Transforming Education to Create an Alternative for Young Women and Girls who are Marginalized, Street-involved and/or Homeless

by
TRACEY MCINTOSH

B.Ed., The University of British Columbia, 1985

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Abstract

Drawing on her personal and professional experience, the experiences of young women and girls, and the perspectives of Feminist, Indigenous and Educational scholars, the researcher argues for the necessity of creating a female-only, inclusive and holistic educational alternative for young women and girls who have experienced marginalization, street-involvement and/or homelessness in Vancouver, British Columbia.

By highlighting the voices of marginalized, street-involved and homeless young women and girls in Canada, reviewing current literature, analyzing recent reports and studies, and narratively recounting her experiences as a teacher working with youth in an inner city alternative program, the researcher gives a detailed account of the problems and barriers facing these young women as they access education. She goes on to frame these problems within the larger socio-economic context, citing the educational system itself as co-creator of young women and girls' marginalization leading to school disconnection and failure. She argues that an ethical practice of honoring all students will entail producing transformative change in our learning environments. And hence, in response to the disparities voiced by the young women and girls, she proposes the co-construction of a targeted educational alternative in which we rethink the purpose, and therefore the practice, of education. She highlights key components she believes are necessary elements to consider, but emphasizes the importance of engaging the young women and girls, their families and communities, front-line youth workers, Aboriginal Elders and community members, as well as administrative, teaching and school staff when further envisioning the possibilities of this transformed alternative.

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Preface

For the eight years before I taught in an Alternative Education Program, I was a Collective member of a feminist, women-only organization. In my primary work of organizing the response of the 24-hour Rape Crisis Line, I responded almost daily to women calling about male violence. Feminist theory came alive in the lives of every woman who called and in every Collective member I worked beside. I learned to challenge my own notion of privilege and gained a deeper understanding of the effects of oppression on myself, the women I worked with, and on our society as a whole. My perspective on teaching was forever altered by this experience. I learned that to truly teach and support the youth in my care, I must first have an understanding of their socio-economic and daily realities.

For the past thirteen years, I have supported over five hundred youth while teaching in an inner city Alternative Program in Vancouver, B.C. Our self-contained program supports youth who have been derailed by personal, social, emotional or family crisis and want and/or need to learn in an alternative school setting in order to complete grades nine and ten. The majority of these youth cope with the effects of living in poverty and many are living with the effects of racism, colonialism, homophobia, neglect, abuse, sexual assault and exploitation, homelessness, mental illness, grief, and/or undiagnosed learning difficulties. In response, many of them come to us struggling with issues of drug and/or alcohol abuse, involvement with the justice system, depression, anxiety, academic failure, chronic absenteeism and are often teetering on the edge of full street-entrenchment.

Justice For Girls Outreach Society is a non-profit, Vancouver-based organization that promotes freedom from violence, social justice, and equality for teenage girls who live in poverty. As a board member, I have had the honor of supporting their work for the past three years. Through their research and advocacy focusing on the eradication of girl homelessness in Canada, I have learned about the extent of the educational disparities that plague our most vulnerable young women and girls. I wrote this paper and the resulting proposal in response to these disparities.

This paper is an amalgamation of more than twenty years of passionate lived experience as a front line activist and an alternative teacher with marginalized youth in Vancouver, British Columbia. Drawing on my experience, the experiences of young women and girls, and the perspectives of Feminist, Indigenous and Educational scholars, I argue for the necessity of creating a female-only, inclusive and holistic educational Alternative for young women and girls who have experienced marginalization, street-involvement and/or homelessness in Vancouver. In addition, I argue that the true value of this alternative lies not only in its ability to successfully address the barriers identified by the young women and girls as blocking their access to education, but in its transformative nature.

In its entirety, this paper can be viewed as Advocacy research that has at its core a commitment to social, political and economic change. As a feminist practitioner, I believe it is important to enter the dialogue of the theorists I review, therefore, in addition to a literature review and document analysis, I narratively recount my experiences as a

teacher working with youth in an alternative program. And I believe that because education is inherently political (Friere,1970, 1992; hooks, 1994), I explore my lived experience as a teacher within the larger socio-political context. I place myself within the practice of researchers like Angela Valenzuela, who are "deeply committed to research that promotes an egalitarian society" (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005: 217). In her words, I have come "to see how my knowledge and expertise could be used for meaningful change..." (230).

As a non-Aboriginal woman, I recognize that I can speak only with my own voice and from my own lived experiences. I am also aware that research is inherently subjective, and therefore, the lens from which I write this paper is my own. I want to acknowledge that although I have included the voices of young Aboriginal women and girls in my paper, only they can truly speak about their lives. I also want to acknowledge that I cannot adequately represent Indigenous communities and their epistemologies, as I am merely beginning to understand and learn the complexities of these ways of knowing. I have worked to honor the voices of the young women and girls for whom I write and those of the Aboriginal community members, activists and scholars from whom I have learned, but recognize that as a project in progress, this work will continue.

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Part 1.

> *In grade eight, she stopped attending school. In her first year with us, her attendance was sporadic and her connection to our program tentative. As a staff, we worked to reach out to her, to develop a trusting relationship that could allow her to let us in on how to support her. By the end of the year, she had made a cautious connection with us. She asked, "Is it normal to cry yourself to sleep every night?" In her second year, we struggled to maintain her with limited success. She was working late hours that we understood as necessary to support herself and her family. She was coming late, missing school more often and becoming increasingly disconnected. School was understandably not her first priority. Two of our staff sat down with her to discuss other options to achieving her goal of completing grade 10. She became visibly distressed explaining that our school was her only safe haven. From all outward appearances, she seemed to be growing out of our young, structured program and yet, her determination to continue with us was fierce. In further discussion, it was agreed that she would remain our student and that we would do what we could to support her.*
> *Several weeks later, she disclosed the sexual abuse that kept her awake at night.*
> (narrative account from an Alternative Program)

Many young women and girls face overwhelming obstacles to completing their education. The greater the marginalization and the larger the barriers, the more difficulty young women have to be successful. Grades drop, attendance falters and they often quietly fade out of the school system. Sometimes, they are caught by an Alternative Education Program, where adjusted programming and a greater staff-student ratio can halt their disconnection. But for some, this is not enough.

In a recent report, *Making the Grade: A Review of Alternative Education Programs in British Columbia (2007),* the Vancouver–based research group, The McCreary Center Society,

applauded alternative education programs in British Columbia and their staff for their ability to successfully reengage many of the marginalized and street-involved youth in school. But their work reveals that the current educational options available are not meeting the needs of our most marginalized and disenfranchised youth. They conclude by emphasizing the need for more targeted programs to reach those most at risk in our province.

> However, a number of the most vulnerable youth in the province are still not connecting with any of the mainstream or alternative education programs available to them. If communities can build on their successes and best practices they could reach out to even more of the youth at highest risk in British Columbia. (Smith et al, *2007*: 59)

Our Federal and Provincial governments, and our local School Board have agreed to promote equality within our educational institutions. They have stated their commitment to support student development, fulfillment and potential by creating accessible educational programming and yet our school system continues to fail our most highly at risk and vulnerable youth (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 1979; B.C. Ministry of Education School Act, 1996; Vancouver School Board website, 2012)

Many believe that school is an important protective factor to ensure positive health and life outcomes for vulnerable youth, as it may be the only safe and stable place they have in their lives. While others see it as a hostile environment where these same youth experience alienation and marginalization. I align myself with feminist and anti-racist researchers and scholars who believe in the possibility of education and its potential power to be a key factor towards achieving an equitable society.

bell hooks (1994), notable feminist speaker and writer, regards the praxis of progressive, holistic education as "a practice of freedom" where educators are in partnership with students to create a conscious community of self-actualized individuals who understand that working towards an equitable society benefits all. She describes this learning as a place where "paradise can be created" and the classroom as a "location of possibility" (207).

In this paper, I highlight the voices of young women and girls across Canada who have courageously spoke to researchers about their experiences of marginalization, street-involvement and/or homelessness. They describe their lives, their experiences of marginalization and homelessness, and their experiences in our educational institutions. It is my hope, that by listening to their collective wisdom, we can learn how to transform our pedagogical practices towards creating learning environments, and hence the world, that we want to live in.

> **"… there are so many stories we have of girls who never made it"**
> (1.2 Defining the problem)

> *…girls when they are on the streets…the shit that they go through on the street…you know…not only that but losing our friends…watching them get murdered and OD and raped and left outside cities, do you know what I mean, those are things that we deal with on a day to day basis, not only bad tricks who piss on us and shit on us and beat us and rape us and pull out our hair… …you know, one of my friends got lit on fire…there are so many stories we have of girls who never made it and that is the reality we had to deal with when were out there…" (Focus Group Participant, Dhillon, 2005: 32)*

I am in constant awe of the tenacity and perseverance of the young women and girls I have taught who, despite insurmountable obstacles, come to school. The 'marginalization'[1] they face is as diverse and complex as they are. Many marginalized girls face poverty, and so help care for younger siblings, work late nights to make financial ends meet, live in overcrowded conditions and lack adequate food, while also bearing the societal pressure of being a youth in our consumer-driven world. Other girls are coping with the stress of living with parents who struggle with addiction issues, who are battling mental health issues, or who are in constant strife within their domestic relationships. Some, having lost their connection to their family, live in government foster or group homes where they may not experience a sense of belonging or care. Some live with the fear of discovery, the threat of homophobic attacks and the invisibility of growing up in a heterosexist society. Many experience racialized harassment and abuse

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[1] I will borrow from UNESCO's definition of 'marginalization' to refer to the intended and systematic exclusion of an individual or a specific oppressed group from meaningful participation in social, political, economic and cultural activities in society, thereby pushing them to the 'fringes' of society and denying them the opportunity to fulfill themselves as human beings.

from others in the community and institutionalized exclusion in a Eurocentric school system. Still others bear the brunt of violence, sexual assault and / or exploitation at home or in the community.

Studies confirm that girls are most likely to disengage from school between 13-15 years old when they are in grades 8 to10 (Dhillon, 2005; Novac, S., Serge, L., Eberle, M., & Brown, J., 2002; Smith, A., Peled, M., Albert, M., MacKay, L., Stewart, D, Saewyc, E., & the McCreary Centre Society, 2007). To ensure that these young women and girls continue their connection with school, it is imperative that they have educational options that honor the complex nature of their lived experiences and their lives.

Many young women and girls, having disconnected from school and home, become increasingly connected to life on the street. Studies have shown that 'street-involvement'[2] operates as a continuum as "street youth often cycle through periods of living at home, couch surfing, or in shelters, group homes or other institutional settings, such as youth corrections centers" (as cited in Higgitt, N., Wingert, S., Ristock, J., Brown, B., Ballantyne, M., & Caett, S., 2003: 63). As well, research indicates that youth often look to leave the street after a crisis or serious life event (Higgitt et al, 2003).

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[2.] I use the term 'street-involved' to describe young women and girls who spend large amounts of time involved in 'street-activities' but who have a home to return to at night.

Young women and girls who identify as street-involved, without stable housing, or homeless, describe harsh day to day lived realities of survival and courage. Their stories of unstable and unsafe housing, forced economic survival strategies, violence and sexual exploitation, trauma, poverty, isolation, addiction, criminalization and deprivation shed light on the enormous challenges they face daily. (Dhillon, 2005; Higgitt et al, 2003; Novac et al, 2002).

> *"To find food, we would do a couple of things. We would dumpster dive and sometimes we would know what time restaurants would be throwing out their food or you know like even like Tim Horton's when they're throwing out their donuts ... sometimes shelters, but not all the time because it depends on what city you're in cause you usually don't want to eat in soup kitchens. You would get food poisoning..."* (Interview Participant, Higgitt et al, 2003: 63).

Often the primary focus of 'homeless' [3] young women and girls is daily survival as they struggle to find their next meal and shelter for the night. This struggle leads to an increased interdependence on other street-involved youth, further entrenching them into street-culture and away from mainstream services and support.

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[3] In this paper, the term 'homeless or homelessness', refers to young women's experiences, which are social, political or economic in nature. The young women and girls whose voices and lived experiences this proposal is based on, encapsulate what the United Nations defines as both 'absolute' and 'relative' forms of homelessness. 'Absolute' homelessness describes the experience of those individuals living without any safe and affordable permanent housing, including those living in temporary shelters. Whereas 'relative' homelessness includes those who live in unstable and precarious housing situations and "draw(s) attention to the additional marginalization and social exclusion homeless peoples face in their everyday interactions with social institutions" (Dhillon, 2005: 10).

I will use these terms for the purpose of this paper in order that we have common language for the ensuing dialogue. I am aware though, that labels serve to deflect our attention away from the true social and political nature of the problem, instead focusing our attentions on the individual pathology of homelessness. I hope that my following arguments will clearly outline how 'marginalization' and 'homelessness' are the inevitable result of a society that does not distribute value, power, recognition and resources to all its members equally.

The young women and girls who are homeless must live with a greater risk of health concerns and a lack of safety. Studies indicate that they are more susceptible to chronic illnesses, particularly respitory and skin infections, nutritional deficits and 'street-sickness' (Higgitt et al, 2003; Smith, 2007). In addition, sleep deprivation is common as many girls describe being fearful to close their eyes at night. With

> *"No, you never feel safe. You're always sleeping with one eye open. You never know what's going to happen next".* (Higgitt et al, 2003: 61)

little to no options available to them, many stay with older men leaving them vulnerable to further victimization. Once on the street, young women and girls are at a high risk for being recruited into the sex trade as a way of survival and Novac et al (2002) found that this recruitment was the most "pervasive, organized and violent in Vancouver"(11).

> *"When you're on the street, this is just my personal experience, life is the shits. The only thing you can think about is escaping it. How you do that, I think, varies from person to person right. I did drugs."* (Higgitt et al, 2003: 72)

In response to the difficulties of street life, mental health and addiction issues are widespread among homeless young women and girls. Three hundred ninety-seven youth were counted regionally in the Greater Vancouver Regional District's 2011 *Metro Vancouver Homeless Count,* and of those surveyed it was noted that 50% reported having a health condition, 33% live with an addiction (In the *2010 Vancouver Homeless Count,* the percentage is closer to 49), 26% describe themselves as having a mental illness and 11% live with a physical disability.

Although more public attention is now given to tackle the issue of homelessness in Vancouver, services to support youth who are street-involved and homeless are described

as fragmented by front line service providers and researchers (Youth Inclusion and Youth Homeless Forum 2012; Basi, S., Clelland, T., Khind, N., Morris, A., & Severison, P., 2012). Without a continuity of services, young women and girls have only the street to fall back on once they have finished utilizing a service or have "aged out" of the youth services. For young women ages 16-18, who are too young or unwilling to access adult services, this is particularly troubling. In the Metro Vancouver Homeless Count (GVRD, 2011), it was noted that 25% of the youth surveyed reported experiencing a withdrawal of youth services, 51% before the age of 19 and 17% by the age of 16. Tragically, all the youth whose services were withdrawn were also denied adult services because they were youth.

This lack of targeted services is also true of educational options. Novac et al (2002) noted that while there were health services designed to assist homeless youth, there were no educational services available at the time of her study. In Vancouver, although there are now many more options for adult learners over 16, there is only one educational space specifically designed to target street-involved and homeless youth and none specifically designed for young women and girls (Family Services of Greater Vancouver website, 2012). Without a targeted educational option, young women and girls who are marginalized, street-involved and homeless will continue to drop out of or remain disconnected from school, increasing their vulnerability to future poverty, poor health outcomes, disempowerment, and inequitable access to economic and social opportunities.

> **"Being alive and worrying about myself is a bigger problem, then you know, what I'm going to get in English."**
> (1.3 Demographics of the street-involved and homeless young women and girls)

> "… … … *when you go to school and try to talk to another 14 year old who hasn't been through what you've been through and you want me to fit in with them, there's no way…..how…you know like…oh, what did you do this weekend?...oh, one of my friends was murdered last week or my god, my pimp just knocked out one of my teeth…or I'm wanted and I got no where to stay and social services will turn me in if I go there for a place to sleep….I got no where to live so I'm sleeping with johns so I have a place to crash…you, you just can't…you know then,….and then getting up and brushing my teeth and doing all that normal shit that people do in the morning is the least of my problems…being alive and worrying about myself is a bigger problem, then you know, what I'm gonna get in English…."* (Focus Group Participant, Dhillon, 2005: 25)

The Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee's, *One Step Forward... Results of the 2011 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count (2012),* revealed that the youth homeless population has increased, that Aboriginal people remain over-represented in the homeless population, and that the overall female homeless population has been rising since 2005. Although for the first time they employed a 'Youth Implementation Strategy' to count youth between the ages of 13 and 24 who were not accompanied by an adult, the count does not distinguish between the male and female youth as they do in the adult category. I was able to extrapolate gendered youth data from this information, but I was surprised by this omission. Both women and youth are considered special sub-groups in this count, with added vulnerabilities and needs. Young women and girls under 24 therefore, represent an even more vulnerable sub-group who require specific attention and

consideration. To make invisible the gender in the youth category further marginalizes the most vulnerable of our homeless population.

Using the data from the *2011 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count*, I have discerned that a minimum of 69 young women and girls under the age of 25 are visibly living without permanent and stable housing in Vancouver (although one street-level service provider guesstimated that there were close to 500 homeless, and at-risk for being homeless, young women and girls (Novac et al, 2003: 54)). This data are consistent with the *Vancouver Homeless Count 2010* which reported that 19% of the 333 women counted were youth. It is important to note though, that the *Metro Vancouver* report employs the Wellesley Institute's "Precarious Housing Iceberg Paradigm" to explain that the numbers counted were the minimum number of homeless people in the Greater Vancouver Area. The 'visible homeless' are only the tip of the iceberg with the 'hidden homeless' and those at risk of being homeless under the surface. In addition, the report points to specific findings and previous research that reveals the added vulnerability of women, underscoring the even greater risk to young women and girls. For example, women are under represented in the total homeless count because they are often not the "visible homeless." They remain hidden to protect themselves or they avoid shelter or other services by staying with friends or family or by entering a relationship with a man who will give them a place to stay, placing them at greater risk for exploitation and abuse. As well, women are more likely to have experienced family breakdown leading to an increased vulnerability to continued violence and to using the sex trade to secure an income.

It is important to note that most reports point to the over-representation of young women and girls who are Aboriginal and lesbian within the street-involved and homeless youth population. (Basi et al, 2012; Dhillon, 2005; Kraus D., Woodward, J., Billows, S., Greenwell, P. & Alvarez, R., 2010; Novac et al, 2002; Smith et al, 2007). In fact, the 2010 *Vancouver Homeless Count* found that 49% of the women identified as Aboriginal compared to 36% of the total population. The results of the *Metro Vancouver Count* concur, noting that 52% of the youth who were counted as homeless identified as Aboriginal, this compared to 36% of the total homeless population. McCreary Society's 2007 study, *Against the Odds, A profile of marginalized and street-involved youth in BC.,* also highlighted that 32% of the young women respondents identified as lesbian or bisexual.

Feminist researchers (Czapska A., Webb A. & Taefi, N., 2008; Dhillon, 2005) insist that the realities that bring girls to the street and those that keep them there can only be understood within the larger political context. In particular, they point to male violence, colonization, poverty, institutionalization, homophobia and racism as increasing the vulnerability of Aboriginal, lesbian and racialized young women and girls and leading to their over-representation in unstable, unsafe or inadequate housing. These groups of young women are more vulnerable to victimization and have less access to support than other young women and girls.

Continuing with educational goals is often impossible as homeless young women and girls struggle daily to survive. Yet, Dhillon (2005) points out, "Contrary to commonly

held beliefs about homeless young women's desire to participate in educational programming, almost all of the young women and girls who participated in this project conveyed the importance of obtaining a formal education and expressed a sincere desire to attend school as a means out of social, political and economic forms of deprivation" (29). The youth interviewed by Higgitt et al (2003) agreed, noting that independent housing, job skills and education were key to helping them move away from the street and back to a successful place in mainstream society. Exploring ways to support these young women's educational goals is paramount.

"It (the rape) changed me. I don't feel the same anymore"
(1.4 Risk Factors – why do they disconnect?)

Through tears she exclaimed, "I'm angry all the time now. Men disgust me.
"It (the rape) changed me. I don't feel the same anymore."

She was fifteen, when, after continuous fights with her mom, she left home. She spent three weeks "couch surfing", living from day to day unsure where she would sleep at night. At a party, she and a friend met some men in their mid twenties. They offered the girls a place to sleep. She woke up with him on top of her. She hit and fought him but he pinned her arms down, ignoring her screams for help and her pleading for him to stop.
The next day he bragged about his "conquest." She didn't tell anyone else the truth knowing that people wanted to believe what he was saying about her.
(narrative account from an Alternative Program)

A disproportionate number of the young women accessing our Alternative Program have experienced sexual exploitation and/or violence during their lives. Often, it is a sexual assault that has derailed their schooling as they have struggled to cope with the effects of

the violence. They are often referred to us because their grades have 'inexplicably'

dropped and they have stopped attending school.

> *"I was raped three times (tears) and she (mother) said it was my fault every single time. And she said I shouldn't have been looking for her. That was when I was six years old. She was missing for two days. And I said I will go look for her, I know one of her friends and he said she is not here. I said well I am going home now. (Pause) And he grabbed me and he raped me. (tears) And I was only six years old."* (Bazyluk, 2002: 138)

FREDA (Feminist Research Education Development and Action) Center for Research on Violence against Women & Children in Canada reports that 54% of girls under age 16 have experienced some form of unwanted sexual attention, 24% have experienced rape or coercive sex and

17% have experienced incest. Without support, many of these young women and girls

remain isolated in their pain and learn to cope the best way they can, sometimes resulting

in a disengagement from their educational goals.

> *"I hadn't seen my mom in about four years. When I was in grade eight, my dad was doing crack and stuff. I didn't know at the time"(Higgitt et al, 2003: 52).*

> *"I got slapped in the face, burned with cigarettes, hit with a belt. You name it; I got it… My mom was thinking there was something wrong with me like I was brain damaged. She took me to psychiatrist because she thought there was something wrong with me and there was actually something wrong with her. It's really weird how that happened."(Higgitt et al, 2003: 54)*

Family conflict and crisis are often cited as major reasons why young women and girls

disconnect from school. Abuse, neglect and witnessing violence can take its toll, making

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it difficult for them to concentrate in school. The transition to high school is particularly difficult as academic and self-reliance expectations are increased. Managing the rigor and homework demands of up to eight courses and eight teachers, when there is little emotional room (and sometimes not physical space) to concentrate is overwhelming. Skipping school is inevitable as the workload becomes unmanageable. "Findings from the BC Adolescent Health Survey (2003) have shown that youth who live in unstable or challenging home environments often experience interruptions to their education which can lead them to fall behind academically and subsequently become disengaged from school" (as cited in Smith et al, 2007: 15).

Conversely, being removed from family and placed in foster care is considered a significant precursor to school disengagement and homelessness reflected in the disproportionate number of youth in government care attending alternative programs. (Dhillon, 2005; Novac et al, 2002; Smith et al, 2007). Higgitt et al (2003) report, "many of the kids with whom we talked reported being let down by the child protection system. Most of the youth in our study were preteens or early in adolescence when they became homeless" (58). In addition, their study reveals that youth experienced more instability once in care as they "were shuffled through various living arrangements" (58). Isolated from family and community, young women and girls often have few options for social and economic security. I have known several young women who, after leaving our program and unable to manage the emotional toll, academic rigor and economic cost of completing grades eleven and twelve on their own, have entered the sex trade to survive.

> *She was 17 and living in a foster home in the city, when she "graduated" from our program with her grade 10 education. She had struggled through the years to maintain her schooling and she had relied on the connection to our small program and the support and encouragement of our staff to succeed.*
> *She called several years later. She was wanting to drop out of school, as the strain of maintaining her grades on her own and working the late night shift in a factory were getting too much for her. She needed to work, yet couldn't find other employment with her limited job experience and education. She was considering taking a job as an online survival sex trade worker. The pay was more than double and the work wouldn't be as exhausting.* (narrative account from an alternative program*)*

The McCreary Center Society (*2007*) surveyed 339 youth in alternative programs across B.C. to learn further what youth are saying about why they disconnect(ed) from school. The youth reported that the impact of living in poverty leaves many without adequate clothing and food for school and many who need to find sources of income to help support their families. The young women surveyed contended with more emotional distress, with 28% either considering or attempting suicide in the past year. Girls were much more likely than boys to report having been physically abused (61%) or sexually abused (44%) or raped (35%). And Aboriginal youth were much more likely than non-Aboriginal youth to report similar attacks. Drug abuse and addiction and being held in custody also accounted for school disengagement.

It is important to read these statistics critically and locate the conditions of the young women's lived realities within a larger socio-political context. Focusing on the individual problem alone is a tacit acceptance of what is, allowing the education system to continue to fail our girls. For example, girls are more likely to face multiple sexist challenges of physical and sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation leading to greater emotional distress. Twenty-five percent of the young women and girls most at risk respond by not attending

school (this does not include those young women who are homeless) and those with the added responsibility of a new child were more likely to drop out (Smith et al, 2007). Understanding how social inequality is producing the conditions of marginalization and homelessness is imperative if we are to truly transform our educational options for young women and girls.

Other factors for why young women and girls disconnect are important to consider. Novac et al (2002) noted that "early school leavers express dissatisfaction with their courses and school rules…feel they do not fit in school, have problems with their teachers, participate less in classes…(yet) performed satisfactorily while in school" (20). My experience teaching in an alternative program supports their findings. Youth have often stated that before coming to our program they hated school, didn't like their teachers, felt bored and disinterested, and were treated like an outsider. This leads us to consider school disengagement as a form of self-preservation or resistance. Why remain in an institution where you don't feel like you belong, are not feeling valued or validated, are not learning what is meaningful to you, and experience unnecessary and restrictive constraints? Kohl (1994) agrees and argues, "to agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not learn and reject their world" (as cited in Silver and Mallet, 2002: 38). In the hopes of revealing how to transform our current pedagogical practices, a further discussion of how our educational institutions are complicit in exacerbating the conditions which lead to school disconnection and failure follows in Part Two.

Part 2.

"I just wanted to give up."
(2.1 Education as a transmitter of the dominant culture and therefore co-creator of young women's marginalization leading to school disconnection, failure and drop out)

"I just got so behind and it just kept piling up in all my classes, all my work that I was missing cause I couldn't make it to school – I didn't have bus fare and plus I was just so like upset that my brother kicked me out when I was just starting to build my grades up again…I was just so discouraged because the whole reason I moved in with him was to get out of my mom's place which was an unstable environment and then I just got thrown back in there right before I was about to graduate. I just wanted to give up. If I had like a lot more support than I might have stuck in there…instead of teachers saying actually I am not going to let you make up this test." (Focus Group Participant, Dhillon, 2005: 42)

Locating the stories of the young women and girls within a broader social context and political framework is critical as we search for proactive and hopeful responses to their marginalization, school disconnection and street entrenchment. As we have heard, most of the young women and girls interviewed want to remain connected with education and the possibilities that it offers. We have heard stories of the overwhelming challenges many of them face on a daily basis. Given these challenges, why would so many young women and girls drop out of a system supposedly designed to support them?

There are reasons why children disconnect from school. It is easy for our current system to attribute this disconnection to solely an individual problem or pathology or even choice. But it is my contention, that the educational system itself is co-creator of young women and girls' marginalization leading to school disconnection and failure. I believe that the systemic biases, Eurocentric pedagogical model, hierarchical underpinnings and

restrictive policies are experienced as institutionalized barriers for some young women and girls, reproducing and reinforcing the social inequities of the larger society. For girls already coping with difficult life circumstances, resisting an institution where they are further marginalized and alienated may be their only recourse.

Dhillon (2005) insists that educational institutions are in fact a "(re)production of the dominant culture" and like our larger stratified society with its unequal distribution of power, their structure and practices ensure that some students succeed while others do not (23). In our exploration of new educational alternatives, it is essential, therefore, to shift the focus away from blaming the girl's individual 'pathology' and instead, look at the systemic barriers that prevent these young women and girls from reaching their full potential in our current educational system.

> **"I trusted them and now they laugh about it." Her story of rape had since been used in cruel jokes against her.**
> (2.2 Sexism and sexual harassment)

As he stomped out of the gym, he yelled back, "And I guess that fucking bitch never does anything wrong, like kick me in the nuts!" I went back into the gym and called her outside. She explained that she had accidently kicked him, but that he and the other boys had been harassing her the entire class. In fact, they call her a whore, slut and bitch on a regular basis. She admitted that she does engage in the negative name calling with them, but she sees it as self-defense. She told me how at the beginning of the year she had told a couple of the boys about being raped. "I trusted them and now they laugh about it." Her story had since been used in cruel jokes against her.
(narrative account from an alternative program)

In any one year, it is not uncommon for over 50% of the young women and girls in our alternative program to have experienced sexual violence at some time in their lives. For many, the violence was the catalyst that brought them to our program. Over the years, I have watched as these same young women struggle with the pressures of growing up a girl in our sexist society. In school, girls must navigate sexualized harassment from the boys and interact with insensitive or even judgmental male staff. In addition, they must struggle to find their place within a system and a curriculum in which sexist stereotypes and attitudes still abound. It is alarming that in an institution intended to promote equal access to education, young women and girls are routinely subjected to sexist content, materials, attitudes, judgments, interactions, harassment, and sometimes violence.

As an adult woman I have experienced sexism and sexualized harassment from male colleagues, administration and students within the context of the school system. These experiences and those of my female colleagues and students, highlight how within educational environments sexist attitudes are naturalized,

> *"If you have sex with a certain amount of people and you are a girl, you are a fucking whore…but guys are heroes. And then people say that to you in school and shit and that is a big problem and I think it is always going to be like that because women are supposed to be lower than men but I think women are way higher than guys…*(Individual Interview, Dhillon, 2005: 30)

and replicate the dominant society's patriarchal culture leading to gender inequities. In my position as an adult and a teacher, I have the power, knowledge and support system to challenge these oppressive interactions. Yet, female students have little power to negotiate this onslaught. In her research, Dhillon (2005) notes some "young women explained how they felt as though they did not have adequate measures of recourse within the school to challenge what was happening to them by their male peers and male

teachers who were making them feel uncomfortable, awkward, and ultimately violated"

(31). Unchallenged and recurrent harassment by male students and staff in schools is

experienced as a tacit acceptance of the larger society's culture of dominance.

> *"My friend, she is pregnant with twins and she is only 14 years old and her guy teacher looks at her chest and she got grossed out so she didn't go back to that class..." (Individual Interview, Dhillon, 2005: 30).*

Van Roosmalen (2000) describes this culture as follows:

Young adolescent women come of age in a patriarchal culture. The gender system characteristic of the patriarchal culture experienced by girls is largely grounded in constraints such as economic dependence, gendered power relations, fear of harassment, sexism and violence, norms of caring, cooperation and appearance, and in shared peer group assumptions about appropriate behavior for females (as cited in Dhillon, 2005: 30).

For young women and girls who have experienced sexual violence, working with an adult

male in a position of authority may be overwhelming. Many marginalized and street-

involved young women are at a greater risk for continued victimization. During one

school year alone, within a three-month period, four of our girls were raped. I have

witnessed the anger, withdrawal, and resistance these young women use to cope with the

anxiety of having to work with male teachers. For homeless young women, who must

rely on the sex trade to survive, sexual exploitation and victimization by men is an

everyday occurrence. The following quote illuminates the untenable position these

young women face at school.

> *"...I don't know if Diane told you about that guy she testified against who was a trick...he was a school teacher....it happens and I am sure...every high school in this city, being a prostitute for as many years as I was a prostitute in this city...I bet you if I walked through every school and lined all the teachers up I bet you I would find at least four or five who were tricks...I see tricks all over the fucking place...whether it be the janitor, or the principal...whether it be your art teacher or gym teacher...guys buy sex... ...*
> *(Focus Group Participant, Dhillon, 2005:32)*

Creating a learning environment that transforms the dominant hegemony of the current educational system is critical if we are to engage and sustain marginalized young women and girls in their educational futures.

> **"It made me feel like not wanting to come to school...and [made me] ashamed of who I was."**
> (2.3 Racism and the legacy of colonialism)

> *"Some students would make racial comments like 'squaw' or 'dirty Indian'. It made me feel like not wanting to come to school. The comments brought me down and [made me] ashamed of who I was. (Silver & Mallet, 2002: 24)*

The legacy of the residential school system in Canada is still experienced today by Aboriginal people. Many First Nations, Inuit and Metis young women and girls are intergenerational survivors of these colonialist practices and live out the damaging effects that these policies had on the Aboriginal people, their families and their communities. The profound and devastating impact of the schools led to a loss of identity, culture, language and ways of knowing.

Colonization continues today with institutionalized policies and practices that implicitly sanction the extreme inequalities faced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Current statistics highlight the disparities endured particularly by young Aboriginal women and

girls including higher rates of poverty, criminalization, child apprehension and male violence.

Although Aboriginal girls and young women comprise only 6% of the country's population, they are disproportionately criminalized representing 44% of all girls sentenced in youth custody in 2008-2009 (Native Women's Association of Canada, *Gender Matters*, 2012: 24). The systemic biases operating within the criminal justice system ensures that First Nations, Inuit and Metis young women and girls are more likely to be charged and face stiffer penalties than non-Aboriginal youth. In my program, there was a one-week period, when, on separate occasions, four students were caught shoplifting. Only one of them was charged. She was Aboriginal and the others were white. Aboriginal girls are also more likely to spend longer periods in custody than non-Aboriginal girls. McCreary Society's 2007 *Making the Grade* study concurs, noting that Aboriginal youth are 1.5 times more likely to have been held in custody as a result of a charge or conviction than non-Aboriginal youth (Smith et al, 2007: 34).

Although Canada has signed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Article 7.2) which states that Indigenous peoples " shall not be subjected to any act of genocide… including forcibly removing children of the group to another group," Canada's child welfare system continues to remove children from their communities and culture. "There are three times more First Nations children in state care than there were in the height of the Residential Schools" (NWAC, 2012: 27). In Vancouver schools, out of 207 children living "in care" in 2011, 66% of these children were Aboriginal (VSB,

2011: 15). Living in foster care is a known risk factor for school disconnection and future homelessness. Isolated from their communities and culture, Aboriginal young women and girls are at an even a greater risk for possible homelessness, and therefore future abuse and criminalization.

Studies of youth in Alternative Programs indicate that Aboriginal youth are more likely to have experienced physical (60% of those surveyed) and sexual abuse (35% of those surveyed) than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Smith et al, 2007: 31). In addition, Aboriginal young women and girls who leave their home and community to escape abuse are vulnerable to further attacks as they struggle to survive on their own. Recent high profile cases in Canada point to the abysmal failure of the police and the criminal justice system to protect these women from male violence. "The Native Women's Association of Canada has documented the disappearances and murders of over 600 Aboriginal women and girls in Canada over a period of about twenty years" (NWAC, 2012: 26).

We learn about the history and I am sorry…I think they should have…when you go to a regular school and you know you learn about white people (laughs) …you never learn about you know like native people…we were the first people in Canada. It's like we don't exist" (Focus Group Participant, Dillon, 2005: 37-38)

Even with its policies of inclusiveness and enhancing Aboriginal education, our school system still has a long way to go to shed its colonialist practices which lead to school disconnection and failure particularly for Aboriginal youth. The Vancouver School Board's 2011 report entitled, *How Are We Doing, Aboriginal Education 2006-2011,* shows only 35% of the Aboriginal females completing 6 years of

school and graduating from high school, compared to 89% of the non-Aboriginal female population. In addition, the over-representation of Aboriginal youth in alternative programs is an indication of the systemic racism and failure of our mainstream education system.

Aboriginal students are forced to 'choose' between the collective ethos of their community and the ethos of the dominant society's school system, which does not honor their culture. Disconnecting from school may be their only option to resist a hegemonic educational system that continues with assimilation and genocidal goals. Hampton (1995) agrees emphasizing that "…the failure of non-Native education of Natives can be read as the success of Native resistance to cultural, spiritual, and psychological genocide" (as cited in Silver & Mallet, 2002: 39). They explain further: "That resistance, we believe, takes many forms: acting out in ways that take the form of disciplinary or academic 'problems'; (or) rejecting school by dropping out entirely" (Silver & Mallet, 2002: 30).

Our school system perpetuates the legacy of colonization when it persists at pointing to Aboriginal young people's failure in school as their own. When it continues to label Aboriginal youth as

> *The non-Aboriginals would call us 'wagon-burners' and 'Red Injuns' and 'squaw'. That was when I got into trouble because I would fight them....I dropped out of school. I felt that that school would never change and that the non-Aboriginals would always get their way. (Silver & Mallet, 2002: 24)*

behavior problems instead of addressing the systemic and individualized racism faced by these youth in our educational institutions. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) describes this systemic bias. "The existence of racism and neocolonialism within

the education system is the product of the privilege given to Euro-Canadian knowledge and values (Anuik, Battiste & George, 2010: 64).

It is noteworthy that despite the fact that Aboriginal youth attending alternative programs "reported experiencing a greater number of risk factors for disengaging from school compared to non-Aboriginal youth", they were overcoming the obstacles they faced to remain engaged in their education (Smith et al, 2007: 13). I believe these findings stress that instead of labeling and pointing to individual pathology as the reason for school failure, we should be celebrating these young people's perseverance and courage and asking why the school system continues to fail them.

> **"I don't got money for school supplies…I barely got money to put clothes on my back."**
> (2.4 Economic and material barriers)

> *"School fees and school supplies, that's another thing. I don't got money for school supplies…I barely got money to put clothes on my back, you know what I mean…I only have a certain amount of money to last the whole month and I don't want to buy binders and shit like that…and I got my kid."* (Focus Group Participant, Dhillon, 2005: 33)

Poverty is a common reality for many marginalized young women and girls. For those who are living in unstable housing or on the street, getting the basic necessities of life is a daily struggle. There are many explicit costs to attending school, including school fees

and school supplies. Fortunately, in many school districts, financial constraints are considered so that some fees are waived and some supplies are provided. But the hidden costs of school can take their toll and be overwhelming barriers for some young women and girls to maintain their educational goals.

Many young women and girls have no access to money for school clothing, adequate food, or transportation to and from school. Vancouver School Board's meal program provides funding for 1/3 of a student's 'daily nutritional needs', but for many students, this may be the only meal they get in a day. As well, the current Vancouver School Board's transportation subsidy provides bus passes, but only for students living more than three kilometers away from their school. Walking up to six kilometers daily to and from school may be a barrier that many young women, already struggling to remain engaged in school, are unwilling or unable to overcome.

For some young women, working nights and weekends is necessary to help financially support their family. Other girls may need to stay home to babysit younger siblings or must arrive at school late or leave school early to drop off or pick up younger siblings at preschool or daycare, so that their parents can work. Still others must find affordable, skilled and convenient daycare for their own children in order to pursue their educational goals. But, constrained by restrictive attendance, punctuality and grading policies,

> *"I used to have two jobs and try and go to school and it is insane…like you get off school…I used to work in the McDonald's…I would get off school and run home…with enough time to get home change into my uniform and I would have to be at work for 3:30pm … … I was like ready to collapse …then I had to eat and go to work for like 4-8 hours and then leave work, go home do my homework and go to school and get up the next day and do it again." (Focus Group Participant, Dhillon, 2005:40)*

mainstream schools and teachers are often unable or unwilling to accommodate these 'individualized' needs.

> *"I started getting involved in street life and those people became my only friends because I wasn't attending school anymore because I can't. I had to, you know, to find food, and find shelter and stuff like that." (Higgitt et al, 2003, P.66)*

For young women and girls who live in precarious housing or who are homeless, the financial barriers may be insurmountable. The 2010 Vancouver Homeless Count noted that only 47% of the youth surveyed reported getting income assistance and 17% reported having no source of income at all. With limited or no financial supports, these young women and girls have no choice but to abandon their schooling to provide for their basic needs.

> **"In Grade 8 I was living on the streets and they told me that I couldn't go to school."**
> (2.5 Inhibiting policies)

> *"In Grade 8 I was living on the streets and they told me that I couldn't go to school but yet I was coming to school everyday and getting my homework done but when they found out I was living on the streets, they said I couldn't go…but I didn't want to go to a group home and I didn't want to go from foster home to foster home again…so…and they kicked me out and told me I was not allowed to go back to that school." (Focus Group Participant, Dhillon, 2005: 43)*

As a teacher in the public school system, I experience daily the constraints of conforming to constrictive and rigid policies that often have more to do with economics, liability, Eurocentric notions of assessment and achievement, and directives from the political

party of the day, than with doing what's right and best for children. For example, young women and girls whose grades or attendance falter find they are held to accountability systems that do not take into account their lived experiences. As well, without a local address, school districts receive no funding for students, and therefore often refuse their registration. Young women who are estranged from family and managing on their own, are blocked by requirements that insist parents or guardians sign enrollment, registration and consent forms before students participate in any school classes, activities or extra-curricular events.

In alternative programs we experience a small measure of autonomy, as there is an unspoken understanding that the youth we serve require more flexibility than students in the mainstream educational system. Nevertheless, we are still bound by a prescribed curriculum, standardized exams and assessment procedures, rigid grading and reporting demands, attendance and address policies, daily scheduling constraints, and the legalities associated with working with minors. These policies do not take into account the daily-lived realities of many marginalized and homeless young women and girls and instead act as barriers, further increasing their alienation and disconnection from the current educational system.

> **_"I was violently violated so many times and to bring that into the education system, they just don't know what to do."_**
> (2.6 Lack of understanding, support and trusting relationships)

> _"And like, totally like…girls get sexually abused for a couple of years and then at home by their dads…and then prostitutes are getting raped…like god I don't know how many times I have been raped…I have been a prostitute since I was 11 and I am 25 now…like come on…how many times have I been like, even when I wasn't in school from 11 to 16…like you know I was violently violated so many times and to bring that into the education system, they just don't know what to do like…like I remember going to Grange Collegiate and them not knowing what to do with me just because I was a 13 year old prostitute, IV drug user, violent, a lot of people just didn't know what to do with me at that time…(Focus Group Participant, Dhillon, 2005: 32)_
>
> _She and her mother suffered horrible abuse at the hands of her father. In Elementary school she was labeled a bully and sent to an anger management class. By 13 she was selling ecstasy. When I met her at 15 she had been kicked out of several schools. (narrative account from an alternative program)_

From my teaching experience, my work in a rape crisis center and my own personal life, I know many young women and girls whose reaction to the spoken or unspoken violence in their life was (mis)interpreted, invalidated or ignored by school personnel. On numerous occasions, young women have told me that teachers and school counselors did not ask, or did not know what to do beyond referring them to some other counselor. Just this year, a young woman explained that she had told her school drug and alcohol counselor about her rape. In response, the counselor only asked if she had seen a doctor and then didn't bring it up again.

School staff are untrained and so may feel unprepared to adequately support young women and girls who are dealing with complex issues and histories. Cues are often missed or misread and even difficulties that are revealed are met with an inadequate or invalidating response. Referring to being raped at fifteen, a close friend exclaimed, "didn't anyone think it was strange that all of the sudden and out of the blue, I went from being an 'A' student to skipping out all the time and failing?"

Without a close trusting relationship, young women and girls are unlikely to connect even with a trained counselor. One student, who was referred to a counselor she didn't know explained, " I like talking to you guys (school staff) because I know you, we see each other every day and we have a relationship. I don't feel comfortable talking to her so there's no point going." The power of a day to day lived connection, which has developed over time and has proven to be trustworthy cannot be underestimated. Young women who have experienced various levels of victimization and betrayal require this attentive and conscious connection borne out of a daily-lived experience of mutual respect and earned trust. In addition, they require these same individuals to support them emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually as they travel on their healing journey.

Part 3

"Schools have such power"
        (3.1 Transforming education to be a liberatory practice, an equalizer and full of potential possibilities)

> *"I think the best way to change these issues is to teach about it. Schools have such power to teach kids not only basic skills and knowledge, but also society and how to accept people within it. ..." (student writing).*

Within an educational environment we are presented with an extraordinary opportunity and, with it, a profound responsibility. We are entrusted with the care and instruction of our most precious resource, and our most valued gift, the potentiality of each child. Using Hannah Arendt's notion of 'natality', Bowen-Moore (1989) deepens this understanding, maintaining that with the birth of each new child there is a "force of unpredictability unleashed into the world" and with it, the possibility of renewal and hope (22). I am struck by the power of this image and left asking, "how do we as educators ethically engage with the responsibility of this 'force'?" I argue that by honoring each child, as we reimagine a better world together, educators have the power to launch a positive force into the world. bell hooks (1994) describes this as the sacred nature of education. "…There is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; … our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (13).

I believe an ethical practice of honoring our students will entail producing transformative change in our learning environments. We must rethink the purpose, and therefore the practice, of education. Palmer (1999) argues that "education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our places in the world" (18-19). As a liberatory practice, educational settings can be places where we can imagine and practice the society we want to create. Education can also be an equalizer as it has the power to effect change and is considered by many to be a key factor towards achieving an equitable society.

Reforming the current educational options will not be enough to adequately address the social and economic inequalities that maintain the daily conditions of poverty and injustices experienced by young women and girls who are marginalized and live in unstable housing. Instead, it is critical to address the gendered and cultural injustices through a transformative politic of social recognition and economic redistribution (Fraser, 2007). Only through this thoughtful, deliberate and conscious politic will we be able to transform the dominant hegemony of inequality and create a true educational alternative for marginalized, street-involved and homeless young women and girls.

> *"I now have a different idea of the world. Thank you for helping me change for the better"*
> (3.2 What is the praxis of this educational alternative?)

> *"All I got to say is thank you! From the bottom of my heart! Without your amazing drive and amazing thought I wouldn't have a different idea of the world! Thank you for helping me change for the better! <3"*
> (student comment taken from an alternative staff's yearbook)

It is my contention that the structure of the school and the practices of the staff team must be guided by a common underlying philosophical and political framework. In particular, each staff member must have a shared understanding in theory and in practice of the social and political context that led to the young women's marginalization and disconnection from their education, that influence their current choices and behaviors, and that are systemic barriers to their future stability and success. Horsman (2004) agrees and states that, "a starting point for innovative programming will take into account that many students have a lot going on in their lives." He goes on to add that "schools need to develop new responses to the learning needs of students who have experienced violence." (as cited in Dhillon, 2005: 26).

As well, having a collective staff ethos that operates within an inclusive and holistic learning framework and centers the needs and development of each learner is key to restoring economic, cultural and gender justice for these young women and girls. These common understandings and collective beliefs will act as guiding principles for all

decisions and actions within the operation of the school and influence all interactions with the young women and girls thereby creating a cohesive and consistent team approach.

In her examination of 'Tiddas', a successful female-only school supporting many marginalized and Indigenous young women and girls in Queensland, Australia, Amanda Keddie (2011) describes the shared philosophy amongst the staff as an "ethos of positive regard." She states, " this ethos of positive regard and inclusion framed the school's holistic, coherent and shared approach to supporting the girls through structures and practices of economic and cultural justice" (1008). In her view, this transformative practice created the conditions needed to achieve a "parity of participation", leading to success "within and beyond education" for the Indigenous young women and girls (1014).

 Having a shared political understanding shifts the focus away from the more common model of individual pathology. Instead of focusing on what can be done to 'fix,' 'maintain,' or 'adjust' the young women and their behavior, the staff will be aware of where the behaviors are coming from and can focus on creating the social and economic conditions that can lead to success.

> ***"It was like the light went on"***
>
> (3.3 Creating an inclusive, equitable and self-sustaining community where the young women and girls experience a sense of belonging)

" '*It was like a light went on'*, said one community member, describing when she was first exposed to Aboriginal history." (Silver & Mallet, 2002: 22)

Each week we gather as a group. It is their opportunity to tell their story, to be heard, to build confidence and community. In this time, we see powerful connections being made between the youth as they hear their own stories being reflected in others and have the opportunity to offer support and empathy or delight and celebration. I believe this experience has an added consequence of politicizing their experiences. They come to understand that they are not alone and become conscious of how conditions of oppression and belatedness impact their lives. There is a high level of trust and mutual respect in this activity. We have heard stories of escaping Hussein's rule in Iraq and living through refugee camps, stories of nights in the drunk tank and of friends over-dosing, stories of police harassment and of friends being assaulted, stories of being taken away from their mother. Maxine Greene (1993) argues the value of telling our stories. "...Learning to look through multiple perspectives, young people may be helped to build bridges among themselves, attending to a range of human stories, they may be provoked to heal and transform". (cited in Hasebe-Ludt, 1999: 46). (McIntosh, T. (2011), taken from essay, *Creating Hope as a Revolutionary Act in an Inner City Alternative Program*)

One particular story stands out as exemplifying the healing and transformative possibilities of sharing our stories to create 'belonging' in a community:
It's Jada's turn to speak. She is an openly gay, 16-year-old youth. She cries as she states that her parents weren't perfect. Both were addicts and she and her little brother suffered abuse at the hands of their father. She explains that because she and her brother only had each other, they are very close now and look out for each other. She says that she has had to work hard to get where she is today and is proud of who she is and what she has accomplished. I cry along with a number of other students. I am overwhelmed. Her level of trust in our community is astonishing. At the end of 'check-in' I get in line to give her a hug. We hold tightly and I quietly tell her how proud I am of her, and that she's my hero. I leave her surrounded by the others who are touched by her story of hope. (narrative account from an alternative program)

When we listen to the voices of disenfranchised young women and girls across the country, it is clear that we must address their shared experience of alienation and marginalization in our educational institutions. As we consider the creation of this innovative alternative, it is essential to "unschool" our thinking and move away from the current western institutional model which Dr. Donald Dwayne (2011) describes as the "Pedagogy of the Fort," where some students are on the inside and others are kept out. In its place, we need to create an inclusive, equitable, welcoming and self-sustaining community where each young woman and girl is a valued member and all experience a sense of belonging.

> *"(This program) has become a second family to me and I have grown to love and respect all of you.*" (student comment taken from an alternative staff's yearbook)

In imagining this intentional community, I have reviewed work by both Feminist and Indigenous scholars and reflected upon my past teaching experience to make initial recommendations that I see as key factors to consider. But, given that a community is defined by its members, these must be seen as merely a starting point for the 'living' community we hope to co-construct with the young women and girls it will be serving.

With this in mind, I will begin by addressing the importance of inclusion and belonging. It is well recognized that belonging is one of the most basic human needs. Dr. Martin Brokenleg's *Circle of Courage* includes 'belonging' as one of four core values that must exist in any community to create environments that ultimately benefit all ('Reclaiming International Youth' website, 2012). In addition, Dr. Grant Charles (School of Social

Work, U.B.C.) in his lecture to the 'Youth Inclusion and Homelessness Forum' (2012) emphasized that what young people who have been disconnected need is connection and that the biggest barrier that young people face when in transition (i.e. foster care) is loneliness. Other front line youth workers at the Forum also spoke of the importance of building community around the individual youth and building resilience within the community by having all members valued, celebrated and supported equally. In my practice, I have learned that by experiencing a sense of belonging, students learn that they are valued, and they become invested in taking responsibility for the success of the community. In this new alternative, we will seek to create an inclusive learning community, which recognizes and values all the young women and girls it serves.

Fraser (2007) argues that a politic of 'recognitive justice' is necessary within the school setting to counter a dominant culture in which traits associated with masculinity are privileged consequently devaluing those associated with femininity. This devaluing takes the form of gender-specific status subordination such as demeaning stereotypes, marginalization, objectification, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

In this 'all-girls' environment, we have the opportunity to focus on gender recognition, where we not only center, but also celebrate the young women and girls who for the first time experience a world free of the dominant culture. The school's day-to-day practice of respecting and valuing women in its structure, activities, curriculum, resources and daily interactions, will create an alternative to the dominant hegemony of male-centered educational environments. Within this environment of care and respect, girls will receive

different messages than the ones they receive daily about their place in the world. They can be empowered to challenge the internalized oppressive attitudes of the larger society and to reframe their notions of being a 'girl'. In this new light, they can begin to imagine a different way of being in the world and can see their lives with new possibilities and hope. A recent experience has highlighted the power of structuring gendered 'recognitive justice' into the practices and curriculum of this new educational alternative.

Just last week, I met with one of my students who had recently moved into a foster home. During our conversation she explained that because of our Social Studies classes this past year, which highlighted 'resistance' movements, she had finally decided to tell about the abuse she was experiencing. When we were studying the 'Women's Movement', we watched a film about the true story of a woman who legally challenged the sexual harassment she was experiencing at work. In the film, it was revealed that this woman had also been raped as a teenager but had kept it a secret. Through our class discussions, the young woman had begun to see her situation and the world in a different way. She was able to see her life reflected in the film and decided that she didn't want to be an adult still holding onto her secret. She knew that telling would be difficult but that in the safety and support of our community, she could get through it. I listened to her story, and as a member of that same community, I was enriched, blessed by her insights and fortified by her courage, strength and resilience.

An inclusive environment must also embrace cultural recognition, in order to create a sense of belonging for young women and girls who identify as Aboriginal. Brazilian educator, Paulo Friere (1970) "argues that a people who have been colonized and

oppressed are psychologically liberated when they learn their history from their own perspective" (as cited in Silver & Mallet, 2002: 22). It is imperative to decolonize this educational alternative by naturalizing Indigenous epistemologies ('ways of knowing') into the school's structure, practices and pedagogy. Without this shift, we will continue to alienate Aboriginal learners who are left with no other recourse but to resist a learning environment that forces them to choose between their ways of knowing and the dominant Eurocentric model of knowledge.

Silver & Mallet (2002) describe this as "a challenging goal…acknowledging the legitimacy and the significance of Aboriginal culture, and moving it from the margins to the centre of the curriculum" (47).

Castagno and Brayboy (2008) agree and emphasize that 'braiding' western and Indigenous knowledge systems will give both systems equal value and equal weight. By integrating an Indigenous

> *"We have a lot of elders input out in the community. They do a lot and that's a vital thing. ...So we get a lot of knowledge and wisdom from them and direction with Indigenous things around here."* (interview with school board member, Keddie, 2011: 1007)

holistic learning framework which emphasizes the equal development of the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs of each learner, and incorporating key components of this pedagogy, such as the importance of intergenerational learning, we will be honoring all learners.

Keddie concurs describing this as an "explicit valuing of Indigenous culture" (2011: 1013). By developing cultural awareness, affirming indigenous identity, restoring knowledge and pride in community, giving confidence-building avenues and

opportunities to speak up and be proud of their heritage, Aboriginal young women and girls can "see themselves and their values positively represented in the school, (and) the impact (can be) exceptional" (Silver & Mallet, 2002: 48)

Creating an equitable community goes hand in hand with being inclusive when attempting to create a community of belonging. It is important that we work to break down hierarchical barriers, and involve all members of our community as partners in its co-creation and leadership. bell hooks maintains that "to diffuse hierarchy and create a sense of community" the classroom should be "a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership" (2003: xv). In keeping with this belief, the young women and girls as well as community members and service providers must be consulted prior to initializing this project. As well, a visioning and advisory committee of staff, students, parents, elders, and community members should be organized to consult on matters regarding the implementation and operation of the school.

The community must also be a welcoming environment, therefore, offering an accessible space where no girl is turned away, is essential. This may involve offering a safe place, emotional support, food, material needs, or advocacy to any young woman who walks through the door. Given the fluidity of street-involvement, the difficulty of accessing stable housing, and the understanding that young women and girls are more likely to reach out when they are in crisis, we must be available to connect when they are ready to connect, support when they are ready to be supported, and teach when they are ready to learn.

Lastly, co-constructing a self-sustaining community, one that is 'living' instead of static, and therefore continually recreating and renewing itself, is a key component to achieving a parity of participation and therefore equity for both students and staff. In keeping with Indigenous philosophies, we will emphasize the value of each member's contribution to the wellbeing of the community. By incorporating learning that is cooperative and experiential, the young women and girls will have the opportunity to both learn and teach. For example, within the school, there will be an expectation that staff and students plan, prepare and eat meals together. Developing self-sustaining projects will contribute to the overall wellbeing of the school community by promoting the autonomy and independence of the individual young women and girls, and the collective leadership of all. In addition, through these projects we can work to give back to the community at large. Lastly, we will draw from our community of young women and girls for paid positions, volunteer opportunities, job creation connections, and mentors for new students.

Keddie concludes by stating, that a "supportive and caring 'family' environment where there is unconditional respect and empathy for the girls' circumstances provides an alternative positioning where there is an explicit valuing of the girls' capacities to succeed." She goes on to say: "Such valuing rejects a positioning of the 'other' (femininity and Indigeneity) as deficit and can be seen here as setting up the requisite conditions for the girls to achieve" (2011: 1008).

> **_"I'm so glad you came into my life"_**
> (3.4 Developing intentional relationships of respect, care and understanding)

> *"Thank you for everything you've done for me. You're so understanding and caring. I love u! You've helped me a lot. I'm so glad you came into my life. I think of u as a 2nd mother."*(student comment taken from an alternative staff yearbook)
>
> *"I don't even know where to start. Without you what would I do, where would I be. I am so happy I came to this school cause of YOU. You impacted my life so much and you are an amazing person. I love you so much."* (student comment taken from an alternative staff yearbook)

Being willing and able to develop intentional trusting, mutually respectful relationships, while demonstrating understanding, compassion and care is a prerequisite to working with and for marginalized young women and girls. It goes without saying that these young women have had their trust repeatedly shattered by individuals in their families, by people in their community and by the public institutions designed to help them. Why would this new relationship be any different? The staff must understand that it will take time, patience, understanding and care for these young women to risk opening themselves up to trust again. We must listen to both their words and actions, be available when they are ready to connect and take their lead on the way forward. We must believe they know what will work best in their lives. Only then will we gain their respect and trust.

Experience has taught me that a grounded political analysis will allow staff to begin each new relationship from a place of honor and respect, and that this will develop further into a deep sense of admiration for each young women's courage, tenacity, their strategies of

survival and daily resistance as the relationship grows. Developing a trusting, personal

relationship, where there is only mistrust, Berry (1993) insists, requires an educator to

develop a "practice of love." He states, "personal connections…depend (also) on trust,

patience, respect, mutual help, (and) forgiveness…" (as cited in Rozema, 2001: 251-252).

> *When she turns to greet me, I am caught off guard by the confident young woman before me. It's been three years since we've seen her, an unusually articulate, mature and intuitive young woman of Aboriginal descent. She is visiting Vancouver for the first time since moving and said she was determined to visit us while here. We spend an hour and a half talking and catching up on our lives over the past three years. She explains that she almost didn't come because she was fearful. She reassures me saying that upon further reflection she discovered that her fear was coming from having to face the memories of what was happening in her life at the time she was attending our program.*
>
> *During our visit, our Youth and Family Worker relays a call she just took from a parent of a recently graduated student. The parent wanted us to know that her son, now in grade 11, was voted "the smartest boy" in the school of 100 where he was now attending. He had received honor roll status in most of his classes. Upon receiving this news, his mother had immediately thought of us. She wanted us to know that she believed his success this year in school was attributed to the work we did with him the previous year.*
>
> *Our former student listens to this story and replies, "she's right you know. That's why I wanted to come here. **To tell you.** You all give so much love to each student. You open yourselves up and are there for all of us. Most people, like me, coming here, don't get that from their parents and it makes a difference. I didn't realize the impact it was having on me at the time but when I started to reflect on my time here I know it changed me. **I came here to thank you** and to tell you all that I really love you."*
> (narrative account from an alternative program)

The power of this relationship cannot be underestimated. For some young women and

girls it can mean the difference between staying in school and dropping out, or

connecting with services and staying on the street. Most researchers agree and point to

having a relationship with a significant adult as one of the most important factors to

ensuring that young women and girls succeed in school or in helping them transition off the street. (Bazyluk, 2002; Dhillon, 2005; Higgitt et al, 2003; Smith et al, 2007).

> *I remember the first time we spoke of her childhood. She fought back tears, working hard to keep up her tough exterior. I gently persisted and for the first time she allowed someone into the pain and anguish of her past. Our bond was forged in the trust of that moment and together we committed to working together to rebuild her vision of her future. That was ten years ago and we maintain contact to this day. She calls me her "homie" and I call myself her "mentor," and we both laugh. I truly believe that it was through our relationship of trust and mutual respect that she was able to risk hoping again. I believed in her – her potential for great things – and told her so often. In turn, she believed in herself. The belief in her future potential kept her in school, urged her on towards graduation and helped alter the course of her life.*
> *Years later, when I asked her what worked. She told me, "you," I stayed in school because of you."* (narrative account from an alternative program)

"They're so wonderful, the strength in them…"
(3.5 Centering self-empowerment and self-determination)

> *"They're so wonderful, the strength in them…these kids are labeled in the community…(but) they are kids that achieve…"* (Keddie, 2011: 1006)
>
> *"You're one of the few teachers that actually believe in their students. Thanks times a million… I'm proud to say you were my teacher."*
> (student comment taken from an alternative teacher's yearbook)
>
> *"You've helped me through the times when I needed help but couldn't find it and even when I wasn't willing to learn, you motivated me to always finish."* (student comment taken from an alternative teacher's yearbook)

Given the oppressive and powerless experiences that young women and girls, who are marginalized and homeless have had to endure, it is imperative that we co-create an

educational option that values self-determination and self-empowerment as its primary

objectives. Castagno and Brayboy agree emphasizing the importance of connecting

students "to the human need for self-determination" (2008: 963). They note that our job

as teachers is to engage students in their own learning, so we can help them develop

strategies for understanding and acting on the world around them. Organizing the

learning environment around a model of self-directed learning will assist with this goal.

It is my contention, that young women will develop their own volition if they strive to

achieve a goal that is their own. Being the authors of their own successful action counters

the oppressive internalized voices of the broader community that describes them along

deficit lines. This journey of self-discovery, in turn, can lead to self-empowerment,

restoring self-esteem and confidence in their ability to succeed.

They call her name and she walks confidently across the stage. We stand and clap and whistle and cheer her name, " Yay, Sylvia!!!" Behind us, two rows also erupt in celebration. She is the first person to graduate in either her immediate or extended family. I remember the two years she attended our school. Her mother was 15 years older than her, her grandmother, 15 years older than that. When the police harassed her family daily and maintained 24- hour surveillance on her house due to her family's connection to a known gang member, she never stopped coming to school. When she refused to continue in the gang life, left home and feared for her life, she never stopped coming to school. She hears us in the front row and looks down smiling. She receives her graduation certificate and walks proudly off the stage.
(narrative account from an alternative program).

Through self-empowerment, the young women and girls can reclaim their self-identity,

pride, entitlement and hope. Creating a self-designed, self-directed and valued learning

plan in which they experience success, will allow them to move forward, out of despair. Having high staff expectations with scaffolded support is critical. This, along with a flexible delivery model and a schedule that reflects and responds to the needs of individual students' lives, will ensure students are working towards building positive futures of their own choosing. In this cooperative, self-directed learning setting, teachers work as educational facilitators who share the role of teaching and learning with the other students and staff. This model can be likened to many Indigenous focused schools, whose intergenerational and cooperative learning models have helped contribute to their success. (Anuik, J., Battiste, M., & George, P., 2010; Bell, 2004; Parent, 2009; Keddie, 2011).

> ***"Coming to this school changed my life. If it wasn't for them (the staff), I wouldn't have stayed in school"***
> (3.6 Offering holistic support to address the systemic barriers and social / economic disparities that impede full participation in educational programing)

> *"I owe them my life. Coming to this school changed my life. If it wasn't for them (the staff), I wouldn't have stayed in school"* (excerpt from a conversation with a former student)

We have heard numerous stories exemplifying the social, economic and systemic barriers that young women and girls encounter when attempting to pursue their educational futures. Implementing structures and practices that not only eliminate these barriers, but also create the conditions for the girls' future security and success is therefore critical.

With this in mind, offering holistic supports to the young women and girls which equally address emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual development is crucial to promote full participation in their own educational success. To teach in this holistic way, educators and school staff must be cognizant that intellectual development is inseparable from the other elements of a person's being. Co-constructing an individualized learning and support plan with the young women and girls will therefore necessitate focusing on all aspects of their life. It may include incorporating pre-employment and life skills training, cultural teachings and spiritual guidance, and/or personal health and well-being counseling, as well as the more traditional learning goals. To meet these diverse goals, co-teaching with other staff and students, Elders, community and business members, will not only be preferable, but necessary. In addition, networking with sister agencies and youth services will ensure the availability of services the school and the staff are unable to provide. As well, ongoing professional development and training will be critical for all staff to be able to respond to the myriad of complex issues in the lives of the young women and girls.

> *"For me, I had self-esteem issues and I didn't have anybody to talk to or mentor me and even just to love me…no adult support person…and that would have made a big difference…I went through so much sexual abuse and physical abuse and … I think there should be more counselors helping students…even normal kids get stressed out from all they go through…*(Individual interview, Dhillon, 2005: 26)

Given our understanding of the importance of relationships, it is essential to have staff that can provide on-site emotional support and counseling. Working towards family reconciliation will also be key as we support the girls' transition away from the street.

Providing concrete support and basic needs to enable youth to freely access education is imperative. On-site advocacy must be available to secure stable housing, to address financial security, to connect with needed services and resources, to fight over-criminalization by the justice system, to connect with adequate medical and dental supports, and to access addictions and detox services. Further, knowing that we are all much stronger when we are not alone, providing accompaniment, in the form of transportation and emotional support to appointments and interviews, will help build confidence as the young women engage with the world in new ways.

Within the structure and practices of the school we must be prepared to remove the economic barriers cited by the young women and girls. Fraser (2007) and Huggins (1998) describe this as the *politics of economic redistribution* which "reflects an understanding of the girls' economic hardship as located within a broader socio-historical context where race and gender specific modes of exploitation, marginalization and deprivation continue to disadvantage Indigenous women and girls" (as cited in Keddie, 2011: 1010). For example, providing bus passes, financial provisions for school activities and work experience, adequate clothing, school supplies, and daycare for young mothers and for those students who need help caring for their younger siblings, is necessary to ensure the young women and girls can be "on par" with their mainstream counterparts. In addition, providing three meals a day, where young women and staff alike share in the planning, preparation and consumption builds community and teaches valuable life skills. Finally, given the significant health problems and lack of access to medical attention experienced by street-involved and homeless young women and girls, it is critical that the school have

ongoing relationships with youth doctors and on-site nurse practitioners available several times throughout the week.

Spirituality comes in many forms and is practiced and experienced by each individual in different ways. In its broadest sense, spirituality can be described as doing what is meaningful to you. Spirituality has the power to be a healing and transformative practice. Being with nature is one avenue to access this power. I am among many who have experienced an inner peace and a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all things by being alone in nature. It will be important to create opportunities in this alternative for the young women and girls to retreat from the urban center to connect with nature. As well, prioritizing the development of relationships with Aboriginal elders, community members and local knowledge keepers will be a critical element for the healing and support of the young women and girls of Aboriginal descent.

> **"We do work really well as a team"**
> (3.7 Employing a passionate, committed, experienced and representative staff team who work equitably together within a common educational philosophy and political framework)

> *"Here, I get, more than anywhere I've worked, a real sense of 'if I've got an idea, I can take that to someone…' I've never worked in a place like that, so to me it's really good…every staff member just gets in…We really do work well as a team"* (Keddie, 2011: 1007).

It is a widely accepted belief that the long-term success of any educational venture can be attributed to the strength of the staff team. The research, my observations and my own experiences confirm this belief. Employing a staff team that shares passion and commitment, and whose members work equitably together is important. This team must be representative of the youth being supported. They must work within a common educational philosophy and political framework, and must have skills, knowledge and experience to holistically support young women that are marginalized, street-involved and / or homeless. Such a staff team will form a critical element of this educational endeavor.

It is crucial that each staff member invest in the success of the whole program. Given the intensity and emotional toll of work of this nature, individuals will need to have a strong belief in the importance of the work being done.

A high priority must be placed on the value of the team. Therefore, each staff member must be valued equally. Their voice and vote must count equally. Their input, initiatives

and personal expertise respected and encouraged equally. With equal value comes equal expectations and this must be reflected in an equitable pay scale. This is particularly essential as we are intentionally creating the inclusive and equitable community we want to live in. Removing financial and hierarchical barriers amongst the staff is the first step to achieving parity of participation within the program for the young women and girls the program will be supporting.

In keeping with these beliefs, it is essential that the staff hired is representative of the youth being supported. It goes without saying that the population of young women and girls accessing the program will have experienced, and may continue to experience, a disproportionate amount of male violence, particularly sexual assault and rape. Given these experiences, many are unable to develop trusting relationships with men, particularly those young women who continue to fight for their safety and survival on the street from the men who are exploiting and assaulting them. We have already heard from marginalized and street-involved young women who have described dealing with male staff as a barrier to continuing with their education. I argue that for the most vulnerable and highly at-risk young women and girls that this program is designed to support, a women-only staff is imperative. Dhillon's (2005) research with young women and girls across the country supports this belief. "What is vital to consider, ….is the development of female only educational spaces where homeless and / or street-involved young women who have experienced male violence have the opportunity to participate in educational programs without the sexual harassment and threat of male peers and the power and authority of male teachers" (32).

Further, I would argue, that for the staff team to truly be reflective of the population of young women and girls in need of this educational alternative, an active recruitment of Aboriginal women staff members is essential. Dhillon's findings concur. "Calls for First Nations content in the curriculum and the hiring of Aboriginal teachers, then, was of paramount concern to any of the homeless young women participating in the project and advanced as a fundamental component of any educational program designed to meet their needs" (2005: 39). Without equitable leadership from Aboriginal women within the staff team our responses to the young women and girls seeking our support will be at best inadequate and at worst, wrong. Bazyluk (2002) identified that Administrators who were proactive in their strategies to promote inclusivity and academic success for all learners by recruiting Aboriginal teachers and staff had a greater success rate for Aboriginal learners. Silver and Mallet (2002) agree, noting that 96% of their study participants agreed that there should be more Aboriginal teachers and confirm the belief that there can be a significant cultural/class/experiential divide between Aboriginal students and a largely non-Aboriginal teaching force (19).

In addition, it is well known that for Aboriginal students, their connection to their family and their school's connection to their family and community is a marker of educational success (Bazyluk, 2002; Keddie, 2011; Silver & Mallet, 2002). Having staff of Aboriginal descent can be an important part of building positive relationships and increasing parent confidence in school given the damage and mistrust caused by the Residential School System. Keddie (2002) agrees and notes that at Tiddas, the Indigenous

staff was able to develop strong social bonds with Indigenous families which "enhanced the girls' and families' sense of connectedness and affiliation with Tiddas which in turn supported the girls' schooling participation and engagement" (1007).

Bazyluk (2002) emphasizes though that it is not enough to just hire a representative staff. "Transformation in Aboriginal education cannot take place while Aboriginal teachers are marginalized" (139). A concerted effort must be made to be inclusive and promote participatory parity within the staff team if there is to be true success. Each staff members' voice, contributions and vote must be valued equally to address the marginalization we are fighting against. If we can't do it for each other, also practicing the equitable world we want to create, how can we expect it for the young women and girls we hope to support?

Only the most skillful, knowledgeable, and experienced staff need apply. This is not an entry-level position. Only those experienced and successful in working with at-risk and marginalized youth can comprehend the rigor and all encompassing demands placed on the staff. It entails giving of your heart and spirit as well as your mind and body. It entails inventing creative, innovative and imaginative solutions and responses to insolvable problems and crises. It involves flexibility and openness to new ways of being and thinking. It involves being willing to learn as well as teach, to letting others share the lead, to listening instead of talking, to admitting when you are wrong and being willing to make things right. It entails working collectively within a competitive society and a systemically hierarchical system. And it sometimes involves actively forgetting what you

learned at school. The most vulnerable of our young women and girls deserve and need this much and more. They also need a staff with training in supporting young women who have experienced male violence with a feminist approach to supporting them. The young women need to know they are not to blame for the actions of the men who have hurt them and they need help to unravel the damage done to them by years of oppressive beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that have marginalized them, led them to the street and kept them there. They need a staff team that is knowledgeable of the community supports and resources available to them and those with the ability to advocate within the social services, housing and criminal justice systems on their behalf.

> **"...they treat me with respect"**
> (3.8 Creating a private / public partnership)

> *"I'm able to talk with them, even about things not related to school"; "they take time to get to know you"; "they treat you like an adult"; "they treat me with respect"; "the teachers here have a little more understanding and patience. They take time to listen to us".* (Silver & Mallet, 2002: 19)

The Vancouver School Board has a long and successful history developing and maintaining private / public educational partnerships with community organizations to create targeted educational alternatives for specific groups of learners. I propose the formation of another such partnership with the Vancouver based organization, Justice For Girls Outreach Society to create an educational option designed to target young women and girls who experience marginalization and / or homelessness.

Justice For Girls is a non-profit local organization that, for the past ten years, has successfully promoted social justice and an end to violence, poverty and racism in the lives of young women and girls who are low-income or homeless (Justice For Girls website). Their experience working with, for and beside marginalized young women and girls in the areas of access to education, to stable and affordable housing, to fair and equitable treatment in the criminal justice system and in response to young women's experience of male violence make them an invaluable partner in this educational venture. In addition, their expertise advocating and lobbying for policies, laws and practices which promote safety, equality and dignity for young women and girls at provincial, national

and international levels and their public education aimed at prevention and awareness will be a valuable asset as we seek proactive and hopeful solutions towards eradicating the conditions that create marginalization and homelessness.

> **"…there's no formula for the sort of person who works here. It's more about commitment…"**
> (3.9 Proposing a staff composition)

> *"…there's no formula for the sort of person who works here. It's more about commitment…"* (Keddie, 2011: 1005).

The staffing composition must equally address issues of education, counseling and advocacy, therefore I propose the hiring of seven staff members: 2 teachers (VSB employed), 2 Counsellors, 2 Advocates / Outreach workers and 1 Program Coordinator. With this composition, the program staff could support 25 young women and girls enrolled formally in the educational component, and also be available to support those wanting to connect on a drop in basis for counseling, advocacy, connection, food, basic necessities, clothing, laundry and a safe space.

Staff should understand that although they will be assigned primary roles and responsibilities, these roles will be interchangeable. Given the uniqueness of each young woman and girl, students will develop different relationships with each staff and all staff may be in the position of counseling or doing advocacy.

Primary Roles and Responsibilities:

Teachers: facilitated instruction and support of learning plan goals created in partnership with each young woman

Counselors: social / emotional support; family and community reconnection; must have an understanding of how sexism, poverty and colonization have impacted the young women's lives and their versions of themselves; reframing their self-image and identity; redefining themselves in the world; self-empowerment; self-determination; must be trained in sexual violence and addictions support

Advocates / Outreach workers: advocacy for stable housing, financial stability, over-criminalization, pre-employment training and placement, material supports, medical and dental supports, connecting / networking with other community organizations; must have a strong knowledge and be able to develop strong relationships with sister organizations and youth services within the community, business and government organizations; ability to positively represent the program and the young women

Program coordinator: eye to overall operation and tone; administrative responsibilities such as staffing, scheduling, funding, program development, staff development, networking, community relations, employment, training and recreational opportunities

Administrative support: budgeting, office and phone support (hire from community)

"…dwelling is not primarily inhabiting but taking care of and creating that space within which something comes into it's own and flourishes. Dwelling is primarily saving, in the older sense of setting something free to become itself, what it essentially is" (as cited in Jardine, 1998: 96).

A 'dwelling' is much more than a physical location. We need to imagine this new educational alternative as a safe space where the young women and girls can begin again; a space where they can launch or continue their journey of self-discovery and create an identity outside of who they may be in the community and the outside world. With this in mind, it is important that the space and location be given serious consideration.

I recommend transforming a house in order to create a welcoming environment that does not have an institutionalized atmosphere. The site must be in a safe location, away from the downtown core and easily accessible by public transit. As they enter, the girls can be welcomed by a large inviting, comfortable, drop-in gathering space. Access to a big kitchen where women can cook, eat and connect together, washrooms that have built in shower and laundry facilities, and a quiet space with beds are essential. In addition, space for counseling and administrative work should be available. Three learning spaces, which house internet-accessible computer workstations, a 'quiet' study room and a classroom setting can be created. Given that the young women and girls will guide their own learning plan, they will access these spaces only when they are ready to learn. Storage

space for donations and educational supplies, a yard for a community garden and

opportunity for expansion must also be considered.

> **"…cause I wish … I did have all my schooling and I was like going forth with that**
> **and I could actually get a good job and actually go to university or college"**
> *(3.11* Proposed Funding Options)

> *"The only way it makes me a bit angry is cause I wish … I did have all my schooling*
> *and I was like going forth with that and I could actually get a good job and actually*
> *go to university or college … but I can't because I still have to get my grade twelve*
> *and that affects me so much cause there is so much that I want to do and I won't be*
> *able to do that until X number of years so that's where it does make me bitter".*
> *(*Higgitt et al, 2003: 83)

It is imperative to create a diverse funding base if this school is to be sustained. With this

in mind, I initially propose the creation of a public / private partnership with the Justice

For Girls Society. In addition, seeking provincial and federal government funding, as

well as financial support from private funders, corporations and organizations is essential.

The success of the Take A Hike Foundation in Vancouver, which provides the majority

of funding for their innovative alternative program, suggests future research into the

creation of a school foundation may also be warranted.

> **"Thank you endlessly for everything and your complete support."**
> (3.12 Future Directions and Conclusion)

> *"Thank you endlessly for everything and your complete support. I couldn't have done it without you."* (student comment in an alternative staff's yearbook)

We must not stop in our quest to create educational environments in which even the most vulnerable and at-risk children and youth in our society can thrive. Only then will we know that we have truly transformed education for all learners. 'Unschooling' our beliefs and assumptions about 'traditional' ways of learning may be required to achieve this radical shift.

Bazyluk (2002) argues that, "their (the students) job is to share their stories and experiences and to guide educators in the transformation of education" (141). This paper has highlighted the stories and experiences of young women and girls from across Canada. The resulting proposal is a direct response to their voices and offers guidance on how to transform our current educational model to create an inclusive and holistic alternative. But much more needs to be done to achieve this goal.

We must convince government bodies, funders, organizations and corporations of the importance of this work and this project. We must engage the young women and girls, their family members, front-line youth workers, women's organizations, Aboriginal Elders and community members, as well as educators, administrators and school staff to further imagine the possibilities of this new learning environment. And then we must

commit our hearts, minds, bodies and spirits to co-create this transformed educational

alternative with the young women and girls whose voices give life and meaning to this

paper.

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