able to compete with the many discourses surrounding educational

success and achievement in our province, and more globally, their discussions will have an impact on their own knowledge construction, developing self awareness, and identity formation. They may also gain a sense of their own power to effect change through collaboratively constructing meaning. Student voices have been absent from these dominant discourses, as far as I can tell. Emery Dosdall, the influential and powerful Deputy Minister of Education of British Columbia, frequently uses language about the value of “all achievements of all students” (personal communication, April 2005, August 2005). I will explore how the girls’ constructions of meaning are reflected in and challenge the BC gender equity policy (1990) in chapter 5. The girls’ voices could problematize the dominant patriarchal discourses by disrupting the taken-for-granted stereotyping of what girls need, and also what boys need, in the education system, in ways that could enable relevant, diverse voices to be heard and thereby benefit our system by indeed valuing the achievements of all the students, not just a select few.

Even though many educational policies purport to “equalize” or to seek “equity” between boys and girls within the system, too often these are characterized as dualistic, either/or conceptualizations, when differences within the genders do, in fact, exist and need to be sought out, recognized, and included in the discourse. Otherwise, the students who do not easily fit the stereotype (the vast majority) risk becoming “invisible” (Bryson & de Castell, 1997). I believe that we, in education, need to examine whose interests are being served in these discourses if we hope to truly assist our students to construct meaning and to gain knowledge that is meaningful to them. The girls in this study will contribute their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about what they believe they need to be successful.

The way was paved for this study and the sorts of questions it seeks to explore by various social movements. In the next section, I briefly examine the legacy of the social movements most central to my inquiry, namely the Women’s Movement and the Aboriginal Rights Movement.

## **Important Social Movements**

Both the Women's Rights and the Aboriginal Rights Movements have several issues in common. Women and people with Aboriginal heritage have been marginalized from the white, male, middle class discourse on success. We have had to fight for decades to be included as being equal and to be respected as people with rights within our society. Our voices are often muted, excluded, and/or disregarded by the patriarchal, powerful voices who decide what knowledge is valued and how it will be reflected in the governmental policies and practices in many of our institutions, including Aboriginal Affairs and Education. As Castellano (2000) suggested, meaningful knowledge can also be defined as "enhancing the capacity of people to live well" (p. 33) and I would respectfully like to add "all" people to that definition, so that no one is excluded, based on their gender orientation, cultural heritage, socio-economic class, religion, or other perceived "difference" from the dominant privileged, white, male, middle-class "standard".

These two important social movements formed in reaction to the inequitable treatment of certain groups within the wider society, including schools. In challenging the status quo, they helped to create counter discourses of success to the dominant discourses which have been reflected in and promoted by schools over the years.

## **The Women's Movement in Canadian Education**

Gaskell, McLaren, and Novogradsky (1989) documented the ongoing need for a radical change in the conceptualization of women's rights within the education system through various policy initiatives through the 60s, 70s, and 80s. However, those policies tended to be based on a liberal feminist framework of "difference" where the girls and/or the conditions in schools could be "fixed" to allow girls to learn the skills, attitudes, and vocabulary necessary to succeed in traditionally male courses and careers such as math, the sciences, and technology. While seeming

to break down the barriers and stereotypes, these plans, policies, and strategies actually tended to reinforce them by not considering individual differences and by not addressing larger political and educational systems and structures, such as exploring the use of a variety of assessment tools in measuring and defining achievement in addition to test scores. The financial support and valuation of these courses and careers were not explored or questioned.

I believe that words like “woman”, “feminism” and “gender” are socially constructed; their meanings vary along with the context within which they are used. Many people define themselves as feminists as part of their identity, but as in any group of people, there are many differences within the group, including issues associated with age, ability, skills, social class, religious beliefs, languages spoken, and cultural background. The Women’s Movement was a social movement in several Western countries which began in the 1970s as various grass root networks of women and minority groups began forming coalitions in an attempt to influence government policy and practices concerning equal rights and opportunities, particularly in the realm of education (Gaskell & Taylor, 2003). In Canada there was a Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 and while it had a liberal feminism framework, there were some important recommendations which were enacted, influencing educational policy and resulting in funding for various women’s groups, including the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (Gaskell & Taylor, 2003). While there were some gains in understandings of discriminatory policies and practices and in addressing some women’s issues in Canada, there were few national strategies or institutional changes to address identified inequalities. The many coalitions within the Women’s Movement were loosely held together and had different agendas and strategies, depending on the specific needs of the group. It proved difficult to identify simple, overall targets and strategies. The conversations and issues were complex and the

Women's Movement did challenge the taken-for-granted meanings and practices, introducing spaces for new ideas and practices to be debated more openly (Gaskell, 2004).

Gaskell (2004) also pointed out that during the 1980s and 1990s the debates within the education system tended to be centred on making the power men had assumed within education more visible, and more negotiable, regarding curriculum and even the goals of education. There was a new focus on "the gendered nature of interaction in staff rooms, classrooms, and playgrounds" as well (p. 307). Taken-for-granted structures, policies, and practices which centred on gender issues were beginning to be discussed. There were also some gains in understanding how class, race, disability, and sexual orientation affect gender; however, gender issues tended to become marginalized again by the later 1990s in favour of a more broadly defined social justice umbrella of issues and the focus changed to accountability measures (Gaskell & Taylor, 2003). The power of the Women's Movement was, according to Gaskell (2004), in creating spaces for deconstructing and debating current and past practices and policies in education and elsewhere. She believed, and I agree, that fundamental to a democratic and civil society is the space for different perspectives and positions to "be articulated clearly so that they can be debated and resolved....unlike a benevolent dictatorship, democracy starts from the premise that the public good will not be agreed on" (p. 308). Particularly in this new era of accountability and data gathering, I believe it is even more important to be creating those spaces again where alternate discourses can happen and meaning and knowledge can be constructed from diverse voices.

### **Aboriginal Rights Movement**

The Aboriginal Rights Movement has influenced educational policies and practices over the past few years by focusing attention on and including the voices of Aboriginal people in decisions that affect their lives and their schooling. Rather than assuming that Aboriginal

children would, or could, fit easily within a narrow, white, male, middle class framework for education, Aboriginal issues have been brought more to the forefront in decision making about more relevant ways to improve their lives through education.

An influential report in this regard was the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, Volume 3 Gathering Strength, (1996). This was an attempt to broaden the educational definition of success to be more inclusive of the Aboriginal experience. The authors carefully clarified at the beginning of the report that the terms such as “Aboriginal People” and “First Nations” referred to “organic political and cultural entities that stem historically from the original peoples of North America, not to collections of individuals united by so-called ‘racial’ characteristics” (p. xii). However, they did not clarify how individual differences among these “entities” were considered and accounted for when policies and programs were developed. They also acknowledged the many individuals and groups who made presentations before the commission, but did not describe the process of selection of arguments, opinions, experiences, etc. which influenced the report. I could find no information on the backgrounds of the authors of the report, nor any potential biases from which the report was conceived and written. Without this important information, it is difficult to know how reflective the report and its recommendations are of the Aboriginal experience and thus how relevant and meaningful the recommendations will be to the people they seek to assist, if or when they are implemented.

In the Education section of the report, there were several recommendations made. These include under Youth Empowerment, 3.5.10:

Aboriginally controlled, provincial, and territorial schools serving Aboriginal youth develop and implement comprehensive Aboriginal youth empowerment strategies with elements elaborated in collaboration with youth, including (a) cultural education in classroom and informal settings; (b) acknowledgement of

spiritual, ethical and intuitive dimensions of learning; (c) education to support critical analysis of Aboriginal experience; (d) learning as a means of healing from the effects of trauma, abuse and racism; (e) academic skills development and support; (f) sports and outdoor education; (g) leadership development; (h) youth exchanges between Aboriginal nations, across Canada and internationally (p.687).

The authors of the report further recommended that education, both K-12 and post-secondary, come under Aboriginal self-government, early childhood education services be extended to all Aboriginal children, and collaboration with Aboriginal governments on the development of “innovative curricula that reflect Aboriginal cultures and community realities” (p. 685) in all schools K-12.

Currently, ten years after the report was released, in public schools, there are a few units on Aboriginal peoples and their culture at various grade levels within the social studies curriculum. There is also a single secondary school course, First Nations Studies 12 in British Columbia, which is only offered if sufficient students (usually approximately 15-20) register for it; otherwise, most secondary schools offer no specific courses on Aboriginal culture and/or issues.

Other recommendations in the report included: priority for Aboriginal language education and recognition of Aboriginal languages as fulfilling the post-secondary language requirement, encouragement for parents’ and elders’ involvement in their children’s education, development of a comprehensive Aboriginal education strategy by local school boards, extension of secondary school programs to community centres, distance education, etc. in order to facilitate the re-entry of Aboriginal students who dropped out of school before graduating, funding for schools which develop co-op programs for Aboriginal students, collaboration with Aboriginals and participation in overseeing the development and inclusion of “Aboriginal content” into teacher

training programs. Also stressed was the importance of developing strategies to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers, continuation of financial support for Aboriginal post-secondary students, establishment of an “electronic clearinghouse” to facilitate communication and the exchange of information among Aboriginal communities, awareness campaigns to inform Aboriginal youth about these initiatives, encouragement of corporations, small businesses, and governments to enter into partnership agreements with Aboriginal groups to provide work experience and training to youth, among others.

Castellano (2000) was co-director of research for *The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* and discussed the primary goals of the report to include “establishing more harmonious relations, and for ensuring the equitable participation of aboriginal people in Canadian life...endorsement of principles of respect for cultural differences and recognition of the moral, historical, and legal right of aboriginal peoples to govern their collective lives in ways they freely determine” (p. 22). She acknowledged that these political and structural changes would take time to put into practice. However, she stressed that the many changes required to improve the lives of Aboriginal peoples living in Canada needed to begin right away.

She outlined the oppression and marginalization of Aboriginal people under current and past restrictive and antiquated laws and policies in Canada, the lack of respect for their distinct cultures and “ways of relating to the world” (Castellano, 2000). Hopeful that Aboriginal representatives would participate appropriately in the development of policies and practices which affected their lives, such as health, education, governance, economic development, and family rehabilitation, Castellano described different sources for Aboriginal knowledge and the importance of non-Aboriginals to “open up space” within the dominant discourses for the expression and application of this knowledge in new initiatives evolving from the report. These sources for Aboriginal knowledge included: traditional knowledge, which is handed down from

generation to generation usually by elders and describes the origin of the particular clan and of the world, reinforcing values and beliefs through stories of past battles and relationships; empirical knowledge, which is gained through careful observations by many persons over time and where new information is interpreted within the context of existing information; and revealed knowledge, which is acquired through spirituality and through dreams, visions, and intuitions.

Aboriginal knowledge, she believed, was also “rooted in personal experience and lays no claim to universality” (p. 25), was transmitted orally to learners when they were “ready to use knowledge responsibly” (p. 26), experiential, and holistic in nature, often expressed in metaphor and/or story-telling format. Castellano described the medicine wheel as a powerful way of characterizing the holistic nature of Aboriginal knowledge and experience. It was a traditionally part of the culture of the nations of the plains of North America, including the Cree, Blackfoot, and Dakota. The wheel symbolizes the interrelatedness of all experience and all life, past, present, future, animal, vegetable, mineral, human, and spirit. The centre of the wheel symbolizes balance, while flags at the ends of the intersecting lines symbolize the winds of change as a natural life condition. The message of the medicine wheel, according to Castellano, is to seek balance through incorporating and sharing the individual’s gifts from one quadrant with those in other quadrants (p. 30). Knowledge, too, needs to achieve balance through both analysis and synthesis, not by isolating pieces of experience, but by considering them within the “context of all its relations” (p. 30).

Castellano also pointed out the difficulty in accurately representing Aboriginal knowledge in print because of its reliance on an oral tradition and the narrative form it takes. When someone from outside the community attempts to represent the stories, the internal authenticity and authority of the stories may be lost and become unavailable to the people it

represents. She recognized and acknowledged that her explanation of Aboriginal culture and knowledge “represents only one view of reality, a perspective that needs to be evaluated in the context of other stories by other members of the community” (p. 32). By interpreting her essay in my non-Aboriginal words, making meaning for me within my particular non-Aboriginal context, I further may skew the meaning and intent of the Aboriginal knowledge. I will discuss the problems and issues associated with studying diverse cultures as an “outsider” in the next chapter.

In concluding her essay, she stated, “The ultimate test of the validity of knowledge is whether it enhances the capacity of people to live well” (p. 33). She saw the self-government, economic renewal, involvement of the Aboriginal people, themselves, and the other policies proposed in the Report, as being crucial in the survival of both Aboriginal peoples and of their knowledge into the future.

This description of valid, meaningful knowledge as “enhancing the capacity of people to live well” (Castellano, 2000), as determined by the people, themselves, seems to me to add an important element to a necessary discourse on the future and the success of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike within the school system.

Graham and Abele (1996) traced the history of the Aboriginal Rights Movement from 1965-1992 as a result of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples being established in 1991. There was a need seen to understand and to analyze past policy development in order to build on work completed and to delineate successful elements of past discourses which could assist improving communication in the future (p. 3). Over 200 public policy documents from a variety of sources were examined. The authors found that national Aboriginal organizations emerged in the early 1980s, in part as a result of increased constitutional debates relating to Aboriginal lands, title, and governance, as well as additional federal funding to these organizations. There

were other social movements, particularly in North America, arising during this time frame, such as the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights Movement and later, multicultural movements. Additional provincial government involvement also occurred as a result of these debates (pp. xi-xii). These authors found that while Aboriginal voice has become strengthened and more institutionalized over the years and there has been an increase in participation from Aboriginal organizations in consultative processes, they note that much of the language used in the policy discourse has been vague. This lack of clear and consistent meaning has contributed to an absence of common vision and direction for change. As with the Women's Movement, there is not a single Aboriginal voice, rather a multitude of voices, representing various cultural heritages, locations (i.e. rural, urban, on reserve), classes, genders, etc. This diversity can be both a strength in recognizing diverse perspectives in deconstructing taken-for-granted practices, as well as in reconstructing shared meanings, and an additional complexity in communication and in action planning. The sub-title, *Soliloquy and Dialogue*, reflects this lack of understanding, as several times over this time period, Aboriginal peoples, as well as government officials were talking largely to themselves (p. 11) in a "soliloquy".

Within the 1960s and 1970s, the Report outlines the history of oppression for Aboriginal students within the education system, the loss of Aboriginal culture and languages and a lack of meaningful engagement in the system. Greater parental and community involvement came to be seen as important influences in education for Aboriginal students. By the 1980s, as Aboriginal organizations were more focused and having a greater impact on policy decisions, education was being seen by Aboriginal peoples as a component of the movement for rights for self government (p. 297). However, while principles of human dignity and equality were being included in the policy discourses, self-government was not. This is seen as a necessary component for success of Aboriginal peoples by the people, themselves. There was also no unified response to issues

raised by Aboriginal groups across Canada, despite similar concerns. There were only local and provincial responses, influenced mainly by local concerns.

There was an increased emphasis from all groups involved in the policy discourse on processes to be more inclusive and rights-based, less of an assimilationist orientation, recognizing the nuanced voices of such diverse Aboriginal groups as the Métis, Inuit, First Nations, Native Women's Association of Canada, and more (pp. 335-336). In order to continue to develop a real dialogue, Graham and Abele (1996) suggested several necessary conditions. These included: participation by all those affected by the decisions; processes established for sustained discussion that recognized different starting points and communication styles, and a focus on problem solving; and development of a common vision of what would be discussed, based on openness and honesty (p. 343). They also discussed the importance of considering the differences in and influences of power among the participants, institutionalizing processes in order to realize meaningful discourse, the timing and windows of opportunity for social movements, and the commonality of vocabulary and paradigms so that conversations among participants were able to construct new meanings.

These conditions are common to all conversations where meaning and knowledge are recognized as shared and constructed. It is when knowledge and power are held in the hands and minds of a few, that communication is thwarted and past practices are continued in a taken-for-granted way with no new ideas or perspectives included to enlighten and empower the "Others".

### **Empirical Studies of Secondary School Girls and Aboriginal Youth**

In the school context, particularly at the secondary level, curriculum, pedagogy, and organizational structures link more closely to students' future options for experiencing success. The developing sense of themselves as individuals capable of navigating the pressures and expectations of an increasingly globalized society, results in large part from students'

experiences at school and within their families during this time. I believe that we, in schools, have a responsibility to strategize and to act in ways that counter feelings of powerlessness among girls, Aboriginal youth, and others who are marginalized from the dominant discourses. Many diverse voices need to be included and heard regarding the many contested meanings of success. We also need to partner with families of secondary students, to hear their voices, and to construct relevant and meaningful knowledge together about suitable actions to help to empower all students.

The following studies explore the voices of adolescent girls from a variety of perspectives. Rather than being led by the dominant discourses in developing strategies to help to empower girls, I am interested in hearing from the girls, themselves. If we listen to the girls, what do they have to say--about their sense of themselves, about their futures, their interests, and their needs? I am also interested in the diversity among girls. What are some of the differences--and similarities-- within that broad category "girl"?

### **Girls' Voices**

The movement within feminism which essentializes women's "ways of knowing" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Matluch, 1997; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1989) reinforces "difference" between the two genders, rather than considering individual differences within the genders and similarities between the genders. This has been important work in adding a "different voice" to the dominant discourse over the past 20 years and has served to at least include consideration within that discourse of some issues which concern women and girls in education and in society.

However, these voices have tended to further contribute to the deficit model of women and girls, as a homogeneous group, needing to be compared to men, as a homogeneous group, and found to be lacking. These researchers, while listening carefully to the voices of many

women and girls, focused mainly on the differences between the genders and the similarities among the female participants in their focus groups and interviews, rather than on any reconceptualization or deconstruction of the language, the meanings, and the power structures in society and/or the school system.

During adolescence, when girls are forming their sense of identity, it is particularly important for educators and policy makers to listen to the voices of the girls, themselves. Since the girls are growing up in uncertain and unstable times in this, the 21st century, where power relations between teachers and students are changing and there is an explosion of information as well as often conflicting and competing demands and expectations on them, there can be a generation gap in assumptions about what and how the girls are thinking, discussing, and needing. Kenway and Willis (1999) suggested more research was needed on what individual girls were actually saying about their lives, including their thoughts on gender, class, race, sexuality, and ability as a strategy to “help feminism to stay alive” and to open avenues to actively and meaningfully contribute to the dominant discourse.

In their Australian research, Kenway and Willis described a definition of success that was determined by high marks in certain subjects. The “hard sciences” (mathematics, physics, etc.) were valued, and still are, over the arts and humanities. This tended to reflect the preferences of white middle-class males, since they were traditionally enrolled in these subject areas. Kenway and Willis advocated for a broadening perspective on success, to move beyond high marks in particular courses, to include giving both girls and boys the skills they required to progress in these and other courses, as well as to rewrite curriculum to be more gender inclusive.

Brown, Way, and Duff (1999) also discussed identity formation in adolescent girls. They highlighted some significant differences in the ways middle class and working class girls form and maintain friendships and peer relations, as well as their differing strategies to buy in to or to

resist the dominant discourses on success. They maintained that girls' adolescent development and socialization was not a predictable or consistent process when such social contexts as social class were considered. They pointed to the importance of engaging girls in conversations about such issues as institutional and relational power asymmetries and their own struggles to find their place within the dominant culture (pp. 213-217) in order to expand the dominant discourse to be more meaningful.

Fine (1992) also discovered in her research on adolescent girls that much of the research tended to construct the topic and developmental paths of adolescent girls from the position of a white, middle-class, heterosexual adult. As a result, Fine decided to rely on "the frames that these young women offered as they narrated their own lives and the interpretations we could generate through culture and class" (p.177). She believed that the girls needed to discover and to explore their own voices within safe spaces where identity and power structures could be debated and contested.

McLaren (1996) believed that socialization theory was inadequate to explain gender formation for all girls. She saw girls as active agents, not passive recipients of a unified cultural and societal set of norms and expectations around what it means to be a girl. By listening to girls from different social and cultural backgrounds, talking about working and mothering, she realized that the girls were making choices of different discourses in order to make sense of their particular context. McLaren saw that the role of educators in the schools was to take account of the often contradictory and complex social contexts of their students and to ensure that their discourses had meaning and also created meanings for the girls, so that the contradictions could be exposed and considered and the hegemony of the dominant discourse could be interrupted.

Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007 b) in *Listening to Girls: Discursive Positioning and the Construction of Self* listened carefully to the "everyday talk" of a variety of Canadian

adolescent girls from different social classes, some of whom were Caucasian, Asian-Canadian, or Aboriginal. They were looking to understand more about how girls constructed a sense of identity through their discourses, as well as to question the concurrent loss of voice and self-esteem documented by Gilligan (1982) and others as girls entered adolescence. They found that the girls positioned themselves within the discourses by several means, including affiliation with a given identity category (i.e. popular, brainy, slut, etc.), through feelings of affinity with a particular identity category (i.e. Black people), through ambivalence as expressed by contradictory messages, by assertions of dissociation (what they were not), and by disavowal (distancing themselves from a category which the girls deemed as negative). Throughout the discourses, they found the girls' positioning to be dynamic and often contradictory. They observed a sense of agency with the girls negotiating the contradictions, consistently recognizing the importance of being "yourself". The girls' belief in the importance of authenticity, rather than reflecting instability in a sense of self, Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007 b) believed, reflects "the complexity of Selfhood as an ongoing accomplishment" (p. 393). They saw the girls' positioning of themselves within the discourse of "girlhood" as contributing to their ongoing construction of themselves, as well as being defined by it. Rather than being victims of socialization and stereotyping of what it means to be a girl, losing their "voice" to become passive, compliant, "good girls", these girls positioned themselves against the discourses that they saw as limiting their choices and options. This further demonstrates the importance of this methodology of listening carefully to the girls' individual voices and recording the differences within the category "girls", as well as to their individual efforts to construct meaning as part of the group (see also Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2007 a).

Harter, Waters, and Whitesell (1997) also explored authenticity and loss of voice among developing adolescents. They discussed the emergence of different "selves" in adolescence

where both girls and boys struggled to express their true or authentic selves. They reviewed the literature on the gradual subordination of girls' voices in adolescence as the girls conformed to societal expectations and to the dominant discourse on a simple, singular self--that of girls' needs to build and preserve relationships. They also documented the possible consequences to this suppression of one's authentic self within relationships to include loss of zest, energy, love of life, depressive behaviour, a sense of hopelessness, and loss of self-esteem. Rather than a single sense of self or "authentic" self, however, I believe that throughout one's life and the many diverse experiences and conversations we all have, multiple identities can and do co-exist, dependent on circumstances, contexts, time, others involved at the specific time, power balances/imbances, as well as the perceived needs and purposes of the particular conversation. It is important for me as a person and as an educator to remember that not only do I need to be aware of these overlapping identities, but also I need to challenge myself and my students to be open to enlarging our perspectives on who we are and who we can be.

Many boys, as well as many girls, cannot or do not participate in the dominant discourses in society and in schools. Harter, Waters, and Whitsell (1997) found that many male students, as well as many girls, experienced a loss of voice through adolescence. The dominant, white, middle-class, male-centric discourses excluded, devalued, and silenced subordinated groups of many types. They further explored loss of voice along various axes, not just age, through grades 6 – 12, among both girls and boys. They discovered that even for their sample of mainly white, middle class students, voice, as an expression of their "true" or authentic self, was highest for both girls and boys in conversations with their friends, followed by conversations with classmates of the same gender. This finding again demonstrated the importance of ensuring these conversations do have a place within the school system for students to express their unique and evolving identities. Expressions of voice were lowest with classmates of different genders,

parents, and teachers. They investigated the individual differences within the groups of boys and girls and found that those girls who were most oriented to femininity (as determined with a survey instrument which classified the students as feminine, masculine, or androgynous, depending on their responses on the survey) also reported the lowest levels of voice, particularly with male classmates. This group of approximately 25% - 35% of the girls studied, identified with the "good woman" stereotype, endorsing mainly "feminine" characteristics, such as passivity and submission. The remaining girls identified with some of the masculine characteristics (such as playing sports and expressing their opinions), as well as the feminine, and were termed androgynous. These androgynous girls did not report significant loss of voice in any context. With the boys in the study, 50% identified with only masculine traits, while 49% chose both feminine and masculine traits. These latter boys were also termed androgynous. With both groups of boys, there were no real differences in levels of voice reported with teachers, parents, and female classmates. However, the masculine group did report higher levels of voice with male classmates than did the androgynous group and the latter group reported higher levels of voice with their close male friends than did the masculine group. These findings argue for the heightened risk of "good girls" to being silenced and to losing power in the context of mixed gender classrooms, as well as in social settings with boys. The authors saw these patterns of devaluing and silencing girls' voices as contributing to gender inequities in the students' future contexts, such as in heterosexual relationships, the workplace, and in society, as a whole (Harter et al., 1997, p. 171).

The authors also investigated other external factors which could contribute to the silencing of some girls and boys. They found that parental encouragement, support, and validation were also powerful contributors to level of voice in adolescents. Feminine girls with low parental support for expressing opinions had the lowest levels of voice. They also had the

lowest outcomes on self-esteem measures. These girls were also most likely to rate high on a measure of the importance of outward appearance; this is a measure that showed a dramatic decline in all girls, not so for the boys, through adolescence from middle school, through college years. These girls, then, were seen to be in “double jeopardy” as they endorsed the belief that women should be “seen and not heard”. This, according to (Harter et al., 1997, p.169) can lead to “negative evaluations of both their outer and inner selves”. The girls and boys who had parents and/or significant others who modelled high levels of voice as well as supported the expression of opinions in the home and classroom, on the other hand, had the highest levels of voice. These findings seem to account for some of the individual differences among girls and boys and also serve to demonstrate the complexities of identity construction, as well as the importance of context in making meaning and expressing power.

They recommended that schools needed to restructure programs so that they did not perpetuate the “debilitating gender stereotypes about abilities and social roles” (Harter et al., 1997, p. 171) and not only validate and support girls’ expressions of their inner selves through language, but also ensure that their male peers did so as well. This is especially important for those girls who placed high value on their physical appearance, did not express opinions in class, and demonstrated other stereotypical “feminine” behaviours.

Jones and Myhill (2004) also found that certain girls in classrooms were at risk of becoming “invisible”. They were interested in how under achievement and high achievement were perceived and constructed differentially by some teachers in Britain. The students were from different social classes, some rural, some urban, and from grades 1 – 13. They were particularly interested in exploring and deconstructing the dominant discourse about low achieving boys and high achieving girls being constructed as the “norm”. They found that the teachers in their study were inconsistent in the criteria they used to identify under and over

achieving students and they were also frequently inconsistent in what they said they believed and what they actually did in their classrooms. The teachers were found to often use stereotypical language when they described boys (active, outgoing, needing a challenge, disruptive, needing to be pushed to learn, confident, better at math, not keen readers, etc.) and girls (wanting to please, passive, compliant, allowing boys to dominate, less inclined to take risks, more thoughtful, neat, more expressive, better readers and writers, etc.) in the classroom. However, from their own observational data, the researchers found that there were individual differences within the boys' and girls' groups within the classrooms they studied. They found that participation in class activities and class discussions were more strongly linked to the students' actual achievement than to the students' gender (Jones & Myhill, 2004, p. 556). Under achievers of both genders were significantly more likely to be off task while high achieving girls were the least likely to be off task, either during small group or classroom wide activities and discussions. The low achieving girls were the least likely to be engaged and also were the least likely to be invited to respond by their teachers in classroom discussions. These latter girls were seen not a discipline problem by their teachers, even though they were off task and frequently disruptive, as were the low achieving boys, but were mostly overlooked and made invisible. Teachers rated as "typical" the under achieving boy and the high achieving girl. Once pressed, the teachers rated as atypical the high achieving boys and they had difficulty in even identifying some under achieving girls within their classrooms!

Jones and Myhill (2004) further discovered that under achieving girls tended to be increasingly less engaged by the end of middle school and were often observed to be "disruptively disengaged" in secondary school, yet were still not identified as such by their teachers. When asked specifically about these girls, the teachers had "little to say about under achieving girls - the cause of their under achievement is principally seen as caused by a lack of

confidence, and little is said about poor behaviour or a disaffected attitude. Stereotypical gender identities persist..." (p. 559). The researchers characterized many of the under achieving girls through their own observational data as resistant to school values and expectations, demonstrating uncooperative, "stropy" behaviours, more typical of the under achieving boys than similar to the passive, compliant, high achieving girls in the classes. They concluded that more attention needed to be paid to the complex needs of all students and that the tendency of the current dominant discourse in education to associate all boys with low and all girls with high achievement does little service to any of the wide range of students and their diverse needs. As Harter, Waters, and Whitesell (1997) suggested, the more stereotypical "good" girls complied and achieved well in school. However, in this study, the non-compliant, less "feminine" girls were ignored and were not invited into the dominant classroom discussion to disrupt or challenge it or to offer an alternate discourse.

Brown (1998) suggested that girls learn to negotiate the pressures to conform and be passively "feminine" or resist and be active and "masculine" during early adolescence. She believed that during this time, if girls were provided a forum in which to express their anger and indignation at realizing they were expected to be compliant and subordinate to their white, middle-class, male peers, they had a better chance of resisting these pressures. Brown outlined the multiple sources of the construction of the idealized "feminine" to include parents, the media, teachers, and friends. She further believed that without a safe forum for the girls to express their anger and frustration, their resistance to this external expectation could become viewed in classrooms as disruptive behaviour.

At least the disruption caused by these girls is preferred, in my opinion, to being "invisible" and ignored as Jones and Myhill (2004) discovered. However, Brown's study of these angry girls lends more credence to the case of the importance of establishing forums for girls to

express their thoughts and feelings, engaging with other girls in constructing a positive sense of themselves, as well as strategizing to actively resist the patriarchal, dominant discourse in positive, self-affirming ways.

Luttrell (1997) explored and analyzed the stories of working-class American women for insights they had about the interrelatedness of selfhood, class, race, gender, identity, and schooling. The women contrasted the different forms of knowledge they had gained through being “streetwise”, “schoolwise”, and “motherwise”. Many of the women saw themselves as school failures, but successful at home with their children. However, many also felt that to be “somebody”, they needed to have some “schoolsmarts” and to have graduated from high school. Luttrell believed that the self was only known through its relation to others in specific historical and cultural contexts and conditions, not as part of a pre-determined, developmental sequence. She also saw problems with the North American educational system where schools were organized in ways that split off and devalue one side of the education process in a dualistic fashion (social/emotional development) versus another (academic achievement). This had particularly negative consequences for the girls who adopted and mirrored the dominant discourses on what were suitable courses and careers for girls because they devalued the very courses and careers that girls tended to “choose”. These included courses such as typing, home economics, child development, the “soft” sciences, such as biology, which led to careers in teaching elementary school, nursing, etc. There is an obvious tension demonstrated in Luttrell’s (1997) work in that while success and certain types of knowledge in some contexts may be valued by individuals in their practical lives, the externally imposed, dominant discourse, “right” pathways to success, did not include these women and they felt unsuccessful as a result.

Fordham (1996) supported Luttrell’s work and demonstrated that American working class and Black girls and women, not only had a gendered set of expectations to live up to, but

they also constructed those expectations as white and middle to upper class. As a result, working class, as well as Black girls and women, had different strategies and different meanings attached to achieving success. Fordham was particularly poignant in her descriptions of the tensions girls faced between “acting too white” in their attempts to access dominant discourses around school success by conforming to the expectations for “good girls” and resisting those discourses by not achieving in, or often only sporadically attending, school. She conceptualized achievement as also a form of resistance; in this case the girls were resisting the dominant discourse concerning the lower abilities of and opportunities for Black students. However, by succeeding in this form of resistance and getting good grades, the girls risked losing the support and “fictive kinship” of the Black community. They were seen as “Others”, and felt isolated and alienated just as the Black community is seen as “Other” within the dominant discourse of our patriarchal (white) society. She found that Black students who resisted by not accepting or aiming for the “American Dream” tended to internalize the perceptions of the limitations of Black people and perpetuated the cycles of under achievement. Black girls, then, in this study, had additional levels of complexity within their constructions of self, compared to White girls. Not only is gender a factor, but so also is race, where there is pressure to conform to a white, male standard for “goodness”, as well as to a stereotypical appropriate standard for being Black. Even resistance to these externally imposed standards was not recognized or constructed as a positive. I will explore similar issues related to Aboriginal students in the next section.

Tsoldis (2001) sought to bring school-girls from the margins of the “deficit-based, hegemonic images of them being constructed by others” (p.102) and to listen to their issues, with them feeling centred or considered as subjects themselves, rather than as “Other”. She acknowledged the difficulties in trying to have the group “ethnic minorities” speak for all the diverse voices within that diverse group. In the process of listening and deconstructing, she

explained that researchers must also recognize “that there is always essentialism implicit in identifications...” (p.106). She suggested the need for involving those subjects in the analysis, but cautioned about the potential “political paralysis” if the analysis and theorizing took precedence over taking action to challenge the patriarchal gender relations and discourse. Tsoldis aimed to illustrate the complexities of gender and ethnicity in schools and thereby challenged the current structures and processes to produce new possibilities, new meanings, rather than to define a “minority” perspective. This labelling, she believed, would further reinforce these diverse, non-White groups as “Other”.

She also opposed continued use of the dualisms of difference/equality, seeing them as further illustrations of hegemonic power structures. Discussions of “difference” can easily become a difference from the white, male standard and in this important way, gender and ethnicity intersect in perpetuating a “deficit model”. She argued for challenging the dichotomies of difference/equality frameworks and suggested instead that girls be reconstructed as active agents within the education system in all their difference and diversity. Rather than trying to be equal, identical, the same, which is impossible and creates and reinforces positions of “Other” and marginalization, she believed that school structures needed to be reconstructed as “spaces which allow students to contest, negotiate and recreate cultural identifications” (Tsoldis, 2001, p.126). This echoes Snitow’s (1990) third way of including diverse voices within the dominant discourse to benefit everyone’s understandings and meaning-making, rather than excluding them, leaving so many who do not, can not, and/or may not wish to mirror the white, male stereotype, feeling powerless and pretending that the dominant discourse represents all people.

Shereen Benjamin (2003) investigated several conceptualizations of success in a large comprehensive girls’ school in Britain. The educators and politicians in the United Kingdom, as well as in many other Western countries, were in the midst of a dominant discourse focusing on

improving student achievement at the time of this study. Benjamin described hierarchically organized versions and discourses of success with the dominant discourse on success being defined as achieving specified marks on a national set of standardized, norm-based examinations. High achievement on these exams was seen to enable students to access jobs and further education so they could acquire status and material rewards (a very narrow conceptualization of success, in my opinion).

A “consolation discourse” surrounded students deemed incapable of achieving to the “standard” in the regular program. The discourse for these students did not look to the future, but to the past, comparing past poor performance to current (hopefully) satisfactory, improved achievement in different, easier courses. This discourse was characterized as a “deficit discourse” in that the girls occasionally “succeeded” by escaping the “slow learner program” to the regular program, but generally were destined to stay in the less challenging program, reinforcing “the enduring reproduction of inequalities” (p.110). Some girls within this program used a strategy of resistance to these discourses by rejecting the “good girl” discourse, which was shown to be so necessary for success in the dominant discourse. This sub-group of girls engaged in an anti-school and anti-teacher discourse within the “consolation discourse”. These girls may be similar in their resistance strategies to the actively disengaged, underachieving girls from Jones and Myhill’s (2004) study. When success is constructed so narrowly, to exclude so many, there seem to be few options for female students: actively resist, be quiet and compliant, and/or become invisible.

The third level in the hierarchy Benjamin observed in the girls’ school was the “really disabled discourse” for students who, under current policy imperatives for inclusion, in the past would have been extremely marginalized in “special schools”, rather than being included in public schools. However, those students still experienced marginalization as their goals centred

on self-esteem, rather than on academic achievement, and they “were ‘Othered’ through being positioned as victims of fate and recipients of benevolence” (p.113).

Benjamin argued that the current “standards and achievement” agenda demanded homogeneity and did not in reality value diversity and difference in its construction of successful students. She advocated for a differentiated curriculum, diverse teaching strategies and assessment tools, and to really engage in deconstructing and reconstructing current educational policies and practices which serve to perpetuate and reinforce inequalities.

### **Aboriginal Youth Voices**

Ward and Bouvier (2001) compiled several essays on the struggles of Aboriginal people for survival, self-determination, and full membership in society and against the oppression of poverty, joblessness, racism, sexism, and colonialism. They showed how access to quality educational experiences, class differences, and access to relevant resources influenced the experiences of Aboriginal people, as well as their local environment - rural, urban, and on reserve (p. 5). They also pointed to the importance for educators to move beyond recognition and celebration of difference, as in many multiculturalism and anti-racism projects as “an antidote to the poison of deficit theories” (p. 6), to recognition of the inherent power imbalances and the necessity to build coalitions to forge new understandings of Aboriginal “potentialities” (p. 7). While they recognized the diversity within Aboriginal cultures and the dangers of treating Aboriginal culture as a homogeneous group, they also summarized several important and common characteristics which would be vital to consider in any undertaking to understand and to meaningfully include Aboriginal peoples in constructive conversations. These include: a strong sense of tradition and continuity; connectedness to the natural world and to ancestral lands; the importance of extended family and elders; and spirituality (p. 8).

The essays (Ward & Bouvier, 2001) also pointed to suggestions for educators to provide culturally appropriate curricula for students to increase a sense of identity and belonging among Aboriginal students and to utilize a more interactive, story-based format in teaching to better reflect the learning styles of many Aboriginal students (many non-Aboriginal students also learn better this way). They further suggested that overt or covert resistance may be students' response to overwhelming challenges within the hegemonic school system (pp. 11-12). This resistance may take the form of many of the indicators of concern to both the ministries of education and of school educators, such as early school leaving, non-engagement, non-attendance, etc. In many ways these signs of disengagement and resistance may be similar to the resistance shown by non-academic girls (Harter, Waters & Whitesell, 1997; Jones & Myhill, 2004) as well as Black girls (Fordham, 1996) within school systems.

The McCreary Centre in Vancouver, BC, along with van der Woerd, Dixon, McDiarmid, Chittenden, and Murphy (2005) surveyed Aboriginal youth around the province over the past decade and stressed the importance of de-emphasizing a deficit approach in researching and reporting on Aboriginal youth, as well as emphasizing the positive health and educational gains made over the years in several areas. They found that there were several "protective factors" (p. 15) in fostering positive, healthy development in Aboriginal students which included caring relationships with significant adults, safe environments, positive expectations for growth, and opportunities to develop competencies at school and in community life. The authors reported that only 17% of Aboriginal students live on reserve within BC, while 83% live off reserve. They included the disclaimer that while more Aboriginal students were staying in school longer over the past decade, the total who graduate was still only 46%, compared to 82% of non-Aboriginals who graduated. This low number of Aboriginal students in the school system may also influence the results of the surveys, which are given to students attending schools across BC. More needs

to be done to both keep Aboriginal students in school longer, as well as to capture the responses of Aboriginal youth who no longer attend school to have a more complete picture of health and education behaviours and attitudes for Aboriginal youth.

Several studies specifically explore school success and other educational issues related to Aboriginal youth. Bazylak (2002) used a discursive narrative method of a sharing circle to investigate sources of success with 5 female Aboriginal recent Catholic secondary school graduates in Canada. All the girls were grade 12 students who were identified as “at-risk” because of one or more of the following characteristics: attendance difficulties; having been enrolled in several different schools; and/or having been placed in remedial or alternate programs or schools over the years leading up to their graduating year. The high drop-out rate of Aboriginal students has been a concern for all education ministries in Canada for many years. Bazylak reviewed many of the strategies which have been used in the provinces in the past to address this concern. Many of these have centred on the Aboriginal students’ difference--in culture, language, literacy level, etc. as the reason why so many Aboriginal youth have left school before graduation (p. 134). Many programs have been tried which focused on remediation, but few researchers have asked the students about their perceptions of success and what works for them to feel successful.

Bazylak discovered that the girls in his study found strength and support from being in a group, exploring and sharing, many for the first time, their individual and collective stories. The sharing circle, a variation of the Aboriginal talking circle, format was utilized in order to maximize the reflections, explorations, and responses of the girls to open-ended questions, as well as to encourage the expressions of their inner voices. The discourse was recorded and analyzed using a medicine wheel framework, along axes of emotional (family, friends, identity), physical (multiculturalism, support programs, drug and alcohol avoidance), mental (Aboriginal

teachers, curriculum, graduation diploma), and spiritual (finding their core being, Catholicism, Aboriginal spiritualism). The centre core of the medicine wheel represented volition or a force of will and the ecology or interconnectedness of life. Part of the search in finding a strong centre for the girls was conceptualized as “finding the gift or talent provided by the Creator. The gift, if discovered and nurtured, assisted in challenging the roadblocks of life. These students became special as they searched for their gifts” (p. 137). The gifts or talents also formed the basis of their feelings about their own successes. All the girls had developed personal goals for life and for their education and they were motivated to create a better life for their children. They saw the ceremonies and celebrations of Aboriginal cultures as bridging the gap between Aboriginal and Western world views and as improving their chances of success in school. All the girls saw their high school diploma as a tangible and meaningful measure of their success. Further important influences on the girls’ success were identified by them as family involvement, teachers’ (particularly Aboriginal teachers’) support, and both friends’ positive encouragement and their past negative experiences, from which they could learn.

The five girls were from varied Aboriginal backgrounds and had varied past experiences, so they were unsure as to what a singular “Aboriginal identity” could mean when they discussed that topic. They had similarities in their stories and experiences, however, which facilitated meaning making and mutual understandings, as they engaged in the discourse. Similar to the findings by Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2007 b), Bazylak found that the girls identified several group identities in their schools. They discussed the “popular” students and the various different multicultural groups as representing different identities. While multiculturalism programs and policies were designed to focus on respect, equity, and inclusion, the girls found that they actually mostly served to further marginalize, exclude, and perpetuate differences between groups of students at their schools. This finding further accentuates the necessity to deconstruct

the many policies, systems, and structures in schools based on taken-for-granted, stereotypical “needs” of diverse groups of students. As educators and policy makers, we too often utilize a narrow lens to determine what is “good” for students, instead of participating in discourses where the students speak for themselves and we can jointly construct meaning and relevant procedures to meet their identified needs.

Bazylak (2002) also found that the girls further identified support services in the form of counselling for family and personal issues, an engaging and relevant curriculum, recognition and support for different learning styles, dedicated, caring teachers with realistic, high expectations, healthy peer and student-teacher relationships built on trust and mutual respect, communication skills, and spiritual guidance from both elders and from their Catholic school teachers as essential elements in their successful educational journeys.

This sharing group format and framework were useful and respectful of the girls’ comfort levels, as well as trust, in uncovering the often silent voices of Aboriginal girls. When they felt respected and listened to, when their voices were interpreted in meaningful ways, the girls contributed a great deal to the discourse on success. Sharing their stories and experiences empowered these girls, moving them from the margins, ever so slightly, toward the dominant discourse on what students need to be successful. Rather than developing policies and imposing programs for students who are “different” and in a deficit-based value system that often considers them as “failures”, or “Others”, educators and policy makers would do well to listen carefully to these girls’ suggestions for useful, relevant, and meaningful programs and systems, diverse teaching strategies, multiple frameworks for interpretation and assessment, and alternative conceptualizations for success which would assist the students in achieving their goals, as well as a sense of themselves as valued, capable people.

In Smithers, BC, Lorna Williams, from the Ministry of Education Aboriginal Branch, also used a group format in the video, *Supporting Success Wet'suwet'en Student Stories* (2004), to ask 13 Aboriginal secondary school students to tell their stories about their experiences in school, what the obstacles were, and how they each attempted to overcome them. She also asked the students to describe their supports and to give advice to other students about how to be successful. Both the girls and the boys in the group talked about being too shy or too frightened to ask questions in class, particularly once they arrived at the secondary level. One girl talked about her difficulties in having so many different teachers at secondary and middle, in contrast to her experiences at elementary where her teacher knew her and her classmates so well, their individual learning styles, and how to help them. The girls described their supports as including home, teachers, and counsellors who took an interest in them, cared about them as people and helped them with school work at lunch and after school, pushing them "to my limits", as well as the support of their friends. The boys also stressed the importance of home support and teachers who helped them through difficulties, both personal and academic, and who challenged them and "found the potential in me".

Two of the boys told stories about their experiences with non-Aboriginal students making fun of them until they learned about the history and traditions of the different Aboriginal students, that each clan had different stories to tell, stories which the Aboriginal students had learned from their elders. Another boy talked about not being part of the popular group in school. He didn't take certain courses, dress in certain ways, or play certain sports, so he could not claim "being popular" as part of his own identity. He overcame these feelings of rejection of who he was not, by listening to the stories of his elders. His grandmother and her friends helped him to learn that "it was ok to be different, unique...we're all different" (Williams, 2003). He also said sadly that he and his friends didn't know the languages of their elders any more, that part of their

identity was lost to them, but also that the support of their elders was still very meaningful and important to them. Part of the process of negotiating a sense of self for these boys within the school system seemed to include a strong sense of belonging within their family and cultural systems.

The Aboriginal girls in the video described extra curricular sports and clubs, open gym, and programs and classes at the community centre as helping students to be more successful in school, as well as in life, and as an incentive to stay away from drugs and alcohol. They also mentioned the importance of involving the students, themselves, in developing the activities “to capture their interest” (Williams, 2003). Financial support in paying for a van to take the students home following their after school activities and in paying for them to take workshops and training also assisted these students in feeling supported.

The teachers at Smithers Secondary School, where all the students attended classes, discussed the changes in the attitudes of the staff over the past 10-15 years, since a “racial incident” occurred at the school. They described the teachers as taking more of an interest in the students’ and their families’ culture and history, creating feelings of comfort and safety in an Aboriginal Education room, telling the students about the programs and services they offered from the room, and challenging the students, setting expectations high, not letting them “get away with inferior work, telling them they can do better...even the kids who struggle...” (Williams, 2003). They didn’t exclude the students from participating fully by adopting a deficit model which would marginalize non-Whites as described by Benjamin (2003) as the “consolation discourse”.

The students in this video, I think because they were asked to tell their own stories and were in what appeared to be a comfortable social group rather than being singled out, seemed to be open and confident in describing relevant and meaningful issues about their successes in

school. They wanted involvement in developing appropriate programs and activities, support and encouragement to attend them, caring, involved teachers who actively helped them and believed in them and in their chances to succeed, as well as support from elders and from their friends. The boy, who told about his experiences with the racist comments from his non-Aboriginal classmates, also suggested that once those students learned more about Aboriginal culture, they became interested and wanted to learn more about the Aboriginal students. Perhaps, more Aboriginal courses and expanded discourses within daily classes by teachers about Aboriginal cultures, traditions, and issues would also serve the purpose to educate non-Aboriginals about the rich and diverse histories and identities of the Aboriginal peoples in Canada and lead to better mutual understandings and respect between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals.

Laurette Gilchrist (1995), in her research for a Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at UBC, conducted in-depth interviews with urban Aboriginal street youth in Vancouver, BC, Montreal, Quebec, and Winnipeg, Manitoba. She found that Aboriginal teens went to live on the streets of these urban centres and survived there for many of the same reasons and in many of the same ways as did non-Aboriginal teens living on the streets (p. ii). However, she did find some differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth she interviewed, as well. She discovered that the Aboriginal youth generally had a “unique worldview” and tended to feel dispossessed and “separate”, having no real homeland and no real recognition of their inherent indigenous rights. Further these youth felt that their culture had been obscured throughout history and continued to be marginalized, even within the context of current multicultural policies and practices. As a result, they often felt separated from the mainstream youth population. Gilchrist suggested that these feelings of isolation resulted from colonial era policies which were still embedded in current legislation to regulate Aboriginal people in their daily lives (pp. 1-2).

She identified several antecedents of Aboriginal youth going to take refuge in street life. These included: physical, emotional, mental, and sexual abuse; removal from parents and/or extended family; poverty; institutionalization; criminalization at an early age; adoption breakdown; racial harassment in school; alcohol/drug abuse in family of origin; and death of parent(s) (pp. 218-219). She found that Aboriginal youth were overrepresented in street youth and in foster care, as well as more likely to face racial attacks and discrimination than non-Aboriginal youth (pp. 245-246). The teens who were interviewed reported that the racism and harassment that they experienced often started early in their school environments and included isolating, violence, insults, and stereotypically negative images (p. 262).

Gilchrist recommended that educators recognize and understand the psychological and socio-cultural barriers of Aboriginal students and work to include realistic and relevant images of Aboriginals in historical contexts. Through knowledge of Aboriginal culture and heritage, including language, customs, and values, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students can gain a better understanding of and respect for the important place of Aboriginal people within the Canadian context. Aboriginal students also would benefit from culturally appropriate support services in schools and meaningful job training, in order to feel less isolated and more empowered (pp. 262-263).

While the Aboriginal girls in my study were not street youth, nor were they in imminent danger of leaving school before graduating, they could only have benefited from the respectful, inclusionary practices and policies mentioned above. I believe that everyone benefits from hearing and seeing the voices and contexts of people who have differing, sometimes conflicting, views and experiences. Only through seeking perspectives different from our own, can we begin to understand similarities and differences among us all and to construct meanings which are relevant and useful to us all.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that secondary school graduation is a minimal standard for all people to reach in order for them to find success in any form in current Western and more global societies. However, their experiences leading to a diploma must be meaningful to the students and to their particular context. They need to engage with their learning, to read, write, think critically and analytically, to learn and to practice the skills with caring, respectful, ongoing support, which will enable them to determine for themselves who they want to be, where, and when. bell hooks (2000) believed that the development of these skills and abilities must be placed at the forefront of the feminist agenda in order for women of all ages, classes, religions, and cultures to have a voice, to share their stories and experiences, and to support and assist each other, moving from the margins of the dominant discourse to participate fully and meaningfully, sharing their knowledge and power.

What becomes clear to me as I am reading and writing is the need and the imperative to access alternate discourses on what “success” means. We, as educators, need to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions around the dominant discourse on secondary school success and achievement and to create spaces for discourses involving students from diverse backgrounds in order to enable the sharing of thoughts, feelings, and perspectives, as well as the sharing of their knowledge, meanings, and power, in order to deconstruct this concept of success, to problematize it. We need to ask who defines success? Does its meaning change over time? How are people’s lives influenced by this definition? Does success have to be the opposite of failure? Is success only about wealth and material comforts, the “American/Canadian Dream”? Is it only about achieving high marks? Are “successful” Black students destined to dominate other Blacks (Fordham, 1996)? Is success only accessible to the few, the privileged (Brown, Way, & Duff, 1999)? Does success for girls need to mean that they must be focused on relationships and their

appearance, doomed to be passive, compliant, and subordinate (Jones & Myhill, 2004)? Do successful girls need to feel guilty or isolated or “split” from being individualistic, disconnected from their peers, focused on their own achievement, at the expense of friends and a sense of community (Luttrell, 1997)? Can Aboriginal students feel included in the BC curriculum and in classroom discussions and assessments (Ward & Bouvier, 2001)? Can all girls--and all boys--feel successful in both school and in life, through their own efforts to construct meaningful, relevant knowledge, as well as to find their voices, to share their experiences, to gain a sense of empowerment in being accepted for, and also for accepting, who they are with all their overlapping and emerging selves? Can it be ok for us to broaden the definition of success to include people making their own decisions about how they can “live well” (Castellano, 2000)?

I believe that it is only through face-to-face interaction that individual girls can find their voice and contribute to constructing meaning and knowledge. Looking at broad groups of girls, or any other group, and drawing conclusions for the group does a real disservice to the individual members of the group. It also disempowers the individual by creating an expectation for behaviour in taking for granted that their thoughts and feelings are reflected by a summary group response. At the same time, there are bound to be similarities across many subgroups, identities can overlap, depending on circumstances, contexts, and the needs and interests of individual group members. In my next chapter I will discuss how I came to begin to answer some of these questions and to consider and value the diversity within the school setting.

## CHAPTER III

### MY STUDY—FOCUSSING IN ON THE GIRLS

In this chapter I will describe the process through which I came to design and implement my study with three groups of secondary school girls in conversations about how they define “success.” I will also outline the methodology I used.

As I described earlier in Chapter 1, my good friend, Sherilyn, and I walk and talk together nearly every week and have done so for many years. We share many overlapping roles and identities and have grown very close as we have helped each other through the twists and turns life has thrown our way over the years. Over several of our weekly walks a couple of years ago we discussed our own daughters’ futures and those of the girls we saw in our professional practice. Was the world really all that different for them now than it was for us a couple of decades ago? What were their choices today? Was there still an implicit expectation for them to marry, to have children, to work for “pin money”, extras, over and above what their husbands could provide for them, as there was for us at their age? Were they expected to be “super moms”, having both a career and a family? How did they feel about “job” versus “career”? Was there a difference for them? Was it ok for them to have a career or a family? Was it ok not to marry? What pressures were they facing, both implicit and explicit from us, from their fathers, their friends, the media? more globally? What did we think about all this? What did they think about it? Had they thought about it? Talked about it? Did they have a vocabulary to express their thoughts and feelings about these questions? Were there other questions that were more relevant to them, to their lives in this current society?

Sufficient money at retirement to feel a sense of security seemed to be a large part of feeling “successful” for both of us at our current life stage, as we talked and walked over the weeks. That focus on finances was certainly a function of our perspective at middle age and of us

both nearing retirement age, but it was also a consideration and a concern for us as we thought about both our daughters and the girls with whom we worked. Who and/or what concerns were going to influence their lives and choices at various life stages? Could they feel successful with little or less than adequate financial security (by our white, middle class, North American standards) in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, retirement? Did they need financial support from someone other than themselves? Were they likely to get it? The harsh realities of the necessity of “enough” money overlapped with feelings of competence and contribution, a sense of belonging, connection, and attachment as we worked through reconstructing notions of what success meant for us. It was difficult to apply our emergent criteria for success as middle aged women to this new generation of women. Would it turn out to be similar? I was still unsure about how to clear away all the taken-for-granted assumptions around who I was and what I was expected to be, let alone to try to figure out how these girls thought and felt about what success meant to them. I decided that the best way to find out what girls thought about success was to ask them.

### **The School Setting and Demographic Profile**

Initially, I thought I would have individual conversations or interviews with senior girls in the school in which I was a vice-principal. I was interested in finding out if there were differences in the thoughts about success with different groups of girls. In the school, the students were generally from a stable community of middle to upper middle class families. There were approximately 15% of the students who were English as a Second Language students, the majority of whom were Korean. There were policies and procedures at the district and school levels for integration of these students, as well as for special needs students, into all classes.

The school district within which I work has a common delivery model for ESL services in all secondary schools. The students are initially assessed for their understanding of English with a common assessment rubric which determines their written and spoken proficiencies and

then they are placed in an appropriate level, ranging from 1-5, which spans Beginners, through Intermediate, to Advanced. Students generally take 1 ESL class and 3 other general classes (electives, mathematics, music, etc.) in a semester, progressing at their own rate through the levels. The students are assessed frequently through the semester by their ESL teacher, who is also in contact with the students' other teachers, and moved to different levels when appropriate, as well as being challenged by more difficult work or supported with adapted materials depending on their individual needs. A Korean Youth Worker has recently been hired by the school district International Education Program and is located at the school where I work. She is able to provide ongoing support and translations for the Korean speaking students at the school. For students from countries other than Korea, school personnel contact local community resources to provide support services for the students and their families.

The students with special needs in the school and the school district are also frequently assessed by teachers who have special training in this area and Individual Education Plans are developed by the special education teacher in collaboration with the student, their parents/guardians, and their teachers. Within the IEP, student strengths and areas on which the student needs to work are identified, goals are set, and strategies and assessment criteria are developed and monitored. Sometimes the strategies include a block of time in the Learning Resource Centre in the school, where the student may receive additional time and/or different materials and/or the individualized instruction of specific concepts required in a course. Sometimes the strategies include extra support within the classroom with special education teachers and/or teacher assistants helping the students with their work. The plans and strategies, as well as the assessment tools, again reflect the individual needs for each student.

Aboriginal students who are identified as having special needs would also be given an IEP. However, there are few, if any, culturally relevant resources and no Aboriginal teachers or

teaching assistants at the school level. Aboriginal Youth Workers and Cultural Workers visit the Aboriginal students and deliver programs at the school level, but the students do not have the ongoing support or modelling from school personnel which would assist them in feeling more understood and increase their sense of belonging at the school. Even the Aboriginal personnel who do come to the school may not represent the individual student's particular cultural heritage and as a result, the students may feel alienated and not understood and cared for within the schools. The term Aboriginal is used to include people of Métis, Inuit, and many other First Nations cultures. Each grouping of peoples within the term Aboriginal has many diverse cultural and individual characteristics, needs, and interests within the grouping, as well as within the overall category of Aboriginal.

In the Fraser Health region, which is where my research study took place, according to the Raven's Children II survey (Van der Woerd, Dixon, McDiarmid, Chittenden, & Murphy, 2005), there were 5% of the population who identified themselves as Aboriginal. Ninety-five percent of those students lived off reserve. Seventy-one percent of those students reported expecting to complete grade 12, while 72% of those students expected to complete post-secondary education.

Although Coquitlam School District did not participate in that particular study, they do have an *Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement* (draft, March, 2007) which sets goals for the education of Aboriginal students within the school district. According to this document School District #43 (Coquitlam) lies within the traditional territories of the Tsleil-Waututh, Katzie, Musqueam, Squamish, and Sto:lo Nations and approximately 3 % of the 30 000 district students self reported as Aboriginal, the majority as Métis, Cree, and Coast Salish and as living off reserve (Preamble).

The school district provides a variety of support services for the Aboriginal population including Cultural Workers, Aboriginal Youth Workers, tutoring services, learning resources relevant to Aboriginal learners, and professional development and support for teachers of Aboriginal students. The goals of the Agreement include: to increase knowledge and respect for Aboriginal culture and history for all students; to increase the number of Aboriginal students reporting feelings of safety and a sense of belonging; to improve Aboriginal students' achievement (with a focus on literacy and numeracy from K-8, utilizing district-wide, district developed assessment tools as well as the BC Performance Standards); and to improve grade-to-grade transition rate and six year Dogwood Graduation Certificate completion rate. These goals were developed by an inclusive committee of representatives from individuals and groups of Aboriginal parents, students, and elders, the School District, Aboriginal Education, the Principals and Vice-Principals' Association, the Teachers' Association, and the District Parent Advisory Council. Their purpose was to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. There is little data gathered at this early stage of the Agreement and baseline data will be gathered in order to assess progress in meeting the identified targets.

Clay Little, an Aboriginal Youth Worker who frequently works with students at the school where my research was conducted, said that of the approximately 1100 Aboriginal students attending school in Coquitlam School District, only 2-3 in any given year live on the Kwikwetlem Reserve, which is within the school district boundaries (personal communication, March 16, 2007). The vast majority of Aboriginal students live in the urban area of the school district and are not originally from this traditional territory. He also mentioned that some families live in poverty and some live in one parent families, as with non-Aboriginal families in the school district. Many of the students and families he sees are of mixed cultural heritage, often not having a strong sense of their traditional Aboriginal cultural background. In the school years

2004/2005 and 2005/2006 Aboriginal students had graduation rates of 63% and 62% respectively in Coquitlam School District, well below the non-Aboriginal average, but above the provincial averages for those years (<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/perf2004.pdf>).

### **Selecting My Participants**

The school has a positive, safe culture and a focus on high academic achievement, as well as a rich and diverse fine and performing arts program. The students at the school fill in Ministry of Education surveys on school safety each year. Over the past several years, the students rate their feelings of safety at the school as high. Also, in my role as vice-principal, I see very few incidents of serious conflict either in the hallways as I supervise or in my office as a disciplinary issue. At the same time, I acknowledge that there may well be subtle incidents of racism, harassment, and/or exclusion of which I am unaware. While students often bring current and potential conflicts to my attention, many students may feel intimidated by me as an authority figure and may not feel comfortable talking to me about these issues. This may also have influenced who the students were who volunteered for my study. The girls in all three groups in this study seemed to feel comfortable with both me and my research question or they would not have volunteered. An unknown researcher may have created discomfort among different students for similar or different reasons. Any time there are volunteers for a research study, it is important to remember that the results are quite narrow and while they provide an important glimpse into a small section of life in a particular context, they do not necessarily represent results which can be generalized to the whole population.

There was a small group of Aboriginal students who met weekly with an Aboriginal Cultural Worker. All of the students in this group happened to be girls in grade 11 and 12 at the time I was thinking this through. I wondered if there would be differences between girls who

identified as Aboriginal, those who were focused on academics, and those who were focused on fine arts. These three groups came to form my research groups.

While I recognized that the Aboriginal group was not parallel to the other two groups in its make up, the Cultural Worker was able to bring a positive energy to the group and the girls met with her to discuss issues and to work on crafts together quite regularly. Often the program was not as well attended as it was at that time and I thought it was important to possibly build on the success of the relationships that were being established within this group of girls with Aboriginal heritage.

Some of the Aboriginal girls also had a focus on academics and/or fine arts. Was culture a component of their ideas about success? Would the fact of this particular group having a pre-existing group structure around cultural issues enable them to express their ideas more clearly than the girls in the other groups? Would they have similar or different criteria for what success meant for them than for non-Aboriginal girls? I did not ask the girls about their relationship to their particular cultural heritage. The distinguishing of the different attributes of the numerous Aboriginal cultures represented within a public school in a midsize community in the BC Lower Mainland would have been beyond the scope of this study. The Ministry of Education documents and personnel who refer to Aboriginal issues of concern, such as low graduation rates, tend to group all Aboriginal students together. While I know that there are real dangers in doing this, losing the individual differences, not only between the various cultures but also within a particular culture, stereotyping the group, I had such small groups to work with that there seemed to be little point or validity in trying to deconstruct the group too far.

I also felt hesitant to intrude into the girls' cultural heritage. As a white authority figure within the school environment, I felt some discomfort in delving into their personal connections to their Aboriginal ancestry. In schools in BC, we do not ask questions or require proof when

students and/or parents/guardians claim Aboriginal ancestry on registration forms when they first register at a school or when they register for programs for Aboriginal students. Although I am only problematizing my hesitations now in this writing, I can see that the potential richness of context, had I asked some questions and listened to the girls' feelings and thoughts about their heritage at the time of recruitment and/or subsequently, when I sent out the Parent Questionnaire (Appendix VIII), has been lost. Better insights into the girls' families and cultural contexts and sense of personal identity would have provided important depth to my interpretation of the results of their discourse in the focus groups. In addition, I am now interested in why the Aboriginal girls specifically chose the Aboriginal group in which to participate, rather than the academic or fine arts groups. That will need to be another study.

I have added some additional information on Aboriginal issues and Aboriginal students in this dissertation because I had constituted one of the groups in my study around Aboriginal issues and I felt that I needed to gain more knowledge in this area. The readings and the writing I have done have assisted me in my analysis and interpretation of the conversations of the girls in the Aboriginal group in Chapter 4, as well as in some of my recommendations for practice and policy in Chapter 6.

### *Focus Groups*

I quickly realized that individual interviews would be extremely time-consuming and that since I was the vice-principal, I could have an undue influence on the free exchange of their thoughts and feelings about the topic of success if I had been conducting the interviews, myself. So, with the assistance of my supervisor at UBC, I decided on a focus group format for open ended conversations about what success meant for these girls. I asked Sherilyn to facilitate each of these focus group conversations since she knew the context of my wonderings. Her perspective was similar to mine in many ways, so I thought she would likely have similar biases

and take the conversations to similar places. She is also a trained counsellor with many years of experience in facilitating groups of students from grades 6-12. She was also familiar with over half of the girls, since she had been a counsellor at the nearby middle school, which a majority of our students as a whole had attended.

I also thought the focus group format would be more reflective of “real life” constructions of meaning through conversations. I was interested in how the use of language contributed to the girls’ abilities to make meaning jointly through their conversations. Could they construct meaning together about a concept like success? Did they have a vocabulary to enable them to adequately express their own and to understand others’ ideas and thoughts on the topic? Were they aware of and could they access any implicit taken-for-granted assumptions and/or expectations on success from their own experiences? Could they deconstruct the concept, reflect on their own values and beliefs and reconstruct something meaningful together? Were their views on success the same or different from the commonly held, dominant views by white, middle class, predominantly male, well educated decision-makers in schools and in the government ministries, that high marks in academic courses (particularly in the “hard” sciences and in mathematics) were the most important criteria by which to judge one’s success in schools? Were there other criteria by which to more meaningfully judge and/or define success that the girls could suggest?

I was interested in tapping into the girls’ “webs of discourse” (Kenway & Willis, 1998, p. xvii) and observing the interplay of meaning, power, and identity within their conversations. With age, physical location, and gender held constant within and among the groups, did other factors emerge as influential or powerful in determining who would speak, on what topics, and also in who would be silenced?

The girls in each of the three groups knew each other from classes and activities at the school, but were not necessarily friends. While there has been some research on the positive benefits of female peer relations contributing to girls' cognitive, social, and moral development, as well as to their interpersonal skill development and need for intimacy, there is little research on the interplay of this development within the girls' different life contexts, including their class, religion, sexual orientation, and race (Brown, Way & Duff, 1999). Schools have been seen as reinforcing societal power asymmetries and encouraging normative behaviour, thereby "institutionalizing a hierarchy of popularity" (p. 218) where boys have more influence and power than girls and white girls who strive for power and recognition, like the boys, feel competition and isolation, rather than trust, solidarity, and connection with other girls, allowing few to feel "successful". In either case, Brown, Way, and Duff suggested it was important to engage girls directly in conversations exploring issues regarding power relations. These group conversations were found "to hold particular promise when they were facilitated by an adult who can help the girls translate and negotiate the culture of power--someone who can listen, stay with the girls' critique, and also explore with girls their often contradictory feelings, their interactions with other girls and women and their capitulation or resistance to social separation and internal divisions" (p. 218).

Brown, Way, and Duff also discussed the importance of creating spaces for girls to explore and to develop strategies of resistance to the dominant patriarchal, culturally determined notions of femininity so dominant in most societies. A female facilitator led a discussion in their study with six adolescent girls about what changes they would like to make in their schooling. They cited research showing that the friendships of adolescent girls contributed to the girls' cognitive, social, and moral development more so than did boys' friendships. Since their study focused on mainly white, middle class girls in the suburban mid-western United States, they recommended the importance of research into the complex interrelatedness among gender, class, race, and ethnicity

in a social context. In Coquitlam School District, there is an ethnically diverse population and it has been so for the last 10-15 years. As a result, the students have grown up with this diversity and may not feel the same sense of difference that girls in the mid-west US may feel where there are still noticeable tensions between Black and White students. Within my study the Academic and Fine Arts girls groups were a mixed ethnic population. The findings by Brown and her colleagues may relate in different ways to the Coquitlam girls' need to "negotiate or to resist culturally inscribed and socially sanctioned" (p. 213) general expectations of what it means to be a "good girl", which are predominant in Western cultures. They described the tensions that the girls in their study experienced between competing for individual success in school and feeling solidarity with their friendship group (p. 213). They also suggested that, "cultures that emphasize individualism, competition and self sufficiency may undermine trust in the context of girls' close friendships" (p. 217). In order to change these power and relational asymmetries, they further suggested the importance of engaging girls in conversations with adult facilitators about these issues, so they could begin to name, explore, and negotiate the culture of power and their own, often contradictory, feelings and interactions with other girls and women through their use of language (p. 218).

The research on utilizing focus groups generally finds that homogeneous groupings based on similarities in gender, age, ethnicity, race, religion, and shared experiences can generate valuable information on collective views and on the meanings underlying those views (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Focus groups can also be an effective way to articulate taken-for-granted assumptions about normative behaviours within a social group (p. 5). However, the construction of the group can affect the comfort level of the participants in several ways. If a group is too homogeneous or already has pre-established hierarchical structures and processes, as within friendship groups, individual roles and norms for behaviour may already be

established for the group and there may not be sufficient flexibility and trust for the participants to express divergent points of view on an equal footing. On the other hand, if a group is too heterogeneous, the diversity of views may lead to arguments or to silencing if no common ground can be found. I believe that the shared experiences of the girls in my three research groups in all being students at the same school, living in the same catchment, being in their senior years, yet not being from established friendship groups, would have provided the necessary balance between these two group characteristics. While the Aboriginal girls were part of the pre-established cultural group who met with the district Aboriginal Cultural Worker, the group was quite fluid and none of the girls attended regularly.

Bazylak (2002) specifically used a form of focus group format in his qualitative research study with five Aboriginal girls in Saskatchewan in a sharing circle to discuss their perceptions of success. He concluded that this format was “an appropriate cultural method of collecting data” (p. 134) for Aboriginal students. He found that although the girls were not friends, but acquaintances from the same school, as in my study, they bonded as a group early in the session and comfort and trust emerged within the group as each student gave voice to their particular thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

In Smithers, BC a focus group of differing Aboriginal students was asked several questions concerning their school success (Williams, 2004). The seven girls and six boys answered questions in a conversational format about how they overcame obstacles in their schooling and more generally in their lives, as well as what advice they had for other Aboriginal students to be successful. As discussed in Chapter 2, the focus group format worked well to elicit thoughtful, meaningful responses from the participants. The facilitator for this group was also an Aboriginal person, who opened the session by explaining that the students would be able to tell

their stories. Storytelling as a frame for the focus group was probably less threatening a format than individual interviews, as would be the case for most adolescents.

Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robson (2001) suggested that the optimum size for the focus groups was 6-8 participants in order to maximize the opportunities for everyone to speak and share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, as well as to minimize feelings of awkwardness with too few participants where discussion may be limited. While my goal was for 6-8 students in each group, the reality of last minute commitments for the students (tutorials, work schedules, family issues, etc.) led to fewer students participating in the groups on the days of my study. There were four Aboriginal students, five Academic students, and six Fine Arts students who ended up participating in the study. Conversations flowed well and Sherilyn, the facilitator for each group, did not need to use the prompts we had brainstormed together prior to the sessions in case they were required to get the conversations moving. However, the Aboriginal students often struggled for the appropriate words to express their thoughts and Sherilyn assisted them in this regard with slightly longer wait times and occasional alternate word suggestions. I will discuss this issue more fully as I discuss the results of the study later in the next chapter.

Bloor and colleagues (2001) further suggested that while focus groups were a “socially dynamic situation” (p. 21) with somewhat unpredictable possible outcomes, the goal of focus groups was to stimulate discussion among people with some shared characteristics and experiences in order to understand the meanings and norms which underlie the usually taken-for-granted behaviour of the individuals within the groups (pp. 42-43). This goal of understanding is different from the goal of group or individual interviews where participants are often asked a series of predetermined questions where the goal is to find answers to those questions. The focus group format assisted me in my goal of trying to understand what the girls believed was the

meaning of success to them, as individuals and, through the construction of meaning within the group, to the group.

The role of the facilitator is not to control the group, but to remain a background figure, facilitating group interaction, ensuring no one dominates the discussion, continuing to focus on the general topic, uncovering norms and meanings through questions for clarification and to validate all contributions, not just agreements (Bloor et al., 2001, pp. 48-49). Through listening to the tapes, I am satisfied that Sherilyn executed this role and these expectations well.

Weedon (1997) discussed the importance of creating spaces for girls to explore the ways they made sense of their world as a necessary starting point for them to understand how power relations structure society (p.19). The usual discourse in society and in schools is patriarchal and subordinates the interests of women to those of men. By creating this opportunity in the focus groups for the girls to jointly construct some meaning about success in their lives, I also hoped to demonstrate to them that alternate forms of knowledge can be constructed and their social power and sense of identity could be strengthened through such discourses. These groups created a small space for some resistance to the norm of patriarchal discourse.

Eder and Fingerson (2001) stressed the importance in providing the opportunity for adolescent participants in focus groups to “give voice to their own interpretations and thoughts...on topics that are salient in their lives but do not occur in daily conversations or interactions” (p. 181), in order to reduce the power imbalance of adult power and privilege. They also pointed out that the group format was quite a natural one for girls to communicate their social knowledge, so it tended to facilitate the construction of meaning through a shared process. They also recommended open-ended questions for the session so that participants had more opportunities to speak in familiar modes of discourse, to expand on responses, and to collaborate with their peers in the group (p. 184). By learning about the participants’ use of terms

and language structures, rather than translating their words to adult (male) language patterns, the girls' words, feelings, and thoughts are validated and made more meaningful. This also helps to stop the "Othering" and marginalizing of their voices.

Eder and Fingerson (2001) also stressed the importance of the researcher probing their own relationship with the participants in order to not contribute to this marginalization (pp. 197-198). Since both Sherilyn and I are quite familiar with both adolescents as a group through our professional and personal lives, as well as with girls particularly, and as women who have experienced this marginalization ourselves, I believe we have considered these issues carefully and consciously in the design, implementation, and analysis of this study.

Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007 b) used semi-structured, informal interviews with adolescent Vancouver, BC area girls, some in pairs, others singly, to explore both how to gain access and to analyze girls' talk, as well as how the girls positioned themselves within and against their own and broader societal views of feminism. They rightly stressed that the process of describing what we, as adult researchers, heard the girls say is a mediated process and may, in fact, tell us more about what we believe than what the girls believe (pp. 377-378).

### *Feminist Method*

In addition to the focus group as a methodological tool, I have also chosen a feminist research methodology. Harding (1987) argued for a "Feminist Method" and identified several key characteristics of this methodology. These include: the generation of the problematic from a woman's perspective; value placed on women's experiences, as told by women; and critical examination of the sources of social power with a goal of providing women explanations of social phenomena and of their own worlds, so they/we can begin to effect meaningful, positive change. She also outlined the requirements of feminist research to include the researcher

explicitly situating themselves within the research. This introduction of “subjectivity” into the research is necessary, Harding argued, in order to increase its “objectivity” and to decrease its “objectivism” of women (p. 9). The reader can then assess the validity of the research, considering the researcher’s explicitly stated biases and positions, rather than reading research in which unexamined beliefs and behaviours of researchers may unduly influence the study in terms of the question, participant selection, data gathering, and analysis (p. 9). Throughout this writing I have endeavoured to situate myself and my wonderings, my life experiences, my beliefs, thoughts and feelings about myself, my daughters, my women friends, and my students. I am also exploring the sources of power as they relate to women’s and girls’ feelings of efficacy and their ability to feel successful in their lives, both personally and within the school system. I chose to have a woman facilitate the discourse of girls groups within the school setting in order to hear directly from the girls their own thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. I will endeavour to accurately report and analyze their discourse, through my own feminist lens.

Wilkinson (1998) described the role of focus groups in feminist research as a vehicle to understand the person within a social context through the joint construction of meanings and knowledge (p. 111). She outlined several characteristics as increasing the validity of this research methodology. These include: interactive data gathered through the group process more accurately reflecting the co-construction of meaning as found in the social world and enabling an analysis beyond content only; it also provides more accessible insights and reduces ethical concerns over the possible exploitative nature of one-to-one interviews, where the researcher controls the process; new, important issues may be brought up within the group discourse, where participants may challenge each other or ask clarifying questions which can broaden or refocus the original research question to one of more relevance to the participants, empowering and validating them and their experiences, better serving their needs; and the participants’ own

language and their frameworks are recorded and utilized in interpreting their understanding of their lives.

Manika Morris (2002) also outlined several characteristics of feminist research. These include: being written from a feminist perspective; giving voice to experiences; identifying problems and concerns; finding solutions that lead to meaningful social change; educating and training awareness for policy makers and decision makers; and building a social community, among others. I followed this criteria in designing and implementing my study.

In my study I asked for volunteers and explained the purpose of the research to both the girls and to their parents/guardians. I sent the girls the transcript of their particular group conversation along with a short summary of my preliminary analysis and asked them for feedback as to whether I had captured the meaning from the group (Appendix I, II, and III). I asked them to send back any comments as well as giving them another opportunity to withdraw from the study (Appendix V). I received several comments that the summaries were accurate and no requests for withdrawal from the study were made.

Morris (2002) also cautioned against generalizing any results from small, non-randomized studies, such as mine (pp. 11-13). I discuss the results from my study fully in the next chapter and while the numbers of participants were small, there were some interesting and relevant findings which have added to my understanding and knowledge about girls' education. This new understanding does have implications beyond my own practice and I will explore those in the last chapter.

In further accordance with the principles of feminist research, I believe that the rights and dignity of the participants have been respected throughout the study and lengthy analysis and that I do have a genuine desire to accurately represent the girls and their realities in order to assist them in understanding their shifting identities within various contexts, as well as to add

meaningfully to an alternate discourse for the purposes of developing more inclusive educational practices and policies.

Altheide and Johnson (1998) discussed the importance of remembering and considering that as researchers engaging in qualitative research, we were interpreting the social life of our participants (p. 284) and this social world was not literal, but was continuously under construction, and even deconstruction (p. 292). Researchers needed to attempt to understand and as accurately as possible to represent the participants' point of view, in order for the study to be reliable and repeatable, as well as a valid and truthful representation. Not only do researchers need to carefully consider the participants' perspectives, but researchers also need to carefully consider their own processes, procedures, and positionality, as well as authorial style and their potential impact on both the participants and the outcomes of the study. Researchers also need to consider the role of the reader or possible audience of the study and possible interpretations they may have throughout all facets of the research study (p. 291).

They also correctly pointed out that one's social experiences are different than and more complex than words and symbols alone (p. 297) and that "The nature of meaning and its unfortunate location between language and experience produces an imperfect fit" (p. 298). In order to make the interpretations of the data valid, accurate, and meaningful, researchers need to be explicit about how they make decisions on how to represent the work, as well as how they claim to know what they know about it (p. 306).

Since both Sherilyn and I have spent most of our lives within the public education system as students ourselves, as teachers, and as counsellors for students, I believe we both have a good understanding of the context within which the students operate. We also have daughters and maintain a strong and ongoing interest in the welfare of girls. I do recognize that as an adult, I do not have easy entry into the girls' worlds. My goal, in addition to providing an opportunity for

the girls to express their feelings and thoughts on this topic of success and to construct meaning for themselves, singly and together, is to positively impact my own practice and relationships, as well as to inform the larger discourse at the school, district, and provincial levels in developing policies, processes, and procedures to positively impact girls' lives. The readers then, in addition to the girls, will hopefully be decision makers. Considering these research goals, I will continue to endeavour to make my own position explicit and to utilize a writing style which is relevant, representational, and clear.

Lincoln (2002) outlined several "emerging criteria" (p. 327) by which to evaluate the validity or trustworthiness of qualitative and interpretive research (pp. 330-342). These include: a commitment to fairness and a balance of stakeholder's views; a dedication to the learning of the participants as well as to the researcher; an open and democratic sharing of knowledge; the fostering, stimulating, and enabling of social action; the need for the researcher to openly and honestly declare their positionality; a recognition that the research takes place within a specific community and needs to serve the purposes of that community as well as to contribute to new knowledge and new policy; a consideration of voice--who speaks for whom, to whom, and for what purpose; the researcher needs to be involved with the research participants in such ways as to change the conditions which seek to silence and to marginalize the voices; to engage in critical reflexivity in order to try to understand subtle differences in the personal and psychological states of others; a consideration of not only individual responses, but also responses as part of relationships, with the researcher included; an appreciation of the sacredness of the research process and the need for concern for human dignity and respect; and the sharing of the perquisites of privilege through acknowledging the researchers' gains in status or other advantage.

I have endeavoured to follow each of these criteria throughout my study by carefully explaining my purpose and interest in hearing, sharing, and including girls' voices, to bring them

from the margins to the centre of the educational discourse at the school, district, and provincial levels in order to create more ways for them to feel successful in their school life and personal life. I have also endeavoured to treat the girls, as did Sherilyn, with respect and fairness throughout the study, fully acknowledging how much I appreciated their thoughts and feelings about this topic.

### *The Sessions*

I decided to audiotape the conversations because I thought that it would be less intrusive and less likely to interfere with the free exchange of ideas than videotaping the sessions. We initially had some problems in making the audio tapes work correctly. However, in the school setting, the students were used to having technology problems, even with “low-tech” tape machines. I had brought each group some cookies and boxed drinks, so the girls chatted comfortably while Sherilyn ensured the audiotape was working correctly at the beginning of each session. In the Academic group, the tape ended without anyone realizing it, so the conversation abruptly ended and the transcription was incomplete. However, the time was the same as the other groups, about one hour, so there was comparable data to analyze. I asked a professional court reporter to transcribe the data from each of the three groups.

I wrote out an Opening Statement for Sherilyn to read at the beginning of each session in order to provide consistency of instructions and setting, as much as possible, among the three groups (Appendix IV). I discussed the importance of ensuring all the participants were contributing during the group session with Sherilyn and asked her to be watchful for anyone who tended to either dominate or to not participate. This was not a problem in the sessions. Focus groups are socially dynamic and therefore, unpredictable (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001). I also asked Sherilyn to keep the focus on the question: “What is success?” in order to

both expose the assumptions related to group norms underlying the discussion and also the meanings constructed through the conversations on the topic (p. 90). Sherilyn, as a facilitator for the groups, remained in the background, asking for clarification, as needed, validating expressions on difference in order to encourage divergent views, attending to non-verbal cues, and both writing them down later and voicing them within the audio tape in order to clarify the flow and agreement/disagreement within the conversation.

### *Recruitment*

I talked to the staff at the school about what my study was all about and enlisted their support in talking to their senior classes about it and in soliciting student volunteers for each research group. Again, I decided that if I went to classes myself, to ask for volunteers to participate in my study, the students might have felt some coercion because of my position as vice-principal. I wanted to avoid that and have the girls freely volunteer if they had an interest in the topic and also had the time to spend an hour out of their day in a conversation with their peers. Once the teachers had a few names of grade 11 or 12 girls who were interested in participating in the study, I gave those teachers an overview letter (Appendix VI) with a space for parent consent with my name and number for more information, as required by the UBC Ethics Review policy. When those initial letters were returned to the teachers by the girls who were volunteering to participate, I asked the teachers to give the girls a formal Parent/Guardian Consent Form (Appendix VI). I also asked the counsellors to give the same letters to the Aboriginal girls who were participating in our school Aboriginal Cultural Program. I had initially planned to enlist the help of the Aboriginal Cultural Worker in leading the Aboriginal focus group or co-leading the group with Sherilyn, but she took some time off at that time and we had no one filling in for her at the school for awhile. When another cultural worker came in to the

school a little later, she had no relationship with any of the girls or knowledge of our particular school community. I wanted the context and experience for all the groups to be similar in order to increase the internal validity of the study, so I asked Sherilyn to also facilitate the group of Aboriginal girls, many of whom she also knew from middle school. In order to make the group structure have some meaning, I asked their teachers to ask the girls into which classification they thought they “belonged”. So the girls chose for themselves to be part of the Fine Arts, Aboriginal, or Academic focus group, depending on which area they thought most closely represented their sense of identity and affiliation.

### *Permission*

I gained permission from both School District # 43 (Coquitlam) and from the UBC Ethics Review to proceed with my study on February 4, 2004 and March 10, 2004, respectively. Permission was granted by the UBC Ethics Review on October 25, 2004 for an amended study (Appendix VII) to include a brief questionnaire on parental demographic information (Appendix VIII).

### *Parent Questionnaires*

I mailed the parent questionnaires (Appendix VIII) to the homes of all the girls who participated in the study. The questions included information on the age and grade of the girls, the name of the parent(s) or guardian(s) with whom they lived, the girls’ birthplace, the educational level of parents and the language spoken at home. I wanted to gather this contextual data in order to see if there were differences among the groups related to these factors which might have contributed to differences among the groups in their conceptualizations of success. A summary of the returned forms and the total numbers of girls in each group is as follows:

1. Aboriginal Group: 0/4 forms returned

2. Fine Arts Group: 3/6 forms returned

3. Academic Group: 4/5 forms returned

The size of the groups of girls was very small and the return rate for the forms, except for the Academic Group was low. Unfortunately, no forms were returned from the Aboriginal Group. From the student demographic information available at the school, I was able to fill in basic information about the girls' age and grade for those who did not return their forms. A summary of the findings is as follows:

### **Aboriginal Group**

None of the girls returned their forms and the information I have is that all the girls were in grade 11 at the time of the study. One girl was 17 and the others were 16 years old.

There was considerable overlap among the characteristics of the three groups of girls. Many of the Aboriginal girls were also interested in and/or were taking fine arts courses in and/or out of school or were "academic" in that they achieved good marks on their report cards and were set to graduate; some also had aspirations of attending post-secondary education. Many of the Aboriginal girls could have fit into either or even both the fine arts and academic classification.

### **Fine Arts Group**

The three girls who did not return their forms were all 17 years old and in grade 12 at the time of this study. Of the girls who returned their surveys, one student, who was also 17 years old and in grade 12, was born in BC and lived with both parents, who were also born in BC. Both parents spoke English at home, the father had finished a program at Vancouver City College and her mom had finished high school.

One student was 16 years old and in grade 11. She was born in BC and lived with both parents, who were also born in BC. They spoke English at home, and her dad had a BEd from UBC and her mom had an ARCT piano teacher's degree.

One student was 18 years old and in grade 12. She was born in BC and lived with both her parents. They were both born in Canada and had post secondary training, mom as a nurse, dad at BCIT; they spoke English at home.

### *Academic Group*

The girl who did not return her form was 16 years old and in grade 11 at the time of this study. Two students were 16 years old and in grade 11, one of these girls lived with her mom and the other lived with both parents. The girl living with her mom was born in Canada, while her mom was born in China. They spoke English at home; her mom had a pharmacy degree from the University of Manitoba. The other girl was born in BC, as were both her parents. They spoke English at home and both parents had degrees from UBC.

One student was 17 years old and in grade 11. She was born in Kenya and lived with her mom and dad, who were born in Pakistan and Tanzania respectively. They spoke both English and Kuchi at home and both parents had university degrees.

One student was 17 years old and in grade 12, was born in Taiwan, as were both her parents. They spoke Mandarin at home and both parents finished high school.

Since there was so little contextual demographic information available for any of the girls, I cannot provide any substantive data relating to comparisons between the groups regarding parents' birthplace or educational level, language spoken at home, or the girls' birthplace or cultural heritage. From the available data, all that is comparable is that all the girls were secondary school students in either grade 11 or 12 during the time of the study. I was not able to

follow up with the girls concerning this information or the reasons why the forms were not returned, since all of them had graduated by the time I was beginning to analyze the transcripts and data and I no longer had access to their demographic or cultural information. Therefore, I cannot hypothesize as to possible differences between the group responses based on demographics. I planned to (will) interpret the group responses as constructions of meaning within the groups, with the groups, themselves, being a construction of the individual girls' sense of identity and sense of belonging.

### *Getting Started*

The girls met for an hour within their particular group at a time during the school day which was most convenient for a majority of the girls who returned their signed consent forms. I met with each group briefly at the beginning of the session to explain my interest in the topic of defining success that their conversations would be audio-taped, kept confidential, and be anonymous. I also told each group that I would send them each a copy of both the transcribed tape of their particular group session, as well as a summary of what I thought I heard in the tapes. They would be invited to agree, disagree, and/or provide clarification, ensure accuracy, and to question my interpretations. I also explained that they could withdraw at any time from the study and also withdraw their contributions to the conversation within the session. Sherilyn spent the first few minutes in each session after I had left the room, reading the Opening Statement and ensuring the girls understood and agreed to norms for acceptable behaviour within the session, as well as terms regarding the confidentiality of their conversations. The girls' names were not used except coincidentally during the sessions to further maintain confidentiality and anonymity. I was interested in the group constructions of meaning on this concept of success rather than on individual responses. The benefits to the girls, I saw as being in their opportunity to have a

conversation with their peers on a topic of interest and importance to themselves. I also wanted their voices to become part of the larger conversation within our school, the school district, and the province about how success was defined for our students and what it meant to the students, themselves, to achieve success.

I maintained confidentiality of the tapes by keeping them in a locked file cabinet drawer before and after having them transcribed. In addition to sending a copy of the transcription of their particular group and my initial summary asking for feedback to each of the participants, I also gave these to Sherilyn and asked her to check both the transcripts and the summaries for accuracy. She had made some notes on her impressions of each group which included body language before, during, and after the sessions (i.e. hesitations, eye rolling, crossed arms, etc.) which added to my understanding of the conversations, but which was not available on the audio-tape.

### *Results*

I sent brief, preliminary summaries (Appendix I, II, and III) from the transcripts of each of the groups' sessions to the girls in their respective groups in order to check that I had accurately understood their conversations. I also asked for any clarifications or need for changes and received none in return from any of the girls. From this, I assumed the girls agreed with my initial summary of their particular session.

In listening to the tapes again while reading the original transcripts, I was also able to make some corrections to the transcriptions in identifying speakers from the conversation line or through voice recognition. I also corrected some discrepancies in the girls' wording through careful listening and my knowledge of their vernacular.

I present the descriptions, analysis, and interpretations separately by group and also as summaries of differences and similarities across groups in the next chapter. I intended to look at

each group as a separate entity in the beginning of my study, thinking that the three groups I chose for the study represented separate identity categories within our school. However, while the girls chose within which group they wanted to participate, there was much overlap, in that several of the girls also felt strong affiliation to the other group or even to both other groups. For instance, several of the Aboriginal girls were also high academic achievers and some also considered themselves to have a fine arts talent. Likewise with the Academic and Fine Arts girls; many later said that they felt they belonged in both groups, but arbitrarily chose one group over the other because one group had fewer participants or the meeting time was more convenient. In analyzing the discourse in all three groups, I also found very similar trends and themes. The groups were also very small, and any generalizations to Academic, Fine Arts or Aboriginal groups of secondary school girls would not be valid. So it seemed to me to better represent the meaning constructed by the girls in their groups more generally as the discourses of secondary school girls. The girls' groups were composed of girls with similar characteristics since they all lived within the same generally middle-class, ethnically mixed school catchment, as Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robson (2001) recommended as a way to enhance participation and meaning making within the group format. I used the girls' voices in my analysis and identified them only with a letter and the group to which they chose to belong for the purpose of this study in order to protect their confidentiality.

Certainly a consideration of social class would have been relevant in most analyses about students' conceptions of success, as well as in broader conversations about success in general. Luttrell (1997), McLaren (1996), and Fordham (1996) found that considerations of social class added additional layers of complexity to gendered expectations of what it meant to be successful in the dominant, mostly white, male, middle-class discourse. The working class women that Luttrell (1997) interviewed valued the practical knowledge they gained by working,

and for some, also by being mothers. Luttrell believed that the education system also needed to value multiple forms of knowledge, in order for students to develop a fuller sense of self within a broader context, than only academic achievement in certain (predominantly male dominated) subject areas. While these young women understood the importance of graduating from secondary school, they felt success could also be found in other ways than “schoolsmarts”.

In this particular study, nearly all the students lived in a very homogeneous middle to upper-middle class neighbourhood, so it was unlikely that there were large differences in social class among the participants, although I did not ask the question. In different school catchments, where social class was more varied, there could be additional, important influences on the conversation relating to social class. Each group of girls did however discuss money as a part of their group conversation and I have included that in the analysis and interpretation for the groups.

By utilizing a small group or focus group format with only girls, I was aiming to create a context whereby the girls, familiar with each other as students at school, but not necessarily from the same friendship group, could construct a social reality relatively free from the usual power imbalances experienced within a school or societal setting where the voices of girls and women tend to be marginalized and/or silenced (Kenway & Willis, 1998; Weedon, 1997). A group of girls with an experienced woman facilitator seemed to me to maximize the opportunities for the girls to openly express their thoughts and feelings on a relevant topic of interest to them in their last year or two of secondary school, that being “school success”, and in so doing jointly construct not only a deeper sense of themselves, but also of meaning about success in their lives. These discourses were also an important way for the girls to give voice to the issues that concern and interest them and also to interrupt the power imbalances in schools (Eder & Fingerson, 2001).

In the next chapter I will present and analyze the data from the audio-taped and transcribed focus group sessions with each of the groups as they answered the question: “What is school success?” I will use the girls’ voices to describe their ideas and feelings on success. I will then analyze the data to find key items and the patterns among them. Then finally, I will interpret the results in relation to the methodology described by Wolcott (1994) where my reflections, analyses, and interpretations are grounded in descriptive quotes from the girls, themselves.

## CHAPTER IV

### DATA ANALYSIS---STUDENTS ANSWER THE QUESTION: WHAT IS SCHOOL SUCCESS?

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, a few people in high places often answer the question of student success with little or no input from the students, educators, or parents. Goals are made, plans are developed, strategies are set in motion, end results are measured, mostly by government developed and mandated standardized exams; then students, as well as schools, are ranked from most “successful” to least (Cowley & Easton, 1999; School report cards, 2006). These goals and plans reflect the policies of the BC Ministry of Education and echo a global, politically right wing focus on “accountability” and economic growth. I will explore some of the mechanisms of policy development in the next chapter in more detail.

Educators generally do not believe that these summative assessments of learning, based on standardized test scores, reflect the complexities of the learning process in classrooms, nor do they accurately reflect student learning and ability (Kelly & Brandes, in press, 2007; Repo, 2005). Students have diverse backgrounds, roles, stresses, needs, interests, strengths, and personalities. Too often, a single mark on a report card or a test simply cannot represent that entire student. However, they are judged as “successful” or a “failure” depending on that mark.

Through years of working closely with students from preschool to grade 12 as a teacher, counsellor, and administrator, I have heard students of all ages talk to me about the challenges they regularly faced at school and at home, as well as how they worked to overcome those challenges. The challenges included many complex issues such as: emotional, physical and sexual abuse; gender orientation confusion; eating disorders; learning and physical disabilities; mental illnesses such as depression and bi-polar disorder; family dysfunction; drug/alcohol use and addiction; peer pressures; bullying and other forms of aggression and violence; issues surrounding power imbalances at home, at school, and in the workplace; legal issues; financial

problems; death of a family member or close friend; issues related to their family moving frequently; immigration issues; cultural and religious issues; and others.

Schools and classrooms are microcosms of society and students reflect the issues and challenges within that society. Some of the many recent changes in communication (i.e. increased use of the Internet and cell phones) have contributed to our local culture and society becoming more global in scope and influence. The amount of information to which our students have access is staggering when compared to that of even a decade ago. While there are many benefits of this increased access to information, it also can create new pressures, in addition to new complexities and realities for students.

I thought it was important to engage students in a conversation about what success meant to them as individuals within this complex milieu. Did their views on success reflect what the politicians and bureaucrats defined as success? Were marks on government exams a true indicator of success in the complex lives the students lead? Were other measures possible? Was it even possible to quantify success for this new, aware, information rich, technology savvy generation of students? This was the purpose of my research study.

The facilitator, Sherilyn, and I talked about the possibility that the girls might expand their conversations about success beyond the school setting. I decided to let the conversation flow naturally and asked Sherilyn not to try to refocus the discussion, as long as there were continued links to the concept of success. There are, of course, many possible meanings for success. In addition to being interested in the girls' views on school success, I was also interested in the process. Was this focus group format useful in facilitating meaning making for the girls? If it was, I could use it subsequently with students to benefit their personal growth through the development of self confidence and feelings of engagement and agency (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

In this chapter I will follow the general model of data analysis outlined by Wolcott (1994) by first using the girls' voices to describe their views of school success and tell their stories within their separate groups, answering the question. I will also analyze the conversation to systematically find key factors or items and the relationships and patterns or trends among them. In addition, I will investigate some of the taken-for-granted elements of the discourse, recognizing that within a poststructuralist, feminist theoretical framework, the hegemonic discourse tends to be exclusionary and appears as "objective", "non-contingent" both historically and culturally and "natural", easily accepted as the "truth" or as "reality" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 186). I will, therefore, include a comparison of what the girls said with the common hegemonic educational discourse, as well as how the possible consequences of the different discourses may vary. I will then interpret the results, providing inferences. Finally, I will look for overall trends and patterns among the groups.

I will emphasize description, as it forms the foundation for what Wolcott (1994) believed was the basis for analysis and interpretation. I will do this to allow the girls' voices to take and to hold centre stage. The direct quotes from the girls provide the basis for whatever follows and the readers will undoubtedly draw their own inferences from that data. My analysis and interpretation will result from my own biases and tools for meaning making. This kind of educational research seems quite different to me to much in the field currently and I would like the emphasis to remain on helping to empower the girls and listening carefully to their voices. I will, in Chapter 6, summarize my findings and make general recommendations, both for current educational practice and for further educational policy and more general research.

Margaret LeCompte (2000) discussed the importance of making the researcher's tacit and formative theories explicit in data analysis (p. 146) in order to minimize, or at least to make the reader aware of the researcher's biases in conducting the research. These biases, as well as the

researcher's purpose, act as filters through which data is highlighted or selected for consideration. I have outlined my own biases and purpose throughout this dissertation. The overall theories from which I am working are poststructuralist and feminist, where I believe that language serves to construct an individual's sense of self (Weedon, 1997; Kenway & Willis, 1998) and that power imbalances between the genders need to be made explicit and addressed. It is through these dual lenses that I will proceed with the description, analysis, and interpretation of the girls' conversations.

In order to increase the reliability of the data described here, I will report items within the conversations which are supported by more than a single study participant wherever possible. I have also sent brief summaries of each group session to the girls in that group for them to check for accuracy and to provide any clarifications or feedback (Appendix I, II, and III) to ensure my initial descriptions were accurate and reflected the conversations faithfully. This step also contributes to the validity of the study to ensure the data are credible and useful to the girls themselves (LeCompte, 2000).

### **Fine Arts Group**

The six girls in this group represented a variety of fine and performing arts, including creative writing, choral and instrumental music, and visual art. While all were students at the same secondary school, they were not friends, so they started the conversation by introducing themselves and briefly describing their art. They quickly became engaged in the conversation about what success meant to them, with little intervention from the facilitator, Sherilyn.

## **Description and Analysis:**

The following themes emerged from the focus group discussion:

- 1) The importance of developing and maintaining balance or a sense of being well-rounded was mentioned by all the girls as being part of success.

These girls, rather than believing that high exam and report card marks were the goals for their education believed that academic study was a means to an end. They recognized that the high marks would get them a scholarship to the post secondary institution which they had chosen as best suited to their career goals within the arts. However, being happy in their lives, travelling, being creative, expressing themselves, having time for home, a job, and recreational activities, as well as following their passion were also very important to each of them for feeling successful.

*K: To be successful in school and in life, I think it takes a lot of balance because it's really important to make sure that everything that you do kind of runs together or else you will find that either school weighs you down or home weighs you down... (p. 3).*

*B: And that's success for me: To be able to be well-rounded and being able to have fun doing the things that I enjoy doing, and putting a lot of effort into the artistic part of my life, as well as achieving in academics. (p. 5).*

A sense of contribution and the expression of emotions, rather than competition were also seen as an important measure of success.

*M: I agree with what P and K said. See, for me, if you asked me a couple of years before, and asked me about school and stuff, I would have said, told you, okay, everything that matters is school because of my upbringing, I came from Hong Kong, and basically, the competition there for academics is really, really tight. Like you have to do the best in*

*every single course or else you won't be anything in life. But when I came here, and then I sort of got involved with, you know, sports and community and stuff, and I found out that I really liked writing, and I think that—I actually did get some stuff published, and I thought that the greatest accomplishment for me was not getting straight As in school or anything like that, it was more like having people read the stuff I write, and people talking about their thoughts, and like evoking emotions and thoughts in other people. And I think that is the greatest success for me. (p. 8).*

The possible consequences for not including broader measures of success than high academic test scores would be to negate the sense of contribution and expression that students find meaningful. Many abilities and interests cannot be easily measured by pencil and paper evaluation.

2) The girls often mentioned the importance of setting their own goals in the journey of being successful.

The girls built on each other's ideas in their discourse concerning goal setting. This item developed from their discussion on balancing their lives at school and also in their future endeavours.

*P: I guess, as long as you like, you have to sort of define success for yourself, like whatever goals you want to achieve, and if you manage to achieve those, then I guess you've succeeded. (p. 3).*

In schools, we often teach goal setting as part of Career and Personal Planning and other health related courses, as well as a part of a counselling and/or discipline plan for students in need of a positive focus or direction. Often, too, these goal setting models do not take into consideration

the “little steps” to which M refers or to keeping “options open” as a goal in itself, as K suggests. Too often the goals are imposed on the students or developed by students and teachers, counsellors, and/or administrators through a less than meaningful process, more to satisfy time constraints than the students’ own sense of self.

*M: I don't know what I want to be, but for me, success would be doing something that-- I think success is an ongoing thing, like it doesn't really stop. You take little steps and you gain little goals, but you don't really reach a point where success stops, and say, "Okay, I'm happy with my life like this", 'cause you keep on wanting to improve yourself and improve the life around you... (p. 4).*

*K: ...I really agree with what you're saying [referring to M] because I'm also the same kind of way... I don't know what I want to be when I grow up, but at the same time, setting the little goals on the way kind of keeps the track open and the options open to me. (p. 7).*

The possible consequences of not teaching how and of not allowing students to set meaningful and achievable goals for themselves include the possible dismissal of important and useful skills in determining both short term and long term priorities and strategies, as well as knowing how to achieve personally relevant goals, and moving oneself forward in life towards success within differing contexts.

3) The girls also believed that it was necessary and helpful to follow their passions at school to keep them engaged and motivated, as well as to learn the necessary skills of their art.

The girls discussed at some length the importance of enjoying their future job and of having the opportunity to be creative, rather than having a lot of money, as an important part for them in feeling successful. Often a person’s success in our Western society is measured by their

paycheque. These girls disagreed with that criterion. They saw the value in pursuing their art for its sake, for their own enjoyment, and for the positive effect it would have on others.

*P: Yeah for me, like in the future like, as long as I can travel and have the money to travel, and work in a job that I enjoy and not just doing it for the money, then I'll be happy, like creatively, because I'm a creative person, that job would have to be in some way where I could express myself in creative ways. (p. 3).*

*K: ...I think it's more important....to be successful, it's....to me, it's to be like happy in what I'm doing, and I don't really....it's not a big concern for me about what kind of money or lifestyle I'm going to have when I have a career because I would rather be doing something that I'm passionate about, and something that I'll be happy doing for a long time than just something that will get me lots of money, and that's why I'm going to do art. (p. 4).*

*T: I, like A, am hoping to be a music teacher, and I also understand that I won't be making the largest sums of money, but I believe that I will be successful if I get there because I will really be enjoying what I'm doing and music is my life. (p. 5).*

They also recognized the importance of having a wide range of courses within their particular focus area as a motivator to attend school and to assist them in performing well in their other courses. Currently, these are times of budget cuts and a focus on “accountability”, where funds are targeted in areas of government priority, such as testing, report writing, and specific initiatives, rather than in areas of student priority. As a result, the depth and breadth of course offerings, by teacher specialists, often are cut in schools. This leads to fewer courses offered in

fewer areas of specialty, often being taught by teacher generalists or teachers trained in other curricular areas. At the school level, this situation leads to frustration and often less than optimum learning conditions for both students and teachers. Without adequate funding for teacher specialists, sufficient supplies and equipment within a specialty area, and an array of options within a program (i.e. musical theatre, concert choir, jazz choir, concert band, jazz band, guitar, strings, etc.), students cannot learn the necessary skills and gain the necessary confidence and experience to even consider these areas as a career choice.

*B: And in order to reach graduation, a lot of people struggle with graduating even, right? And if you have something at school that you're interested in, like musical theatre, writing, or anything that each of us here does, is interested in, it can really, really help your success in the other subjects because it helps motivate you. Like I find that, like great, I have to go to school. I've got history, like first thing, right. It sucks, but then I look forward to the afternoon because it's like musical theatre, acting, vocal jazz, right, so I have my favourite courses in the afternoon, and if I just hold on throughout the morning, and then I get to do the fun things in the afternoon, so school offers a lot of like really worthwhile things I want to put my time towards. (p. 9).*

*A: Yeah, I totally agree with you because I remember in grade 9 and 10 when I had concert band in A Block, that was the only reason I would get up for school...(p. 9).*

*T: I used to just find it completely pointless coming to school because I just wasn't into anything, but now I take several music courses throughout the day and it keeps me here. So that makes me successful in my other courses as well. (p. 9).*

As a result of staffing cuts over the past few years, many K-12 schools in BC can no longer offer basic programs in the fine and performing arts, let alone the exemplary music and art programs described by these particular students as having made such a positive impact in their lives. Without a variety of these broad, specialty area programs, students can lose interest and motivation in coming to school and experience more difficulty staying in school to graduate.

4) The girls acknowledged that the support they received from teachers, family, and friends also helped them to be successful.

Teachers in art and music were specifically mentioned by these students as integral to their feelings of success in those areas. These particular teachers, as well as many others in the school and in the system as a whole, are dedicated specialists who work incredibly hard to connect with, positively influence, and mentor their students in their chosen field of study. The students recognized and appreciated the support from their teachers and counsellors, their families, and their friends. Some mentioned active encouragement, others the importance of the support being “*always there*” (M).

*K: And so I always kind of like had the mentality that I would be doing something, and then I would be just like an artist on the side, and when I came to high school, I kind of realized, like with the help of my teachers, that I don't want anything else. I'd rather, I'd feel so much better doing a career in just visual art. Like I think I would be miserable doing a different career. (p. 10).*

*B: I think that there's another thing that contributes to success for me personally, anyways, influential people throughout school life, whether it be family or teachers. (p. 11).*

*K: It's funny 'cause one of the most influential people to me at the school has been Mr. P., and that's very surprising, because at first, a lot of people don't like him, but he's the one that taught me that it was ok to love art, and it was ok to be a successful artist and to be proud of it. (p. 11).*

*A: I just agree with everything you just said because the importance of being close to teachers, and if not a teacher, then a counsellor or someone, right, is they can—I mean they see kids go through the school every single year, so depending on how long they've been teaching, they've probably met kids who have similar attitudes as you or have similar aspects or character traits. I mean it's easier for them to give you advice than it would be for say a friend you just met this year...for me personally, family has been very supportive through like everything. My parents are really excited about me going to university and studying music and all that. (p. 14).*

The relationship between home and school is becoming more and more important in providing that kind of support for students. Parents can offer valuable insights into their children's interests, needs, and skills, while school personnel can provide specific resources, both in time and in materials, to better meet those individual needs. Rather than a system based on achieving high grade point averages or exam scores or graduation rates, a system where individual goals are set, monitored and assessed with parents, educators, and students working together would seem to be more in keeping with what these students are suggesting works best for them.

*P: Yeah, I think support from my family and friends, it's actually essential because when you have that backup, you know, support behind you, it's just like someone believes in you. (p. 15).*

*M: I'm also in kind of, well, maybe not the same situation as K, but I can also see where she's getting at because I have a younger brother that I feel that at home I should always try to set an example, which also motivates me to do well in school and in other parts of my life. I'm the only sibling he has, so, and my parents are usually not at home, so I always try to do my best because—well, my parents give a kind of quiet support because they don't encourage me or anything, but they're always there.(p. 16).*

By not recognizing the complexities of students' lives, each with their own context and overlapping roles and needs and continuing to focus on “number crunching” and averages, we can lose the essence of the individual student and their successes.

5) The girls also discussed the importance of physical health and appearance to feeling successful.

At the end of the session the girls tackled the issue of appearance. Rather than a simple buy-in to the taken-for-granted assumption that girls tend to focus on their appearance to attract boys and to the detriment of their studies, these girls had an interesting discussion on what appearance meant to them. In this topic there was less overall agreement among the girls. Although they had differing views from each other, as well as from the mainstream consumer/sex-driven, assumed norms for adolescent girls, they did continue to construct meaning together on what was important to them in how they and other girls looked. The girls recognized that physical fitness and good nutrition not only contributed to their sense of well-being and self-esteem, but also enabled them to function more effectively in a variety of areas and to feel successful.

*B: I find another thing, I don't personally think that I'm very, like I don't do the best with this, but I think that personal well being, like health, can contribute to success. What you eat. Without eating breakfast, I don't have a good morning; it's just always pretty bad....the part that I don't do as well is probably exercise, and I mean I find when I do work out or go for a roller blade, I feel really good. It really clears your head. Like some sort of physical activity is a really good way of like, it's not academic, it's not creative, but it's a way to release some energy... (pp. 17-18).*

*P: ...I think that's just another challenge like balancing your time, and getting everything ready, and something you work on, and like you improve upon, so they're good skills (p. 18).*

*A: I agree also because the better you feel about how you look, then the better your self-esteem is and the easier it is to do well. Like besides the fact that like the health benefits are actually going to help you, and you actually are going to feel better, and everything, just the better you feel about yourself, then it's so much easier to be successful. (p. 18).*

The girls also discussed the pressures on being attractive as a girl and that while it was important to feel and to be healthy, it could be detrimental to look too attractive because others tended to not take them seriously. They recognized that their appearance was an expression of who they were and that it was fun to try out different looks.

*K: Well, my whole job [as a model] is focused around that [appearance], and in school, I find it is important to be healthy in your appearance, but not always....like it's almost*

*better sometimes not to be attractive because like, well, sometimes you almost get looked at in a smarter kind of way. It's kind of interesting because I had bleached blond hair and didn't really care about how I looked in school, and how much make-up I wore, and I was really in grade 9, 10 mode, and that was really essential to me growing up and realizing who I am. But at the same time, I realized that when I dyed my hair darker, it's almost like people took me more seriously. They realized that I do have a voice and I am a smart person, and I started to develop more intellectually. (pp. 19-20)*

*P: But as for how you look at school, because you're here every day, like sometimes I'll just look however I want to, but for the most part, it feels like a big fashion show. I'd rather come here casual because I'm coming here to learn and that's my purpose. It's not like I'm coming here, like who am I dressing up for even? Like there's no one here I want to impress. So, if I do dress up, sometimes I'm like, oh, this is just to make myself feel good. (p. 20)*

The girls thought it was important to look “put together” in order to be taken seriously and agreed that how they dressed affected how others judged them and responded to them. If they wanted respect, they believed that they needed to look like they respected themselves and so needed to not dress provocatively. They built on each other’s discourse, using the word “respect” and constructing additional dimensions to its meaning. They interpreted dress choice as a mode of personal expression that went more deeply into why girls chose to dress the way they do. Earlier in the discourse, B struggled with the idea that girls may dress provocatively and may not realize “the message” it sends. Later, P stated that some girls may lack confidence and others may deliberately provoke a reaction or others may use dress as creative expression.

*A: I would agree with that. For me, personally, I'm not the one who's out there in the super, super mini-skirt, and all that, like I'm not doing that thing or anything. But for me, personally, like I like to look put together, you know, and even if not that, like I'll come to school in a sweatshirt and jeans, or whatever, right, you know, but I still like to look like I didn't just roll out of bed...I like getting put together because it makes me feel like I'm putting—I don't want to say like the best me forward because, well, I'm not wearing a ball gown, but I feel like I've made myself look presentable and that people are then going to take me seriously. Like I want to present the image that will give me the response that I want from people. As much as it sucks, and as much as it is superficial, and everything, people do judge you on your appearance, right? (pp. 20-21).*

*B: A mentioned before the word respect, and I mean, like you have to respect yourself with what you wear so that others will respect you, and I mean, I admit I wear some shorter skirts, but I wear them to a point where I feel they are somewhat respectful, right? Like I'm not going to dress provocatively. Like a lot of girls, I find, don't really know, or they don't realize, or maybe they do and maybe that's their intention, but they don't realize the message they send out when they wear the clothes they wear at school. (p. 21).*

*P: The word respect has actually come up a lot since we've been talking about appearance. I think it takes a lot to respect people just however they want to look, like even if they do just dress like a skank or something. I mean, I'll still respect that person 'cause they are willing to put themselves out there and do that. I mean some girls do because they lack self-confidence, but sometimes they do it because they have the*

*confidence to look how they want. And I mean, I'd rather just like look at a person and feel like, whatever they want to look like, fine, I don't know who they are inside....I think we should be able to express ourselves 'cause it should be like a creative thing, like how you want. And of course, you will get certain reactions for it, but that's just the repercussions of it. (p. 22).*

Often in schools and in broader society we lack the perceptive abilities of these grade 11 and 12 girls. We do tend to judge a person's character and intentions by their appearance. The proliferation of school uniforms is an example of a hegemonic notion that the uniform will make students equal in some way and more focused on their academics. Where is there room for these in depth analyses and interpretations and meaningful constructions through conversation when individual differences are discounted and marginalized? These girls could clearly construct meaningful possible reasons for wearing certain outfits and looking certain ways. For them, appearance and clothing were about choices and expressions of individuality. They were able to see that outer appearance may or may not reveal the true person on the "inside".

### **Interpretation**

From my position as a middle aged, white, middle class, privileged, professional woman educator, who is utilizing a poststructuralist, feminist lens through which to view my reality, I have several inferences to draw from this limited data set.

These girls were articulate, confident, bright, talented, and reflective and had a pretty clear sense of themselves, both as to their own identity and as to which career path they were headed. They were open to differences in opinion within the group and indeed, reflected differences within the group, both in artistic talent and interest, as well as in their family history and structure. One girl,

K, lived on her own with her younger sister while her mom worked in Africa, others lived with both parents, M came recently to Canada from Hong Kong, and others were born in Canada.

The girls were able to find meaning in their peers' comments and to build on ideas and thoughts, delving deeper to explore complexity within the conversation as to the meaning of success as well as to other related issues, such as appearance. They were enthusiastic and energetic in their tone of voice and body language, seeming to enjoy the experience of talking freely and openly about this topic.

The facilitator, Sherilyn, did not need to prompt the girls after the initial start up of the session and only asked a couple of clarifying questions throughout the session. She said she felt a positive sense of engagement throughout the hour, with each of the girls participating fully and thoughtfully. No one seemed to be silenced or marginalized.

Rather than conforming to a stereotype of middle class adolescent girls being either focused on attracting boys through provocative dress and not engaging in academic work, or focused on academics to the detriment of other aspects of their lives, these girls had clear goals on leading a balanced, well rounded life. They recognized the importance of high marks, but as a means to an end, not as an end in themselves. They also recognized the effect of clothing and appearance as an expression of themselves as well as their effects on others. They displayed a remarkable ability to express themselves and to construct meaning together.

These students need to be heard. They need to be heard not only by school personnel and parents who are making decisions about their needs, but also by district and ministry level policy makers, curriculum writers, and others who make decisions about them and their education. We cannot continue to assume the taken-for-granted stereotypes of young women having nothing of value to say about who they are and what they need to feel successful in their lives. These girls demonstrated clearly that they can contribute positively to an open conversation concerning our

education system, its values and purposes, what is working, what does not work in their best interests, how we can improve it to better reflect the students' realities, and the students' own goals for themselves. We need to listen to more of this, engage more students and families in these conversations, and change our practice accordingly, not to satisfy global pressures and trends, but to meet the needs of our students.

### **Academic Group**

There were five girls in this group. While they were all students at the same secondary school, they knew each other, but were not close friends. Some students were focusing on a particular subject area, science and/or math; some were taking both science/math courses and arts courses. The students' conversation focused mostly on the importance and the meaning of achieving high marks. Good marks as a measure of success were the focus of this conversation. Within that overarching theme, there were a few sub themes that the girls discussed, but not in a deep, coherent way. They seem to have bought into the dominant discourse for the meaning of success. I have grouped the sub themes as items for closer analysis. The facilitator, Sherilyn, intervened several times to encourage discussion on topics outside the realm of marks as contributors to their feelings of success. Near the end of the session, she asked the group, "You've talked about the importance of doing well. What about the other aspects of school?" She was met with a long silence before Al asked, "Like what?" They could express little else as a possible component of success.

### **Description and analysis:**

The following themes emerged from the conversation:

- 1) The process of getting good marks was important to their learning and to their feelings of success

The girls recognized that working hard, completing assigned homework, doing one's best and feelings of accomplishment were all important aspects of feeling successful. Far from confidently embracing this concept, though, they used tentative words like "sort of" (M), "kind of" (Li) and "sometimes" (Lu); the girls all also used "like" a lot to soften their opinions and "right?" seeking confirmation among the group. This hesitancy in their discourses would seem to indicate a lack of a well thought out argument, as well as a lack of confidence in their opinions and ideas, and/or a desire to connect with their group members. They did not develop this theme through constructing meaning as a group in a focused manner; rather they expressed thoughts on the item throughout the session, coming back to it over again.

*Li: I don't think it's like, oh, you got an A, like, wow, you're successful. It's like, have you worked hard for that A? Like what have you done to get it, kind of thing? (p. 24).*

*M: I sort of agree with Li. A lot of times it's the process of how you get there versus what the end result is 'cause a lot of the time the end result isn't what you hoped it would be. But the process was everything that you set it out to be, then I think sometimes you feel like you've accomplished just so much. (p. 25).*

*Am: ...choosing something, doing it and doing it your best to do it, is what makes you happy in that and trying to create success. (p. 25).*

Some of the girls questioned the practice of awarding marks for the end results of learning, as opposed to the process along the way and the importance of working hard.

*M: But I think school doesn't always measure it the way that we measure because, if you look at it, like I consider homework a process in learning, and we all sort of came to an agreement that a process is a big part of success. But, in school, it seems a lot of the time that it's the end result, that it's the test or exam or the final product versus how we got there, like homework in a lot of classes is worth not as much, and I think that reflects on how much school values the process of learning sometimes. (p. 25).*

*Lu: Sometimes, like academic-wise, grades seem like everything to like most students, right? Everyone wants to get an A, but an A doesn't mean everything, right? You can be getting like say 100, 97, and somebody else who's getting like 78, just like Li said, it's not like they're not working hard enough, like they've worked hard. (p. 29).*

By continuing to only focus on the end results, the marks, I think we, as educators, miss valuable opportunities to assess learning along the way. There is some relatively new professional development focus on encouraging formative assessments to inform teaching practice, but the students do not see the value in activities unless they see the mark. We need to re-educate the students and also to demonstrate our value in the learning process if we truly want students to also value the process.

2) The girls also expressed some ambivalence about getting those high marks.

The girls questioned the process vs. end result discussion, demonstrating an ambivalent attitude toward whether that argument really was true. They recognized that for them, the university-bound students, marks would get them where they wanted to go and the process of learning along the way to the exam was not all that important. Their discourse appeared contradictory as

they talked about the importance of learning and application of knowledge, along side their focus on marks and the necessity to “just flush everything out and get ready for the next [exam]” (M).

*Am: Isn't it though the end result what you've worked for in the process? The process gets you to the end result, so you couldn't really say that you could like do so much work and then do really badly on the final because then the process really wasn't as good as it should have been. (p. 26).*

*Al: I would like to comment on the fact that I think writing a test is very different from actually learning the materials because I can sit down and write a test knowing every single detail, but a few days after, I can just forget everything 'cause I'm more into getting the mark out of my test than actually feeling, oh, I should actually know this and learn it and use it in my later life. (p. 27).*

*M. I agree with Al completely, like a lot of the time, even though we all value the process, like in the end, the process isn't going to get us as far as the end result. So I know I will cram for a test, write it, do fine and then just flush everything out and get ready for the next one. And that might not be the most successful system for me, but in the end, it gets me the mark I need... (p. 27).*

Some of the girls also engaged in contradictory discourses within their own contribution. Lu says she is “not very good” at physics, then goes right on to say she’s getting an A. Her difficulty in accurately describing her achievement demonstrates her ambivalence and uncertainty. Application of the learning seems to be an important component, but she is unsure, and the item is not further developed.

*Lu: Sometimes, like what Li just said, a person could be getting 95 %, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they actually understand what they've learned. Like they could do well on the test, get the good grades, but could they really apply what they've learned in everyday life? I mean if you're doing physics, for example, personally I'm not very good at it. Like I do well in it, I'm getting an A, but it doesn't mean you can apply it to every day life. Like, yeah, I learned all this math. I learned all the formulas; I plug in all the numbers. What does it all mean, kind of thing? I can do well on the test, but it doesn't mean you can apply it to like everyday life, like electrical circuits and stuff. (p. 30).*

The girls went back and forth several times in their conversation wrestling with whether marks were or were not “very, very, important” (Al).

*Al: I think grades are very, very important. Like to me, it's almost my whole life. But now that I look at a lot of things that's happening in this world, I, a lot of times, question myself whether the way that I'm thinking is correct because, like I said earlier, grades are not everything. (p. 32).*

For these high achieving girls, whose goals include attending university, marks are very, very important, since they are the major criteria by which applicants are judged. Government policies could include conversations about expanding the university entrance criteria to include other attributes of applicants, perhaps awards won in the arts, volunteer activities, community service, club and/or team involvement, and more.

3) They also discussed the effects of their emotions on test writing.

In their discussion on process vs. end results, they recognized that some people were better at writing exams and tests than others. However, again responding to the lack of coherence in that argument, several girls talked about their own difficulties in test taking, even though they consistently scored high marks. They mentioned feelings of panic when writing a test or exam as well as feeling embarrassment and guilt in getting better marks than their “hard working” friends and peers in class. These latter emotions seem to reflect another taken-for-granted stereotype of the “good girl” who is caring and compassionate and subordinates her own abilities, self growth, and ambitions to those of others. These further examples of competing and conflicting discourses on emotionality, such as panicking, but still scoring high marks, were also not explored and deconstructed to a deep level. Discussion continued on other items, as identified, often circling back to previous items, but without further exploration or meaning-making through attempts at reconstructing their views on success.

*Lu: ...some people, they're really good at writing tests like what [M] said. But like me, for example, a few times, I get really, like I study for a test, I prepare for it and everything and then when I'm actually sitting there doing the test, I'm all cool, and then the instant the test is handed down to me, and I start writing it, then I start panicking and stuff, so that can affect it, like my emotions when I'm writing the test. (p. 26).*

*Li: ...I kind of panic when I get the test, like a simple question, I can't answer it...because you're not just thinking about the answer, you're thinking about how will this affect my grade? So, I don't know. Like I have some friends who get a C+, Bs, even C-, and I hate to say it, but they work a lot harder than I do, and that's bad. Like I really feel that I*

*should work harder and stuff like that, but I think for people like that who don't make Honour Roll, that they're working like hard to get their B or whatever, that they should be like, that's successful as someone who gets like high marks and doesn't work as hard, kind of thing. (p. 27).*

Guilt can be a common emotion among women and girls who are high achievers in a male dominated world as we try to negotiate various externally set expectations for us to be successful. Can a woman be successful in this hierarchal world when they are also expected to be "good girls" (i.e. passive, compliant, and focussed on maintaining relationships)? These contradictory and conflicting discourses set women up for equally conflicting and contradictory emotions. These girls seem unable or unwilling to accept that they received their high marks because of their abilities. As with the girls in Fordham's (1996) study, these girls may feel the tensions of trying to access the dominant discourses about success, but also being cognisant of the risk of losing the support of their friends. They may also understand the injustices of a system that rewards marks and not effort; the hard work of their friends is invisible in this system.

The girls in this study seemed to feel the need to justify their exam scores with contrasting feelings of panic and of not really understanding the material. These confusing emotions may serve to silence the girls in the future as they decide whether to embrace a simpler version of themselves, rather than being able to understand and embrace the complexities of numerous, overlapping selves (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997; Jones & Myhill, 2004).

*Lu: Sometimes I feel guilty. Like, you know how people after a test they will like compare marks, like, "Oh, what did you get?" and then you'll be like, "I got an A," or, "Oh shoot, I got a C+", but you know the person who is getting a lower grade actually worked*

*harder than you, then you feel really, really guilty when they ask you for your grade because you really don't want to hurt their feelings. (p. 29).*

The girls expressed many conflicting and competing emotions which accompanied their achievement of high test scores and report card marks. The stress and pressure to perform well needs to be examined and these girls need support services to learn successful coping strategies to enable them to maintain their mental and physical health.

4) The girls brought up the topic of feeling happy and being well rounded as important parts of being successful.

With some prompting from Sherilyn to consider other items in addition to achieving high marks, the girls did discuss extra curricular activities and feeling happy as indicators of success for them. Some of the girls indicated that doing well was not as important in these out of school pursuits and that some valuable lessons could be learned which would be important "later on in your life" (Al). Again, this item was not well developed, as not all the girls participated or jointly attempted to find meaning.

*Li: I think to be successful; you have to be happy with yourself and what you've accomplished in life. (p. 24).*

*Am: I think it's really important not to be just academic in school, but to be really well rounded. I think that's where I'm happy and where I'll find success in knowing I've done everything. I'm not good at everything I've tried, but I have to try it out and work hard at it... I've made lots of new friends and it's just great and that's been a really good success for me even though I'm not really good at it [club girls' rugby]. (p. 36).*

*Al: I think extra curricular is very important 'cause you learn a lot of things that you won't necessarily learn in your courses and these details that you learn in extra curricular will be really important later on in your life. (p. 36).*

These girls really struggled with the idea of another focus in school, other than achieving high marks. The consequence for such a narrow focus, I believe, is increased stress and poor mental and physical health.

5) The girls discussed different types of people and different possible gauges of success appropriate to them.

This item links back to earlier discussions on process being important, not just test results. Implicit in that conversation was the attempt to find a way for "Others" to feel successful. It also flowed from their ambivalence and talk of panic and guilt in test taking. Most of the girls engaged in this particular discourse, although it was not a sustained discussion, rather it took place over time, culminating with the naming and acknowledging of "different types of people" (Li). They talked about the difference in "capacity" (Li) for different people, people who secluded themselves from others, risk takers, and "safe" people (M), spontaneous people and the importance of having social skills. It was interesting to note that the girls tried to distance themselves from the "geeks" who "study hard, but they're not part of the society" (Al). In this way the girls do seem to be challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions about people who get high marks having poor social skills and no other interests, as well as perhaps beginning to define their own sense of identity. However, they also may be contributing to "Othering" the geeks and just be trying to distance themselves from the stereotype, rather than to construct a meaningful sense of themselves as young women who are smart and achieve high marks, but are also caring and have a social life.

*Li: ...I do have a friend, she's getting C+s and Bs and she's proud of her marks. And her family, like they understand her capacity and they're proud of her as well because they understand that like she's not going to be an Einstein; like she's good in different areas. Like she's really good socially; like she has a really good ability to talk to people and persuade people and that's not something that I'm very good at. (p. 28).*

*Al: I think social skills are way more important than how well you do in school because if you have the skill to convince people, the skill to just talk to people, you're more like accepting to society than a person that we stereotype as geeks, right? They're the people who study hard, but they're not part of the society. (p. 32).*

*Li: Like I think, like honestly, there are different types of people. I think some people might be happy like that, like totally being secluded in their own world and not having to deal with other people. That's like they can like that or whatever, right, and that's cool and everything. But I think it's so hard to gauge success-cause everyone's like, different; everyone has different capacities and like different things. (p. 32.)*

*M: I think it depends on what type of person you are. There is risk-taking people; there are people who are spontaneous. There are people who can take risks and know that the next day they can be living in a huge house or a cardboard box, but they're ok with that just as long as they don't have any regrets that they had in taking those risks. And there are safe people who would rather not take that risk and make the extra "X" amount of money just to be guaranteed the roof over their heads the next day. So I think it really*

*depends, like successful people can be safe people, and a lot of time they are risky people. (p. 35).*

*Am: I think that the stereotype that safe people are normally the ones who end up feeling not successful at the end because they're the ones who live with regrets, and thinking I could have done this or I could have done that. (p. 35).*

The girls again struggled with constructing a sense of identity for themselves which included the seemingly contradictory identities of “geek”, popular, risk-taker, safe, social isolate, and being socially adept in their attempts at deconstructing what successful people are like. The consequences of not allowing these girls the space to work through these concepts include an increasing chance they will accept the taken-for-granted, stereotypical definitions of these different groups of people and consider them as “Other”, marginalizing them without really considering the similarities, as well as the differences, to themselves and their “group”.

6) The girls also briefly discussed the importance of money and a “good” job to feeling successful.

This discussion was also quite brief, involved only a couple of girls, and was referred to sporadically over time in the hour session. Again, this discourse seemed to be reactive to both the girls’ own taken-for-granted expectations for themselves as future professionals and also reflective of their lack of understanding of others, who do not attend university and are still able to get a high paying job and to thereby feel successful. They mentioned real estate agents and electricians who make high wages without going to university as being “successful”. They recognized that “society” (Li) has made having a professional career the definition of being successful and again brought in the aspect of being happy, even though it’s not the “big job” (Li). Since success is defined so narrowly, Am contributed an insightful comment that “lots of

people are going to fail and not be happy with it. So people have to look and find success in other ways.” However, this insight was not fully explored or developed to construct some meaningful arguments or ideas about success, since, again, implicit in this discourse, was the girls’ steadfast belief in their own taken-for-granted ability to be successful by attending university and in landing a professional, highly paid career. The “other people” are meaningless constructs, friends and peers with low “capacity”, geeks, risk takers, “safe” people, etc. who will need to find different ways to feel successful.

*Li: I know families who live on top of Westwood Plateau and like they started there and like they became like experts in their trade and that’s how they became successful...other ways of being successful in their life as well, not just like doctor, lawyer, you know, like the usual stereotypical successful like careers. (p. 29)*

*Am: What we have seem to have done, is that everyone wants to be successful and we’ve put success on like one of the top spots that only a few people can get to, but yet, everyone is trying to become that person. So, obviously, lots of people are going to fail and not be happy with it. So people have to like look and find success in other ways... (p. 29).*

*Li: ...like we’ve kind of like, our society has kind of made certain jobs and certain careers, paths in life, like the successful one. Like you know, the academic, like go to university, like get your Master’s Degree, and like this and that and this and that, like get money like. I mean, ask anybody, it’s like that person is successful, but we don’t know if they’re really happy. Like some electrician, someone who’s making lots of money can be*

*like, okay, I could never sit in a classroom for like 6 years or 8 years to study to become like an architect or something like that. (p. 30).*

*Al: ...he's really happy, and now he's very successful. He's a socials teacher. He earns a high wage. (p. 31).*

*Li: ...getting high marks for me means like that I'm successful kind of because I'm like applying myself and so forth. So I mean if I got into university, and like got a good job, that to me would be successful...but there are like other people that I know that, like their dream is to be a real estate agent. Like I don't know, it's not like a big job or whatever, but there is like real estate agents out there, they're so successful, they're making so much money, and they like enjoy what they're doing, so. (p. 33).*

Again, if the girls are not able to deconstruct success to include more than a university education, lots of money, and a high paying career, they may feel disappointed and without a reference point if all their goals cannot be realized within their idealized time frame. They also may not have empathy for those who drop out of university, get laid off from their jobs, or choose other priorities in their lives.

7) The girls also briefly discussed the meaning of support and pressure from their families and friends on their feelings of success, again with some prompting from Sherilyn:

The girls mentioned the influence of friends and family on their feelings of success, again, not in a coherent way, but sporadically throughout the session. Sometimes friends and helping out a friend were mentioned as part of the discourse about the importance of having social skills and feeling happy. Other times, family was seen as important "because they love you, right?" (Al) or

as a source of pressure, pushing for high marks (Li). Far from explaining the support or influence from friends and family, these girls made only superficial references, not fully recognizing and understanding the relevance, influence, and importance of these support structures to the formation of their sense of self, as well as to their sense of success.

*Al: I think success is more of having your friends around you and being happy and getting the grades you need for now. (p. 32).*

*M: ...I'll probably remember that one nice thing that I did for someone else and that they were really happy about. And if that made my day successful, when I look back, I don't think the mark on my test would make my day as successful as the interaction with someone else... (p. 33).*

*Am: ...I think that sometimes our views of success sort of get distorted with what other people's views of success are. Like you may want one thing, but all your friends are, your parents or teachers will be pressuring you to go somewhere else because they think you'll find success that way, but you know that you'll find it somewhere else, and it's really conflicting to find which way you go. (p. 34).*

*Al: I think it's the most important of all [family]. Because your family is the one that usually supports you and helps you throughout your life and your family, I don't know, they love you, right, and I think they're more close than friends usually, so I think family is very important. (p. 37).*

*Li: It depends on the family. Like totally like on the family 'cause I know some parents, like they ground their kids if they don't get As or they like, they pay their kids like \$20 per B or something like that, like just to push them for their marks. But like in my house, I live with just my mom and little brother, and she does not push me for grades at all. (pp. 37-38).*

The girls felt the push/pull from their families and friends with pressure and support. Often young people, especially girls, want to please others, and some of these girls may be pursuing a university degree because of this. A stronger sense of self may be able to be developed through discourses with diverse perspectives, opening up avenues the girls may not have considered.

### **Interpretation**

In reading the transcript and listening to the audio tapes from this session with the girls who felt a close affiliation with an academic focus, I saw and heard a group of girls who had pretty well adopted the taken-for-granted definition of success from our patriarchal, accountability-focused, educational system as well as the broader Western society.

While the girls were very bright and achieved high marks on their exams and report cards, they experienced difficulty making any meaning for success outside that realm. When they did discuss additional possible aspects of success, at Sherilyn's suggestion, they struggled, often Othering those who did not focus on and achieve equally high marks.

I believe several of the girls felt the tension of trying to be inclusive and caring for those who will not "make the cut for university" (Li) (p. 29) and their own taken-for-granted expectations and general belief systems. Trying to live up to the multiple expectations of being a caring, social, well rounded, "good" girl, who works hard and is also bright and goal oriented to a university education and a high paying career, was probably too much for them to grasp and to

do more than start on deconstructing the concepts in a one hour session. Their often contradictory discourses reflected this as well.

This group of girls also recognized, I believe, what they needed to do in order to achieve their academic goals and to attend the university of their choice. Entrance criteria at universities focus on high marks in academic courses and these girls understood that. While I found some of the discourse difficult to hear (i.e. M: "...I will cram for a test, write it, do fine and then just flush everything out and get ready for the next one..." (p. 110), as a former "academic girl", myself, and as a current educator, I hoped they would have more of an emphasis on learning and less on the marks. These girls felt the conflict as they saw their friends work hard, but not have their efforts rewarded. This group of girls had academic goals and knew they needed the recognition of the marks in order to succeed in their chosen direction.

This focus on marks and "accountability" emphasizes and reinforces the deficit model and the dualism of winners/losers to be found in the current dominant discourse. I may also be mediating these girls' responses (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2007) through my own lenses in different ways from the other research groups because of my own experiences as a high achieving woman negotiating my way through academia throughout most of my life, meeting the conflicting demands of the various institutions within which I am working. Often, for me too, getting the high marks is what is required to be successful and move to the next level.

I do believe that by opening up this space for the girls to begin this process of exploration and meaning-making, they may have begun to question their own taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations concerning success for themselves and for others. It is only through creating these kinds of opportunities for safe, open, and honest discourse that students and educators can begin to deconstruct some of the taken-for-granted assumptions in education and to construct relevant and important meaning around such topics as success.

Sherilyn, in her role as a facilitator, as well as in being an educator, can be seen to be co-producing this conversation through asking questions for clarification and extension. This is an important role for educators, to not only speak or to listen to students, but also to contribute to the construction of new meaning, relevant to the lives of the students.

### **Aboriginal Group**

There were four girls in this group. While some of them could also have chosen to be part of the Academic and/or Fine Arts Groups because of their interests and abilities, they chose to be part of this group, since this is where they felt the closest affiliation. The dynamic was different in this group, in that one student, E, was a very strong personality, and while she often contributed to the construction of meaning with the other girls, she also tended to sometimes monopolize the conversation, be argumentative, and/or inconsistent (e.g. "I don't think that clothes has anything to do with success at school" (E, p. 48), "I also agree with what L says, clothes do influence you to some extent" (E, p. 40), "I think that clothes influence your confidence" (E, p. 50). This tended to sidetrack the conversation on occasion. Since there were only four members of this group, the small number may have contributed to the ability of one student to sometimes dominate the conversation. In a larger group, more girls could perhaps have had a greater influence in keeping the flow of the conversation moving. In any event, many of E's comments served as a positive catalyst for deep discussion. In listening to E's comments and sometimes challenging them, they still were trying to construct meaning together through their discourse. This group was also constituted differently from the other two groups who positioned themselves according to their particular interest, rather than to their heritage. Their positioning as Aboriginal may have contributed in some ways to this group dynamic. However, since I did not include this possibility in my study, I can only speculate here.

Sherilyn, the facilitator, intervened occasionally to maintain the flow of the conversation on topic, to ensure everyone participated, and to suggest vocabulary for some girls who were struggling to express themselves clearly. The process of having a conversation in this focus group format seemed valuable for the girls to address issues in a complex manner and enabled them to learn some new vocabulary which may serve them well in their futures (Smith, 1987).

The girls also participated occasionally in a school district-run Aboriginal Cultural Program. The program was run on a drop-in basis to accommodate the students' schedules and the demands of the secondary school setting. None of the girls attended the program regularly, nor were they in the same friendship group, but they did know each other.

#### **Description and Analysis:**

The following trends emerged from their conversations:

- 1) The girls discussed the importance of making goals, working hard, overcoming obstacles, and feeling a sense of accomplishment as important markers of feeling successful.

The girls not only explored the item of making goals for themselves as important to their feelings of accomplishment and success, they identified some specific examples and strategies that they used, themselves, in order to overcome obstacles that they saw as interfering with their success. Even just dealing effectively with the obstacles was seen as contributing to their feelings of success. The girls also moved more deeply into the importance of working hard and knowing and maintaining one's "morals" (E, pp. 55-56) as contributing factors to their success. They rejected a taken-for-granted, dominant discourse of measuring success as achieving high marks, discussing instead the importance of knowing themselves and setting reasonable goals that would not "overstress" themselves (Me, p. 40).

*Mi: You always have to make a goal, and you have to kind of, you have to keep it up every day, and try to reach it until you actually reach it. (p. 39).*

*L: I think school success is whatever you want to accomplish and reaching that goal...Say you want to like graduate like with all Bs or whatever, if you reach that, that's what success is 'cause it's measured by each individual. (p. 39).*

*Me: It's like, yeah, like L said, getting your goals. It's not necessary like, oh well, you have to get like straight As or whatever. It's whatever you think that you should get in order to make yourself feel successful and happy, and don't overstress yourself. (p. 40).*

*Mi: I think if you say you're doing homework and you don't get it, you obviously get stressed out. So it can come with some obstacles and you do get stressed out, you've got to just go to find a way to kind of let it out to be successful, and go for a run or something; that's what I do. (p. 40).*

*E: ...I think that success is, of course, you have been successful in dealing with the stress or the obstacles. (p. 41).*

*Me: Like there are so many other people who are going to like want to become the same things as you. There's like so many people trying to be the same thing, and if you're not competitive, and everything, and, "Oh, like I don't care, I'll let them do it," then you're not going to accomplish anything. (p. 55).*

*E: I think that as long as you, like you can be competitive, as long as you keep your morals, that's just my opinion. I think that if I sell out and I stab people in the back and I lie to them, or do whatever, I think that's not being, if I end up reaching my goals through that method, I don't think that's success... So as long as you keep your morals, and you keep your beliefs, and you back them up, like you stand up to whatever it is you believe in, then, and then still work hard, work harder than those people, I think it will have a lot of success. (pp. 55-56).*

These girls, in discussing strategies to overcome obstacles to achieving their goals, were quite advanced in their development of identity and in their abilities to think and reason for themselves. They recognized the importance of having a strong moral foundation upon which to base their decisions.

2) They also talked about the influence of relationships to their success, both in positive and negative terms.

They also discussed in some depth how supportive, accepting relationships with friends, boyfriends, and family could assist them in feeling successful, while pressure from these same relationships could create stress and feelings of discouragement. They handled these conflicting and competing discourses by providing examples from their own lives to illustrate the complexities of these relationships, rather than constructing or accepting a simplistic explanation. They also discussed how problems in relationships contributed to them losing focus at school, feeling like they had "no hope" in doing well (Mi, p. 41). At the same time, the girls took ownership for their success and talked about the importance of setting priorities and doing their best, for themselves, rather than for someone else, as key to their being successful.

*Me: It's not only like stress because of school work or whatever, its stress like with friends and that. Getting into fights with them obviously will stress you out, and like, I don't know, just things like that. Boyfriends, stuff like that. (p. 40).*

*L: I agree. I think that it's not just like educational stresses; it's like a lot to do with social aspects because in high school, it's all about like over applying like, everything. Like by the end of the week, everyone knows everything about you that you've done, and it's just like gets on you no matter like what, you can't help it... (p. 41).*

*Mi: I think you have to find out what's important like in your eyes, and obviously, it's your friends, family, school. But when I'm at school and my friends really, like I have a fight with them, like I do not focus on school at all. I don't focus. When I get in a fight with my boyfriend, I just, I can't do school. I just want to lay down and it gives me no hope that I'll do well, so I kind of think over that, and I try to do my best that I can 'cause I really know that at the end of the day, I won't feel good about myself if I don't do anything, as soon as I find out what's most important. (p. 41).*

*E: Support. Like if they [family] don't support, like, you know, if you come home with a C and your mom is like, "Oh, you need to work harder," or you come home with an A, and your mom is like, "Oh well, your sister got this when she took that course," like I think it's just discouraging. So, the more support you have, not pressure, but support, the better you'll do in everything. (p. 44).*

Women are often characterized as being totally focused on relationships, often to the detriment of their academic or other success. However, these girls easily distinguished between the positive

relationships which accept, support and assist them in working toward their goals for success and the negative relationships which create negative feelings and interfere with those goals. They demonstrated their agency in setting and working toward their own goals and in making their own meaning.

*Mi: That's one thing that really pushes you away is pressure, 'cause I find that when my mom pushes me, then I don't do well. I just say, okay, well, I don't want to do well any more. So, I think of myself, and I do it for myself, to do well. Like if I get an A, I kind of push myself and say, "Mom, I got an A", and she's happy with whatever I got. But, if I got a C-, she'll say, "You know you can do better," I think that's support. (p. 44).*

*Me: I think having a boyfriend helps, but it's not something that you need, but it helps, 'cause they're like another best friend, but different with like a boyfriend than your best friend because they're like, they have different views because it's like a guy and stuff. And they can help you, like they can make you want to do it better. And they give you positive support... (p. 45).*

The consequences in not having a sufficiently strong sense of self, would be to be unduly influenced by friends and family pressures. This would take away the sense of agency these girls experienced.

3) The girls explored the importance of being popular, looking good, and feeling confident to their success.

The girls explored, again in some depth, what it meant to them to be popular at school. They disagreed on criteria to be popular, the importance and pressures involved with being popular, and which groups at the school were popular. As mentioned previously, the girls knew each

other, but did not belong to same friendship group. This may have contributed to their differing opinions on this issue. Some girls may have seen themselves as in the popular group and felt uncomfortable with the label, feeling the need to explain their point of view in more detail. E seemed to feel outside that circle of popular people (see below, E, p. 48). E did not really seem to fit in very well in any group within the school, perhaps in part because of her strong personality and often contradictory opinions. E was often observed in the session as Othering groups and individuals, talking about “those people”, whether they were the school Goths, people who didn’t work hard, homeless people, etc. (pp. 51, 55, 60, etc.). The girls did, however, work together to construct meaning about this item, exploring issues about how clothes could make them feel happy, comfortable, and confident. However, clothing was recognized as part of a choice in order to fit into a popular group. The girls’ discussion about *Zellers* vs. *Guess* also may represent social class differences. Students who are in the popular group may have additional financial resources or they may feel the pressure to maintain their popular status by shopping at specialty stores rather than mass market stores.

E: ...popularity isn't a necessity, I don't think, it doesn't mean not to be successful. (p. 46).

L: ...and you can't argue that one group is more popular than the other group because you look at the smaller group and nobody knows them; and then you look at the other group, and everybody in the school knows them. (p. 47).

E: That group [of popular] people is there because they want to be there. And they're not, they're loud and they can be obnoxious because they choose to be. The people who we sometimes don't notice, they don't want to be noticed. So, I mean, it's not like you sit

*in a little corner and say, "Oh I wish I could be popular," like click your heels. People do stuff to make themselves popular....it has to do with like if you wear Guess versus like Zellers. (p. 48).*

*Mi: Clothes make you happy. Like waking up in the morning and finding something to wear, you know, it like, makes you have a good day. Like you feel comfortable in what you're wearing. You're not kind of insecure in what you're wearing. Like you can't find anything in your closet and you just wear something, whatever, and you kind of, if you're insecure about it, it kind of interrupts with your school. (p. 48).*

*L: I think your appearance in some matters has to do with [feeling successful], but not really, because I know like a lot of people who are ugly per se, or whatever, and they do really good in school, and there are some who don't. And I know like pretty people, and like some of them do good and some of them don't, so I think it's just all about your attitudes towards school. (p. 49).*

*Me: If you don't have confidence, you'll always find something wrong with yourself, like no matter, like weight, hair colour, like the way you look, or anything, you'll find something wrong if you don't have confidence. (p. 54).*

*Mi: I think popularity counts, too, because popular people kind of look at you, and they're like, they kind of maybe look up to you or something, Well, I can't really get it out. Say, it's like you're waking up this morning and you just have to look your best, right? You have to look your best so you don't change their image that they think of you, right? So I think you get more and more insecure each day if you just can't, if you find*

*stuff like wrong about yourself because, I don't know. I just can't really get it out. I have a thought, but I just can't get it out. (pp. 56-57).*

*L: Yeah, I understand what Mi means. I think it's like you are more popular or whatever, that your focus, like I guess you don't want it to be, but your focus becomes like, oh, do I like, like you have to get up in the morning and go, "Oh, I have to look good," because so many people are looking at you because you are popular, and like you're just like, you lose your priorities...the social aspect of your life just takes, overtakes everything else, and that's what you're like striving to be is like a person that you're not, maybe, sometimes, yeah. (p. 57).*

They concluded that it was most important to their success to keep their focus on their priorities and to have confidence in themselves, rather than to worry too much about their appearance or whether they were popular. Popularity seems to have a lot of pressures associated with it, according to these girls. The pressure of looking good all the time, focussing so much on appearance, was seen as detrimental to their self-confidence. While the girls acknowledged that clothing and appearance can affect how they feel, they also believed that feeling secure and confident and having a positive attitude were important in combating those pressures, so that "the social aspect of your life" (L) does not over take their other priorities and goals. The construction of their own meaning on this particular topic again contradicted the taken-for-granted notion that girls tend to focus on their appearance and on being popular, rather than their studies. These girls accepted that while clothing can be a positive influence in how they felt, being true to themselves and to their goals was most important to them, as Mi clearly articulated, as follows.

*Mi: I'd rather have someone hate me for who I am, than love me for being someone who I'm not. (p. 57).*

This comment by Mi is a powerful one for such a young person and demonstrates, again, a strong sense of self and of agency. Although the girls contested what it meant to be “popular”, they were able to construct meaning in significant ways.

4) The girls discussed the importance of balance and having extra curricular activities in their lives.

The girls again not only talked about the benefits of having a well rounded life which included extra curricular activities, they also explored their feelings and thoughts and gave specific examples of strategies and activities which helped them to feel balanced and more successful. These girls had a strong sense of identity so they could jointly construct and identify the importance of living a balanced life, not just focusing on marks and school work.

*E: It [stress] can influence your school work as well as because you have so much stuff that you don't know how to balance it, or then you try to set priorities. (p. 41).*

*L: I think that you should really try to do well in school, but you can't just make that your main focus because that will eventually stress you out to the point where you can't do it, and it's not just family issues and like friends where you can deal with... and you do need times to like think about other things and go out. Like, you can't just spend all your time on homework. (p. 43).*

They spoke of feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and depressed when they focused only on school work, unable to cope with other issues with family and friends.

*Mi: Yeah, like balance it out because you can't just do one thing, like just school work. If you do one thing, then you kind of depress yourself, I think. Like if I do just one thing, focus on it for awhile, it depresses me. I just want to, I just feel like I'm not doing everything I know I can do. (pp. 43-44).*

Not only did they identify some positive factors associated with extra curricular activities in motivating them to try other interesting activities, they could see the benefits in helping them to stay away out of trouble.

*Me: Like it [extra curricular activities] gets you more like motivated to do things and get involved with other things...if you have things to do in your spare time, I think it will keep you like away from doing things that will not make you successful. (pp. 51-52).*

*Mi: I think if you had extra curricular activities to do, I think you become a more positive person, and you feel more, what's that word? You feel fulfilled and energized, and just like you're doing well in life. Like you have, you're being successful by doing all these activities, like signing up for dance, signing up for running, signing up for gym. Like doing that kind of stuff, like it helps you in other ways. (p. 52).*

The consequences for not striving for balance in their lives would be, as for the other groups, increased feelings of stress and compromised physical and mental health, as well as the possibility of getting into “doing things that will not make you successful” (Me).

5) The girls also explored many issues around having money and a good job as a gauge of success.

They explored this item in real depth, often at odds with each other, questioning each other, challenging each other, in order to clarify their own viewpoints and finally agreeing, if tentatively, on some common meanings about how much money was needed to be successful. Rather than accepting the conventional taken-for-granted notions that high salaries and lots of money were necessary criteria for defining success, these girls problemitized “enough” money and discussed various aspects of having money. In the end, they again returned to the importance of setting goals for themselves, overcoming obstacles, and then meeting those goals, demonstrating their strong sense of identity and their ability to be active agents in their own lives. On the way, they discussed the relative importance of making and having their own money, as opposed to having to rely on someone else in order to feel good about themselves and their accomplishments, as well as to provide some security in case a provider left them.

*Me: Another big part of success, I think, is money and like the job you choose to have. I guess you can be successful if you're like a stay-at-home mom, or whatever, but it's a lot to do with money 'cause if you're a stay-at-home mom, obviously, your husband is going to be out working and like making money for your family and stuff. But even the stay-at-home mom thing, I think that everyone should like have some sort of education 'cause what if they like split up, 'cause it happens a lot, so if you split up and you're a stay-at-home mom, what are you going to do if you no longer have your husband or whatever? So, you need to be making your own income, too, like supporting your family...and making your own money because without money, I don't know. Without money, I don't think you'll be happy. And happiness is a big part of success. (pp. 57-58).*

*L: Money doesn't make you happy... You can be married to the richest person, but be the most miserable person, and you have money, so money doesn't make you happy. (p. 58).*

*Mi: I think if you make your own money, and if you work and make your own money, you're a happier person. (p. 58).*

*Me: Cause you can then rely on yourself. Then you can rely on yourself and you don't have to rely on others, and that will make you feel better about yourself. (p. 59).*

They also discussed what it meant to be poor and homeless, how much money was enough for someone to feel successful? Could someone feel successful and be poor? Yes, they finally agreed, if there was enough money to provide food and shelter to themselves and any children, and that met the particular person's goals for themselves. These girls were not about to accept any taken-for-granted assumptions about how to define success; they clearly had their own personal growth as their main criterion for defining success for themselves.

*Me: But like, so you're saying that if there was, like say someone on like Hastings living on the street, you're saying that if you were in that condition, you had no money, you'd still be happy? (p. 60).*

*E: No, because I'm superficial and I like having money. I like living in the house that I live in with the soft bed, but those people who made the choice to live down there, they might be happy because they made that choice. (p. 60).*

*Me: You think some people make the choice to live on the street? Why would you make the choice to live on the street? They might have made stupid decisions, but they didn't make a choice. (p. 60).*

*E: So, you're saying that if somebody is living on the street and they make enough money to buy food, like not on the street, but they're living in a run-down house, like Erin Brockovich, the movie, you know the house she's living in, like a gross house like that, but you can make enough money in order to say pay your bills so that your lights stay on, and say, make enough money so you can feed your kids and yourself, that makes a person happy. I agree with that. As long as you're not starving. (p. 62).*

*L: And so it wouldn't matter if you had money or not because success isn't measured by money, it's measured by what you define success as, so I think you can have money and be successful, but you can also not have money and be successful because success isn't having a good job and having all your family with you. It's setting goals for yourself and overcoming everything that's in between them and getting those goals. (p. 62).*

Again, this discourse was often contradictory and conflicting, but the girls were able to work through their differing opinions and ideas to construct some common understandings. The benefits of having these conversations include the opportunity to clarify one's own position on various relevant topics, to expand perspectives on issues, and to jointly construct new knowledge and understanding.

## **Interpretation**

Although the girls occasionally struggled for words to express their thoughts and feelings, they clearly had something important to say. Despite, or perhaps because of, having a strong personality in their group to challenge and frustrate them at times, they deconstructed and made meaning concerning many important topics of interest to them in this session. Providing spaces like this focus group session allowed the girls, from disparate friendship groups, with disparate opinions, to come together in a safe way to explore and to make meaning on issues of relevance. I believe that continuing with sessions like these would enable the girls to gain a broader, richer vocabulary and to explore these issues further. In some of the literature I reviewed in chapter 2, some of the girls seemed to be invisible in their classes. In this session, E (p. 48) briefly referred to “the people we sometimes don’t notice” and some discussion followed recognizing that this group of people existed in the school. I wonder if all the girls who volunteered for this and the other research groups belonged to a larger category of articulate, self confident, high achieving girls and I wondered how these “not noticed” students would respond in a focus group session together and/or as part of such a group as these. Clearly, there is a need for further exploration of the thoughts and feelings of this group of students in order for educators to understand and to meet the needs of all students.

Group discussion is a necessary component for learning in most classrooms, so these skills are also important for all students to learn in order to successfully navigate their way through K-12 and post secondary schools, both within classrooms and in the hallways and grounds beyond the classrooms.

It is also important for us, as educators, to explore with our students different ways for them to express themselves other than through discussion, such as through art, music, drama, a

more storytelling approach, video, computer PowerPoint, and others in order to maximize the contribution and learning of each of our students.

Rather than accepting taken-for-granted assumptions on the meaning of success, the girls in this group were able to sort through positive and negative influences on their success, as well as to provide meaningful examples and effective strategies to maintain a focus on their own goals and priorities. They explored and challenged their own and other group members' thoughts, constructing meaning together.

### **Aboriginal Contextual Issues**

Since this group of girls volunteered to participate in this study as Aboriginal students, rather than as Academic or Fine Arts students, I think it is important to consider some of the longstanding issues which form part of the context of being a 21<sup>st</sup> century Aboriginal student. None of these girls lived on the nearby reserve. However, the fact that they chose to belong to this cultural group is significant. Although I did not ask the question, I do not think the girls were all from the same cultural heritage. Most often in urban schools, Aboriginal students represent different cultures and as a result have different traditions and heritages. The term Aboriginal serves as a general grouping and does not distinguish the many cultural differences among the various groups. I also recognize my limitations in providing meaningful context for these Aboriginal girls since both Sherilyn and I are Caucasian, of Scottish and Irish descent. I do not know what, if any, discussion in the girls' lives among family and friends centred on aspects of being Aboriginal and on the issues they faced in the past and present and as a result, or how familiar they were and/or in what ways they were influenced by these. I will attempt to briefly capture some of the contextual issues which may have influenced the girls' sense of themselves.

There is certainly a lot written in the media and in educational literature about the necessity of narrowing the "education gap" between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students in

several measurable areas, including Foundation Skills Assessment scores and graduation rates (<http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/reportcards/index.asp?snav=rc>). These scores, on their own, without any contextual information, tell the reader little about the individual students and their learning needs, as well as their social, emotional and physical needs. This simplistic approach to categorizing Aboriginal students, and others who also score lower than some others on these tests, creates “winners” and “losers”, reflective of the deficit model discussed earlier.

Those students who declare themselves as Aboriginal score consistently lower than those students who declare themselves as non-Aboriginal. The tests, themselves, may not be capturing cultural differences and they also may not be measuring knowledge in a way that is compatible with these students’ best ways of expressing that knowledge. Bazylak (2002) and the producer of the video of Aboriginal students in Smithers, BC (Williams, 2004) effectively utilized a storytelling, group format with Aboriginal students, as well as a focus on the positive aspects which contributed to the students’ feelings of success. The researchers were able to gather relevant, meaningful data to accurately represent the students’ knowledge, thoughts, and ideas. Rather than always utilizing pencil and paper tests to assess student knowledge, other formats may access deeper insights from Aboriginal students, and other students, as well.

The legacy of the Residential Schools, primarily run by the Roman Catholic and United Churches and administered by the federal government, is also often cited as having a negative impact on the success of successive generations of Aboriginal students ([www.irsss.ca/history.html](http://www.irsss.ca/history.html)). From 1861 until 1984 Aboriginal children from the ages of 7 to 15 were isolated from their families, traditions, and culture and indoctrinated into “White society”. Many students were abused emotionally, physically, and sexually. These former residential school students are the parents, grandparents, and other family members of many current Aboriginal students. Many still suffer from serious health and social problems as a result of such

poor treatment for those many years. Trying to heal and to regain a sense of hope and trust in educational, political, and religious institutions is a focus for many survivors. Our current Aboriginal students cannot but be affected, either personally through a family member, or through their own reading or viewing of local and/or national media of the ongoing struggle by these survivors for some recognition and compensation for the many harms committed in the name of education. The educational experience and thoughts of success gained through their own education might therefore, have a different meaning than for non-Aboriginal students. Another potentially powerful negative influence on their learning is the current Eurocentric curricular focus within our educational system. Gradually other resources which include diverse voices, rather than only white, European, male voices are being included in such areas as English and social studies. There are also courses being developed around an Aboriginal focus (e.g. First Nations 12) with which students can gain credits toward graduation. Assisting and supporting Aboriginal students in regaining trust in the system and in their ability to find success within it, needs to be a focus of our efforts in K-12 and post secondary schools, as well as within policy development and implementation at the Ministry of Education level.

There are also many other examples of colonial and post colonial oppression suffered by Aboriginal peoples. Among them are the misappropriation of their lands, traditional rights and ways of life, and their cultural heritage and practices. Family, religious/spiritual, and cultural traditions have been interrupted over the generations. The resultant ongoing sense of loss of identity and place, as well as feelings of discrimination are also bound to contribute to the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that many Aboriginal peoples experience (as described in Chapter 2)

There are several initiatives recommended by the Canadian Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (1996) and in the Auditor General of Canada's Report in November 2004

(Graham & Abele, 1996; [www.ainc-inac.gc/ps/edu/eap/acp\\_e.html](http://www.ainc-inac.gc/ps/edu/eap/acp_e.html)) to begin to address these wrongs and to increase both the achievement scores and graduation rates of Aboriginal students. At the school level, Aboriginal students can also be more involved in setting their own educational goals, objectives, and strategies along with their families and teachers. A variety of methods for accessing and assessing the knowledge of Aboriginal students also needs to be considered. In further research studies such as this one, the students also could be asked to explore such issues as how being an Aboriginal person influences their views on the importance of education, success, etc. and how these can be improved to be more meaningful to them

## **Summary**

### *How Are the Groups Different?*

The girls in the Fine Arts group were the only ones to talk extensively about the importance of following their passion for the arts in all they did.

The girls in the Academic group were alone in their almost complete focus on marks-- including the process of getting good marks versus the end result, their attitudes and their feelings about marks and test taking. They also discussed different types of people, related to success, comparing the "difference" to themselves as the university-bound, high achievers. Even though they were girls, this group seemed most to resemble the dominant, male discourse on success being quantifiable and defined by high achievement scores, as measured on exams.

The Aboriginal girls, as well as having a different cultural context than the other non-Aboriginal girls, which could result in them feeling different pressures and many ambiguities about being a minority group within the school, also explored a few items in more depth than the other groups. The specific topics which the other groups did not discuss included the importance of developing strategies and working hard to overcome obstacles in their path to success, the

importance of knowing and acting on one's morals and having self-confidence, the influence of having a boyfriend, the importance of having one's own money, having money as a measure of success in relation to poverty and homelessness, divorce, and stay-at-home moms.

### *How Are the Groups Similar?*

All the groups discussed some aspects of the importance of making, monitoring, and assessing their own goals for success. They also all talked about the importance of positive support from their families and friends. All the girls recognized the importance of being well rounded and having some balance in their lives, often including extra curricular activities.

The girls in the Fine Arts and Aboriginal groups explored the influence of appearance and generally agreed that while there was an influence on their feelings of success and how people judged them, but that feeling self-confident was more important than clothing styles or physical appearance.

All the girls also explored the issue of money, although the Fine Arts girls discussed money in connection with it being of less importance than following their passion in the arts in order for them to feel successful. The Academic group demonstrated some ambivalence in discussing money as a measure of success juxtaposed with their ideas on getting a "good" job with a university education. They began to explore their thoughts about trades and such careers as real estate agents, who earn high wages in the current economy, yet do not require university degrees. The Aboriginal group also explored the issue of how much money was a measure of success. They delved deeply into several possible scenarios, including single parent families, homelessness, and poverty as they challenged themselves and others within the group to examine their own thoughts and feelings on this topic.

In summary, the girls in this study demonstrated a willingness to share and to explore issues related to their feelings of success. They were articulate, motivated, and reflective, only

occasionally needing a facilitator to maintain flow, stay on topic, and suggest relevant vocabulary to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. They frequently disagreed with and challenged each other; they also jointly constructed new meaning about what success meant for them within their conversations. The girls deconstructed and disagreed with many taken-for-granted assumptions concerning girls getting high marks, focusing solely on relationships and their appearance, or the necessity to focus only on academic school work to the exclusion of relationships and extra curricular activities. They seemed willing and able to explore other possibilities for success other than an “either/or” dichotomy. They also demonstrated an eagerness and confidence in being active agents in their own lives, setting their own goals, and making sense of themselves and their lives through their conversations with other girls, many of whom had quite different cultures and contexts.

In the next chapter I will explore the context of the development and implementation of the BC Ministry of Education policy on gender equity and some ways it has failed these girls and other students in the school system. In all stages of the policy development and implementation stages, important voices were excluded or marginalized. As a result, many of the recommendations and strategies to address inequities within the education system have been largely ignored and the status quo has been more firmly entrenched in many ways. Both the Women’s Movement and the Aboriginal Rights Movement (Chapter 2) were important social movements formed in reaction to the inequitable treatment of certain groups within the wider North American society, including schools. They each created counter narratives on success and on equity, challenging the narrow views of success promoted by schools. There was brief opportunity for these alternate discourses, but many of these important voices have been lost again in the years during and since the policy was developed.

## CHAPTER V

### GENDER EQUITY---WHAT DOES IT MEAN IN EDUCATION?

I was particularly interested in reviewing the gender equity policy developed by the BC Ministry of Education in 1990, because I could see evidence of inequities within the system at all levels from my vantage point as a school administrator. There were differences in expectations for girls and boys as well as for the white, privileged students and the rest. These differences were in expectations for courses taken (e.g. Literature 12 vs. Auto 12; university bound vs. minimum wage job), for marks achieved (Honour Roll vs. barely a passing mark), for behaviour in class and on the grounds (exemplary behaviour vs. a shrug and “what can you expect?” attitudes), and more. These seemed to me to have more to do with gender, culture, and socio economic status than individual student interests, abilities, and possibilities. These taken-for-granted expectations seem to make the system inequitable, and I was curious to see what the Ministry of Education had done to rectify this situation.

The BC Ministry of Education policy on gender equity included principles, goals, and program objectives. These were based loosely on recommendations from the BC Royal Commission Report, *A Legacy for Learners* (Sullivan, 1988), as well as on such global influences as the Women’s Movement and feminism. An advisory committee was established to approve the Ministry’s implementation plan for gender equity in the province’s public schools for the years 1990-1994. Unfortunately, the entire process from conceptualisation to implementation was seriously flawed. Both the text of and the discourse around the policy were superficial at best. In this chapter I will outline some of the contextual variables which assisted in moving equity issues into the main political agenda and out again within the BC Ministry of Education. I will also relate the current focus within education on accountability and student success as measured by numbers of students achieving high marks on government mandated

standardized tests in academic courses to the broader, more meaningful conceptualizations of success as constructed by the adolescent girls in my study.

The coalitions formed in the Women's Movement and other human rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s opened up the political discourse in many countries to include disparate, previously unheard voices in the development of educational policies. Unfortunately, these voices were often subsumed and heard as a group, not as individuals, with different needs, interests and strengths, as well as with some commonalities. I will explore different feminist ideologies and the economic forces, which influenced education policies and programs concerning equity issues in the 1970s–1990s. I will also discuss the ways in which the principles and goals of the gender equity policy reflect different conceptualisations of the goals of education, in particular those outlined by the Sullivan Report (1988). In fact, as Bryson and de Castell (1993) noted, the gender equity policy implementation plan (1990) was mainly a “rubber stamp” for a policy that was never fully debated, deconstructed, or grounded in any particular theoretical conception of what the terms “gender equity” or even “education” meant. I will review some frameworks within which to analyze gender equity policies and demonstrate the shallowness of this particular policy in its real influence within education to benefit girls – or boys.

I will conclude this chapter with suggestions for reconstructing a more respectful, deeper view of equity policies, possible only by first deconstructing taken-for-granted terms and ideas about differences, diversity, and equity. Rather than reinforcing and perpetuating status quo power differences through rubber-stamping, it should be possible to listen carefully, to consider culture, history, class, and power and to work toward discovering and understanding who we are as individuals within a contextual framework. Only then can we realistically and openly discuss our needs and values and work together toward common understandings, and perhaps even some

solutions, of commonly defined issues, such as equity, within a more clearly defined context, such as education.

### **The Development of a “Policy Window”**

In the decades following World War II in industrialized English speaking countries, an increasing number of young people in public schools prompted governments to invest heavily in education (Levin, 2001). Enrolment in elementary schools grew rapidly. Participation rates in secondary schools increased and post secondary schools expanded in the types of courses and amount of spaces offered to students.

Levin recounted how Human Capital Theory provided a policy framework for governments to justify this expansion, as more education was seen as the key to further economic growth. The role of education in society was extended to include an emphasis on students learning not only the “basics” of curriculum and some job skills, but also learning social skills and how to contribute positively as citizens in a democratic society. There was a concurrent focus and financial investment in social policy issues in health care and other government programs during this time.

In the West, the decades following World War II were also characterized by sustained economic growth and expanded rights and liberties for many previously disenfranchised individuals, such as racial minorities, trade unions, and women (Apple, 1989). A broadening and deepening of democratic principles to include disparate voices occurred, and opportunities for more citizens to participate in discussions of policy began to open. Apple discussed such issues as individual rights, equal treatment of all citizens, and the concurrent need to restructure society and its institutions moving toward the centre of the political agenda in the United States during the 1950s – 1980s.

A “policy window” (Marshall, 2000) was opened in the 1980s within many Western governments as coalitions of previously marginalized people began a discourse around human rights and social justice issues. Such traditionally women’s issues as pay equity, childcare, abortion, and women’s educational and employment opportunities moved from the margins to the centre of political agendas for discussion in many countries.

Ball (1990) defined policy as a reflection and operationalization of values. The broad social justice umbrella of policies and principles concerning individual and group rights came uneasily to the political agenda in the 1970s and 1980s in many Western countries, mainly through coalitions of different groups, with sometimes very different agendas and goals. The underlying value of more inclusive democracy and human rights was consistent, however, for many of these groups.

Marshall (2000) also discussed the pressure from minority groups and women in Australia for policies and programs to promote more equitable treatment. Many Western governments began to hold more liberal and expansive views than in the immediate post war era and became open to these discussions. Economies were also expanding with the population and money was invested in new, more inclusive social programs, including education.

While many of the initiatives for social policy were local, there were also larger, more global pressures, and some “policy borrowing” or “policy learning” was evident among these governments. Dale (1999) differentiated this more “traditional” transfer of policies among a few nations through the 1970s and 1980s from the more global influences and pressure of the “supranationals” of the 1990s. The Women’s Movement gained momentum and influence from these transfers of ideologies across predominantly white, middle-class Western societies. Gains were made in including women in the discourse and in the development of some socially inclusive policies.

In Canada the National Action Committee (NAC) was formed for the purpose of lobbying the Canadian government to implement the recommendations of the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women (Vickers, Rankin & Appelle, 1993). The coalition of thirty women's groups coming together to form NAC in 1971 grew to over 600 groups by 1988. For this particular citizen group, women's issues were not a marginalized or special interest, but a central focus for policy development and implementation. While NAC's ideals of equity and social justice were laudable and they did contribute to the discussion in the development of such policies as the 1982 *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the 1986 *Employment Equity Act*, they were seen by many as representing too narrow a focus of mainly white, middle class women (Mohanty, 1989) to truly represent all women's voices. Even within this narrow configuration of women, there were different ideologies, interests, and needs. Many women felt excluded from the discourse, including women living in poverty, women with disabilities, women of colour, and lesbians. While NAC's own policies welcomed debate on diversity, it proved to be difficult to encompass and sustain the coalitions of women's groups, particularly since government support and funding were cut sharply in the late 1980s.

Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) outlined the dangers and possibilities inherent in coalitions: "The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive" (pp. 356-357). She also stressed the importance of seeing both differences and similarities in the struggles of all women in a group or coalition, not just perpetuating the myth of some common experience in being a woman. Once differences are really accepted, acknowledged, and open for discussion, as in the coalitions she described, there can be no more safety and refuge in hiding inside a socially constructed, all encompassing term such as "woman". She traced the Civil Rights Movements for Black people in the US during the 1960s and 1970s as a starting point for the

discussion of human rights. As the movement gained momentum, other people who felt oppressed joined to form coalitions (e.g. women, the poor, anti-war advocates, homosexuals, and lesbians). That movement was successful in advancing human rights in the US and Canada when the “right” was the focus, rather than the group. She believed that individuals needed to be heard and understood within the coalition and some individuals needed to fight to survive as independent voices. Only by breaking down these kinds of myths of group sameness can real commonalities be recognized and understood, and rights advanced.

Women in the Third World also have had historical and cultural struggles, traditions, and beliefs, which have not usually been an active part of a political discourse in their own country or in the West. Mohanty (1989) stressed that there was no “...universal sisterhood...” of issues (p. 180). She believed that feminist discourses needed to be reconceptualized so that differences and inequalities could be analyzed and understood within their historical and political contexts. If real social change was a goal for the discourse, she believed that differences must be defined, not as benign variations on a theme of being a woman, but within their own sphere of culture, history, and power hierarchies.

Themes of power, domination, and resistance are central to an understanding of the global Women’s Rights movement. The structures and organizations of our political institutions need to be radically altered in order to accommodate this inclusive kind of discourse. So far, this has not happened.

Gaskell, McLaren, and Novogradsky (1989) also chronicled the call for a radical change in the conceptualization of women’s rights policies in education in the 1960s and 1970s. These often tended, however, to be grounded in a “deficit model” (pp. 11-12) where girls and women were measured against boys and men and found to be lacking. Inadequate skills, language, attitudes, confidence, and/or ability in girls could be seen as needing remediation, so the girls

could achieve like or be equal to boys. The authors cited research on policies and programs that were aimed at “fixing” girls. While seeming to aim at breaking down stereotypes of girls and boys as polar opposites, these conceptualizations actually reinforced them by not considering individual differences and by not addressing larger political structures in schools, such as the assessment tools used in measuring girls’ and boys’ achievement, as well as the financial support of and value placed on certain traditionally “male” courses and jobs, within mathematics, the sciences, and technology.

Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger, and Tarule (1997) as well as Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer (1989) have written extensively about women’s “ways of knowing” and have certainly added a “different voice” to the Women’s Rights discourse in North America over the past 20 years. However, these authors also seem inadvertently to be contributing to this “deficit model” of women and girls, as a homogeneous group, needing to be compared to men, as a homogeneous group. Although all the above authors spoke and listened to many women’s voices, their narrow focus on gender group differences seems to have women being measured by and falling short of men’s abilities, skills, attitudes, and language. They tended to focus on similarities among the women and girls being interviewed, without also considering and validating, the differences.

Marshall (2000) elaborated on other feminist ideologies which tended to underlie the equity policies developed during the 1970s – 1980s. In addition to the former “women’s ways” philosophy which put a focus on women’s different values, choices, and socialization, there was also a liberal feminism philosophy which supported maintaining the institutional and political status quo, but removing barriers and increasing access for women to higher paying “male dominated” courses and jobs. There was again an implicit assumption that all women were simply waiting around for a barrier to be removed, so that we could move along as a group and fit into all those presumably attractive positions within the social hierarchy, whether they were in

education, business, politics, or other existing structures. Individual preferences, skills, aptitudes, and needs were not considered. Neither was the extent to which inequities were entrenched in these institutions and their policies, procedures, and processes considered.

The liberal feminist focus on women as a group, with no deconstruction and meaningful analysis of the diversity within the group, as well as the concurrent reluctance to challenge the status quo led to few meaningful, systemic, and long term changes. Success was usually still defined in male terms. In the late 1970s and 1980s the policy window started to close. In the next section I will discuss the continuing focus further away from equity issues to “accountability issues”.

### **Numbers versus People**

Part of the data gathered by the Ministry of Education in the 1980s tended to narrowly define successful schools by student performance scores, graduation rates, and participation rates in certain academic courses. The results tended to show that girls and women were underrepresented in several important areas within the school system (Avril, 1998). Girls tended not to enrol in mathematics, “hard” science, and computer science courses in secondary or post secondary schools. Women were also underrepresented as teachers in secondary schools, as well as in administrative and senior management roles. This simplistic focus on numbers, without any deconstruction on the taken-for-granted assumptions on what success actually meant, further obscured any consideration of individual preferences or abilities for girls or boys in taking courses, pursuing careers, or in any real discourse around what it means to be an “educated” citizen.

As population growth slowed and the recession occurred in many Western countries in the late 1970s and 1980s, there was a growing lack of confidence in education, the health system, and in governments in general. From a belief in the importance of governmental control over the

policies and programs in social institutions, more conservative stances advocating less government intervention and a more market-driven economy gained in prominence. Since that time, market forces have become more important to government policies and programs in Canada, as well as in other industrialized countries, and pressure to be competitive in the global economy has escalated (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, & Taylor, 1999).

Ball (1990) discussed the rising influence of business leaders and parents in educational policy discussions, particularly in Western countries, since 1980. He believed that as government stepped back from direct control and some of the financial support of education, educators were being listened to less and less by policy makers. As a result, education policies can often be reactive, responding to business interests, rather than based on actual practice with students or on a coherent conceptualization of what it means to be educated. As educators lost power and influence in setting the agenda or in the discourse around educational policies in the 1980s and 1990s, education, itself, as a meaningful concept to be discussed, deconstructed and reconstructed, seems to have been left out. These speakers, knowledgeable and grounded in their own educational practice, have been displaced, their influence over meaning lost, their professional preferences replaced by abstract mechanisms and technologies of “truth”, “accountability”, and “rationality”, including parental choice, the market, efficiency, and bureaucracy. A new discursive regime has been established and with it new forms of authority (Ball, 1990, p.18).

In the last 10–15 years, education in the West, in addition to other social institutions, has come to be seen in market driven terms. This neo-liberal stance rejects the view that governments have a major responsibility to ensure the “public-good functions of education” (Dale, 1997, p. 273). Parents have demanded and been given more choice and more input into educational decision-making. Parents are increasingly seen as consumers and schools are being

held accountable through a variety of public mechanisms (i.e. published standardized test scores).

The BC Ministry of Education gender equity policy was developed during this time of lowered social expectations and heightened economic expectations, where policies were developed in reaction to quickly changing global market conditions. The discourse was moving from a focus on human rights or on women needing remediation, to women's economic contribution in the workforce. The focus on increasing girls' participation rates in traditionally male courses and jobs was seen as an economic strategy to increase a country's competitiveness in the market place.

Dale (1997) described the shift toward privatization in education over the 1980s and 1990s. As public funding became less generous, there was a decline in the "post-war welfare – state settlement" (p. 273). While there was an explicit political movement to decentralize governmental control, Dale argued that there was an implicit strengthening of the state's control in key areas of education. Since government was still the major funder of education, it maintained the majority of control. With pressures from "supranational bodies" and fewer resources, government has tended to shift in its control "from carrying out most of the work of the coordination of education itself to determining where the work will be done and by whom" (p.274).

Dale discussed the balancing among the market, the state, and the community in the operation of education systems. Often the underlying purposes and values of each of these influences can be conflicting. Market mechanisms, if given priority, can create efficiencies, but often at the expense of individual rights. Policies aimed at deregulation or reducing barriers for parental choice of educational programs can tend to reduce areas of professional influence and discretion of teachers, the front-line of the education system. This competition for students

among schools can also lead to demoralization of the teachers as they witness a change of focus from the needs of individual students to group scores on standardized tests as the standard for judging the success and value of the schools.

Green (1994) discussed policy as often being a balance between inconsistent or conflicting values. He also asserted that policies were seldom based on research, theory, or knowledge. As a result, policies as action statements can be written with no particular agreement on underlying goals or conceptualizations. Although there may be some interdependencies among the goals or values sought or expressed in policies, some will, of necessity, be maximized while others will be minimized, depending on which influence has prominence and whose bias is reflected in the writing of the policy. As the value of the marketplace became the centre of policy debate, the value placed on individuals, their rights, and social justice issues faded in the discourse in education and were replaced more and more by “accountability” measures.

As funding for education was cut from the government, other sources of funding tended to be found by schools to augment the loss. This funding often came from the community via Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) and from corporate sponsorships and/or partnerships. These groups, then, also had an increased influence over, not only local conceptualizations and goals of education, but also policy and program implementation. This can lead to “have” and “have not” schools and a system with a fragmented system of governance (King parent fundraisers, 2004). Public Choice Theory, as described by Levin (2001), which was popular during the 1980s, advocated moving authority away from public organizations to individuals and families. Policy development also moved away from costly collaborative efforts to “top-down change strategies, rapidly implemented” (pp. 14-15). Business models became common in educational policy structures and processes. Dale (1997) wondered “how the public-good purposes of education relating to democracy and equity can be addressed” (p. 280) in such hierarchical systems? The

universality of education is also brought into question in an “ability to pay” or “user pay” system. The complexity of the system and the economic and market pressures on education has become an excuse by governments for not ensuring these “public-good” qualities of education are maintained as a discussion topic and as a value of education. Certainly, gender equity considerations can thereby be easily minimized or lost in a system driven by local issues, competition, and financial pressures.

There are also other global factors that influence education policies. Expanding technologies have increased awareness and often a sense of competition among nations regarding their national policies. Dale (1999) explained that these global influences were often indirect and were interpreted differently by various nations and governments. The economic, political, and cultural strands that Dale discussed which comprised globalization measures and pressures have separate, as well as collective, effects and can occur at different levels of such governmental social systems as education. International or “supranational” organizations have tended to have common ideologies based on preserving “their own privileged positions in the world economy” (p. 4). This common value of being economically competitive is often seen as the motivation behind the shift in focus in education from one of democratic rights to that of creating skilled workers who can contribute to their countries’ global effectiveness with minimal government financial support. The increased emphasis on standardized assessment and “accountability” in education can also be traced to these global competitive trends. Students are increasingly being tested, as a result of changing government policy directions, in various skill areas, which are valued in this global economy, and results are compared across school districts and across countries. School success, from this perspective, comes to be narrowly defined. Levin (2001) saw this “policy borrowing” across countries as being deliberately orchestrated by the “New Right” (p. 99).

The Fraser Institute, a right wing “think tank”, publicly ranks private and public elementary schools based on their students’ scores on standardized Foundation Skills Assessment tests, mandated by the Ministry of Education in BC, to be administered to every grade 4 and 7 student in the province each year. The Fraser Institute also ranks secondary schools in BC based on their students’ scores on recently developed and mandated grade 10 and 11 government exams, as well as grade 12 government exams. These rankings appear in the news media each spring with little accompanying context and parents are encouraged to choose schools for their children based on the ranking and the scores on these standardized tests, without also considering the multitude of other factors which may define a “good” school. Some of these factors could include the depth and breadth of the fine and performing arts program, athletic programs and opportunities, diversity in program offerings (i.e. International Baccalaureate, French Immersion, Career Education and Training, Outdoor School, etc.), as well as in student population, opportunities for students to participate in extra-curricular clubs and teams, community involvement in the school, and much more.

Right-wing conservative governments and policies reflect business interests and tend to advocate a redistribution of wealth and power to the few, who score the highest in business sponsored courses and programs. Women and other minorities seem again to have been relegated to the margins in policy discourse, except for the consideration of how they can contribute economically to the placement of their country in the world marketplace.

Since the power and effects of the “supranationals” can often be implicit and indirect, as well as externally initiated, it is important in policy development to be explicit as to the underlying values of the country, province, and/or local community. Individual states can maintain their own policy goals and processes, but in order for policy implementation to be successful in education or elsewhere, these local and underlying values must be explicitly

considered, deconstructed for their taken-for-granted assumptions, and reconstructed with many, diverse voices contributing to the discourse, rather than opting blindly to adopt broad, global economic goals (Dale, 1997). An attempt at defining some education values for the BC education system can be found, in part, in the Sullivan Report (1988).

In the next section, I will review this report. I have a particular interest in this report for several reasons. I was a parent of two daughters in the public school system at the time. I knew Barry Sullivan personally and regarded him highly as a man and a father. I presented a written and verbal submission to the panel on which he presided in our local neighbourhood. I was also finishing my Master of Education degree and preparing to re-enter the education system as a school counsellor. The report and the process by which it was formulated held a great deal of promise for me. I was optimistic that it would create real change in the system for my daughters as students and for me as an educator. I saw a chance for people's voices to make an impact and open up discussion on what worked best for individuals toward the social justice values of education.

### **The Sullivan Report**

The BC Royal Commission study of K-12 schools was initiated in 1987. Barry Sullivan, a lawyer appointed by the ministry at the time, and his staff toured the province holding public forums and accepting written submissions of various people's ideas, values, and concerns about the public education system. The objectives of the Commission included assessing current and future programs and processes, as well as recommending courses of action. Education was discussed in general terms as including career preparation, creativity, the love of learning, and some life and social skill training. There was no explicit value placed on individual rights and responsibilities and no real intent to explore, discover, and/or debate the "common good" of what education could be and do for our society.

After a year of listening to over two thousand oral and written submissions by British Columbians (many educators and parents were included), Sullivan wrote his report and made several recommendations for the future of education in the province. These ranged from financing, to collective agreements, to curriculum, to relationships among provincial, district, and school personnel.

There seem to have been some thoughtful considerations in the report about the diversity of needs and interests of learners in the education system:

As this report has detailed throughout its pages, the accommodation of diversity - whether defined by individual or group differences at regional, local, or neighbourhood levels, or in terms of varying parental and pupil appetites for school services - is a factor of primary importance. We believe it must be satisfied (p. 202).

Also included in the report were discussions of various options in schooling (i.e. home schooling, independent schools, etc.), as well as the needs of Aboriginal, special needs, and female students. Sullivan and his team acknowledged “centuries of cultural, sociological and psychological conditioning which directs women to certain roles and excludes them from others” (p. 213). They suggested that schools had an important role in not perpetuating limiting stereotypes and inequities. They suggested some changes in school organization concerning hiring practices so that more female role models would be available at the secondary level, particularly as teachers of math and science courses, as well as in administrative roles. Further, they suggested hiring more female counsellors, to both serve as role models and to “influence” female students to enrol in math and science. They also recommended that the Ministry of Education monitor curriculum resources for inappropriate gender stereotyping and for content

that included the contributions of women. Just how these superficial measures would address “centuries of...conditioning” (Sullivan, 1988) was not clear.

From this one-page discussion of issues and four recommendations around improving girls’ opportunities in school and in careers from the whole report of 263 pages, a single goal was written in the implementation plan for the Royal Commission. In Working Plan #3 (1990), this goal related to gender equity states: “Achieve gender equity in curriculum and learning materials. Achieve equity in policies and practices in the education system” (pp. 40-41). There was a ten-year and four-year framework outlined with major components, ministry tasks, school board/district official tasks, and provincial organizations’ responsibilities. The language, as in the actual gender equity policy, is quite passive. Within the language of the implementation plan (1990), there were words like “support”, “develop guidelines”, and “work with districts”. There is also no rationale, explanation, context or elaboration on what is meant by the terms “gender equity” or the brief mention of “diversity” from the Sullivan Report. Many of the concepts used have been constructed from years of patriarchal stereotyping and needed to be deconstructed and reconstructed by diverse voices within the policy writing group in order to explore their meaning within the current time and context. Even the term “gender equity” tends to implicitly refer to the right to be the same, to become equal in numbers, or some other quantifiable characteristic to an “idealized subject” (Bryson & de Castell, 1997), which of course, is male and usually white, well educated, and middle class. Without even a deconstruction and exploration of what “gender equity” meant, within which contexts, institutions, and practices, considering the influences of different kinds and effects of power embedded in the term, Bryson and de Castell argued, how can policy makers, or policy implementers, know what their goals and strategies could and should be?

The main ten-year framework included “supporting initiatives directed at implementing gender equity” for five of the ten year plan. In year nine these initiatives were to be evaluated and in year ten the project would have been “complete”. There were no clear criteria for selection or evaluation of these “initiatives”. Nor was there any discussion of the authorship of these goals. In the introduction there was mention of “government” adopting most of the recommendations from Sullivan’s Report in the development of the plan. There was also mention that in order for the goals to be implemented there must be “cooperation and commitment” from educators, trustees, communities, district and ministry personnel, and provincial education organizations. How this is to be accomplished and specifically by whom is also not clear.

The Sullivan Report, while hinting at some interesting possibilities concerning the history and stereotyping of women, as well as some thoughts on the nature of differences, did not move beyond the “deficit model” considering the whole homogenous group of girls and women needing some minor assistance and support to become more like boys and men. The implementation plan and the gender equity policy also reflect this shallow interpretation of what women want and need without considering the diversity within the group of women itself. The goals of equity are reduced to data collection and equalizing numbers in certain courses and jobs.

The BC gender equity policy seems to reflect a liberal view of improving “opportunities, access, and support for all girls and women in the BC school system” by stating this as its Program Goal. The program objectives include such passive verbs as “inform”, “support”, “assist”, “provide information”, and “recognize”. These verbs are clearly not concerned with challenging the status quo in terms of political or institutional structures. They seem to apply to a need to simply “identify and remove barriers” faced by girls and women – whatever these barriers may be, and regardless of the needs and preferences of the girls and women involved.

The Principles outlined in the policy do not define what equity is or looks like in behavioural terms within a school or in society at large. While gender equity is said to “consider” such issues as class and culture, it is not clear how these are to be considered. Are these factors part of “gender” and/or “equity”? There is mention of rights to certain kinds of learning environments, but I’m not sure how I would recognize a “gender-equitable” environment in a school setting, since it is not clearly defined or discussed. There is also mention of students’ program and career decisions being based on interests and abilities, rather than on gender, alone. The assumption seems to be implied and hence, reinforced, that gender determines choices. Do all boys choose one course and all girls another? Are the genders finite and on totally opposite ends of an either/or dichotomy? While “co-operation and collaboration” among a variety of people is seen as the “foundation of gender equity”, without a clear conceptualization and framework, how are we to collaborate? Also, who is to collaborate and in what kind of forum are we to collaborate? Who will be included and who will be moved to the margins of the collaboration?

Paquette (1998) outlined four frameworks within which educational equity policies tend to be developed. These include:

- a) Members of different social categories are to be represented in courses in the same proportion as they are in the general school population.
- b) Students’ abilities should determine the distribution of students in courses.
- c) Students’ measured ability should determine their allocation to courses.
- d) Students’ abilities and other relevant factors, and not only group-membership characteristics (over which students have no control) should determine allocation of resources and instruction (pp. 41-61).

Although the BC gender equity policy is unclear and quite passive, it seems to reflect the first of Paquette's equity frameworks, where fifty percent of students should be enrolled in every course, regardless of the students' ability and/or interests. The BC policy seems to assume that if there were just more information and support and some barriers were removed (how is a barrier defined? which barriers need removing? by whom? in what ways?), then girls and women could "access" the same opportunities as boys, and in some way be more equal.

The final Program Objective reflects a "women's way" kind of ideology in efforts to "recognize, value and encourage the diverse ways women provide educational leadership". However, once again, there is no clear explanation of exactly how my educational leadership as a woman vice-principal is "diverse" (i.e. different than a man's leadership) and should be "recognized, valued and encouraged". This kind of statement, once again, reinforces a stereotype of a "deficit model" of equity, in that I feel so "different," only because I am a woman, that I need special consideration to help me feel and act as if I was a "real" vice-principal ( i.e. male). What do the policy writers imagine that I would need to feel "encouraged" in my leadership role in a secondary school? Perhaps, an office with pink curtains could be sufficient to help me feel "encouraged", I wonder facetiously?

In the next section I will explore various perspectives on what equity and justice in education can mean. Far from being easily and simplistically defined, these concepts, like success, need to be openly discussed by many diverse voices, with a clear goal for change--change in policies and practices, change in systems and structures--so that all students feel that they have a place and a voice, as well as the power to make meaningful decisions in their schooling.

## **Social Justice in Schools**

Paquette (1998) attempted to define equity, recognizing that the term was complex and controversial and had ambiguities influenced by emotions, theories, and politics. He discussed equity as fairness on two dimensions. Vertical equity was described as allocating resources according to both need and merit. Horizontal equity was seen as “giving to each according to the common lot” (p. 41).

He elaborated on the tension between these two conceptualizations of equity within the education system. As a consensus on the goals or meaning of the public education system dissipates with a reactive, shifting, market-driven approach in which economics and choice of the “best” schools are valued over the “common good” or democratic citizenship social goals, there is less agreement and less discussion about systemic inequalities in education. A serious discussion about what equity or fairness really means in the new millennium, in a society that is truly diverse and unequal in power, opportunities, and outcomes, is no longer considered or sought.

Gerwitz (1998) also attempted to open and contribute to a discourse on conceptualizations of social justice issues in educational policies. She saw fairness or equity as a complex concept with two main dimensions: distributive and relational. Distributive justice refers to the “fair” distribution of both material and non-material resources. The underlying principles that govern this distribution need to be clearly expressed. This dimension tends to be individualistic in that it describes how resources and goods are distributed to individuals within a society.

Within this distributive justice theme, there are also considerations of different conceptualizations of social justice “the traditional ‘weak’ liberal definition of justice as equality of opportunity and the more radical ‘strong’ liberal version of justice as equality of outcome”.

The former traditional view justifies unequal participation by target groups since everyone had the “opportunity” to participate. The ‘stronger’ view supports such direct interventions as affirmative action to “prevent disadvantage” (Gerwitz, 1998, p. 472).

The second dimension of social justice discussed by Gerwitz was relational justice, which refers to a consideration of the nature of relationships or connections between individuals in a society. Such concepts as respect and dignity are considered, not as goods to be measured, counted, and distributed, but as topics in their own right to be discussed and deconstructed carefully and systematically. Gerwitz expanded on the importance of considering these relationships as a major emphasis in discourses and policies concerning equity or social justice issues. Not only do resources need to be re-distributed, but so do responsibilities and obligations, through a restructuring of the power relations within a society and its institutions. A barrier to equity is seen as more than the availability of a science course or some outside encouragement to learn computer skills. It is seen as systemic powerlessness, violence, marginalization, and oppression by those who are dominant and with control. Women, Aboriginal peoples, gays and lesbians, people living in poverty, people from diverse, non-White cultures, people with physical and/or mental challenges are just some of the groups who have been marginalized and had their voices silenced over the years, unable to contribute meaningfully in the construction of new institutions, structures, policies, and practices in education and elsewhere.

These are real barriers which must be recognized and discussed openly by those who have power and those who do not, if any real social justice values and goals can be debated and agreed upon. This discussion has not occurred.

Iris Marion Young (1990) argued that “Justice requires that each person should have the institutionalized means to participate effectively in the decisions that affect her or his action and the conditions of that action” (p. 251). She further conceptualized true empowerment as having

an effective voice and vote in an expanded range of decisions that were made through democratic processes, either directly or through representatives. She further believed that bureaucratic governmental and corporate hierarchies needed to be dismantled so that decision making could become more accessible, immediate, and local. I believe that in applying Young's analysis and interpretation of governmental structures to schools and students with the goal of increasing the sense of agency and involvement of students, to bring decision making from the bureaucracy to the school and/or class level, power can be shared and students can be actively engaged in the planning and implementation of meaningful policies and processes which have such a large impact on their sense of self and their sense of personal success.

In the next section I will describe the process and policy from the BC Ministry of Education through the experiences of a member of the advisory committee charged with its implementation, Suzanne de Castell. In a meeting with her in 2000, she discussed at length her frustrations. I will also explore some of the outcomes from the policy in educational practices.

### **The Gender Equity Policy**

The BC gender equity policy did not seek to address these structural imbalances and oppressions. Instead it sought to "improve opportunities, access and support". No direct interventions were suggested nor were any outcomes mentioned. Girls and women were treated as a homogenous group with no consideration or suggestions for examining characteristics or relations within this group or between the group and the rest of society. While there is a Principle of Gender Equity which "considers social class, culture, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and age", there was no theoretical framework suggested to deconstruct, define, or understand each of these complex terms by themselves, as well as how each relates to the others and to equity and social justice issues.

Suzanne de Castell (Bryson & de Castell, 1993) was a member of the Gender Equity Advisory Committee which was established as part of the implementation plan's four year framework. She described the first meeting of the Advisory Committee as a polite sharing session with the implementation plan already written. The agenda had the group members sharing their respective education institutions' (i.e., schools, universities, BC Teachers' Federation, etc.) "initiatives" and basically rubber-stamping approval for the plan for the next three years (one year of the four-year plan had already elapsed before the committee had even met). There was no discussion of context, rationale, or theoretical underpinnings for the plan - or even any discussion of the efficacy of the plan itself. The terms "education", "equity" and "gender equity" were not defined, debated, deconstructed, or even discussed. A narrow, shallow definition of equity as numbers of girls in certain courses and numbers of women teaching secondary and in administration seems to have been carried over from the Sullivan Report and from the prevailing global emphasis on data collection and accountability.

Suzanne de Castell (personal communication, November 20, 2000) felt extremely frustrated by the lack of research, critical thought, and theoretical conceptualization underlying this work. The purpose of the gender equity policy seemed to be simply to narrow the gap between girls and boys in a quantifiable way in certain school courses. There were simple tasks to be performed, such as developing some curricula and including some job cards on non-traditional careers for girls in school libraries. She felt that the purpose of the committee was simply to approve and move along this "band-aid" of a policy and not to contribute meaningfully to anyone's understanding of individual rights, needs, differences or commonalities, fairness, power, marginalization, or dignity.

Avril (1998) outlined several of the "initiatives" undertaken as part of the implementation plan of the gender equity policy. These included such programs as an interactive computer

program on dating violence by the Canadian Red Cross, a Women's Studies curriculum, developed by UBC with the Home Economics Teachers Professional Association, a sexual harassment policy developed and in serviced by School District #62, and a workshop manual to raise awareness about employment equity issues developed by the BC School Trustees Association with the BC Ministry of Education. There were no plans or initiatives for involving students and teachers in a discourse concerning these topics, promoting feelings of agency and empowerment, sharing the power from the ministry, even to the university and institutional level, let alone to the grassroots, local school level.

In searching recently for some of these resources over the internet and through phone calls to ministries and other institutions, I found many of them out of print, archived, or not known about by research personnel. Many of these resources or "initiatives", are clearly no longer, if they ever were, visible and/or in use or in demand by educators for their students.

Avril (1998) also documented the quantitative shifts in a number of areas between men and women in the school system over the ten years 1988 – 1998. She concluded that there was little change in the years since the Sullivan Report. Any improvements in participation rates in the sciences, mathematics, or technology courses by girls and women were "piecemeal and, in some cases, short-lived without the foundation of policy and implementation support" (p.17). She cited funding cuts since 1995, a lack of ministry leadership, a lack of consistent effort over time, and changing government priorities for the lack of improvement in numbers of girls and women in "non-traditional", male-dominated courses and careers.

Beyond these reasons, there is also the larger issue, so passionately articulated by de Castell (Bryson and de Castell, 1993) that there was no real intent or plan to substantially deconstruct, research, analyze, explore, and/or understand the issues before building a meaningful policy. There were also no discourses between practicing teachers, students, parents,

women's groups, and others who understood and were affected by the policy in order to create meaning as well as meaningful goals, implementation and assessment strategies. Therefore, there could hardly be a hope for any real change or lasting buy-in and involvement.

Gaskell and Taylor (2003) outlined a few of the more lasting changes that did take place in BC policy and practice as a result of this commission. They include more awareness of sexual harassment and the development of policies in local districts, more women in management positions, checklists for learning resources, and some changes in curricula to include women's accomplishments (pp. 161-162). In the next section, I will summarize some of the more current trends in education.

### **Current Tensions in Education**

In the years since the gender equity policy was written, the role of governments and their public institutions has changed. The recessions of the late 1980s and increased pressures from global markets have contributed to changing priorities and even tighter financial controls on government spending. The small gains made by various minority groups, individually or as coalitions, are now being seen as "too expensive" by increasingly more conservative right-wing governments (Apple 1989). Earlier coalitions are tending to disintegrate and class polarizations are deepening in many Western countries and around the globe. The Women's Movement is often thought of as having completed its work and as being no longer necessary.

In fact, there has been something of a backlash against the Women's Movement and feminism in schools and in society. Committees at the ministry and local levels dealing with gender issues have generally been disbanded. In the late 1990s and 2000s, resources and support to pursue feminist questions concerning the joint construction of knowledge and the inclusion of diverse voices in promoting discourses on inequities within the education system have been cut. Further, there has been a switch in attention to the under achievement of boys and the over

achievement of girls (Gaskell & Taylor, 2003; Gaskell & Eyre, 2004; Bourne & Reynolds, 2006). The media frenzy in the last decade on the over achievement of girls, consistent with the focus on numbers over people, has tended to highlight some higher numbers of girls enrolled in undergraduate programs in universities and some higher standardized test scores in literacy for girls than for boys. However, differences in test scores between the genders, particularly in reading and writing, are not new and there are still high achieving boys and low achieving girls. Possible contextual issues and reasons behind these numbers are complex and remain unexamined. This simplistic focus on gender has also distracted attention away from the situation of Aboriginal youth. We need to look deeply at how culture, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect in order to understand how to make positive changes in schooling for all students.

Somehow, feminism seems to be being blamed for disadvantaging boys in some ways, for girls succeeding, seemingly at the expense of the boys. Upon closer examination, girls are not usurping traditionally male jobs, but in fact 70% of all employed women in 2002 continued to work in traditionally female jobs such as nursing, teaching, clerical, sales, and service occupations (Bourne & Reynolds, 2006). The Fraser Institute rankings reports various scores by gender (Cowley & Easton, 1999) and has further contributed to this false alarm and has fed into calls from local school boards and from parents for single-gender classes, programs, and schools, building support for private schools when public schools don't go in this direction. This simplistic trend on publishing standardized test scores and numbers of students enrolled in certain programs, again, misses the point, in my opinion.

In education there is increasing talk of "excellence", accountability, raising standards, centralizing control, and a growing pressure to make business and corporate needs the goals for schools. The discourse, too, has shifted from a student development focus to one of economics. The "common good" in education has shifted from social democratic principles in the 1960s-

1980s to the laws of the market and profitability. Equity is now more commonly and superficially understood to be an individual's opportunity to make money and contribute to an increasingly global economy. Schooling is seen more as career preparation than citizen development.

The fact that economic goals have taken precedence over more social justice and human rights values in education, certainly in this past decade, is the focus of Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, and Taylor (1999). They discussed globalization forces from supranational politics and the need for nation states to redefine their role in managing their own economic and social relations. These researchers believed that rather than passively losing local sovereignty, nations needed to actively engage with the forces of globalization and take advantage of the opportunities afforded them. In order to do this effectively, Henry and colleagues suggested that the education of "active and informed citizens who resist being treated as either objects of globalized economic activity or as consumers of globalized cultural products" (p. 86) would be of critical importance. They also pointed out that markets were intricately tied to social relations and to social values. As governments structured their economic systems, they also considered who would participate and how they would contribute in specific ways to maximize capital expansion and performance. These structures were not value-free. They believed that it was not only possible, but in the long term necessary, to renew a focus on democratic values where the needs and rights of the marginalized or disadvantaged, as well as of the advantaged, were considered and included. While Henry and colleagues admit that many elements of the past Keynesian welfare state were paternalistic, patriarchal, and culturally insensitive, they also saw the need to protect and include those groups of people who have been particularly victimized by or excluded from the market-driven global economy (i.e. women, minorities, the working poor, Aboriginal peoples, and environmental groups, among others).

New communication technologies, such as the Internet, certainly have assisted in extra-nation dialogue about similar issues of concern across different countries. As some of these disenfranchised groups join together again in different coalitions in such venues as the "Battle in Seattle", the Great Bear Rainforest in coastal, northern BC and protests at UBC against foreign dictatorships, the voices of these new coalitions may have an impact in government decision and policy making.

However, in order for these voices to have a real impact, the purpose of education and of being a citizen in an increasingly global society, needs to be openly discussed and deconstructed. Perhaps it will be possible to refocus education from instrumentalism and that of a service-provider to one of inclusion and of social and cultural responsibility. It seems impossible to prepare students solely for the world of work, when that world is so highly volatile and driven by outside forces. There seems to be tremendous opportunities to involve all levels of government, corporations, parents, individuals from all classes and cultures, as well as educators and particularly students, in developing proactive strategies and ideas about alternative future possibilities. I believe that difference and human rights need to be back on the political and educational agenda. Success in school needs to be broadened to include the accomplishments of a diverse student population, rather than reduced to numbers of students graduating in a certain length of time and/or participation rates in certain academic courses.

Burbules and Rice (1991) discussed two trends in the post-modern analysis of education policies through a focus on conceptions of difference. They believed that traditional modernist principles around difference were inadequate and ineffective because of their exclusionary and arbitrary character. Post modernist thought advocated a deconstruction of "taken-for-granted" terms and concepts. The discourse, itself, as well as the structure of the discourse needs to be non-hierarchical and explicitly and implicitly inclusive of as many different voices as possible in

order to understand these differences. The structures involved in the discourse must also be examined for their capacity to alienate, isolate, and intimidate. What are the tacit rules for discourse? Rather than seeking absolutely consistent or unified meaning, or a “metanarrative” to explain terms and concepts, the ideologies underlying various interpretations and meanings need to be identified and discussed openly. Single, simplistic metanarratives tend to reflect hegemony of a particular socially or politically dominant power group. The less dominant are marginalized, disregarded, or compared (unfavourably) to the dominant group, while broader patterns of dominance are perpetuated. The dominant group often has no understanding or real interest in the language or discourse of “Others” who are different, so no real dialogue can take place. Over the past decades women have been considered as “Other”. We grouped together in coalitions for a time, but our own metanarrative did not include the voices of all women. There were “Others” within the group of women who were not heard or respected. The metanarrative of NAC and other groups were still compared unfavourably to the always dominant, powerful, white, middle class men who controlled the discourse and the institutions. These men also tend to exclude and alienate other men who do not value the dominance of the few and the emphasis on the market-economy.

Burbules and Rice (1991) contrasted this conceptualization of postmodernism to an “antimodernism”, where all traditional values were deconstructed and rejected. A moral relativism tends to result, where everything and/or nothing is valued. They saw some hope for increasing understanding through the post-modern deconstruction, reconstruction, and dialogue. I agree.

The authors also suggested some possible benefits of this reconstruction and reflection process for dialogue across differences. These included: the construction of an individual identity along less arbitrary, more flexible lines in relation to others--we are all members of many

subgroups at the same time; the expansion of our understanding of ourselves and others, considering external and internal perspectives; and the development of more reasonable and sustainable communication strategies such as listening, patience, and tolerance.

While complete understanding of another may not be possible, by acknowledging and critically examining power, class, ethnic, religious, and other differences within their own historical and cultural contexts, some gains in building trust, respect, and understanding may result which can translate into more inclusive systems and structures within schools, societies, and governments.

Leach (1992), in responding to Burbules and Rice (1991) saw the goal of the post-modern deconstruction, particularly around the differences between men and women, as creating new spaces and understandings, not simply to re-work or reinforce the traditional stereotypes. Only by promoting the “difference within” as well as the “difference between” women and men, and by critically examining the complexities of larger views of what constitutes knowledge, history, and culture can the discourse move from the personal and interpersonal to find meaning in a larger, societal scale.

Bryson and de Castell (1993) also advocated for a deconstruction of the term gender. They saw gender as being a socially constructed “set of manifestations, expressions, displays and representations, not as an inner aspect of persons” (p. 97). To understand gender in this way, as a rather arbitrary set of characteristics and values, helps to explain why gender equity policies which do not at least attempt to provide the opportunity for real, inclusive discourse, around individual differences and commonalities, are doomed to fail. Competing conceptualisations of what it is to be male, female, and equitable tend to undermine any efforts for change.

They also advocated for setting terms ahead of time for the investigation and discourse about gender equity. By setting the agenda, as well as the time, place, and conditions for policy

making, and by doing broad-based research, women can have the power to develop meaningful, achievable goals and plans within redefined social and political structures, which are more open and conducive to change.

Coulter (1998), in his explanation of the work of Habermas, differentiated between strategic action, or action intended to bring about a specific change, and communicative action, where individuals attempt to understand each other. These actions were seen as complementary and interdependent. He acknowledged that since language is the medium of communicative action and it can never be totally free of implicit distortions, total understanding or consensus may not be possible. However, through honest, open discourse about what values are important in society, and how they are to be transmitted through the education system, a possibility exists to better understand ourselves and others. Coulter believed that only through dialogue can such moral issues be resolved. Complex concepts such as individual rights, justice, common good, equity, and fairness need to be examined critically through discourses among people actually involved in living these concepts, who can discuss their experiences. This includes the powerful and the "Others", the marginalized, the silenced. The language used and the structure of the dialogue must also be constantly open to scrutiny to ensure the purpose remains mutual understanding and joint planning for strategic action to address longstanding inequities, rather than simply serving the system or institution, economically or politically.

With a focus on and a respect for individuals within their personal contexts, apart from stereotypes, power, and traditional structures, it seems possible to engage in this type of communication, to understand ourselves and our differences as well as our commonalities with other individuals within the many subgroups to which we all belong (i.e. middle class, white, woman, well educated, heterosexual, mother, student, friend, partner, educator), as well as across groups. Perhaps, then we can work toward some common understandings of equity and fairness

and the purposes of education. A focus on participation rates of girls and boys or a simplistic look at graduation rates for Aboriginal students is incredibly inadequate in any discussion of what education could and should be accomplishing in our society for it to truly flourish. Communicative action needs to precede and overlap strategic action where values are articulated, terms are deconstructed and reconstructed within a conceptual framework, where policies are developed, and plans are made for implementation to serve the needs of all students so that each may feel some meaningful measure of success within our school system.

In the next and final chapter I will summarize my thoughts, my feelings, my wonderings, and my hopes which have arisen through this journey through the research literature and through my own research. I will also suggest some strategies to bring a sense of agency and empowerment to all students in constructing meaning for their own sense of success utilizing both communicative and strategic action.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS---“COMING TO VOICE”

Writing this dissertation has been an interesting journey over the past three years. My life and my practice have changed considerably. I have become more reflective and more aware of the many taken-for-granted assumptions permeating my thoughts, words, and interactions in both my professional and my personal life. I still am curious and have many more questions than solutions. In this final chapter I will share some of these reflections, constructing more meaning as I engage further with the concept of success, exposing its complexity, and challenging some of the discourse surrounding its use in schools. I will also discuss the implications that I see for both educational practice and policy which have resulted from the knowledge I have gained and the meaning I have constructed from the writing.

#### **Personal Journeys**

During the last couple of years my daughter, Erin, has graduated with a PhD in Forest Biology, started a new job, and married a wonderful young man. They have also recently bought their first home. My daughter, Leah, is still a City Planner, but is working for a new city. She has also just purchased a new home with her wonderful fiancé and they are in the final planning stages of their wedding. My role as mom and my relationship with each of them continues to change and adapt as we all experience new challenges and successes in our lives, singly and together as a family. Since both Erin and Leah live in other parts of the country from me, our primary conversations are through weekly phone calls and frequent emails. There is no particular “plan” for their lives that I can--or want to--forecast or greatly influence or enforce, other than I hope for their happiness. We do engage in meaningful conversations about events in our lives and in the world, about books we have read, people we know, or hear about. We laugh and cry

together, express outrage, disappointment, frustration, worry, fear, and joy. My daughters demonstrate an openness and honesty and confidence that I admire and respect. They don't seem to be locked into others' expectations for their lives or for their feelings of success. As they told me a few years ago in their writing (see chapter 1), they continue to construct a notion of success for themselves, as they go along.

I still walk and talk with my friends Sherilyn, L, and J and I have added a few more good friends along the way, as well. My conversations with my friends still centre on our children, our workplaces, and our lives, more generally. We still are curious and ask a lot of questions, trying to deconstruct and reconstruct meaning from the various experiences we face and have faced along our life journeys. Our children are older, as are we, and we each face new challenges and insights, re-prioritizing our activities in response to new knowledge and shifting responsibilities and roles. We also talk about what success means in our lives and how it has evolved over the years. There are conflicting tensions between the culture of youth and many of us, as "Babyboomers", redefining what the expectations are for people in their middle years. There is some pressure for us to retire and make way for the young, which can make some feel less useful, perhaps, also less successful; there is also pressure for us to remain young-looking and young-acting (there is increasingly less chance of having lasting success there, for sure!). There is a certain allure to the "good old days" where the "plans" were made for us and were simplistic--but, I must remind myself, this current awareness of complexity and the explosion of global information-sharing is a good thing. Truth and knowledge do need to be negotiated and renegotiated, dependent on differing perspectives and understood through ongoing discourses.

I also feel an imperative to clarify ethical values and principles, however, amidst the chaos of so much deconstruction and conflicting information. Deconstruction can be destabilizing (Snitow, 1990) and moral relativism, where there are no "rights and wrongs",

provides no guidance in decision making and no sense of fairness or equity. There may not be a simple, single truth, but I believe that there does need to be something solid on which to reconstruct meaning. For me, this is not an externally enforced standard or expectation, but a “deeply personal construct” (Kidder, 1995, p. 219). I am more thoughtfully engaged in my decision making and work from a strong belief in the importance of fairness and equity, respect, honesty, and compassion.

I continue to have lively conversations with others about this dissertation and seek out diverse perspectives and ideas on what success means--for students, their parents, as well as for my colleagues, friends, family, and acquaintances. In so doing, I have begun to see more easily the often conflicting, overlapping identities we all have, depending on particular contexts. While I see common values and ethical principles underlying my fundamental sense of self, I can also see myself prioritizing and re-prioritizing my actions, dependent on the needs of the situation, the people involved, and my particular role at the time. I can also now better understand that there cannot be a single, simple version of success which would cover all situations, all roles, all the time.

I also recognize that I have benefited from my position as a privileged, white, middle class person. I have certainly bought into the dominant discourse seeing success in terms of a university education. Over 40 years later, I am still engaged actively in being a university student and still see it as a way to feel successful and to be successful. I have broadened my perspective somewhat and also see the benefits of learning and an education, not only as a means to getting a well paid job and to challenge the dominant discourse about a “woman’s place”, but also as a way to broaden my outlook and perspective in life.

I have made much more conscious efforts to include diverse voices in my personal and professional lives. In listening to and engaging in open dialogue, seeking to understand

perspectives different from my own white, middle class, well educated point of view, I am also better able to expand my own understanding of such complex concepts as equity, power, citizenship, and an idea of a common good, deconstructing them with others and making attempts at reconstructing them again to be more relevant to me as a global citizen and also to me as an educator. These expanded understandings assist me in dealing with these concepts daily in more practical, less abstract, and more inclusive and sensitive ways.

### **Professional Journeys**

My professional practice has also changed over the years. I am still a vice-principal at the same secondary school since I started on this particular journey in conjunction with this program at UBC and have moved along from a novice to a more confident administrator. I know the students and their families better from working with and listening to them over the years. I am better able to balance the never-ending challenge of people vs. paper, most days (people mostly win). I am constantly intrigued and amazed by the new situations and new personalities with which I am confronted every day at school. I love engaging in conversations with students, teachers, and parents in efforts to understand them--and myself--better.

Charol Shakeshaft (in Cameron, 1996) suggested that women and men administrators in schools have different life experiences and as a result, often see the school world and their place within it differently. While she tended to essentialize these differences, she also acknowledged that there were differences within, as well as between, the genders. Several of her findings do resonate with my experience in the school system as a teacher, a counsellor, and an administrator from K-12. I have served on numerous district and provincial committees over the years and as president of our administrators' association recently for two years. I am increasingly aware of power differentials and imbalances, as well as how various people, including myself, use power

to influence, control, and empower others. I have worked to gain credibility with staff, students, and colleagues in many ways that the other, male, administrators have not had to do. I can also better see how limiting so many of the structures in education are and how power is exerted politically for reasons other than to serve the direct needs of the students. It takes a certain courage, energy, and judgment in deciding when and how, and even if, to intervene when I see and/or am part of the power imbalance, particularly when I am on the “losing” end! It often takes me awhile--and the right person--to find appropriate ways to express my feelings and to construct an appropriate response. It is easier for me to intervene when I see and/or hear power being abused and causing pain and hurt with the students at my school, where I can intervene and work toward increased understanding and safety, when I can think more clearly, and engage in conversation more fluently and constructively.

Students, as well as educators, seem implicitly to settle into hierarchies within and between the groups to which they belong. Students generally are open to discussing these power imbalances, which are usually based on gender, age, cultural background, ability level, status gained from belonging to a certain club or sports team, and/or others. Often they are not aware of their own implicit, taken-for-granted biases or of the potentially damaging effects of their exercise of power over another student. Awareness of their various roles within these groups assists us in reconstructing a behavioural plan for the student together, which is meaningful and grounded in their own values, as well as those of the school.

I have maintained a strong focus on treating each student as an individual and in building positive, caring relationships with staff, students, and families. When we begin to understand each other, we can work better together to identify and meet the needs of the students and also to challenge them to find and define their own successes. I can exercise my positional power to try to empower others--teachers, students, and families. This is the “power through” that Kenway

and Willis (1998) described, as opposed to the “power over” as I see many of my male colleagues exercising, from their position of privilege and dominance within the hierarchy of the school system. I have also worked to deconstruct, explore, and critique some of the “power in” the institution of the school system and its structures and practices. When I work with students, I usually do not follow a pre-determined, specified “rule”, instead, I listen to the students and their stories and we make decisions together within a broad range of appropriate options. There is still certainly a tension between integrating the demands for control and for agency within the system.

As a vice-principal with student discipline as a primary area of responsibility, I make decisions every day that affect the lives of my students--to withdraw them from school, to suspend them, to change their courses or program, to invite their parents/guardians and/or community agency or district support personnel in to school for meetings to discuss support strategies, to adapt and/or modify classroom expectations, to develop contracts with students which outline acceptable behaviour, and more. I weigh the rights of one student with the rights of all the students. I search for fairness and a sense of equity, dependent on the student’s individual circumstances, as well as within broad district guidelines for acceptable student conduct. I have conversations with the students about these concepts and listen to what they have to say, as I do with their families and the educators at school who sometimes question my decisions. I think about and construct meaning along with some expanded notions of knowledge and truth, through having conversations--with the students, their families, others in the school, and in the community. It is an ongoing process, but a more thoughtful and inclusive process, since I began writing those few years ago.

I have begun to take more conscious action at a broader level as well, working on school, district, and provincial level committees. I have asked a lot of questions, hoping to expose and

begin to deconstruct the status quo and the taken-for-granted assumptions which underlie so much of what we do in education. Many of these policies and practices still reflect the white, male, middle class standard or expectation. I believe that I can disrupt this dominant discourse, ever so slightly sometimes, other times in more meaningful ways. Recently I was on the planning committee for a large national conference for educators. Early on in the planning I suggested that we invite an Aboriginal elder upon whose traditional territory the conference was being held, to open the conference as a sign of inclusion and respect. The other committee members agreed and we began, as a group, to find additional ways for the conference delegates to be able to identify with and to see themselves reflected within parts of the conference (i.e. a gender balance and regional balance in guest speakers, various cultural groups as student entertainers, etc.).

I also gain pleasure and see more possibilities in working directly with the students in my school. They are the future and are still in a stage in their development where they ask questions and challenge the status quo. I hope to engage that passion and curiosity among more of the students and channel it in positive, meaningful ways, meaningful both to them and to our world. A few examples of the work I have done working with students recently include such influential projects as developing a student Reflection Journal to accompany the visit of the Dalai Lama to Vancouver last fall and submitting a proposal to the United Nations G8/J8 Summit on the students' ideas and strategies for combating such globally vital issues as HIV/AIDS in Africa, Greenhouse Gas emissions, and the continued strife in Darfur. I also facilitated a large student group discussion to decide on what style of clothing constituted "appropriate" dress for the school. These were all very enlightening experiences for me, and for the students, as we listened to each other and to the diverse perspectives presented in a focus group format. It was also important modelling for a respectful, fair, inclusive process with which to arrive at a decision or a finished product, reflective and representative of the individual group members. Gaskell (1992)

demonstrated that student attitudes can be influenced and shaped by their educational experiences. We, as educators, do have influence over the choices and perceptions of our students. Are we going to continue to mindlessly reinforce the taken-for-granted, the dominant discourses, or are we going to try to engage our students in meaningful discourses, constructing new knowledge and supporting strategic action to promote positive change?

I also now look more closely for the marginalized students while I supervise in the hallways and classrooms, the consistently quiet, lonely ones, by themselves or on the outside of the social group, looking on. I try to find the students who seem to feel that they do not belong, who may feel marginalized, that they have no voice. I smile at them, find out their names, ask questions about them to teachers and counsellors, trying to uncover a link with which to start a conversation. I try to bring these students from the margins of this busy place, this school, slowly, carefully, into a place where they can feel that someone does care, knows their name, and is interested in what they have to say. Together we can begin to jointly construct a new social reality, as we learn more about each other through our discourse, however slowly and haltingly we do so. Sometimes, these quiet students do not want my interventions and I respect their rebuffs of my attention. But, I do still look for them and try to catch their eye, hopefully demonstrating openness to possible future interaction and an acknowledgement of their place in the school. It is important for me to also notice not only who is marginalized, but also what is marginalized. Is it because of gender, or race, or club/team membership, or something else I do not yet understand?

Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma (2000) rightly point out that many students often move in and out of the margins of both the formal and “informal” school life (pp. 201-202). Power relations can differ and be multi-layered both in the centre and in the margins. Students may feel a sense of belonging in a group or several groups, but also feel marginalized or powerless

because of their culture and/or gender or other “difference” in other contexts. While everyone cannot belong to all the groups in a school and in life, I believe that we do need to work toward another conceptualization of difference, the recognition and acceptance of difference as a strength--difference in cultural background and experience, religion, sexual orientation, social class, ability, interests, and more. I try to conceptualize the difference as not being “Other” or different from the standard of the white male, but different from each other and similar to each other, depending on the contexts, the various roles we take on as our identity develops--more like overlapping circles, than an either/or dichotomy.

These are all different discourses, in different contexts, serving different purposes, but all contribute to the construction of who I am as a person and who I am in my role as a vice-principal. Sometimes the discourses seem conflicting or contradictory, depending on the time, place, and/or audience. I have become much more aware that my sense of self, my subjectivity, is not fixed, nor is it simplistic, but constantly shifting, as new meanings are constructed and new situations demand different responses. Conceptualizations of truth and knowledge are also constantly shifting for me, being deconstructed as questions are asked, many taken-for-granted are exposed, new perspectives are uncovered, and answers are constructed jointly through conversations, as well as through my reading and writing, and through my increased involvement with the visual and performing arts.

In addition to these constructions of my self and others’ sense of identity, I am also finding my voice. As bell hooks (1988) explained, “coming to voice is an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless--our beings defined and interpreted by others” (p. 12). I am sharing both my knowledge and power, using language and giving voice to resist the white, male, dominant

discourse about a woman's "place". I am placing my self at the centre, taking strategic action (Coulter, 1998) and making efforts at replacing structures and practices which serve to reinforce the status quo with new structures and practices which seek to include diverse opinions, interests, and needs. As a white woman in the Western world, I am more aware that I have a responsibility to not contribute to the further domination and oppression of other women and girls, as well as men and boys, who are less privileged than I am. As hooks so ably explained, race and class, as well as gender are all factors which combine to create the social construction of "femaleness" (p. 23).

In addition, I need to consider that within all cultures, as well as within genders, there are differences. While there are certainly similarities within groups of women, of people with Aboriginal heritage, or of Chinese, or Russian heritage, no cultural group is totally homogenous. Carol Reid (2001) stated eloquently that the consideration of differences within cultural groups is often seen as an impediment to multicultural policies and educational practices which assume sameness within a cultural group. "Othering" in these cases involves the comparison of "them" and "us" and a desire to make the "Other" the same as us. These policies speak more to "equality" than to principles of "equity". She argued for a view of culture to include a dynamic component and some degree of agency within the constraints imposed by being "Other". She also argued for a concept of culture as being socially constructed, not biologically determined. By assuming and making decisions based on stereotypical, taken-for-granted assumptions of what various groups "need" to become equal to the white, male, middle class standard (i.e. Aboriginal students learn better in hands-on activities in group settings), we, as educators, are limiting the possibilities for these students through a kind of "social determinism" (p. 28). This echoes the position of Bryson and de Castell (1993) that gender is a socially constructed concept, and as such, must be deconstructed and reconstructed in more meaningful and inclusive ways.

Maxine Greene (1978) advocated for the importance of being “awake” in order to overcome indifference and a sense of powerlessness, so common within the complexities of modern life. She suggested that these feelings could be overcome “through conscious endeavour on the part of individuals to keep themselves awake, to think about their condition in the world, to inquire into the forces that appear to dominate them, to interpret the experiences they are living day by day. Only as they learn to make sense of what is happening, can they feel themselves to be autonomous. Only then can they develop the sense of agency required for living a moral life” (p. 44). She reminded readers, as did Kenway and Willis (1998) that our social worlds are not fixed realities, but are interpreted. Greene also advocated for the importance of teaching students to be “wide-awake”, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes, seeking out diverse points of view, engaging in open discussions, pondering alternative actions, and acting as critical thinkers and “moral agents”. She believed that educators had a responsibility to try to empower students, to engage them in meaningful conversation and actions, and to assist them in taking responsibility for their choices. She believed that we could not live moral lives if we acted without reflection, if we did only what was expected, or what we were told to do (p. 49).

I believe that as educators, as parents, and as citizens, we have the responsibility to deconstruct the taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding gender, race, culture, social class, religion, and other socially constructed identities, as well as to also assist and support our young people in doing so. Those of us with power resulting from privilege have added responsibilities to try to empower those who feel dominated, oppressed, and powerless. We can begin to do this, not by deciding what is best for the group, from our privileged point of view, but rather by creating safe, open spaces for groups to have a discourse, to share their divergent points of view,

and to create broader understandings. We need to do this in order to “break with the mechanical life, to overcome ...submergence in the habitual” (Greene, 1978, p.46).

In addition, those who do have power and privilege have the responsibility to move beyond creating spaces and breaking with the status quo to actively seek out those who have been and continue to be marginalized. We need to include their voices and perspectives, as well as their valuable situated knowledge in discussions and action plans in order to make meaningful changes in educational practice and policy to ensure more equitable treatment for all students.

### **Students’ Active Engagement**

Weedon (1997) suggested that girls needed spaces to explore and to make sense of their worlds, particularly as to how power relations served to structure society. Gaskell (2004) also advocated for the importance of creating spaces for deconstructing and debating the “public good” (p. 308) in education. Schools, in particular, and life, in general, have become so busy and information rich that it is easy to fall into habitual behaviours and attitudes which reinforce the status quo. Stereotypes, marginalization, and power imbalances can flourish in such an environment. Only when people are “wide-awake” and engaged in discourses with diverse perspectives, openly discussing such concepts as equity, citizenship, social justice issues, and the purposes of education, can meaningful change take place within the system.

There are dangers in a superficial commitment to encouraging student voice in schools where goals for student involvement are unclear and may serve political agendas, rather than those of personal growth and active democracy. Rudduck and Fielding (2006) suggested that a rethinking of childhood and adolescence by educators was necessary for meaningful student participation in schools. They found that educators who saw their students as responsible and capable of contributing to the school in meaningful ways, rather than as subordinates who needed to be told what to think, were better able to share power and to develop the necessary

trust for students to speak openly. The authors also found that the students understood democratic principles better by practicing them in schools rather than by having them taught in preparation for them being future citizens (p. 223). They described the development of agency and self confidence for students when the students could explore their points of view and have a real say in matters which were important to them. Rather than having their views constructed from “exam-acceptable voices” (p. 224), the students grew to appreciate and to develop their own voices and a clearer sense of their personal identity. The students also experienced the results of their involvement through inclusive, authentic conversations about what worked and what did not work in helping them to progress and to feel successful, as changes were made in school structures and practices.

Fielding (2004) believed that in order for the discourses between students and educators to be transformational for both groups, there needed to be spaces created where teachers and students “meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together” (p. 309). The discussions in these two studies had to do with decisions regarding curricula and teaching practices, among others, that had real meaning for the students they interviewed. However, there are some restrictions on what can be changed and the students need to be involved in issues over which there is some opportunity for change in order to build and maintain trusting relationships. While that deep level of discourse would need teacher and student readiness for real change, many taken-for-granted assumptions would undoubtedly be uncovered, and interesting, meaningful strategies could be co-constructed to meet the individual and group needs of the students in their learning. To involve students in broader discourses would be enlightening for all who are involved, but the students also need to know the boundaries within which the system operates and how slowly change happens.

Otherwise, students' perceptions of having no real voice can be reinforced and disillusionment can replace passion and engagement.

### **Girls' Voices Resist the Dominant Discourse**

In my efforts thus far in the school during and since my research study, I have just begun to engage students in conversations and projects which relate directly to their expressed interests. These are students who eagerly volunteer to participate, who already have a strong sense of who they are and what they want in their lives. The numbers of participants in each group also was small. It is a beginning. I also need to involve less engaged, less confident students in these kinds of discussions in order to expand my own understanding and to assist the students in their feelings of belonging and in their learning.

The girls in my study had several suggestions as to what they needed and wanted. They were able to jointly construct meaning about the concept of success, sometimes hesitantly, sometimes strongly, always thoughtfully throughout the discourse. They were able to negotiate meaning and to share power in the focus groups setting. All the girls were actively engaged and participated in developing themes within the conversation. They demonstrated a strong sense of their own subjectivity and a self confidence in being active agents in their own lives. Each group consisted of girls with many differences. The Fine Arts girls and Academic girls were from various cultural heritages. The Aboriginal girls, while sharing the broad heritage encompassed in the word Aboriginal, likely were from different cultures. These latter girls also shared some of the interests and abilities of the girls in the other groups. All the groups shared the same gender and general age range, but there were many differences between and among the girls in the groups. There were also many overlapping circles among them.

The girls in the Fine Arts group focused their conversation around the themes of achieving balance and being well-rounded, setting their own goals, following their passion for

their art, the importance of support from family, friends, and teachers, and the importance of physical health. The girls constructed high academic achievement as a means to an end, a way to get to the university or institute of their choice so they could follow their study in the arts. They saw themselves as actively deciding on their own goals and seeking out support from those around them. They did not follow the dominant discourse and external expectation for defining themselves and their success through setting goals toward and attaining high exam results alone. They wanted and worked toward a broader conceptualisation of success for themselves to include being creative, feeling happy, travelling, recreational activities, supportive friends and family, and a healthy lifestyle. An interesting discourse on appearance, through my feminist lens, included more negotiation about what clothes and style meant within the context of school. Looking “too attractive” (K) was seen as detrimental to being taken seriously, at the same time, expressing oneself through clothing choice and appearance was seen as fun and creative, as well as a way to try on different personalities (P). The girls deconstructed appearance further to see that there may be different meanings for different girls and finally agreed, by the end of the tape, that what was on the inside was not necessarily reflected by clothing choice and hairstyles which were visible on the outside. These girls demonstrated an understanding through their deconstruction and reconstruction of a significant issue for women and girls. What is the “message” that clothing sends? Does a short skirt “invite” male attention? Do women “ask for it” by their choice of clothing? The media and the fashion and music industries promote youth and sex appeal to sell almost everything. The pressures to be thin and sexy seem to be enormous for women and girls. These girls, however, were able to resist those pressures and determine for themselves what was ok and what was not. They were on their way to understanding some of the complexities surrounding women and fashion and their appearance.

The girls in the Aboriginal group focused their conversation on success around the themes of making their own goals and overcoming obstacles, the positive and negative influences of relationships, the importance of being popular, looking good, and feeling confident, and having balance with extra curricular activities as well as academics. They also explored issues concerning money and jobs as determinants of success. They were able to identify and share their goals for school and for later in their lives, as well as specific strategies they used to overcome obstacles and to maintain that focus on their goals. They openly discussed many of the stresses they experienced, including pressure from family and friends to “do really well in school” (L), “not ‘getting’ the homework” (Mi), the social stresses from friends taking up too much time or having fights with boyfriends, and being in the popular group (Mi). The girls agreed that while family and friends could exert additional pressures, they also could provide valuable support and assistance in overcoming the obstacles that interfered with them reaching their goals. They mentioned having frequent breaks while doing homework, getting exercise, joining a club or team, and spending time with friends and family as strategies that worked for them to relieve feelings of pressure and stress. One girl insightfully suggested that having extra curricular interests could actually “keep you away from doing things that will not make you successful” (Me). This part of the conversation demonstrated very insightful self awareness as well as sense of agency in being able to influence one’s own outcomes.

This group of Aboriginal girls also struggled somewhat with the concept of appearance and its meaning. They disagreed on who was popular at the school and what message clothes and appearance sent about them. Some of the girls thought clothing choice was about comfort, others thought clothes made them feel happy and self confident (Mi). They deconstructed the issue further and had some insights along the way, wondering if clothes made one feel confident or if confidence made one feel and look good. They talked about the dangers of becoming overly

concerned with appearance and trying too hard to be a person you're not (L). Again Mi was able to capture the essence of the discourse with an important observation, "I'd rather have someone hate me for who I am, than love me for being someone who I'm not." These girls also did not succumb to the dominant discourse, espoused by the consumer driven economy that clothes and appearance were the most important issue for women and girls.

In the last theme of the conversation for this group, "enough" money and a "good" job, the girls also struggled to jointly construct some common meaning. They deconstructed "enough" money to the point of living on the street and wondering if a person could still be happy. They discussed the importance of having their own money as opposed to relying on a partner or spouse (Me) (Mi). They were able reconstruct some sense of having money as being insufficient, in itself, to define happiness and success. Li came back to the goal setting discussion and expressed her thoughts that setting and achieving one's own goals determined success. This discourse also showed resistance to the dominant discourse where success can be measured by the trappings that lots of money can bring, including the big house, flashy car, expensive trips and clothing, and other "things". These girls again saw themselves as active agents in defining and achieving their own success, without the external trappings.

The Academic group was quite different from the Fine Arts and the Aboriginal groups in the themes of their discourse. These girls focused almost exclusively on the importance of achieving high marks. They did include some discussion on the process of getting the marks and demonstrated some ambivalence about their friends who often studied harder than they did and struggled to achieve mid-range exam scores. They seemed to "Other" these students in that while they recognized their hard work in attaining a C or C+ mark, they relegated them to a lower status career that would not include university. Their tone seemed condescending when they discussed the importance of other, less academic interests, such as having good social skills (Li).

The girls did acknowledge that they tended to forget everything after cramming for a test and often just memorized formulas without understanding the concepts (Lu), however, they held steadfast to their belief that the marks and a university education were what counted as success, in the end. They also acknowledged that support and pressure from their family and friends influenced their focus on achieving high marks. These girls seemed to accept and to be more a part of the dominant discourse on success relating to high exam scores than either of the other groups. Since they chose to be part of this Academic group, I guess that is hardly surprising. They seemed to be defining themselves in this (in my opinion) narrow way. The high achievement discourse can certainly include girls; however, it seems that these girls also experienced some ambivalent feelings. They expressed feelings of guilt at attaining the high marks, while their friends worked harder for lower marks. They also tried to downplay the ease with which they wrote tests and scored high marks by telling stories of panic and anxiety during their test taking (Lu). These emotional responses are usually not considered in the dominant discourse, where the high number scores are considered the measure of success.

The girls in all the groups expressed a sense of agency in setting and meeting their goals, even though the goals differed somewhat. The girls also all mentioned the importance of positive support from their family and friends in achieving their goals. Money and appearance were discussed in each group, although in differing ways. The girls were able to use language to deconstruct and begin to reconstruct some meaning for topics that were interesting and relevant to them and their lives, respectfully negotiating their ways through disagreements and differences of opinion. They seemed able and willing to share power among the group members since each girl contributed to the discourse and no one appeared to be marginalized or silenced. It is difficult to generalize or to conclude too much since there were so few girls in each group and the sessions were only one hour in length. However, I am heartened that these girls were so

articulate and engaged in the discourse and that they were able to create and contribute to an alternate discourse about what success means.

### **Implications for Policy Development**

Jane Gaskell (1996) oversaw a study of exemplary schools across Canada as a basis for educational policy development. The research was a collaborative project contracted by the federal government as part of their political agenda and involved mostly university academic researchers. Gaskell described a complex process of dialogue between researchers, government officials, and local school personnel, often with competing agendas.

Their emphasis was on maintaining a structure which focused on local autonomy, while also ensuring national coherence on accountability, common understandings, and sense of purpose. The research team accomplished this through intense and continual dialogue, a model, Gaskell asserted, they also recommended was a good way to run schools (pp. 196-197). They utilized a case study approach and sought out examples of best practice as well as school retention rates. Rather than predetermined definitions for complex concepts like “exemplary”, “successful schools”, and “best practice” (everyone on the committee had different views on what each meant), the research committee sought nominations from local communities for schools they thought were exemplary and to include why they thought so. From this data and their own research at the nominated and chosen schools, the definitions and criteria for exemplary schools emerged. They found that the successes of the schools and the ever present tensions between such educational concepts as diversity and equity, the social and the academic, and accountability and autonomy, were best understood within their local contexts. Whether it was school leadership or special programs, exemplary schools responded to their own communities’ interests, needs, and priorities (p. 206). Based on this study, Gaskell further argued for government educational policies to also respect local and regional differences, rather than

only developing policies stressing equality and accountability measures across large provincial, national, or even global jurisdictions. These latter policies were found generally to tend to negate or marginalize local decision making and responsiveness to local needs and expertise.

Rudduck and Fielding (2006) also recognized that current right wing political policies in education with their emphasis on narrow definitions of student achievement, imposed undue limits on teachers' abilities to tailor curriculum as well as instructional and assessment strategies, since they were driven by compulsory exams and published marks. The authors believed that this narrow focus on standardized test taking also limited student voice. There is so little control given to educators that students and their teachers can contribute little to changing structures which do not serve their needs. If learning and understanding and building meaningful knowledge are the purposes of education, emphasis needs to move away from strict controls at the local level and the "memorization and passing tests" mentality of schooling (p. 229).

Kelly and Brandes (in press, 2007) engaged in conversations with teachers of English and social studies, exploring the ways by which assessment strategies could contribute to nurture equity within the classroom, as well as increasing student self-development and self-determination. Kelly and Brandes linked teaching for social justice and anti-oppression theory to the teachers' assessment practices. By moving away from the "standards" and "accountability" test-taking expectations for teaching and assessing currently prevalent in classrooms in BC and many Western education systems, they demonstrated that "classroom-based assessment remains central to pedagogy and student learning" (p. 5). Extending the work of Young (1990), Kelly and Brandes suggested that teachers needed to focus more on empowering their students and preparing them for more participatory citizenship by utilizing assessment strategies which included social responsibility and also served to "enhance both self-development and self-determination for marginalized groups and work against institutional constraints" (p. 27). They

also suggested teachers needed to communicate to their students and to their parents the importance of equitable assessment practices in enabling diverse students to demonstrate what they had learned, as opposed to the “standards-based” assessment strategies which catered more to an externally imposed standard and which could lead to students’ lack of motivation, passivity, and self-doubt through ranking and labelling “winners” and “losers”. This is certainly an example of a valuable strategy for shifting the balance of power within classrooms and schools and recognizing and valuing diverse forms of achievement and “success”.

Rist (1998) discussed the importance of developing policies over time, creating contextual understandings about relevant issues, building linkages to maintain continuity, and constantly educating about new research developments. He advocated that policy researchers work with policy makers to ensure policies serve an “enlightenment” function, as opposed to an “engineering” function, which is based solely on data collection for policy direction (p. 403). He believed that researchers served to provide a large range of input into policy direction, inclusive of diverse perspectives. Too often policy development was the result of a small group of politicians, the media, and special interest groups, not reflective of the larger population who would be affected by the policies. This small group defines the issues or the problems and formulates goals and strategies to meet those goals. Then programs, procedures, and regulations are developed, along with resource allocations to support the implementation. Finally, accountability processes to measure impacts or outcomes are developed. Rist believed that qualitative research practices, much like those employed by Gaskell (1996) offered a better alternative to simplistic data gathering. By interviewing the people affected by the policy and listening to their reactions and questions and ideas, richer data can be assessed than by collecting numbers alone. Often situations that prompted the initial policy discussions change more quickly

than does the policy development and implementation processes. By utilizing qualitative research methodology, changes in focus can be observed and responses reworked more quickly.

I believe that educational policies need to be more inclusive and research based, preferably using trained researchers, with a qualitative focus. Rather than responding to global economic pressures in the development and implementation of policy, I believe that students, educators, parents, and local communities need to be an integral part of the process. The people most affected need to be heard, they/we need to be part of the decision making and explanation of issues of concern, on their current and past experiences and context, in the selection of appropriate strategies, programs, and regulations, as well as with outcome measures. Policies, I believe, need to be constructed through discourse to meet individual and group needs and interests at the local school and community level in order to be relevant and meaningful to students and educators. Too often educational policies do not consider local needs and are dust collectors on library shelves, rather than useful documents which reflect commonly held values and which support individual student needs and interests.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

I believe that the girls in my study, although they were few and their time was short to converse, clearly demonstrated their capability to reflect, articulate, and construct meaning on topics of interest to them. Although they occasionally struggled with differences in opinions or appropriate vocabulary, they had important things to say. The implications for practice and policy discussed in the preceding sections move far beyond what these few students had to say in a brief, one hour session. However, the process of engaging students on topics of interest to them is a valuable one. We in schools, as well as educational policy makers, would do well to set up safe, inclusive spaces for students to share their thoughts and feelings, to challenge and deconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes, and to learn the principles of

participatory democracy by actually practicing it. We need to teach students--and ourselves--how to find and to use agency and voice, to step in from the margins, to share power, and to engage meaningfully and morally in their--and our--own lives. Only through being "wide-awake" and working together, with all our difference--and our similarities--can we consciously build a better world where values such as social justice, equity, and care can be demonstrated in our everyday lives.

The first action educators need to take is to strategize and to act in ways that counter feelings of powerlessness, so that more voices can be heard regarding the many and contested meanings of success. We can do this through creating safe venues where students can express their thoughts and feelings, telling their stories, listening respectfully to the stories of others. We need to model and participate in the deconstruction of the taken-for-granted assumptions and of the status quo with our students. We need to ask open-ended questions, examine current practices, programs, and policies, and then jointly reconstruct answers and solutions that work for all students. These alternate discourses need to be a vital part of decision making at the school and district and provincial levels. Students also need greater access to the dominant discourses within the education system, to interrupt it, in order to more fully understand the complexities of language, various power structures, and what constitutes knowledge in different contexts. I can start at the school with our students by replicating the focus group format, asking questions and allowing them to bring topics of concern to discuss and negotiate meaning.

I can also include different students on committees and invite them to participate on student leadership activities at the district and provincial levels. In so doing, students can learn diverse vocabularies and develop an expanded sense of themselves within multiple contexts, gathering knowledge from multiple sources to more fully appreciate and participate in institutions of influence and power. I need to ensure all students are included, so as not to create

further divisions between the privileged and the marginalized, subordinated, “Others”. I need to find ways for the resistant and the invisible students to feel included and that they have some agency and power to contribute in positive, self affirming ways. In this way, stereotypes can be exposed, meaning can be co-constructed, and power can be shared so that our school can function more effectively as a participatory democracy.

I can also work with teachers to question their ideas of the status quo, to challenge them to see their students as individuals with diverse talents and with stories to tell. There are already many caring, involved teachers who listen to and involve their students in classroom and school activities and who assess them in a variety of ways, not just by test scores. These teachers, like the teachers in the video on the Smithers Secondary school (Williams, 2003), know the importance of knowing their students and challenging them as individuals to do their best work and to express their learning in various ways. Curriculum resource materials can also be chosen to better reflect the diverse cultural and socio-economic circumstances of the students in classrooms. Support services can seek to understand, rather than to “remediate” differences from the expectations of the dominant, hegemonic discourse. Non-engagement, non-attendance, and acting out can be viewed as acts of resistance, rather than as acts of defiance. By seeking to better understand the traditions, heritage, talents, and interests of all students, we can lessen feelings of isolation and powerlessness.

We also need to work closely with families in partnership at all levels in the school system, particularly at secondary, when relationships can be strained as students seek more independence and families tend to take a step back. All the girls in my study acknowledged the importance of positive family support to their feelings of success. This positive, supportive family involvement was also a key concern for the Aboriginal groups (Bazylak, 2002; Canadian Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1996). Families need to be meaningfully involved in

efforts to develop relevant programs for students. Different kinds of knowledge and different ways of expressing learning must be part of this collaborative process. In my work as vice-principal, I already work closely with families. I can encourage counsellors, student services teachers, and classroom teachers to do the same, engaging in discussions with them about the benefits of doing so--for the students and for themselves.

All students need to engage with their learning, to think critically and analytically, to feel a sense of agency and to have their voices heard. They need to feel safe, respected, cared about, and included in order to learn about themselves and the world, and to find a meaningful place within it.

Everyone can have feelings of success if they have the freedom and the support to continue to be curious and to take action in directions that make sense to themselves and to the others with whom they are in dialogue. Growth and self knowledge are not finite processes. There are many paths upon which to journey in order to discover many truths, to discover “the sound of your heart’s knowledge” (Gibran, 2000).

Many successes can be found and cherished along the way. As Castellano (2000) so ably stated, “the ultimate validity of knowledge is whether it enhances the capacity of people to live well” (p. 33). As educators and as citizens, I believe that each of us has the responsibility to ensure we do all that we can to contribute to all people having the knowledge and skills needed to be able to live well and to feel some success.

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## APPENDIX I

### BRIEF SUMMARY OF ACADEMIC GROUP

Five students participated in an hour long discussion on the topic of "What is success?" The discussion was facilitated by Mrs. Sherilyn Stedham and was held at Gleneagle School on Wednesday, April 14 in Block C. These students were girls from grade 11 or 12 who had volunteered to participate in my research study as part of my doctorate program at UBC. They defined themselves as "Academic" students and each girl was enrolled in several academic grade 11 and/or grade 12 courses.

The girls each participated fully, gaining confidence as the conversation progressed, adding their thoughts and feelings, extending the ideas of each other. They spent some time discussing the importance of the learning process, in addition to the importance of obtaining high marks. Many of the girls felt that working hard should be recognized and valued in school, as well as the "end result" as measured in exam and test results. They delved deeper into this topic by thinking about what it was they were learning in class, if it was just for the exam or if there was any real understanding of the concepts being taught. They also explored how they felt when they got high marks if they didn't have to work very hard for them.

They also spoke of the importance of feeling happy, a sense of accomplishment, in feeling successful. Their conversation took them to their futures, where the learning process and specific events in class and in their school life might become more important in retrospect than the "A" they received in a particular class. They also linked their good grades to a good career and to making money.

The girls spoke of the stereotypical view of success espoused by the school, the school district and the media as needing some questioning, which they were certainly able and ready to do. The girls talked about the importance of being "well-rounded" and trying some new things. The girls, while focused mainly on their marks, also described the importance of extra-curricular activities, friends and family in supporting their success.

## APPENDIX II

### BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE FINE ARTS GROUP

Six students participated in an hour long discussion on the topic of "What is success?" The discussion was facilitated by Mrs. Sherilyn Stedham and was held at Gleneagle School on Wednesday, April 14, 2004 in B Block. These students were girls from grade 11 or 12 who had volunteered to participate in my research study as part of my doctorate program at UBC. They defined themselves as "Fine Arts" students and each girl was enrolled in and/or interested in one or several of the fine arts.

The girls began their conversation hesitantly, but soon were fully participating, adding their thoughts and feelings, extending the ideas of each other. The girls talked a lot about the importance of finding a balance between several competing interests as being an important part of success. They mentioned career/jobs, recreational activities, school/academics, family, friends and for some, religion as necessary components of a happy, successful life. Overriding all these elements was the importance of being able to express themselves creatively, to be able to live their passion, whether it was writing, music and/or visual art.

They also talked about the importance of defining success for themselves, as an individualistic pursuit. They were self-directed and future-oriented, quite comfortable and extremely articulate describing the importance of setting small goals as they clearly saw themselves continually learning and moving ahead in their lives, following and embracing their particular creative avenues. They mentioned several times that it was most important to enjoy their job and that making lots of money would likely not follow them in artistic careers.

The girls mentioned the role of school and certain teachers in helping them to find and support their particular artistic talents and passions. They also noted a difference in how they felt in grades 9 and 10 when there were fewer electives and the importance of expanded elective choice in grades 11 and 12. Some girls felt very supported by the school programs and that they were stepping stones to future success while others felt constrained and ready to meet the challenges of the "real world". Many of the girls saw their grades, while important in getting them where they needed to go, were not an end in themselves. Their fine arts courses helped to motivate many of the girls to come to school each day. Teachers and family members played a prominent role in these girls' lives. They seemed to be oriented towards adults and influenced in positive ways to find balance and to develop their own vision of success, even though they all described different kinds of influence, particularly from their families.

They spoke of their personal appearance within the context of overall health as well as being important to reflect how others would respond to them. They recognized the importance of feeling "put together" as part of their self-confidence and of being respected by others at school and at work. They recognized that how a girl is dressed may influence the perceptions of others about who she is as a person. They also discussed how dressing may be a creative statement and while people tend to judge others on their appearance, sometimes it can part of a girl's self-expression.

The girls each participated in this fascinating conversation and jointly constructed a complex definition of what they thought about success. The recurring predominant themes were self-direction, balance and the happiness found in following their particular passion within the fine arts.

## APPENDIX III

### BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE ABORIGINAL GROUP

Four students participated in an hour long discussion on the topic of "What is success?" The discussion was facilitated by Mrs. Sherilyn Stedham and was held at Gleneagle School on Friday, April 16 in Block E. These students were girls from grade 11 or 12 who had volunteered to participate in my research study as part of my doctorate program at UBC. They were all Aboriginal girls, some of who met regularly with a district First Nations Cultural Worker.

The girls began their conversation hesitantly, but soon were fully participating, adding their thoughts and feelings, extending the ideas of each other, sometimes becoming heated in their conversation. The girls talked about the importance of being happy as the basis of success. They also talked about setting goals and feeling a sense of accomplishment and success when they met their goals. They discussed ways to reduce stresses they felt in school so they could maintain a focus on their studies.

They also discussed at length the importance of friends and boyfriends in supporting their feelings of success. Some of the girls felt that friends, boyfriends and family could also be a source of stress. They talked about how relationship issues could distract them from doing well in school.

Their futures, whether having a job, going to university, being married, having a family, being a "stay-at-home mom" were explored in some depth. The girls discussed various aspects of their lives that would make them happy. Some felt that everyone had to discover what could make them happy for themselves. Others felt that a balance of some of the following would make them happy: school, friends, boyfriend, family, and activities outside of school.

They talked about some of the difficulties some of them felt with pressure from their families and how they felt stressed and discouraged from the pressure to do well at school.

The girls also talked about the importance of appearance and of being popular in school. There was some disagreements on the role of clothes, appearance, including weight, whether they contributed to their feelings of confidence and thereby success in school, or not.

They also talked about the importance of having a positive attitude in being successful. The girls identified several things that contributed to their positive attitude, including: being confident about one's self, fitness, friends, family, boyfriends, clothes, the things one does and the ways one acts.

The girls also spent some time exploring the role of money in defining success later in life. There was considerable disagreement in how much money was enough to enable someone to feel successful. They also talked about earning money and being given money, where earning the money seemed to be more important in feeling successful providing a sense of accomplishment.

The girls seemed to be fully engaged in the topic and keen to relate personal experiences to illustrate their points of view. Some of the girls occasionally struggled to find the words to

express their thoughts to their liking. They kept coming back to a few themes to define success, including setting and accomplishing small goals and feeling happy.

## APPENDIX IV

### OPENING STATEMENT

#### *Preamble for each group:*

Hello, my name is Sherilyn Stedham, some of you may remember me as a counsellor when you went to Scott Creek Middle School a few years ago. I am here today as a friend and former colleague of your vice-principal, Mrs. Jean Fraser, to assist her in finding some information for her doctoral thesis on "What is school success?" She is interested in what you girls think about school success. I am holding these group sessions for 3 different groups of girls at Gleneagle Secondary and she will have our sessions tape recorded and then transcribed. She will provide the transcripts back to you as a group so you can check them for accuracy. She will also give back to you her interpretations and analyses of our sessions, so you can check that she is on the right track. Mrs. Fraser thinks that it is very important to hear what you girls have to say about how to be successful at school and what success really means to you.

She is interested in the group response, not in individual response, so your names will not be associated with particular comments. Mrs. Fraser will ensure that your comments are kept confidential and your names will not be used in her writings.

Within our group session it is important that we all agree to keep the discussions confidential, as well. Does everyone agree that whatever is said here today is kept private? This is to help people be open and honest and not to be afraid that someone will share her thoughts and feelings with others outside the session. There is, however, always the chance that someone may repeat something that was discussed by accident. You all need to be aware of this slight possibility before we begin.

We also need to agree on some basic rules of the group session to make it easier for everyone to contribute. Since we are a small group, I would like everyone to feel comfortable in sharing their opinions. Some rules for effective group participation include: taking turns to speak (no interrupting someone while they are speaking), no put-downs (either verbal, as in, "That's stupid", or non-verbal, as in eye rolling), respectful listening and responding. Are there other rules anyone can think of that would help the process to be open and safe for everyone to participate?

In order for me to get to know you a little better, and in case you don't already know each other, let's take a few minutes and go around the table to introduce yourselves and tell the group a little about yourself.

#### *Sample questions:*

What do you think it means to be successful in school?

What are some obstacles to being successful in school?

What are some things that would /do/could help you to be successful in school?

## APPENDIX VI (1)

### EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FORM

March 10, 2004

Dear Students and Parents,

As part of my thesis for the Doctorate in Educational Policy and Leadership Program at UBC, I wish to involve three groups of female grade 12 students at Gleneagle Secondary School. I am working with Professor Deirdre Kelly from the Education Studies Department of UBC (604-822-3952). She is my Faculty Advisor and she will be the Principal Investigator in this study. As such, Professor Kelly will not interact with the students, but will advise me along the way. The title of the project is "What is school success?"

I am interested in exploring how different groups of girls define school success. I am distributing these letters to all the girls in grade 12 academic and fine arts classes, as well as to the girls in the First Nations Cultural study group which meets each week at Gleneagle.

I am hoping that at least 6 girls from the academic classes and the First Nations group will return the Expression of Interest form below to their teacher. I will randomly choose 6 girls from these returned forms for each group. I will then send home a formal parent/guardian consent form. The groups will be facilitated by a trained counsellor, Mrs. Sherilyn Stedham, who has particular experience and expertise in leading groups of adolescent students. The timeline will be during March to complete the consent process with the group conversations about school success being held in early April.

The conversations will be open-ended within agreed upon rules for respectful discussion and will take approximately 1 hour after school on an agreed upon date. These will be audio-taped and I will have a research assistant transcribe the tapes. I plan to have 1 or 2 sessions with each group of girls, depending on how easily the girls engage in the topic and how well the tape machine works.

I think it is vital to include the voices of these diverse groups of girls in the broader political conversation about what school success means. I hope to find insightful reflections from all the girls on how they define success. I hope to broaden the definition of success and to add the girls' voices to the conversations around policies and financial

**EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FORM**

(please put a ✓ beside your choice **and return this form to your daughter's teacher by March 26, 2004**)

I am  I am not  interested in my child participating in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Name (**PLEASE PRINT**)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Name (**PLEASE PRINT**)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

March 2004, Page 2 of

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APPENDIX VI (2)

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



**Department of Educational Studies**

Mailing address:

2125 Main Mall

Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: 604-822-5374

Fax: 604-822-4244

<http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca>

March 10, 2004

Dear Parents/Guardians,

This letter is the second step in informing you and your daughter and in gaining your consent for her to participate in a study of senior female students at Gleneagle Secondary regarding their views of school success. This study is part of my thesis for the Doctorate in Educational Policy and Leadership Program at UBC. I am working with Professor Deirdre Kelly from the Education Studies Department of UBC (604-822-3952). She is my Faculty Advisor and she will be the Principal Investigator in this study. As such, Professor Kelly will not interact with the students, but will advise me along the way.

The title of my study is "What is success in schools?" I am interested in exploring how different groups of girls define school success. I believe that too often we, in schools, focus only on a narrow band of school success and in so doing, we invalidate the successes of our students.

I think it is vital to include the voices of these diverse groups of girls in the broader political conversation about what school success means. I hope to find insightful reflections from all the girls on how they define success. I also hope to broaden the definition of success and to add the girls' voices to the conversations around policies and financial allocations, as well as to the political and philosophical debates on what school success means.

## APPENDIX VI (2)

### PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

#### THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



At the beginning of each group's session, rules of respectful participation will be discussed and agreed upon (e.g. turn taking, no put downs, etc.) The importance of maintaining confidentiality of the discussions in the groups will also be stressed to all the girls. However, there is always some risk that the participants may divulge some of the conversation that has taken place. This topic should not lend itself too much in the way of personal disclosure of potentially embarrassing or sensitive situations.

Each participant's identity will be kept totally confidential by me. I am going to focus on the content of the conversation for each of the groups. I will gather each group together to verify my interpretation and analysis of the conversation following the sessions. The transcriptions and returned consent letters will be kept in a locked file cabinet and/or in a password secured computer file. No one, except the research assistant who will transcribe the audio tapes of the girls' conversations, and me will have access to the tapes.

The conversations will be open-ended within agreed upon rules for respectful discussion and will take approximately 1 hour after school on an agreed upon date. These will be audio-taped and I will have a research assistant transcribe the tapes. I plan to have 1 or 2 sessions with each group of girls, depending on how easily the girls engage in the topic and how well the tape machine works.

Your daughter has been chosen randomly to participate in this study from the Expressions of Interest Forms returned from the Initial Letter of Contact that I sent home with your daughter in March 2004.

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may

**APPENDIX VIII (2)**

**PARENTS QUESTIONNAIRE**

*What is success? Questionnaire*

1. How old were you in April 2004?

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2. What grade were you in last school year?

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3. Who did you live with last school year?

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4. Where were your parents/guardians born?

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5. What kind of work do your parents/guardians do?

---

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6. Did they finish high school? college? university? where?

---

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7. What language(s) do you speak at home?

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Your name-----

Your group: First Nations? Academic? Fine Arts?

Thanks again for your help

Jean Fraser