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**MEETING THE NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON  
BEING IN AN ALTERNATE PROGRAM**

by

**Paula Irene (Juoni) Shepherd**

**B.A. (Honours) English, Simon Fraser University, 1971**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS  
in the Faculty of Education**

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## ABSTRACT

At-risk students, those who drop out of school physically or mentally, are causing alarm because it is believed that individuals who drop out limit their futures and become a burden on society. Hundreds of alternative education programs have been developed in an attempt to retain students in school to graduation. Thousands of students are placed in alternative programs each year, never to return to the "regular stream". It is, therefore, necessary to ascertain if these programs are meeting the needs of at-risk students. The purpose of this thesis is to determine what the students perceive their educational and emotional needs to be and if they are able to articulate those needs.

The research into the problems of at-risk students has attempted to explain the reasons for the problems these students experience in school on the characteristics of the students themselves or on school policies and structures. It is apparent from the literature that schools are not meeting the needs of many of their students. Students have academic, emotional and social needs. Their most pressing need appears to be the need to feel cared for by their teachers.

Sixteen students currently enrolled in alternative education programs were interviewed about their experiences in the regular and in the alternative education classrooms. To allow students the greatest freedom of expression, the "focused interview", with open-ended questions, was followed. The data were analyzed by searching for themes in the students' comments. A narrative account was then written.

The students interviewed described their alternative program classrooms as being more effective in meeting their needs than the regular classrooms had been. Many students reported having bonded so deeply to their teachers and classmates in the alternate classroom that the people in the classroom had become their "family".

The impact of alternative programs on the future lives of at-risk students is not yet known. It is possible that by participating in alternative programs students are limiting their future options. Schools should be attempting to improve regular classrooms to better meet student needs and to prevent students from becoming at-risk.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated with love to my  
husband, Pete, my children Alison and Peter,  
and my mother Martta Juoni.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## CHAPTER I

### Background

The high school dropout problem is causing alarm for governments, educators, business and industry, and parents in many nations including the United States and Canada. Most of the concern comes from a strong belief that individuals who drop out of school before graduation severely limit their chances of future employment and their chances of having a "quality" lifestyle. Associated with this belief is a second belief that dropouts will eventually cost society billions of dollars in lost tax revenue, in welfare and unemployment payments, and in increased health care and law enforcement costs. Students without high school diplomas also cost industry millions of dollars in training expenses. Research has indicated that it costs industry \$25, 000 to recruit, select, and train new employees. Dropouts, however, stay in jobs less than a year. Therefore, when half of Canada's dropouts change jobs in less than a year, the training expenses rise to a "staggering \$37.5 million". (Carr, 1991, p. 1) It is therefore thought to be best for the individuals, as well as for society, that students complete their high school education.

For many students, however, acquiring high school graduation is a difficult and sometimes an impossible task. Often these are students who come from low socio-economic status (SES) families, from single-parent families, and from minority groups. They are also the students whose academic performances have been poor throughout their schooling. They are easily identified by schools staffs by "predictors" such as below-average reading ability, poor grades, history of course failures, retention in grade, low sociability, low self-esteem, and various discipline problems such as, disruptive classroom behavior, truancy, lateness, skipping classes, a history of suspensions and/or probations. They may be students who have learning disabilities or different learning styles. They may come from homes where alcohol and drugs are abused and they may be involved in drug and alcohol abuse themselves.

These students are described in the dropout literature as students "at-risk". These students are at risk of leaving high school prematurely. There are other definitions of "at-risk". The broadest definition includes all those students, who for any reason, may not be able to achieve success in the "regular" academic program. Some authors include students who have become passive in school. These students have "disengaged" themselves from most school activities, doing only the very least they can get away with doing and still managing to pass. Although these students have not physically left school, they have dropped out mentally. Therefore, these students are also seen as being at risk because they are failing to acquire anything of value from their time in school and because they will consequently enter the adult world without the adequate skills or knowledge to be successful there.

### **Possible Ways to Frame the At-Risk/Dropout Problem**

The beliefs stated in the beginning paragraphs of this thesis frame the dropout problem as an economic problem. The economic view of education sees the primary purpose of schools to be the training of productive future workers for business and industry. The economic view is discussed by Beck (1992) as a "masculine view" of education because it focuses on competition, achievement, and accomplishment. This view has validity because students will need to fit in to the working world eventually. They will need jobs to support themselves and our society will need good workers to compete with workers of foreign countries so that our society will be able to maintain a high quality lifestyle. Dropouts in this context are a serious problem for society as a whole, because rather than contributing to the economic wellbeing of society, they will eventually become a drain on the economy.

The dropout problem may be framed in other ways as well. There is also a social view of education. This view holds that the primary purpose of education is to help solve society's problems of poverty, drug/alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, adolescent suicide, gender and racial inequity, crime, injustice, and recently health issues such as AIDS. (Beck, 1992) By addressing these issues and attempting to correct them, schools would help to institutionalize and maintain the values of morality, responsibility, equality, and justice and would then concentrate on promoting the "general good" of all people in our society. Dropouts in this context are seen to help perpetuate the ills of society because dropouts themselves often come from backgrounds of poverty. When they become parents, their children will, again, be raised in atmospheres of want by parents who do not value education and who will not be able to provide the material or even the emotional support children need to do well in school.

The dropout problem may also be framed as purely an educational problem. This view holds that the primary purpose of schools is the intellectual development of students. In this context dropouts are a symptom of the poor health of the structure and the organization of schools, particularly the poor health of secondary schools. When thirty percent of students are failing to acquire skills and knowledge and fail to complete their secondary school education, that is a good indicator that the system itself is not healthy.

Another view of schooling states that the primary purpose of education is the personal growth and development of individuals. This "caring ethic", is seen by authors such as, Nel Noddings (in Beck, 1992) as being a "feminine view" of education because it focuses on the nurturing of individuals. Making personal "sacrifices" in attempting to meet the needs of individuals and in helping them to solve their problems is a common and expected occurrence in caring for individuals, such as students. Dropouts in this context are seen to be victims of a

system which fails to respect and value human beings as individuals.

Also, several anthropologists have studied the dropout problem as being a "culturally constructed" problem. Raymond McDermott (1989) suggests that the problem only exists because we have "named" it and have now devoted huge amounts of money to identifying potential dropouts and attempting to remediate their problems. To support his belief, he states that "fifty years ago most of our children did not finish high school, but we did not have a named dropout problem." (McDermott, 1989, p. 19) Margaret LeCompte (1987) also recognizes that the dropout problem is a recent development. She believes that dropping out became a problem for our North American society after the 1950s. Up to that time society was easily able to absorb those young people who had not acquired a high school diploma. After the World War II "baby boom", society was faced with a surplus of labour and technology began to radically change the workplace and the skills and competencies the workplace required of its employees. LeCompte believes that students drop out because schools have become ". . . out of synchronization with [their] cultural context." (LeCompte, 1987, p. 238), that is, "isolated" from the "social, economic, and philosophical" realities of our "postindustrial, multiethnic society". Schools in our North American society have, therefore, become "dysfunctional". (LeCompte, 1987, p. 238)

This cultural view also holds that people from different cultures value different things, learn in different ways, and may have different expectations for their children. These values, styles, beliefs, and expectations often come into conflict with the values of the teachers and administrators who run the schools, causing students to fail and withdraw. According to the cultural view, the dropout problem is the result of the "sorting processes" that schools perform for their society. Schools label certain minority groups as "failures" very early in the educational process. (McDermott, 1989, p. 21) Students from these groups are "streamed" into lower tracks and are later placed in modified programs from where many of them drop out. This view states that the primary function schools perform for society is to squeeze students into the acceptable cultural mold (Spindler & Spindler, 1989, p. 8) In this process, the students who do not fit, because they come to school differentially prepared to compete in the educational arena, are discarded. That is, they drop out. In this way society perpetuates its existing class system.

McDermott believes that ". . . in ways unknown, to our hard working parents and teachers, [we are] organizing high school as a place from which it makes sense to drop out." (McDermott, 1989, p. 16) He says that while there are some ". . . brutal facts about opportunity in our economy" (McDermott, p. 21) there are countries and cultures where students experience ". . . high rates of success and few children [are] formally labeled as broken . . ." (McDermott, p. 17). Some cultures appear to be able to live without a dropout problem. In our North American culture

dropouts have become a serious problem because our "... culture works against its own people." (McDermott, p. 22) McDermott states that as long as the "... struggle between the haves and the have-nots dominates the wider community, the same struggle will be played out in every classroom and every category applied to every child." (McDermott, p. 22) McDermott sees the dropout category as being:

... carnivorous: it eats thousands of young people daily. The category LD [learning disabled] is ready to acquire our youngest school problems; the category dropout is ready to acquire our young adults; and the category unemployable or illiterate is ready to acquire our adults. (McDermott, p. 22)

McDermott takes the dropout problem beyond the cultural view and sees it also partly as a political problem warning that once a problem has been identified some people stand to prosper from the existence of the problem. He believes that one way to fight the problem is to study those people who use the term and discover what their allegiances are. He indicates that seeing the dropout problem as a political problem too, allows people to organize formally in protest against it and help force reforms. He does caution that since the dropout problem is embedded in cultural and economic realities, schools cannot be blamed entirely for the dropout problem and that it would be naive to assume that schools are even equipped to solve it.

Rather than accepting one view of the problems of the at-risk students, perhaps it would be more useful to educators and legislators to believe instead that "Academic failure is fully understandable only in its macro-historical, social, economic, and political context". (Trueba, quoted by Fetterman, 1989, p. 45)

How people respond to the dropout problem and to the problems of the at-risk student depends upon the particular view of education they hold. It is apparent from the amount of money and effort being directed at making students fit the system, "fix" the students, give them the correct attitudes to make them good employees, and expose them to the world of work, that the federal government and the provincial government are proceeding from their belief in the economic model of education. Even the anthropologists, with their wider cultural view of the problems of the at-risk students and of the ones who eventually drop out of school, recognize that there are economic and social realities which are "external to the school" but which the schools must still attempt to accommodate. Therefore, this author feels that the economic view of the at-risk student problem/dropout problem is valid and deserves attention. In also recognizing that there are social, political, and cultural factors which affect the health of our schools, perhaps it is possible to shift some of the blame for academic failure from the schools and teachers. It could be useful to suggest to society that schools, alone, should not be expected to solve the problems of the at-risk

students or the problems of the actual dropouts. With a wider focus, perhaps a bigger attack can be made on the problems.

### **Federal Responses to the Dropout Problem**

It is difficult for people studying the drop-out problem to agree on what is an "accurate" percentage of students who leave school before graduation, since there is no agreement on the definition of who a drop-out is and no standard way of collecting data. But it is estimated that the national dropout rate in Canada today is about 30%. A federal government pamphlet, Youth: A National Stay-in-School Initiative, states that "... nearly 100, 000 Canadian young people are ... dropping out of high school every year." (Youth, 1990, p. 5) The pamphlet warns that "... the 1990s could see as many as one million under-educated, untrained youth trying to enter a labour market that increasingly won't want them." (Youth, p. 5) New market demands, global competition, and advances in technology mean that Canada's needs for highly skilled workers will continue to increase as the century progresses. Youth states that this kind of environment "will stifle most dropouts". Because they (dropouts) lack the basics they will find themselves "untrainable" and "... will be trapped in cycles of unstable work and dependency, a situation that will perpetuate low self-esteem, and one that invites increasing problems with illiteracy, innumeracy and poverty." (Youth, p. 7) The federal government feels that the dropout rate is unacceptable in its implied "... loss of human potential, higher social costs, and a serious deficit in the supply of skills needed to expand employment, productivity and incomes for all Canadians." (Youth, p. 7)

The federal government, therefore, has assumed a leadership role in finding solutions to the dropout problem. It has agreed to allocate \$296.4 million dollars to a five-year, national program, the Stay-In-School Initiative (**START**) specifically to address the reasons why students drop out of school and what would help keep them in school until graduation. Across Canada school districts with high percentages of dropouts have been identified by the federal government. These school districts have received funding to hire full-time persons to co-ordinate Stay-In-School projects.

Also, the Work Orientation Workshop (**WOW**) program, another federal government initiative, which began as a summer program in 1985 has now been expanded to operate on a year-round basis. This program also targets at-risk students, in particular recent dropouts and potential dropouts. The **WOW** program's message to students also is: stay in school. Through classroom work and on-the-job experience the **WOW** program attempts to show students the exciting possibilities that exist in the real world for those skilled enough to seize the opportunities.



### **Provincial Responses to the Dropout Problem**

The provincial government in British Columbia is also attempting to keep all students in school by implementing sweeping educational changes as proposed in the Year 2000: A Framework for Learning document. This document was written in response to 83 recommendations made in A Legacy for Learners, the report completed following the Royal Commission on Education headed by Barry Sullivan, Q. C. between March 1987 and July 1988. The Sullivan Commission conducted an extensive study of British Columbia's education system. Like the federal government, the Sullivan Commission also "... documented and confirmed the dramatic social and economic changes that have taken place in British Columbia over the past 20 years. These changes have placed new demands upon, and created new expectations for, our schools." (Year 2000, p. 2) Future workers will have to be flexible and versatile. They must be able to communicate well, have good interpersonal skills and be able to work co-operatively and "... they will need to be lifelong learners." (Year 2000 p. 2) Also like the federal government, The Sullivan Commission found the dropout rate in British Columbia "disturbingly high". The Commission "... concluded that 'one solution to these problems is to create relevant **alternative programs of good quality** [emphasis mine] to attract non-academic students, including those who might otherwise leave school early'." (Year 2000, p. 2)

The Year 2000 document recognizes that there are many reasons why students dropout and that some of the reasons (economic factors, students home life, etc.) schools can do little to change. But other reasons that contribute to students dropping out physically or mentally by becoming disengaged from school activities may be under the control of schools. School curricula, "particularly at the secondary level" are perceived by students as not being "relevant". But according to the Year 2000, "addressing these problems means more than providing a range of alternative programs in the secondary years. As the Commission stated, 'self-esteem must be nurtured' throughout all the years of schooling." (Year 2000 p. 3) The mission statement at the beginning of the Year 2000 document shows a concern both for the individual and for society. It states:

The purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.

### **School District Responses to the Dropout Problem**

School districts in British Columbia have responded to the dropout problem by implementing a wide range of alternative programs where students who previously had been "at-risk" of dropping out are meeting with success and are, in fact, remaining in school to the end of

grade twelve.

In October 1991 forty-nine British Columbia school districts sent a list describing the alternative programs available for the students in their area. The list was prepared for participants in a conference called: *Dropouts: Problem and Promise* sponsored by the British Columbia School Trustees' Association. The list called: *Special Programs in British Columbia Schools* (in the handout binder for the *Dropouts: Problem and Promise*, BCSTA conference, October 31 - November 1, 1991) contained descriptions of 188 alternative education programs now available to students in British Columbia school districts. They range from preschool and early primary programs, to programs for behaviourally disturbed students, programs for students with substance abuse problems, outreach programs attempting to bring dropouts back into school, programs for Native students, programs for teenage mothers, work experience programs, Pathfinder Learning programs (computer-assisted instruction), tutorial programs, mentoring programs, peer helper programs, career preparation programs. Some are specifically labelled "dropout prevention". Some programs are directed at upgrading students' academic skills, others to counselling, others to making a link to the world of work, and yet others to building self-esteem. Since not all districts reported and since some of the districts that did send in reports did not describe all the programs available, it is safe to assume that there are many more alternative education programs in British Columbia school districts than the 188 described.

### **Evolution of Alternative Education Programs**

Alternative education programs are not new. They are not simply a response to pressures from the federal government or from the Ministry of Education. Teachers have always recognized that there are students who have difficulty learning, that some students need different instructional methods, more individualized attention, or a quieter setting than a regular classroom situation can provide. Teachers have always attempted to respond to the individual needs of students by modifying programs, teaching styles, and expectations.

When teachers found that in large demanding classrooms they could not give the most needy students the attention they required, "communication centres", "learning centres", "remedial rooms", and "special needs" classrooms evolved. At first students may have been sent to these quiet rooms with the supportive teacher for a few hours a week. Eventually, regular classroom teachers simply did not wish to reclaim these students, stating that in the "special" classroom their students were meeting with success. In a regular classroom setting they just "could not cope". They would "drown".

The special needs teacher suddenly found herself/himself with a small group of very needy students on a permanent basis for two or more school years. Quite alone, the teachers had

to design educational programs for these students, concentrating on what the students' immediate educational, emotional, and social needs were and projecting into the future to prepare students for what they might need in order to successfully enter the adult world. Sometimes support was received in the form of funding to begin programs. Other times it was up to the teacher to literally scrounge around the school for suitable materials and equipment or to personally develop entirely new materials and activities.

When more teachers at more schools realized that the "special needs" classrooms were successful with students who previously would have dropped out or have been pushed out of school, work began on a district level to write legitimate program descriptions complete with entry and exit criteria and appropriate curriculum materials. This work in Prince George began in the early 1970's and is still progressing as the programs are being refined and improved. The program descriptions or "manuals" usually go through several rewritings and long approval processes through the district principals, the Special Education Department, and finally through the School Board. Once the School Board accepts the program, the Ministry of Education automatically recognizes the alternative program as a "locally developed" course and it has official sanction. This is precisely the process which culminated in the development of alternative education programs in the Prince George school district.

Two of the alternative education programs in the Prince George School District are: The Pre-Employment Program (PEP) for students with some learning disabilities and the Alternate Education Program for students who have the academic capacity to graduate in the regular program but whose social and emotional problems have placed them at risk of dropping out. In Prince George there are several alternate education programs which attempt to meet the needs of very different groups of students from those whose social and emotional problems prevented them from achieving success in a regular classroom setting, to the behaviourally disturbed, the young offenders, to the teen moms.

### **Importance of the Study**

It is important to study the problems of at-risk students and the problem of dropping out, first because in our society educational attainment and employment are "inextricably linked". Our society "... requires literacy for economic well-being . . ." (LeCompte, 1987, pp. 237-238) Also, these problems are not going away for all the efforts at "reform", "intervention", "prevention", and "remediation". Also, no one as yet has found "the solution". There have been many failures as well as some powerful successes in programs intended to help at-risk students and thereby reduce the number of dropouts. Writers such as Natriello, Pallas, and McDill (1986) encourage new directions for research. In particular, they encourage the study of "school

processes" and the long-term consequences of dropping out for students and for society. By asking students to describe their experiences when they were in the regular program and their experiences when they entered an alternative education program, something of value may be learned about how to change schools at the school and classroom level to encourage students to continue their education to graduation or beyond.

Also, it is important to study alternative education programs because there are so many of them. If in British Columbia alone there are more than 188 alternative education programs, hundreds of students each year are being pulled from their regular classrooms and many of them will never return to the regular stream. The concern that must be in the minds of educators is: are these programs good enough? Will students actually benefit from their placement in alternative education programs or are they being deprived of a meaningful education? Are alternative education programs so modified, so slowed down, so "survival-skills" oriented, and having such minimal standards that students who graduate from these programs are then as, Jerry Conrath states: only "minimally competent to survive"? Particularly now in the 1990's, when the new jobs are expected to require up to 17 years of schooling and training (Youth, p. 7), educators cannot afford to send out into the adult world youth whose skills and knowledge are only "minimal". Since it appears that some students do indeed need alternative education programs, educators must be confident that programs are of "good quality" and "relevant" to the lives of the youth they attempt to serve. For these reasons alternative education programs must be studied, evaluated, and improved upon on an on-going basis.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Intervention programs for at-risk students can only be successful to the extent that they can "match" with the particular students they serve and to what extent the programs can meet the needs of these students. The purpose of this thesis is to hear directly from the "at-risk" students themselves what their experiences have been in a regular program and what their experiences have been in an alternative education program and what they perceive their educational and emotional needs to be. This thesis should answer what pictures of their own future at-risk students have. It should also answer whether at-risk students know what they want or need from school and if they are able to articulate their needs. The main objective of this thesis is to learn if alternative education programs are meeting the needs of at-risk students.

### **Method**

To gather information for this thesis, 16 students currently enrolled in alternative education programs were interviewed. Students were asked for their perceptions of what happened to them in school before they entered alternative programs and what is happening to them now in their

alternative education classrooms. A modified form of the focused interview was used in an attempt to enter the minds of the students to discover issues that were of "central significance" to them. The data were analyzed by searching for themes and patterns in what the students described. An attempt was then made to identify the needs students most wanted schools to meet. A judgement was made about whether or not the alternative education programs were meeting the needs of at-risk students, depending on whether the students said they would want to stay in their alternative program or return to a regular classroom.

**Definition of Key Terms**

The term, "at-risk" will include all those students who, for any reason, may not be able to experience success in the regular academic programs offered in the classrooms of public schools. These students are seen to be at risk because they may drop out of school, or they may remain in the classroom but may drop out mentally by becoming passive and "disengaged" from school activities. These students are at risk of ". . . failing to fulfill their own potential." (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 86) As a result, they will be seriously disadvantaged when they enter the work world. They will not have the skills necessary to be employed in anything but menial, underpaid, "dead-end" jobs. They will, therefore, be at-risk both in school and in life.

Frymier and Gansneder (1989) give one of the best descriptions of at-riskness. They suggest that we think of

. . . human existence as a continuum that ranges from healthy or good to unhealthy or bad, then at-riskness is only one-half of that continuum. The 'good' end of the continuum tends in the general direction of health, adjustment, adequacy, happiness, high self-esteem, achievement, and prosocial or life-oriented behavior. The 'bad' end of the continuum tends in the direction of illness, maladjustment, inadequacy, unhappiness, low achievement, low self-esteem, and antisocial or death-oriented behavior. At-riskness begins at the middle point of the continuum and extends to death-oriented behavior. (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989, p. 142)

Barrington and Hendricks (1989) identify a third group of at-risk students, not often discussed in the literature, the "nongraduates". These are students who remain in school to the end of grade twelve but fail to attain graduation. This group is clearly in as much risk as potential dropouts and those who drop out mentally. These students also will enter the adult world inadequately equipped to succeed there.

Since many authors discuss the importance of "meeting the students' needs", the term "needs" will have different meanings which should be clear from the context.

The terms "alternate programs" and "alternative programs" will be used interchangeably to

mean programs that have in some way been modified from the regular program. These modifications may have been made in the curricula offered, in the instructional methods, in scheduling, pacing of the work, or in the kinds of services and experiences offered to students. Since there are hundreds of different alternate programs, in the United States and in Canada, it is not possible to give one specific definition of "alternate" or "alternative education" program.

### **Limitations**

There are three main limitations in this thesis. One is that, while the intent of it is to evaluate the effectiveness of alternative education programs in meeting students' needs, only students' perceptions of whether the programs are effective or not will be used. No empirical data will be collected and no longitudinal cohort study comparing students who graduated from alternate programs, to students who graduated from the regular program, and to those students who dropped out will be conducted. Clearly, the best way to assess the effectiveness of alternate programs is to follow students out of school, into their adult lives and discover if the students from alternate programs have acquired further education or training, if they are working in jobs actually reflecting their skills and ability or if they are in dead-end jobs. The jobs, the incomes, and the lifestyles of former alternate education program students should be compared to those of students who graduated from the regular program as well as those of students who dropped out of school. To conduct this kind of study, however, would require massive amounts of work and several years to complete. It is far beyond the scope of a master's thesis to conduct this type of study.

Another limitation in using only student perceptions is that students may not have a clear understanding of what impact being a student from an alternate program may have on their future. They may have false expectations that they have the same opportunities for further education and for well-paid jobs as graduates from the regular program. Students may not even be aware of what society will demand of them and may believe that the alternative program is very effective in meeting all their needs when it may be only meeting a part of their needs.

The third limitation is that the data is not generalizable to other school districts. It is not even generalizable within the Prince George school district because the students interviewed were not randomly selected from all alternative education classrooms in the district. Principals and alternative education teachers from three Prince George secondary schools were approached asking for permission to interview students for the purposes of this thesis. The teachers asked for volunteers and sixteen students agreed to be interviewed. The students came from eight different alternative education classrooms. The views expressed by the students represent what they perceive to be happening in their eight classrooms and cannot be seen as representing what occurs in the alternative education classrooms of the other five secondary schools in the Prince George

school district.

### **Organization of Thesis**

Chapter 1 gives the background and the statement of the problem. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on at-risk students and various alternate programs. Chapter 3 describes the methods used in collecting information on student perceptions of alternate programs and in analyzing and interpreting the data from the interviews. Chapter 4 is a discussion of the findings of the research. Chapter 5 forms the conclusion and includes a discussion of the implications of the findings.

## CHAPTER II

### MEETING STUDENT NEEDS THROUGH ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

#### The Organization of Chapter II

This chapter first discusses what the literature says about who the at-risk students are and why many of them drop out of high school. This chapter then discusses the possible needs revealed by the students' problems and experiences in their personal lives and in their school lives. This is followed by a discussion of the intervention and prevention strategies attempted in the United States and in Canada. The most successful alternative programs are discussed in terms of the characteristics that made them effective with at-risk students and the extent to which they were capable of meeting student needs. Also, two of the programs which failed to meet their objectives are discussed in order to learn what alternative programs should avoid doing. The chapter ends with a discussion of some cautions and criticisms directed at alternative programs.

#### Critique of the At-Risk/Dropout Literature

Much has been written about who the at-risk students are and why they drop out of school in an attempt to understand the problem and to help keep students in school until graduation. Educational journals have often devoted whole issues to studying the problem. Some of the authors, however, take rather narrow views of the problems of the at-risk students and why they drop out of school. They either blame the victims themselves, seeing that there is something wrong with the young people who cannot, or choose not to, finish high school or equally narrowly, they place the blame entirely on the structure and organization of schools and particularly on the teachers. On the whole the literature presents a very negative view of today's secondary schools and of their teaching staffs. The authors use words such as "assaultive", "systematically destructive", "defeating", and "hazardous", for example, in describing schools. These authors fail to take into account that both students and schools are a product of the society in which they exist. Inequities exist in the communities where the at-risk students live and these same inequities are present in the classrooms they attend. It is naive to expect that even very skilled teachers and administrators can make a positive, long-term impact on every student who comes into the school suffering from various emotional crises, hungry, needing clothes, needing nurturing, pregnant, or on drugs, for example. On the one hand, some authors say that schools are being asked to take on too many responsibilities. Yet other authors insist that school administrators and teachers must accept more work, more responsibility, be more accountable for students' academic progress, and must spend more time with students.

This author feels that schools and teachers can do a better job of meeting the needs of all students, especially the needs of the at-risk students, than is now being done, but they will need



the kind of support that John Goodlad (1984) talked about. Goodlad stated that in earlier years, the home, the school and the church worked together to support the education of young people. In colonial America, for example, the essential knowledge and skills were taught in the home. The church taught morality and responsibility and school learning was only an "add-on" to what was taught at home and in church. But, "all three institutions buttressed each other in the rearing and educating of the young." (Goodlad, 1984, p. 40) All three institutions have changed radically and are no longer capable of sustaining education or even of providing convincing or significant role models for young people. Goodlad sees that a "new coalition" must now emerge.

But this coalition must support more than schools. It must embrace new configurations for education in the community that include not only home, school, and church but also business, industry, television, our new means of information processing and all the rest of the emerging new technology of communications, and those cultural resources not yet drawn on for their educational potential. Education is too important and too all encompassing to be left only to schools. (Goodlad, 1984, p. 46)

Schools and teachers have received much negative attention both in the United States and in America. They have been subjected to wide-scale reform and excellence movements all the while attempting to survive and do their jobs in their busy classrooms, full to the bursting, with very needy students. This author believes that there are many in-school realities that the authors failed to take into account. For example, they blamed teachers and administrators for uncaringly pushing problem students out of school without thinking, or without knowing about the kind of destructive impact even one truly disturbed, attention-seeking student can have on the classroom learning environment. The authors also talked much about the lack of attention students receive on a day-to-day basis in school and only a few of them (authors) discussed the overcrowding in schools which would account for the seemingly "uncaring" attitude of teachers. Much can be learned about how to make schools effective in meeting the needs of all students by talking to students, teachers, and administrators. This writer believes that many of the researchers need to spend more time inside classrooms than they are currently spending. In fact, they should "job shadow" teachers over an extended period of time. Better yet, they should attempt to teach students in the environments they are researching.

### **Who Are The At-Risk Students And Why Do They Drop Out of School?**

In the United States and in Canada large-scale studies of the dropout problem have been conducted. In the United States, the High School & Beyond Study was conducted in 1980; a follow-up study was conducted in 1982 (discussed in Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1987). Also in the States, the Youth in Transition; Study of Schooling was conducted in 1971 and the

National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Labor Market Experience was analyzed by Rumberger in 1983. In Canada, the Radwanski Report, officially known as Ontario Study of the Relevance of Education and the Issue of Dropouts was conducted in Ontario in 1987. Research methods have included surveying, in-school observation and documenting, and interviewing students themselves.

Researchers now have a fairly accurate profile of the at-risk student and can use these characteristics to identify potential dropouts as early as grade three. One important finding that has emerged from studies of at-risk students is that there is no such thing as a "typical" at-risk student or a "typical" dropout. Although dropouts share many characteristics and cite similar reasons for leaving school early, there are many ". . . different types of dropouts who leave school for different reasons." (Rumberger, 1987, p. 111) This point is particularly important for people attempting to design prevention, retention, or recovery types of programs for these young people, because no one solution will meet the needs of these different individuals. The "tremendous diversity" behind the at-risk label requires that student needs be thoroughly assessed and that "multiple interventions" be taken to help them. (Fernandez & Shu, 1988)

Through their studies researchers have developed a long list of reasons why students drop out of high school. Andrew Hahn (1987) reviewed the dropout literature and concluded that the "dropout phenomenon" is ". . . a multifaceted problem. It starts early, has many causes, and grows incrementally worse with each successive year." (Hahn, 1987, p. 256) Dale Mann (1986) also sees the dropout problem as "a nest of problems" with a "multiplicity of causes". He goes on to state that, according to dropout data compiled by William R. Morgan from the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experience (1979 - 1982), ". . . 51 percent disappear because of things about the school: 21 for economic reasons; 5 percent for family reasons; and 23 percent for other reasons." (Mann, 1986, p. 308) The High School and Beyond Study showed that poor academic performance is the most common reason for leaving school early, stating that 42% of the dropouts had had mostly D's in school. Hahn also believes that students drop out because of undiagnosed learning disabilities and emotional problems.

Edwin Farrell's study of at-risk high school students identified pressure and boredom as two of the major reasons students leave school. Hess, Wells, Prindle, Liffman, and Kaplan (1987) cite student involvement with gangs as a major reason why students drop out of Chicago high schools.

Russell Rumberger divides students' self-reported reasons for leaving school into three categories: school-related (for example, disliked school or were expelled or suspended), economic reasons (had to go to work), and personal reasons (pregnancy/marriage, for example). According

to Rumberger, peers may also have some influence on students' decision to drop out of school. He states that "many dropouts have friends who are also dropouts . . ." (Rumberger, 1987, p. 110) Another reason listed often, and discussed in detail by Michelle Fine (1986), is that school work is not seen by students as being relevant to their lives or to their future employment. Students leave school seeing no hope for a better life for themselves even if they do complete high school because they know there may not be jobs available to them. (Fine, 1986, p. 399) Many other students are "literally thrown out" of schools or are passively allowed to withdraw after discipline problems and extended absences. (Fine, 1986, p. 397)

According to William Glasser, students give up on school because school has stopped being a "need-fulfilling experience for them. Glasser says that many students cannot meet their needs for personal power, love and belonging, fun, or freedom in school and therefore, seek to meet those needs out side of school.

Working at a part-time job also has been seen to increase the chances of students dropping out. Students who work more than fifteen hours a week, increase their risk of dropping out of school by 50%. (Mann, 1986, p. 310) LeCompte (1987) stated that 70% of all teenagers work during the school year, leaving them little time for homework, sports, or for other extracurricular activities.

Students also report disciplinary problems and problems getting along with teachers as reasons why they leave school. (Wehlage & Rutter 1986)

Jeremy Finn discusses two different models for understanding why students drop out of high school. The first model is the "frustration-esteem model. Students' sense of self-esteem is lowered by continual failure in school and attempting to reach "unattainable goals" frustrate at-risk students, causing them to feel powerless and ineffective. These feelings of powerlessness, failure and frustration may cause students to raise their self-esteem by engaging in disruptive behavior in their classrooms. Eventually these students withdraw from school, first only mentally, and then physically.

The second model discussed by Finn as an alternative to the "frustration-esteem model" of dropping out, is the "participation-identification model. This model suggests that if students failed at some time to form bonds with, or to identify with their school, and to value in-school activities, they may feel alienated from the school and may exhibit ". . . such behaviors as absenteeism, truancy, dropout, and delinquency." (Finn, 1989, pp. 126-127) According to Finn, "nonidentification predisposes the individual not to continue to participate in school-related activities, leading to less successful outcomes and to emotional and physical withdrawal." (Finn, p. 133)

Finn states that basic premise of the participation-identification model ". . . is that participation in school activities is essential in order for positive outcomes, including the students' sense of belonging and valuing school-related goals, to be realized." (Finn, p. 129) But many schools still limit participation in sports and in school governance to students who have a strong academic background, leaving the at-risk student with no reason to remain in school.

Charles T. Luby conducted a study on the dropout process for the Greater Victoria School District (Victoria, B.C., June 1989). Data were sought from students who had dropped out of school during the year of the study, students enrolled in alternate school programs, and from school personnel. Dropouts, the alternate program students, as well as the school personnel interviewed agreed ". . . that the most important reasons for students dropping out were boredom, teachers distant from students, students having problems and difficulties with teachers, and family problems." (Luby, 1989, p. 1) Students discussed their feelings of alienation from the system. The fact that truly helps to underscore the extent of alienation from school felt by most at-risk students is the finding ". . . that 54% of the dropouts reported that they did not talk to an adult at school [emphasis mine] before dropping out." (Luby, 1989, p. 57). Most of these same students (71%) did discuss dropping out with their friends and with their families. (Luby, 1989, p. 17) Also, "most dropouts stated that they had experienced a critical incident, usually a problem or difficulty with a teacher, vice-principal, or principal that they perceived as being unjust which helped them decide to drop out." (Luby, 1989, p. 2)

Jack Frymier and Bruce Gansneder analyzed data from The Phi Delta Kappa Study of Students at Risk. This study involved 22, 018 students from 276 schools in the United States. Data were collected on fourth-graders, seventh-graders, high school sophomores, and others. The study was intended to help develop a scale to measure at-riskness, so that an "at-risk score" could be arrived at for each student. The findings suggested that between 25% and 35% of students in this study were seriously at risk, having "six or more strikes against them" out of 45 factors identified by previous research as being linked to at-riskness. (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989, p. 144). Students at risk were found to live in nontraditional home settings. They had been retained in grade at least once. They were at least a year older than other students in their grade. They had missed 21 or more days of school last year and had been suspended. Many had attended three or more schools within the last five years. English was not spoken in their homes. They did not participate in extracurricular activities, had a negative sense of self-esteem, used drugs or lived with family members who used drugs. Some of the at-risk students had also sold drugs. Three out of 100 high school students had attempted suicide. Some had been physically or sexually abused and two out of 100 high school students had been involved in a pregnancy in the last year. (Frymier &

Gansneder, p. 144)

### **The Defective Student Versus Defective School Processes**

The traditional research studied the individuals who dropped out of school and found them to be somehow "defective" or "deviant". This "within-child" deficit ". . . model ascribes school failure to deficits the child brings to school, such as IQ, and not to the total context within which a child functions." (Trueba, Spindler, and Spindler 1989, p. 1) The High School and Beyond Study, for example attempted to demonstrate that students who dropped out of high school "differed significantly" from students who remained in school until graduation, the "stayers" or the "stay-ins". Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1986) analyzed the High School and Beyond Study data to arrive at these salient characteristics of the dropout population: ". . . dropouts are disproportionately from low SES [socio-economic status] families and racial/ethnic minority groups." (Ekstrom et al., 1986, p. 358) Compared to the "stayers" dropouts come from homes with "a weaker educational support system." Their homes have fewer study aids. They are less likely to have both natural parents living at home. Their mothers have less education and have lower educational expectations for their children. Their parents are not interested in monitoring their children's in-school or out-of-school activities. Also, dropouts differ from stayers in their in-school behaviors. "They had lower school grades and lower test scores, did less homework, and reported more disciplinary problems in school." (Ekstrom et al., p. 358) Also, dropouts have low levels of self-esteem and an "externalized sense of control" meaning that they feel they have no control over their own destiny.

Rogus and Wildenhaus (1991) have recognized many of these same characteristics listing five conditions that underlie at-risk behavior. These conditions are: ". . . academic underachievement, lack of self-esteem and self-respect, inability to communicate thought and feeling on an intimate level, limited conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, and unrealistic life expectations." (Rogus & Wildenhaus, 1991, p. 2)

According to Robert DeBlois, the most-often shared characteristics among dropouts are ". . . that they are two years behind their peers in reading and math skills, and that by the time they reach the seventh grade they have been kept back a grade for one or more years." (DeBlois, 1989, p. 6)

Barrington and Hendricks found that while there were ". . . significant differences in the ability levels of the dropout and graduates" (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989, p. 313) dropouts had the "sufficient ability" to complete the academic requirements for graduation. But the dropouts they (Barrington & Hendricks) studied did not work up to their potential and had been underachieving since the third grade. Another indicator of at-riskness was found in the higher

number of referrals to special education and remedial type of programs among the dropouts.

### **Questioning the "Within-Child" Deficit Model**

This "'within-child' deficit model" has been questioned by more recent researchers and authors. Anthropologists, for example, look at students experiencing discipline problems, academic failure, and dropping out of school and see that these students are, in fact, simply attempting to "make sense" of their own context, their life at school.

An anthropological perspective insists that every individual does his or her best to preserve self-esteem and survive as an intact person. This struggle to preserve and survive often results in behavior that is perceived as deviant, destructive, and dysfunctional by observers who are operating out of different contexts than are those individuals being observed and evaluated -- the 'natives' (Trueba, Spindler & Spindler, 1989, p. 2)

What anthropologists see students protecting themselves against in schools are the constant pressures to "conform to predetermined set of cultural standards", conform to the teachers, the classes, and submit to tests and various "sorting procedures employed in schools". (Trueba, Spindler & Spindler, p. 2) While

... dropping out is never the most desirable solution in the long run ... it may be the pragmatic one that works for the individual under conditions of stress, confrontation, conflict, and failure on the part of the school to adjust to realistic circumstances.

(Trueba, Spindler & Spindler, p. 5)

American schools, according to George and Louise Spindler, spend much time in identifying, particularly students from minority groups, as potential failures. "... There is always the implication that even if they ... endure school, they are not assured of a positive gain at the end." (Spindler & Spindler, 1989, p. 13) Anthropologist Raymond McDermott (1989) believes that dropping out is a "culturally constructed problem". Society has divided people into "... those who can and those who cannot ... ." (McDermott, 1989, p. 20) and schools follow that example by sorting people into "success piles" or "failure piles". So that when students drop out of school, they "... are doing what culture tells those in the losing half to do: they are getting out of the way." (McDermott, 1989, p. 20) McDermott concurs with the Spindlers' opinion that schools in our society identify students as "lacking" almost from day one, expect them to fail and that the system we have created "... is well designed to make dropouts." (McDermott, 1989, p. 23) Therefore, school for many students, especially for minority students, becomes "a long drawn out degradation ritual." (Spindler & Spindler p. 13)

### **School Processes Which Affect At-Risk Students Negatively**

Many educational researchers and authors have also turned their attention away from the characteristics of students to the school structure and school processes. They are now studying "institutional rather than individual pathology". (Catterall 1987) Andrew Hahn (1987) studied the dropout rates in American cities and found a consistently high dropout rate "among *all* students". This finding suggested to him that dropping out is not just a problem of a few students who could not learn. Rather, "it is a systemic failure." (Hahn, 1987, p. 257)

Wehlage and his co-authors (Rutter, Smith, Lesko, Fernandez, 1989) believe that students drop out of school because "something happens" to them in schools that causes them to lose hope and their dignity to such an extent that dropping out of school becomes almost necessary for survival. Many students elect to leave school early because they are told, ". . . each day . . . in various subtle and direct ways that they are not good at anything. The message is that they are not and cannot be successful. Repeated assaults on their self-esteem make school intolerable." (Wehlage et al., p. 8)

Wehlage and Rutter (1986) state that certain school factors combine with certain student characteristics causing students to drop out of school. (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 389) They see the dropout problem itself as an indicator of the health of the institution. Also, the problem of widespread truancy and 'cutting classes' is a strong indicator that something is wrong with the institution itself. Rather than being an indication that at-risk students are "different", discipline problems are an indication that students are in conflict with the institution and its rules and norms and are, therefore, becoming "estranged" from school to the extent that eventually many of them "elect to escape".

Wehlage and Rutter looked at the High School and Beyond data and found problematic "institutional characteristics" which can affect at-risk students negatively. "Three variables can be seen as measures of student alienation and rejection of school--Teacher Interest in Students, Effectiveness of Discipline, and Fairness of Discipline." (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 382) When students were asked to rate Teacher Interest in Students, more than half of the dropouts and just under half of the non-college-bound stay-ins gave their teachers marks of fair to poor. On Fairness of Discipline 63 % of the dropouts and 52% of the stay-ins rated schools as fair or poor. On the Fairness of Discipline question student responses were even more negative indicating that ". . . schools have a serious problem with how students perceive the discipline system." (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 383)

Wehlage and Rutter disagree that dropouts can be identified in the early years of schooling since most potential dropouts see themselves as eventually graduating from school. According to

Wehlage and Rutter, dropping out is a complex process rather than a conscious decision. They suggest that discipline-related school factors "... are significant in developing a tendency to drop out." (Wehlage & Rutter, p. 385) They go on to explain the process of "rejecting" the institution:

If one comes from a low SES background, which may signify various forms of family stress or instability, and if one is consistently discouraged by the school because of signals about academic inadequacies and failures, and if one perceives little interest or caring on the part of teachers, and if one sees the institution's discipline system as both ineffective and unfair but one has serious encounters with that discipline system, then it is not unreasonable to expect such individuals to become alienated and lose their commitment to the goals of graduating from high school and pursuing more education.

(Wehlage & Rutter, p. 385)

One very interesting finding of the High School and Beyond follow-up study showed that dropping out of school had actually helped to increase the self-esteem of the dropouts. In fact, the gain in self-esteem was "exactly the same" for the dropouts as it was for the college-bound students. This finding again stresses that in school, with constant failures and unfair discipline practices, and feelings of alienation from teachers and from school activities, it is extremely difficult for some students to preserve their self-esteem. According to Wehlage and Rutter, dropping out may have helped students to gain a sense of control over their lives "through participation in adult activities" (p. 388).

Hess, Wells, Prindle, Liffman, and Kaplan (1987) conducted an in-depth ethnographic study of eight Chicago high schools combining informal observations in the lunchrooms, hallways, and classrooms of these schools with data collection on such institutional characteristics as: school discipline and attendance policies, failure rates, course offerings, staffing policies and length of teacher tenure.

Some of the problems they note that may make high schools less responsive to the needs of all students, particularly the at-risk students, are the large size and bureaucracy and "procedural inertia", the high level of teacher transfers from some "problem schools", teacher burnout, lowered teacher morale, and counsellors who were too overburdened with paperwork and handling attendance and discipline problems to even meet their students informally much less offer them individualized counselling. The ethnographers who studied the schools observed that students received less than 10 minutes of individual attention a day from their teachers. Students selectively cut the first and last classes of each day and the hardest classes or the least-liked classes. They also reduced their "classroom exposure by 25% to 38%" by coming to class late. These students were then "punished" for their tardiness and "cutting classes" by being suspended from school. The



authors viewed this suspension policy as "sanctioned cutting".

Students also spent far less time in instructional classes than the law required. In some schools they were scheduled for "fictional study halls" in rooms that did not exist or students were assigned a "library period", which they were not really expected to attend, at the beginning of the day. When the study halls did exist they were noisy, crowded, filled with trash from the lunch hour, and were more under the control of the students than of the teacher who was assigned to supervise them. Hess and his co-authors state that this lax ". . . scheduling communicates to students that school is not a serious enterprise, that their time is not important, and that they do not have to be present when they are scheduled to be." (Hess et al., p. 348)

Michelle Fine describes four main types of dropouts found in urban public schools: those who have made a negative appraisal of the value of schooling and those who see ". . . no relations between schooling and future income." (Fine, 1986, p. 396) Then there are students who must leave because of some immediate crisis in their lives, for example, needing to go to work to support a family or a death in the family. "Finally, there is a group of unspecified size that is literally thrown out of school." (Fine, 1986, p. 397) These students by their very act of dropping out or of giving up and allowing themselves to be "thrown out", are demonstrating that they are critiquing and rejecting school because they have experienced it (school) as a "defeating" place. In her field observations of urban schools Fine has reached the conclusion that schools themselves are part of the reason why students drop out. She states that schools often are ". . . unresponsive, at times assaultive and rejecting" (Fine, 1986, p. 407) institutions.

Fine does not believe that the "overwhelming social and economic pressures" faced by many of the at-risk students are a sufficient explanation for why these students drop out of high school. She believes that in order to understand and then alleviate the dropout problem, researchers need to study the "pedagogical practices" and the "structural conditions" within schools. In her observations of classroom she noted that student opinions are silenced in school particularly in classrooms where the teacher is more concerned with control and with his or her own authority rather than with student autonomy and in classrooms which are organized around competition rather than collaboration. Fine gives examples of structural conditions in urban schools which may hold answers to the dropout problem. These structural conditions are:

". . . the nature of the student body . . . the level of overcrowding . . . fiscal arrangements that encourage the early dismissal and virtual neglect of dropouts, and the level of empowerment or disempowerment experienced by staff. (Fine, 1986, p. 398)

Fine describes how overcrowding heightens students' feelings of "alienation and anonymity". In these overcrowded schools students have little hope of receiving help from

teachers who have too many low-skilled students needing their attention. Also, in these schools teachers have strong feelings of disempowerment. They feel that no one listens to them or shows interest in what goes on in their classrooms. These feelings of disempowerment are often turned against the students. According to Fine, "the disempowered teacher may help to produce the disempowered student who, more often than not, in city schools, drops out." (Fine, 1986, p. 399)

Fine also observed, in person, that teachers and administrators did not demonstrate care or concern for students even when students arrive at the office asking to be discharged from school. She quotes from her own field notes: "Six or seven kids a day come in asking to be discharged. Nobody says 'Are you kidding? Where do you think you're going?' There is no hysteria, no upset, just a bureaucratic, even pleasant exchange of papers." (Fine, 1986, p. 400) There seems to be instead, an unacknowledged "... organizational commitment to ridding the school of its presumably 'difficult students' . . . ." (Fine, 1986, p. 403)

Frymier and Gansneder also found that some of the in-school problems that created problems for the at-risk students were that teachers responded in very traditional ways to students who were at risk. For example, most teachers stated that they did not think it was possible for them to help students with out-of-school problems. Most teachers stated that they knew little or nothing about specific aspects of their students' lives. Although teachers knew strategies that might help their at-risk students, most teachers reported that they did not use any of these strategies very often. Sixty percent of principals reported that they restricted participation in sports to only good academic achievers. Forty percent of teachers said they regularly retained students in grade. Over half of the teachers actually believed that retention in grade was an effective strategy despite research evidence supporting the view that retention in grade increases at-riskness. The survey also suggested that teachers "... lacked skill with or confidence about particular approaches to working with at-risk students." (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989, p. A12)

John Goodlad in his study, *A Study of Schooling*, of 1000 classrooms in the United States (his findings form the themes discussed in his book, *A Place Called School*, 1984) observed that most classrooms are neither "strongly positive" nor "strongly negative" places. He paints them to be rather boring places where there is a "narrow range of activities", "little hands-on activity", where little teaching or learning occur, and where "enthusiasm and joy and anger are kept under control." (Goodlad, 1984, p. 124) In these classrooms teachers are generally autonomous in deciding the activities, the methods of instruction to be used, and the materials to be used and the methods used to evaluate students' progress. There is little praise or correction or guidance given to students on how to do better next time. He also observed that even when students are placed in small group settings, they still essentially work and achieve "alone". He saw that while teachers

are "mildly aware" of personal problems facing their students, they (teachers) do not see helping students with these problems as a "primary concern", believing instead that their primary concern should be the intellectual development of students.

Also, according to Goodlad, schools help to curtail the general education of many future citizens by deciding that certain students are incapable of acquiring a general education and therefore placing them in lower "tracks" or vocational schools or by actually encouraging ". . . the early departure of those deemed most troublesome or recalcitrant." (Goodlad, p. 90) Goodlad believes that today's schools are not "ideal places" even for those students who are academically successful. He believes that "far-reaching restructuring" of schools is now required.

In his book, The Quality School (1990) William Glasser states that schools provide very few opportunities for students to meet their needs. It is particularly difficult for students to meet their need for personal power. Glasser believes that if students are to remain in school and to produce quality work, the way in which schools are managed must change so that students may begin to meet their basic needs at school.

Glasser believes that most schools are "boss-managed". Teachers and administrators "coerce" students with punishments, rewards, and strict rules of deportment. The least advantaged students are "bossed more". They are "pushed and punished" until they hate school. In these schools the main issue is control of students. The teacher has all the power and the students have none. According to Glasser schools should be "lead-managed" in such a way that students will happily work hard and produce quality work because they see their teachers as "caring" and believe that school work can be "need satisfying".

Lead-managers in schools are both administrators and teachers. Administrators manage teachers and teachers manage students. Lead-managers never use coercion. They use persuasion and problem solving. A lead-manager is a facilitator who is careful to ask workers/students for their input on the best ways to do the jobs. Lead managers allow the workers/students to do jobs that best suit their skills and meet their needs and they allow workers/students to inspect and evaluate their own work.

### **Teachers as Part of the Problem**

As noted by many of the authors already discussed, teachers have been cited as a major part of the institutional characteristics that cause students to give up on school. The poor quality of teaching, low expectations for at-risk students and teacher expectations that the at-risk students cannot succeed, the lack of variation in instructional methods, the lack of individualized attention to students, the lack of caring or respect for students by teachers, lack of expertise for dealing with at-risk students, as well as teachers' lack of knowledge and lack of interest about the personal lives or

the personal problems faced by their students, have all been cited as reasons why students feel frustrated and alienated in school. Many dropouts list not getting along with teachers as one of the main reasons they left school. Also, according to Deborah Strother, at-risk students "... viewed their teachers as unhappy with their jobs, disgruntled, bored, and boring." (Strother, 1986, p. 327) Strother quotes Laurie Olsen and Melinda Moore who state that "... poor teachers erode students' confidence, their fragile sense of acceptability to their peers, and can contribute to truancy, dropping out, and acting out." (Strother, p. 327) Teachers have been seen as "the enemy" by students, parents, and certainly by legislators, who have attempted to solve the dropout problem by controlling teachers and by attempting to make them "accountable".

According to Charles Payne (1989) teachers are "easy to blame" if we focus on only a part of the truth. He suggests that we should focus instead "on the overall context of schooling". Payne states that there are at-risk teachers as well as at-risk students. He says "... that the behavior of one side frequently informs and mirrors the behavior of the other." (Payne, 1989, p. 117) Payne sees that teachers are as much victims of "the same alienating structures" and that they respond in similar ways, misbehaving, showing little respect to those in authority, putting little serious effort into their work, and being absent from school as often as possible. Another author, John V. Hamby (1989), noted that in some school districts teacher absenteeism was actually higher than student absenteeism. Charles Payne states that in the worst

... urban schools, teachers, students who drop out, and students who stay in are similarly demeaned and devalued by the physical conditions of their schools, by the impersonal nature of the environment, by supervision founded in distrust, by a lack of basic supplies, by capricious rules selectively enforced, by their inability to trust the people with whom they work, and by their inability to participate in the decision-making process.

(Payne, p. 118)

William Firestone is another author who believes that teacher alienation is part of the cycle of student alienation in school. He says that, teachers' "... disengagement feeds the alienation of students and is in turn reinforced by it." (Firestone, 1989, p. 41)

William Glasser also recognizes that often adversarial relationships between teachers and students are in place by elementary school because the teachers coerce students into performing the way administrators and legislators attempt to coerce teachers into performing. Both work in traditional "boss-managed" school settings where the basic premise seems to be that "neither students nor teachers can be trusted to do what is best for them; they have to be told what to do and coerced into doing it." (Glasser, 1990, p. 55)

### **The Needs as Revealed or Implied by the Problems**

Many of the authors who have written about at-risk students and the dropout problem have either implied or stated directly that the reason at-risk students have so much difficulty at school that they eventually have to drop out is because schools are failing to meet the needs of these students. Several authors caution educators to attempt to meet the needs of these students if we are to help keep them in school until graduation. Therefore, it is essential for educational policy makers, administrators and teachers to know what the specific needs of these students are.

First, and foremost, students have academic needs. Research has shown that students who drop out of school or students who were only marginally engaged in school activities, enter the working world with minimal academic skills and knowledge. They can only find menial, dead-end jobs. These academically-disadvantaged students have greatly reduced earning power and their chances of having a quality lifestyle are also greatly reduced. Therefore, in this rapidly changing, highly technological society of ours, it is safe to assume that all our students need a good general foundation in the core subjects. They need information about the world of work and about how to make effective career choices, as well as how to be good parents and good citizens. They also need access to continuing education past secondary school.

Every author has his or her own list of student needs. These needs cover educational and vocational needs as well as social and emotional/psychological needs. Many authors, however, have discuss the need of students to see relevance in their school work. Rey Carr (1991) suggests that providing career-related courses is not the way to address students' need for relevance. He says, "relevance is helping students discover meaning and salience." (Carr, 1991, p. 8)

Glasser states that students must meet their basic needs for survival, personal power, love and belonging, freedom, and fun at school every day to some extent if they are to see school as a "need-fulfilling" place. Glasser (1984, 1990) explains that all humans have five basic needs which must be met to some extent every day if a person is to be happy and healthy. These needs are: survival, love and belonging, personal power, fun, and freedom. Survival needs are the basic human needs for food, shelter, and safety, etc. Love and belonging refers to a person's need to be loved and accepted by others. Personal power is not power over others. Rather, it is the knowledge that one is important, and that one has accomplished or can accomplish things, learn things, master things, that one has control. It is related to self-respect. Fun refers to the need that people have to play, laugh, and enjoy things in life. And freedom is the freedom to make choices as well as the freedom to say "no".

Finn states that if students are to value school and make a commitment to school-related activities they have to feel that they "belong" in the school setting. Finn says students have a need

to identify with the institution and to value the activities that occur inside it.

Newmann (1989) lists five needs he feels are important for students to become and to remain "engaged" in school work. He lists the "... need for competence, extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interest, social support and a sense of ownership." (Newmann, 1989, p. 34)

Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) specifically mention three needs that schools should help all students, not just those at risk, meet. These are the "... need to acquire a personal sense of competence and success, to develop a sense of identity and social integration, and to acquire the socially useful knowledge and skills that make an individual a good worker, parent and citizen." (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 27) Wehlage and his co-authors paint a very clear picture of schools that fail students as being "uncomfortable, "hostile", "unforgiving", even "hazardous" places for students, particularly for the at-risk students. They strongly imply that students need schools and classrooms to be friendly, sensitive, accepting, safe, and responsive places. Wehlage and his co-authors also believe that students need schools to provide them with "... the stimulus of a personal vision that motivates the effort and commitment to achieve." (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 23)

The research on at-risk students shows that students arrive at school carrying with them some enormous personal problems. They need teachers and counsellors who have had enough professional training in the problems of at-risk students so that they (teachers and counsellors) can recognize common symptoms of major problems such as drug abuse, depression, or stress, in the behavior patterns of their students. Students need school staff who are capable of at least referring them to the correct agency or program for help.

Charles Luby's finding in his Victoria, B.C. study of the dropping out process was that students "... desperately want and need teachers that care about them, are interested in them, and believe them to be worthy individuals deserving of respect and acceptance. (Luby, 1989, p. 59) John Goodlad agrees, stating that students need to be treated as "individuals" not just as students. Students need their teachers to evidence some "concern and support" for the personal problems with which students are faced.

The longest and most specific list of needs found for this thesis was prepared by Dr. Arlene McGinn for the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district. The list is found in a manual called: The Teacher Advisor Program: An Introduction. Fifteen student needs are listed as follows:

need to develop realistic expectations, find a "good fit" (between needs and availability), need to be treated with respect, need to belong, need to understand the school culture, rules and regulations, need to feel competent and be able to master the learner expectations, need

to be able to make decisions and solve problems, need to be challenged, need to achieve accomplishment and completion, need to see relevancy, need to be able to integrate learning to real life situations, need to build a flexible career and life plan, need to be aware of education and training possibilities, need to participate as a member of the community, need to be both independent and interdependent

(McGinn, 1992, pp. 13-14)

Also, authors have discussed students' need to feel a sense of purpose in the work they are doing. In addition, many of the people who have designed alternative programs believe that students have a need to experience success. This need has been written into the objectives of dozens of alternative programs currently in operation in British Columbia schools.

Some students have specialized needs, for example, teenaged mothers need day care facilities for their children. They need flexible schedules to permit them to complete missed school work when a sick baby is keeping them up nights and they are unable to attend classes. They need parenting information, sex education, and information about nutrition and child development.

### **What Has Been Tried?**

The main response at the school district level and at the school level to the diverse problems and complex needs of at-risk students has been to offer alternative programs. There have been preventive programs starting at the preschool level, intervention programs for students struggling in school, and recovery programs to bring back students who have already left school. These programs have focused on improving basic skills, improving students' self-esteem, or on improving attendance. Many have given students vocational skills, computer assisted instruction, personal counselling, and life skills, for example. According to Dale Mann, ". . . virtually everything is being done . . ." (Mann, 1986, p. 313) Some of the programs appear to be succeeding in retaining students in school, or bringing back students who had dropped out and re-engaging the previously at-risk students in learning and in their commitment to schooling.

The impact of these programs on the at-risk student is still unknown as many of the programs are relatively new innovations and documenting of the program effects and evaluation of the programs has not yet been done to any great extent, with the exception of study of fourteen alternative schools/programs in the United States by Wehlage, Rutter, Smith Lesko, and Fernandez. The findings of this study were published in 1989 in a book called: Reducing the Risk: Schools as Communities of Support. The authors found that the most effective alternative schools or programs had some main common features: small size, teachers accepting an "extended role" for themselves, multiple interventions ("diverse programs for diverse students"), and job training programs linked with academic remediation. The most important characteristic demonstrated by

effective alternative programs/schools was the emphasis on matching their responses to the characteristics and needs of the students they served. Regular schools/programs expect students to do all the adapting. (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 110) According to Wehlage and his co-authors, effective alternative programs are succeeding with some at-risk students because "... these programs have created a more embracing and supportive social environment that is appealing to many young people who had rejected the competitive and impersonal classrooms encountered during their previous education." (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 218)

Many other authors (Rogus, Wildenhaus, Kammoun, Hamilton, Mann) have written about the components of successful alternative programs. These effective programs may vary widely in focus but all have main components in common. They offer challenging academic content, intensive remediation and even accelerated learning of academic skills. They relate academic skills to skills required in the working world. They take students into the community through work experience. They help students to develop a "realistic set of life expectations". They "maximize" students' participation in school by involving them in decision-making and in the governance of their classrooms and schools. They are staffed by caring and highly-skilled teachers who believe that their students can succeed. Successful alternative programs are lead by principals who are not afraid to take risks and who take the initiative to lead the program and ensure that necessary resources are available and that the program will continue. Effective alternative programs also have small teacher/student ratios. They offer students the opportunity to work at their own pace and be responsible for their own learning. They offer flexible scheduling and non-traditional approaches to teaching. Cooperative learning is one non-traditional approach often used in effective alternative programs. The focus of successful programs is on "mastery and achievement".

Stephen Hamilton's (1986) review of successful drop-out programs revealed these common characteristics:

- (1) They separate potential dropouts from other students;
- (2) they have strong vocational components;
- (3) they utilize out-of- classroom learning; and
- (4) they are intensive in the sense of being small, individualizing instruction, and offering more counselling than ordinary schools. (Hamilton, 1986, p. 410)

Like Wehlage and his co-authors, other educational writers stress that no one approach can meet the needs of at-risk students. Dino Altieri (1991), for example, states that educators must take the components of effective programs: early intervention, parent involvement, effective instruction and staff development and combine them into a "coherent whole". He sees that the school, the family, and the community must work together to effectively meet the needs of at-risk



students.

Andrew Hahn (1987) also believes that no effective prevention program can be "based on one single element". He believes that a "cohesive, integrated effort" combining many components is required to prevent older youth from dropping out of school. Four of the components he discusses address the problem of student alienation and their need to be cared for. He states that mentorship, counselling, and an "array of social services" must be provided at school for students and that parents and community must be involved in dropout prevention. And to address the need to see relevancy in school work to the working world and to the students' futures, schools and businesses need to collaborate to allow students "access to the mainstream economy". (Hahn, 1987, p. 260) The needs for success or for personal power are addressed by the components of "concentrated remediation" and "individualized instruction and competency-based curricula". (Hahn, pp. 260-261)

Hahn believes that alternative programs are "often the best option" for at-risk students and for actual dropouts but they do not guarantee success for all dropouts. He discusses Eileen Foley's findings that alternative schools, which are supposed to be able to meet the needs of students better than traditional schools, also have a dropout problem. In fact, 25% of alternative program students drop out in New York schools. Hahn summarizes Foley's findings that "the most successful alternative schools were those that challenged students academically and that provided personal counseling and were staffed by caring adults." (Hahn, p. 261) These points address again the students' needs to experience success/personal power and their need to be cared for/love and belonging.

### **Examples of Two Effective Alternative Programs**

Julian Nevetsky (1991) describes Operation Transition which uses a team approach to support at-risk students in middle school through to their transition into high school. This program is one of the best examples of the attempt to meet students' need for nurturing and caring. The at-risk population was divided by a team of counsellors, administrators and assistants, so that each individual on the team was responsible for about eight students. Follow-up of students was done by one "carefully chosen" teacher. This team met each week to review the students' progress and discover which students had been in crisis that week. A "Secret Pal", a teacher, was also responsible for giving additional support to a student they had chosen by providing "that little extra personal touch" outside of the formal classroom routine. This "Secret Pal" was not on the team but would report any behavior changes or alert staff to problems they saw developing.

This nurturing program worked so well for students in middle school that it was extended to the high school. At the high school level Operation Transition particularly targeted the at-risk

students at the grade nine level. This program involved parents by bringing them into the school during the first week of the school year. The intent was to establish "personal contact" and to assure parents and students that someone was available to help them. Additional counselling was also offered to the students. Team members also regularly made evening visits to the homes of the at-risk students. Nevetsky modestly states that although this program is only a "starting place", it has already made "... the difference between dropping out or continuing for many students." (Nevetsky, 1991, p. 48)

Uroff and Greene (1991) describe another exemplary school for at-risk students. The Apollo High School in southern California, is a school for 400 at-risk students. This school is structured around the needs of students as described by William Glasser in his book Control Theory in the Classroom. The school is "lead-managed". The teachers in the school believe that, "if students are to build their self-esteem they must experience the four As--attention, acceptance, appreciation, and affection." (Uroff & Greene, 1991, p. 52) Caring is demonstrated in caring actions such as having the principal of the school, with three fellow students, go to the house of a chronically absent student and urging him/her to attend. This caring action can help students meet their love and belonging need as well as their need for personal power. The student has tangible evidence that the principal and peers really care and that he/she is considered to be important in the school. Caring is further demonstrated at Apollo by the fact that all students are urged to develop leadership skills and are given a real voice in the governance of the school including decisions about the budget.

The Apollo High School concentrates on meeting students' academic needs as well as their "psychoemotional needs". Students are expected to do "quality work". Students are required to demonstrate their competency in subject areas on request. Writing skills and word processing are stressed as are mathematics. The students in this school perform well on proficiency testing and exhibit fewer problem behaviors such as: vandalism, pregnancy, suspensions, and absenteeism. Again this alternative school is demonstrating its effectiveness in meeting the "affective and cognitive " needs of its students.

#### **A Suggestion for Managing School Time to Help At-Risk Students**

Mark Ryan (1991) suggests that a very effective way to help students remain in school is to take the most "most controllable" and "most powerful factor" in school, the allocation of time, and offer students intensive teaching over a condensed period of time. Ryan calls this approach an "intensive learning format". He suggests adopting the summer school format in regular school. By this he means "... providing three-week sessions of five hours of instruction a day on a single subject. (Ryan, 1991, p. 28) This would allow students to complete a whole semester's work in a

three-week period. Also, it would permit students to enroll in up to twelve courses each school year. Absences would be limited to three per three-week session but a student with a history of chronic absenteeism would be able to re-enter every three weeks. In this way students must "spend a fixed period of time" in class to earn credit.

Other benefits would be that students would not waste time travelling from class to class. They would have to deal with only one teacher, and therefore only one personality, and one set of rules and one teaching style, greatly improving the students' chances of getting along with the teacher and of staying out of trouble. The teacher would also benefit by having smaller classes and, therefore, more time to give students individual attention, provide mentoring, monitor student progress, and establish a good classroom atmosphere. According to Ryan the most important benefit of the intensive learning format is that "... the teacher provides the student with a meaningful adult role model for an extended period of time each day. An enhanced student to teacher relationship enriches the educational process." (Ryan, 1991, p. 29) This one teaching approach has the potential to meet student needs for competence/personal power in allowing them to complete units in short periods of time, giving attendance in school a sense of purpose and relevance. It offers freedom from pressure and increases students' opportunities to meet their love and belonging needs/caring from their teacher.

### **Curriculum for At-Risk Students**

Robert DeBlois has written an excellent overview (DeBlois, 1989) of the type of curriculum likely to be the most successful in helping retain potential dropouts in school. The curriculum he describes has the potential to meet many of the needs of at-risk students. According to Robert DeBlois, people designing alternative programs for at-risk students must remember that these students will fail or succeed "with the curriculum" provided in alternative programs. He states, "if we want to keep at-risk students in school, then we must proceed on the belief that these young people have the capacity to become more than minimally educated." (DeBlois, 1989, p. 6)

For at-risk students in their middle years of schooling DeBlois suggests small programs housed in a separate building from the main school so that students and teachers have a chance "... to develop their own sense of identity" (DeBlois, 1989, p. 7) This recommendation has the potential to meet the students need for belonging and reducing alienation. Also, entering students must go through an application process and teachers should have some control over who is accepted in order to prevent the program from becoming just a "dumping ground". DeBlois also stresses the need for setting and adhering to "clear academic and behavioral standards". Both of these recommendations can help to meet the students' need for personal power in that students would recognize that they have been accepted in a program that expects them to succeed and in a

program that does not accept just anybody.

DeBlois goes on to describe the teachers needed for a successful alternative program. He states that teachers chosen for these programs must want to be in these programs. They must be prepared to team teach, work holistically with students, acting as mentors and counsellors as well as teachers. He also believes that teachers in alternative programs need to ". . . be comfortable in confronting their own ignorance, thereby acting as a model-learner". (DeBlois, 1989, p. 9) All of these recommendations would make the classroom setting the kind of intimate, caring, "we-are-all-in-this-together" kind of environment in which students and teachers could meet both their love and belonging needs as well as their needs to take risks and experience success.

DeBlois also believes that an effective alternative program should have a vocational component. This meets the need of students to see relevance in their school work. DeBlois believes that effective alternative programs should form partnerships with businesses to provide students with work experience, expose them to "real life problems" and to various career and vocational possibilities and to show students the relevance of their classroom work to their future. Also, this vocational component will allow students to draw on the strengths they have and to give them a chance to demonstrate the "multiple intelligences" which may have been hidden in their "traditional curriculum" and thereby meet their need for personal power and boost their self-esteem.

DeBlois also recommends that alternative programs should be based on mastery learning, a kind of non-graded curriculum that allows ". . . students to earn merit points for each level of a subject that they master." (DeBlois, 1989, p. 10) This recommendation has been made by many other educational authors and has great potential for meeting students' academic needs and for meeting their need for personal power in increasing their sense of self-efficacy and in raising their academic self-concept.

The advantages of mastery learning, also known as outcome-based learning, are many. Mastery learning allows students continuous progress through the curriculum. It provides students with the opportunity to catch up to their peers or even cut time out of their school year. The materials covered are the same as those covered by students in the regular program although they may be presented differently. Mastery learning is flexible in other ways too. It allows the learning to be group-based and teacher-paced or individually-based and student-paced. Computers can also be effectively used to assist in mastery learning. Mastery learning is suited to peer tutoring and also helps to create a cooperative learning environment.

DeBlois ends his article with two "qualifying points". Teachers will need much support in terms of money and time from administrators. Since they will be expected to teach in new ways,

using nontraditional materials, they will require "significant inservice work". They will need time for planning and organizing and for communicating and supporting their team members. The second qualifying point is that in order to be truly effective, the alternative program must "... have as low a student/adult ratio as possible" (DeBlois, p. 11)

### **Two Examples of Programs That Failed to Meet Their Objectives**

Some alternative programs have been more successful than others. Some have experienced spectacular failures. Much can be learned from the "negative knowledge" about what did not work. One interesting example of a dropout prevention workshop which essentially backfired is described by James Catterall. A southern California school identified students they felt were "substantially at risk of dropping out" of school. One hundred of these students were taken to a mountaintop retreat for four days to participate in a workshop offered by six professional counsellors. Catterall stresses that this workshop was not a "narrow intervention". It was "... rather a collection of cognitive and behavioral approaches designed to address the problems of group members--particularly their low academic performance and negative social relations with peers and school personnel." (Catterall, 1987, pp. 525-526) The students were highly "engaged" during the activities but when they returned to school there was very little positive "spill over" into the regular classroom. In fact, the grade point average of the treatment group declined slightly. There was no significant effect on teacher-reported work habit scores. Teacher-reported absences declined but not significantly and there was no change in the treatment group students' assessments of their self-concepts or in their attitudes toward teachers and school. Also, more treatment subjects dropped out of school than members from the control group.

One possible explanation offered by Catterall for these disappointing results is that the intervention was too little and offered too late to change problems and negative attitudes toward school that may have taken a decade or more to form. Also, there may have been teacher "disfavor" about the workshop which they (teachers) may have viewed as giving the at-risk students an opportunity to miss four days of school. Teachers may also have labelled these students negatively and students may have sensed that the teachers' attitudes had not changed. Four weeks after the workshop the treatment students' social bonding to teachers was significantly lower than that of the control group students. Catterall suggests that perhaps isolating this group of at-risk students from the rest of the school was the main reason why this particular intervention failed. The treatment students bonded with others in the group to such an extent that a sort of nonmalevolent "gang" resulted. This new peer group then "... looked to itself for sources of satisfaction in daily school life, but not to teachers or to regular school activities." (Catterall, 1987, p. 534)

Immediately after the workshops the treatment group students had high hopes and expectations for their schooling, but within the first few days back in the classroom, the realities of their own weak academic skills and the effect of their years of disengagement from school activities, dashed their hopes to do better academically.

The workshop may also have failed to produce positive results because only the students were expected to change. No changes were required by the school or by the teachers. Catterall believes that a program offering only counselling to at-risk students is ineffective, even detrimental to school success. He suggests that counselling combined with emphasis on learning academic skills and offering work experience, might have more positive effects for at-risk students.

The Boston Compact, described by Jeannette Hargroves (1987) is another extensive program which, in 1982, attempted to organize the community, business, labour unions, and school resources to address academic achievement, future employment, and college enrollment for Boston youth. The intent was to decrease the dropout rate, increase minimum competencies in reading and math, open up jobs for high school graduates and increase enrollment in colleges. But the school system made little progress in reducing the dropout rate between 1982 and 1986. In fact, the drop out rate increased between 1982 and 1985. Also, students experienced difficulty passing the reading competency tests. Hargroves states that because the needs of at-risk youth are so enormous and varied "jobs and minimum competencies are not enough and may even make matters worse." (Hargroves, 1987, p. 306) This statement again stresses the fact that multifaceted approaches are required to help the at-risk students. This program is still continuing and is attempting to learn from its mistakes by developing new approaches.

### **Criticisms of Alternative Programs**

Jeannette Hargroves (1987) believes that different learning environments are needed and that alternative schools are one way to help the overage dropout. She cautions, however, that alternative schools can aggravate the problems of at-risk students by labelling them and by isolating them. Also, focusing on providing alternative programs means that people will not be asking how they should go about improving mainstream schools. Shirley Wells (1990) states that teachers expect low academic achievement from students placed in low academic tracks (alternative programs). Also, "negative peer friendships" occur in alternative programs, that is students may bond with the "wrong" type of youth.

There have been other powerful denunciations of alternative programs. Margaret LeCompte (1987) discussed "remedial" and "dropout" programs and stated children from poor classes are placed in these types of alternative programs and as a result are receiving an education that is "... structurally and qualitatively different from that received by the more-advantaged

classes . . . ." (LeCompte, 1987, p. 246) She sees that education is stratified ". . . and still works to create an underclass of students who cannot or do not finish high school." (LeCompte, pp. 246-247) She feels that even the students in these programs are aware that what these programs offer is "inferior". As a result, ". . . dropout programs themselves have high rates of attrition." (LeCompte, p. 247)

John Goodlad feels that the primary role of elementary and of secondary schools is to provide all students with "a good general education", not specialized education. He believes that it is necessary to make provisions for individual differences among students but curricular adjustments should be "modest" and should not jeopardize or limit students' future choices. Goodlad is strongly opposed to ability grouping in the elementary grades because he sees it as preventing the children in the lower groups from keeping pace with their peers.

George Radwanski, who conducted a policy study of education in Ontario in 1987, shares this belief. He states that when children are grouped by ability they are "being left to accumulate a deficit in essential knowledge and skills . . . ." (Radwanski, 1987, p. 129) This deficit causes them to be placed in "basic and general" programs from which they are "more likely to drop out" than graduate. He states that both dropping out of school or graduating "still deficient" in skills and knowledge drastically curtails the ". . . opportunities to participate fully in our society." (Radwanski, p. 129) Radwanski does not blame teachers or accuse them of deliberately attempting to limit children's prospects. He realizes that teachers have been acting ". . . out of the best and most supportive intentions . . . ." (Radwanski, p. 129)

Goodlad and Radwanski are also both opposed to "streaming" or "tracking", the placement of students into classes or programs, such as alternative programs, where standards and teacher expectations of students are lower than in the regular programs. In his report to the Ontario government Radwanski quotes several times from Dr. Jeannie Oakes' book Keeping Track, as he argues that streaming fosters low self-esteem and serves to guarantee that students from disadvantaged backgrounds remain disadvantaged. All three, Goodlad, Radwanski, and Oakes call for the abolishment of tracking and streaming practices. Ontario has responded to the Radwanski report's criticisms of streaming by making ". . . de-streaming of Grade 9 students mandatory as of September 1992." (Appleford, 1990, p. 2)

In discussing the de-streaming of schools, Oakes and Lipton (1992) state that they do not ". . . assume that all children in heterogenous classes will eventually know the same things . . . ." (Oakes & Lipton, 1992, p. 450) They do believe ". . . that all children can understand - and should be engaged in - the core ideas of the curriculum." (Oakes & Lipton, p. 450) Oakes and Lipton say that simply "detracking" schools will not eliminate all of society's and of schools' ills,

but it may cause people to understand that "other institutional changes", such as changes in teacher roles, how they teach, teacher/student relationships, and in the school hierarchy, are required.

(Oakes & Lipton, p. 450)

Undeniably, alternative programs are another form of "streaming" or "tracking" students. It is necessary to consider the possibility that alternative programs offer education that is inferior in quantity and quality to what is offered to students in the "upper tracks". It may be that students in the lower tracks receive only a "minimal" education and that "tracking" students into alternative programs helps to reproduce society's inequities and attempts to socialize students into accepting the values of the working class. These possibilities throw some serious doubt on the ability of alternative programs to meet the needs of students and lends more support to the suggestions by various educational authors that fundamental changes in how schools are structured, how teachers teach and how they interact with students, and in what students are taught, are required. Educators should be looking at how to improve mainstream schooling and not at how to improve or design more alternative programs.

#### **The Effect of the Study on the Beliefs of the Researcher**

For this author, the opportunity to interview students currently enrolled in alternative education programs helped to diminish some negative biases about the educational validity of alternative programs. Having had the opportunity through job responsibilities to spend time in most of the alternative program classrooms in eight Prince George secondary schools, this author has seen what is best and most effective about alternative programs as well as what is the worst and least effective about these programs. During the time spent in these classrooms it became evident that each program is only as good as the teacher who runs it.

Some of the opinions formed by this author prior to conducting the study into alternative programs, may have been somewhat distorted. This author was surprised at the intensity of student affirmations that they enjoyed their alternative program teachers, their classmates, the special activities, and often even the work they do in these classrooms. Having expected to hear that students were dying to re-enter the regular program if that possibility presented itself, this author was tremendously surprised to hear instead that most of these students would elect to stay in their alternative classrooms. What these students revealed about their experiences in both the regular classroom and in the alternative education program classrooms has strong implications for how to change mainstream classrooms to make them more like alternative program classrooms and therefore, more effective in meeting the needs of students.

It must be stressed, however, that these student perceptions are only one side of a very complex, multi-dimensional problem. Some sides of the at-risk/dropout problem were presented



by the authors reviewed in this literature review. Many of them made valid observations about student characteristics, school structures and process, and teaching practices. The two main sides of the problem not being represented here are the perceptions and observations of teachers and administrators and the perceptions and observations of the community, including those of people in business and industry. Both could add other dimensions to understanding and alleviating the problem. Without these other perceptions and observations it is not possible to accept the views of the students, no matter how enthusiastic, that these programs are effective in meeting all their needs. It is possible to believe that alternative programs do meet some of the students' needs far more effectively than the regular program does.

## CHAPTER III - METHOD

### Subjects

The subjects in this study were 16 students currently enrolled in alternative education programs in the Prince George School District. Each student interviewed had volunteered to participate in this study. As the demands of the researcher's job made it impossible to conduct the interviews earlier than the beginning of June, there was no time to enter names of all alternative education program students in a computer and have it randomly select names of students. The researcher asked alternative education teachers for assistance and they approached their own students about participation in the study. Seven students from the pre-employment program and eight students from the alternate education program agreed to be interviewed. One more student, the youngest one, also agreed to be interviewed. He had been enrolled in a "transition class" for one school year. The purpose of placement in this class is to determine if the student should enter a Pre-Employment class, an Alternate Education class, or receive upgrading and be integrated into a regular classroom setting.

The students ranged from fourteen to eighteen years in age. Ten males and six females participated. Three students were Native or part Native. Two students were from immigrant families. Three of the students were well known to the interviewer through their involvement in work experience placements which had been arranged and supervised by the interviewer. Two other had also been involved in work experience but were not well known to the interviewer. The rest were students the interviewer had not known previously.

These students were interviewed because they are enrolled in either the pre-employment program or in an alternate education program. At some point in their education a decision had been made that these students were struggling in the regular classroom and would experience more success in an alternative education program. This decision is normally the result of a School-Based Team meeting at which teachers, counsellors, the student, and his/her parents review the student's academic record, attitude, abilities, and history of any discipline problems. Therefore, their very presence in an alternative education program indicated that they had all been identified by their regular classroom teachers, counsellors, and administrators as being at-risk. If these students had not been placed in alternative programs school staffs, parents, and the students themselves believe that they (the students) would have dropped out of school.

One student was in an alternate education class as a result of medical problems. He had had eight operations and several stays in the hospital both in Prince George and in Vancouver. As a result of so much time lost from school he needed a place to make up the work he had missed.

The average time these students had spent in alternative education classes was 2.5 years.

Two students had been in the program less than one year and four students had been in alternative education classes for four years each. Two students had been in alternate programs for three years, two for two years and six students had been in alternate programs for one year.

### **The Pre-Employment Program**

The Pre-Employment Program (PEP). The stated philosophy of the pre-employment program is "... to help students who have skill/academic deficiencies to acquire the skills needed for productive participation in the adult community." (Pre-employment Program Planning and Implementation Handbook, 1990, p. 2) Pre-employment students have normal intelligence but their reading levels and their mathematical skills are two years or more behind the level of students in the regular program. This difference may have been caused by learning disabilities, sensory handicaps which may not have been identified until very late, and possibly by different learning styles that make it difficult for these students to learn or to keep up with the pace in a regular classroom setting. The minimum age a student may enter a pre-employment program is thirteen. Enrollment is officially set at twelve to fifteen students but many larger classes exist.

When a parent gives written consent to have his/her child placed in the pre-employment program that parent is asked to officially recognize the judgement that this child is "unlikely to meet success" in the regular classroom and in fact, is at-risk in a regular classroom setting. Also, the parent is told that this student will receive an "adjusted program" certificate instead of a graduation diploma at the completion of his/her twelfth year of education. The program attempts to give students knowledge in the "core subjects": English, mathematics, social studies, and science, as well as lifeskills and work study/work experience. Students should also be enrolled in elective courses with regular program students. The work is modified in that the pace is slower and the focus of the work is on what is "functional". Therefore in an English class students may learn to write resumes and cover letters and fill out application forms. The stated outcomes are almost entirely affective rather than cognitive. The Pre-Employment Handbook states that students will learn to develop good work habits; attend school regularly; develop socially acceptable attitudes and behaviours; develop academic abilities, use and understand various community resources; and communicate effectively with peers and adults. (Pre-Employment Handbook, p. 2)

The work study/work experience component of the course is compulsory. The intent of studying the world of work, including labour law and history, working conditions, appropriate work attitudes, etc. and of actual work experience in the community is to help students make a successful transition from school to work. Students spend increasing amounts of time on work experience placements as they reach their senior years at school. Work experience may begin once

the student turns fifteen. The placements vary from two-week, half-day placements to full-day, four-week placements depending on the maturity level of the students and the request of the teachers. Students choose the placements from a prepared list of participating employers or they may request an employer who has not previously participated. In this way it is hoped that the students may explore an occupation that holds some real interest with the students.

Pre-employment teachers, according to the PEP Handbook, are expected "to create a warm, supportive, accepting and stimulating environment which is conducive to the development of a positive self-concept." (Pre-Employment Handbook, p. 3)

### **The Alternate Education Program**

The alternate education program is intended for students who have normal intelligence and normal academic ability. Their problems with school may have been social or emotional, again making it difficult for them to function effectively in a regular classroom setting. Many of these students have a history of excessive absences and some have been given the choice of withdrawing from school or of enrolling in an alternate program. A number of alternate education students are former dropouts who have returned to school. Before a student is permitted to enter an alternate education program he/she is tested to determine that the student is capable of independent study. The minimum acceptable reading comprehension level is grade 5.5, although some schools set it a little higher. Written parental consent is required and students normally also sign a contract on which expectations for attendance and work habits are clearly stated. Failure to attend will result in withdrawal from the program. Enrollment is strictly limited to twelve students per class. There are always students on "wait lists".

The intent of the alternate education program is to allow students to complete work they have missed and earn credits much faster than they would be able to in a regular classroom program. The focus is academic. Mastery at 80 percent is required for students to move from one unit to the next. Used correctly, the program prepares students for re-entry into the regular stream. However, students do now have the option to stay in an alternate education classroom to the end of their twelfth year.

The learning/teaching units in alternate education are standardized across all Prince George secondary schools. Students are on individual programs and work at their own pace. Most programs are half-day programs. Students may be assigned to a morning or an afternoon alternate classroom. Some students do carry full timetables. They may round out their programs with electives or they may attempt regular academic courses when they feel they are in a position to succeed there.

Along with the strong academic focus is a focus on the social and emotional development

of the students. At Storefront, for example, peer counselling and human development courses are taught. Skills for Adolescence (or "Quest") is a component which teaches many decision-making skills, critical thinking, how to build self-confidence, improve family and peer relationships, communication skills, etc. Students are also taught goal setting and they participate in regular class meetings which are run by the students. These components help students to think about themselves and also to help support each other and may explain the intense "bonding" which occurs between the students in alternate education classrooms.

Alternative education teachers are expected to provide "... a positive, flexible, success-oriented classroom environment" (School District No 57 - Prince George, Position Description - Alternative Education Teacher, 1991) "Minimum requirements" for the position state that the teacher must have a "positive attitude" and "empathy for alternative education students and knowledge of student characteristics". (Position Description - Alternative Education Teacher, 1991) The description lists as "desirable qualifications" a degree in "special education/psychology".

### **The Interviews**

The interviews were a modified form of the focused interview described by Robert K. Merton and Patricia Kendall. Open-ended questions were used with the hope of arriving at the "subjective experiences" of the students, their personal experiences as students in an alternative program. The focused interview appeared to offer the best opportunity to achieve what ethnographers hope to achieve in studying people from different cultures: understanding "... matters from the native's point of view." (Trueba, Spindler & Spindler, 1989, p.2). Anthropologists call the "insider's or native's view of reality" (Fetterman in Trueba, Spindler & Spindler, p. 47) the "emic perception". The "natives" in this study were the students. The alternate education classrooms determined the "social contexts" and the "cultural patterns" that influenced students' behavior and perceptions.

The intent of the focused interview was to attempt to enter the minds of the students, to hear their thoughts and feelings and to learn what they believe is important for them about school and about alternative education programs. Also, the focused interview was chosen because the interviewer had hoped to hear something new and not just a repetition of the themes of countless other studies where the responses had been highly structured around already-known common predictors of failure or success in school.

The interviews did not entirely fit the definition of the focused interview. In a true focused interview the persons being interviewed have all been involved in a "particular [emphasis mine] concrete situation", for example, they have all seen the same movie or read the same book. Also, a

"prior analysis" of that particular situation would have occurred in a true focused interview. The investigator would have studied the situation for significant elements and patterns and would have arrived at a set of hypothesis concerning the meaning of the situation. This prior analysis was not done for this study.

The students in this study had all had the same experience only in that they all had had difficulty coping in the regular classroom and had either been removed or had removed themselves from the regular classroom or from school itself. However, the experience had been unique for each student. It was not, therefore, possible to ask: "What were you thinking or feeling as you watched this particular scene in the movie?" But it was certainly possible to ask students to think back on the time when they first had to consider entering an alternative education program and ask: What particularly stands out in your mind about that time? What were you thinking or feeling at that time?

The focused interview attempts to allow the subject to express what is "of central significance" to him/her rather than what is significant to the interviewer. Guidance and direction is kept at a minimum during the interview. The interviewer concentrates on maximizing the range of the responses reported by the subject and in encouraging the subject to be very specific in his/her responses. The focused interview aims at "depth" and generating "personal contexts" through the interview process. It attempts to set a mood of reflection and introspection so that the subjects will yield a "wide range of deep responses". The focused interview process often elicits the "affective value-laden implications" of the responses given by the subjects. Therefore much can be learned about what is on the subject's mind because it (the focused interview), in effect, gives the subject "a blank page" to fill in with his/her own responses.

### **Descriptions of the Settings and the Programs**

In order for the reader to have a better understanding of the students, it is necessary to describe the setting where the students work and the focus of their individual programs. Also, according to the students' own statements, the setting and the physical environment of their classrooms has an impact on their attitudes and on their ability to work.

The first seven students interviewed were enrolled in an alternate "storefront" school. The school is located in a portable beside an elementary school. It is several city blocks away from the secondary school to which it is officially attached. This school operates a pre-employment class as well as an alternate education class enrolling up to twenty-four students at a time. There are two full-time teachers and two teacher aides and a youth care worker.

The focus of the program is to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of the students. There is great emphasis on life skills, social skills, counselling, physical education, and

work experience. The program incorporates many outings and special events in its schedule. Students have gone on bike trips, camping, and hiking up Mount Robson, for example. They participate in baseball tournaments with students from other secondary alternate education programs. Special dinners are cooked and eaten at the site before special holidays. Cooking and eating are regular activities at this school as much for teaching about health and nutrition as it is for the recognition that many of the students arrive at the school not having eaten. Students have a lounge with sofas and games they have purchased with money they have earned through fund-raising activities. There are posters, colour photographs of exotic places, and examples of student work all over the walls. This is the only classroom observed where students called their teachers, teacher aides, and the youth care worker by their first names. The atmosphere is friendly, homey, and pleasant.

Seven other students are enrolled in the largest secondary school in the district. This school operates four alternate education classes with four different teachers and five pre-employment classes with three different teachers. The focus of the alternate education classes is academic with a strong social and emotional component as well. The students generally use the program to catch up to the level of the regular classroom. As soon as they are able to, they begin to integrate themselves into regular courses, sometimes one course at a time until they feel ready to fully re-enter the regular program. Some of these students will remain in alternate education, by choice, and will complete Grade 12 requirements there.

Three of the alternate education classes are located in the main building in the same type of classrooms used by students in the regular program. One is located in the industrial wing of the school. Each of these rooms has a coffee pot available for the students' use. In each class an attempt has been made to arrange the furniture in unique ways. There are screens and private little nooks for students to use if they desire privacy. Often a radio is heard softly playing in the background. Each of these classes has access to the assistance of a teacher aide.

Two of the pre-employment classrooms in this same large secondary school are located in small half-classrooms separated from other classrooms with a heavy vinyl curtain. They are inside rooms with no windows and no apparent ventilation. One classroom is upstairs on the mezzanine floor of the library. It too has little ventilation. The teacher attempts to correct this by opening the door but then all the noises from the library drift up. There is no comfort or privacy in these rooms. The teachers often elect to move their classes into the library to do their work on the computers.

The students in these pre-employment classrooms are probably "terminal placements", meaning that they will not attempt to move into alternate education classes and certainly will never

attempt regular academic courses. They will graduate on an "adjusted program". They do attempt, sometimes with success, regular electives, such as: foods and nutrition classes, mechanics, metalwork, textiles, human development, and art. The focus, depending on the teacher, is on social skills, life skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and work experience.

Two other students are enrolled in a junior secondary school. The alternate education class is a large classroom with windows and pots of colourful geraniums. There is a coffee pot and a sofa in the classroom. As at the largest secondary school, the focus is on academic upgrading. Students here may also choose to complete their education in the alternate setting or they may attempt to re-enter the regular program. The transitional classroom is also in another large classroom on the other side of the school. It has a busy atmosphere and a pleasant view. As explained earlier, this classroom is used to assess the students' needs. Depending on ability, students may return to a regular classroom setting, or enter pre-employment or alternate education.

### **The Procedures**

The interviews were conducted over three days during the end of the school year, just as students were completing their work and were preparing to write final examinations. The students who volunteered to participate had either completed, or were close to completing, their work for the year. Their mood, therefore, was mellow. Possibly for this reason it was easy to establish an "interview environment" that was friendly, open, and relaxed. Some time was spent at the beginning of each interview to establish the environment as a safe place to express oneself. This environment was similar to a good counselling environment in that the tone was respectful and nonjudgemental. As in a counselling situation, on occasion, the interviewer made comments ("That's very interesting. You are the first person who has mentioned that! I'd like to hear more about that.") deliberately intended to validate the students, to let the students know that what they were saying was considered to be important by the interviewer.

This environment and the style of interview appeared to be successful. Although some students were more subdued than others, no one refused to talk. There was joking and laughter throughout the interviews. Students apparently felt comfortable enough to use swear words and slang words casually in conversation and even spell some of the "bad" words the interviewer had not heard of before.

The first seven interviews were conducted in a private office at the storefront setting. At the large secondary school, two of the interviews were conducted in a quiet corner of the student cafeteria late in the afternoon when there were only a few students left in the large room. Three others were conducted in the students' classrooms, again in a quiet, private corner. Two others were conducted in the lobby of the counselling area. The final two were conducted in an office in



the junior secondary school.

Each interview was taped and later transcribed onto a computer. Written notes were also taken for purposes of backup in case of technical failure.

### The Questions

During the first interviews an attempt was made to adhere closely to the interview questions and the format of the questions, that is, every effort was made not to interfere with the student's own thought processes. Interpretation of the questions for the student was avoided. However, some students experienced difficulty with the questions. It became necessary to rephrase the questions. For example, if they had difficulty with the question:

You have now been in the PEP/ALT ED program for \_\_\_\_\_ (how long?)

Thinking back on your time in this program, what particularly stands out in your mind about your experiences as a student in this program?

It may have been rephrased in as personal terms as possible:

Say, you have a friend who is going to be placed in a PEP/ALT ED class, and he was really afraid of it, what would you say to him about your own experience here? What has it been like for you in this classroom?

Some responses were very short and some were a little mysterious. These were then explored in more depth attempting to get at the specific personal meaning the student attached to his/her comment. The interviewer may have said: "I'd like to hear more about this. When you said you were 'just a *bad* kid in school' what do you mean by that? Or: "You said your teachers are 'more supportive here'. What do you think makes them more supportive? What do they do when they are being supportive?"

There were a few times when the student really felt lost as to what was wanted. At those times, the rule of nondirection was broken and a couple of structured direct questions were asked. For example, the interviewer said: "Could you tell me how your classroom is run?" Or: "Could you describe a 'typical day' in your classroom?" Although the procedures of the focused interview warn against asking structured questions, the intent of the interviewer was to allow the student being interviewed to feel competent. If the student found himself/herself unable to answer a question, it was possible for that student to feel he/she just wasn't smart enough to "get it". Asking a structured question at a time when the student appeared unable to think or answer, immediately relaxed the situation. In fact, one student said with relief, "Oh, that's easy!" and went on to give a vivid, detailed description of a day at Storefront from beginning to end. There was no difficulty getting back to the unstructured questions after that.

For each question asked, a mood of retrospection and introspection was maintained. The

questions in the first interviews were asked in a businesslike manner. Later, as the interviewer relaxed, realizing that the students had a great many memories and feelings and that they were willing to share them, the questions were asked in a quiet, gentle, deliberately dreamy style. Students were asked to "think back" in an attempt to mentally send them back to the specified time and re-experience the events and the feelings associated with that time.

The first question asked about what stood out in their minds about the time when they were still in the regular program. The second question took them ahead a little to the time when they knew they would be moving to an alternative education program. Another question later asked about the time they had spent in an alternate setting and what stood out in their minds about that time. These three questions were intended to provide a picture for the researcher about how the students compared their experience in the regular classroom to their experience in an alternative education classroom. The researcher wanted to hear what students thought were the good or bad things about each situation. The second question also was intended to give some insight into the students' self-concept and whether they initially perceived alternate education programs as good or bad and did that perception have any impact on their self-concept?

Two times the students were asked to use their imagination. They were asked if they had a magic wand, allowing them to make any changes they wanted to in the regular program or in their alternative education class, what changes would they make? They were also asked to use their imagination in describing if they had had the "best day" ever in their alternate education class, what would that day have looked like? What would they have been thinking or feeling? What would they have been doing? With these questions the hope was that students would talk about what their personal wants and needs were regarding schools and education.

Also, in attempting to learn what the students needs and wants were and if they were able to see a connection between school learning and a future job, a question was asked about what kinds of pictures they had had about their own future before they entered an alternate program and what their pictures of their own future were now.

Students were asked if they would stay in their alternate education class or return to a regular classroom if that became possible for them to do tomorrow. Here the attempt was to gauge the true success of the programs in the thoughts of the students. If the programs were truly meeting their needs, the students would elect to stay; if they were not, the students would want to go back into the regular program.

Two questions regarding how students felt or what they thought when they were involved discipline situations were asked only during the first eight interviews. The response was poor. Students did not understand the questions. These were then eliminated and questions were asked

regarding students' thoughts and feelings about how their classroom was run and their thoughts and feelings on a typical day in their program. This was an attempt to learn how the school processes inside an alternate classroom compared to the processes in a regular classroom. These regular classroom processes had been described by students in response to the very first question.

Finally, a question was spontaneously added to the end of the interview. Since the purpose of the interview was to get inside the minds of the students, it made sense to ask if they felt they had something else they felt was important to share about the alternative program in which they were enrolled, something that the interview had not asked. This was the final attempt to learn what was of "central significance" to the students.

### **Analysis**

The data analysis is the researcher's "story" or interpretation of the issues the students discussed during the interviews. It began with an intuitive search for themes and patterns in the data. Some of the categories were created by the researcher's choice of interview questions. For example, the responses to the first three questions formed the categories: Experiences in a Regular Classroom, Experiences in an Alternative Classroom, and Initial Reaction to Placement in Alternative Education Programs. Some of the student responses to the first three questions also provided data for the categories called: Why Students Dropped Out or Were Pushed Out of School, Why Students Returned to School and also for the category called: Effects - Self-Esteem.

As the interview transcripts were studied, it became apparent that the students interviewed had had similar experiences in the regular classrooms and also in their alternative education classrooms. Many students described the same pictures and even used the same words. Each time a student mentioned a particular topic, a tally was kept on note paper. Beside the tally a few words or phrases used by students were copied down along with the name of the student who had used them. Topics that the students considered to be important or not important became quickly visible to the researcher simply by looking at the number or times students talked about them. For example, the influence of peers was mentioned by twelve out of the sixteen students; seven times in a positive light and five times in a negative light. Also, every single student interviewed spontaneously discussed their relationships with teachers. As these discussions of teachers were specific to the students' experiences in a regular classroom and in their experiences in an alternative education classroom, a decision was made not to discuss teachers under a separate category. It seemed to make more sense to leave those descriptions under the headings: Experiences in the Regular Classroom, Experiences in an Alternative Classroom, and Why Dropped Out of School. Similarly, curriculum issues, discussed by eight students, made more sense left under the heading: Effects - Academic.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Categories

The categories most easily identified in the data were: experiences in a regular classroom, experiences in an alternative education classroom, relationship with teachers, peer influence, why dropped out of school/why returned to school, initial reactions to alternate programs, effects, self-esteem/self concept, and classroom environment. These were topics that almost all the students talked about in responding to the unstructured questions asking what particularly stood out in their minds about their experiences in the regular program and in the alternate education program. For the purposes of the narrative some of the categories were combined for discussion under one heading. The questions regarding students feelings or thoughts about the kinds of things they learned in their alternate program (curriculum) and the "magic wand" changes students would make in the regular program or in their alternate education program, were semi-structured questions. These two questions then formed categories to which each student responded. Each student also responded to the structured question: would they stay in their alternate education program or re-enter the regular program, if that became possible tomorrow. Work Experience was mentioned by four students, and having had positive adult influence was mentioned by three students.

### Students Needs

The main objective of this thesis was to learn what students perceived their educational and emotional needs to be and if students could articulate those needs. The intent was to use this information as one way of measuring the effectiveness of alternative education programs. Students had several opportunities to express their wants, in the "future pictures" question, the "best day" question, the "magic wand" question, and the final question where they were free to express anything they felt was important about their experiences in alternative education. The wants then could easily be translated into needs, by the researcher. Since the questions were mainly unstructured, students were not asked specifically: What do you want or need in your classroom, or from your teacher, or from the school system? However, by studying the conditions that students described which did not work for them in the regular classroom and the conditions which made the alternative education classes more effective for the students, it was not difficult to classify some specific needs. Therefore, student needs will be identified after a discussion of the students descriptions of their experiences in the regular program and in their alternative education classes.

### Experiences in the Regular Classroom

The experiences that most of these sixteen students had in the regular program apparently

were traumatic to the students. Only two students reported not remembering that time well or not at all. Students used words and images highly charged with emotion in their descriptions. They used words and phrases such as: "fed up", "boring", "really rough", "the hardest time", "frustrated", "confused", "mad at everybody", and "stressed out". What they described created an image of the regular classroom as an inflexible place with many arbitrary rules, too many things to learn all at once, too much pressure, too little time to complete work and too little help from teachers, too many deadlines, too much noise and distraction, and a sense that they were being "forced" to do things whether they wanted to or not. It was a place where students felt they were expected to ". . . do your work and don't move, and don't go to the bathroom, and don't go have a drink, and don't talk . . . just shut up and do it."

The regular classroom was also a place where these students had experienced fear. For some students it was fear of positive and negative numbers, for others writing essays caused fear, and for many of the students there was the constant fear of tests and of failing. It was a place where most of these sixteen students had felt isolated and powerless, too unimportant, they thought, for teachers even to take the time to notice that a student had a problem. One student described the pressure in the regular classroom this way:

It was really rough. There wasn't enough time . . . to complete assignments. And you were always jumping from class to class and subject to subject. And they're always giving me so many assignments on one day in one class. And you'd get another assignment and then a report, or whatever. And it'd all be due the next day. You'd be up to, like midnight, trying to finish it all.

Another student described the isolation felt by some students in the regular classroom: "I was kind of put off in the corner by teachers. And every now and then they'd ask me a question . . ."

Another student put it this way: "In the regular school system there's like a lot more kids and not as much time. So there isn't always somebody to talk to."

### **Why Students Dropped Out or Were Pushed out of School**

The situations in regular classrooms caused some of the students interviewed to decide that they wanted to be out of school. One student had actually written a letter of resignation to her school expressing her lack of faith in the "institution". Some of the students who dropped out had felt unable to keep up with the pace of the work or even the rapid pace of class and subject changes especially under a rotating timetable system.

For some of the students personal problems compounded the difficulties they were experiencing in school. One of the brightest students interviewed described the personal difficulties she was experiencing while attempting to survive in the regular program:

I hated everybody and everything. I had a real *fun* set of friends . . . . I did drugs, alcohol, and -- I had my back to the world, you could say. I didn't want to talk to anybody.

Everybody gave up on me, except for my mom.

One student described having had trouble at school and a difficult time at home because ". . . my father and I weren't really agreeing on much . . . ." Another student also recognized that school "was not the whole problem". She was "going nuts" at home as well.

Some of the students were "pushed out" of school as no options were left open for them. One student described how the principal insisted that she could not return to school until she brought a parent in for a meeting. She brought her father in. At the meeting the principal had told her:

. . . I could either quit or they would kick [me] out. So, it was kind of a losing choice!  
[Laughs] So, I just told him a couple of things - [something "rude", she added later] And I don't know if I quit or if he kicked me out. School terminated.

This student was in grade nine at the time.

A young man described how he was finally "kicked out" after having been "in trouble" constantly and having failed Social Studies 8 four times. The final blow came when his science teacher refused to teach him. Yet another student was always late and missing school. He did not like the strict rules at school and he wanted more help from the teachers. He too was "kicked out". Another student, who "quit in grade seven" described on-going conflicts with his teacher and with the school principal. Finally it made more sense for the student to stay away from school-- permanently:

Well, I would go to school, right? And then my teachers would ask me right in the morning: Are you going to do work or are you going to jerk around? And they'd say: If you're going to jerk around, then just leave. If you're not going to do work, well then, leave. So, I just kept on leaving. Every morning I left. Then eventually I just didn't go no more.

### **Why Students Returned to School**

Seven of the students interviewed had dropped out of school or had been pushed out. One student was out of school for six months before returning into an alternate education program. Three others reported to having been out for as long as two years before they decided to give school another chance. However, all these students did return to school. One student had attempted to get his education through correspondence courses. His future dreams were big: he wanted to be either a business man or become a chemical scientist. He knew he had to return to school. Two others worked during their time out of school. The rest simply spent time sitting

around at home or "hanging out" with friends who had also dropped out or had been pushed out of school. Therefore, one reason they returned was because the time out of school had proved to be extremely "boring". By the end of their time out some of these young people were actually "dying" to find a way back to school. Two students realized that they needed to get more education if they wanted a better job, that is, a job which paid better than minimum wage and which the student would actually enjoy doing. Another student said she returned to school simply because: "I like learning!"

### **Experiences in an Alternative Education Classroom**

Four main issues emerged as important in students descriptions of their time in an alternative classroom. Most students said their teachers were "good", the classes were smaller, there was no "pressure" in an alternative education class since students could work at their own pace, and they said they had "fun" in their classes.

The number one reason students thought that alternative education classes were better than regular classrooms was their belief that alternate education teachers are "better than regular teachers." One student expressed her feelings about alternative education program teachers this way:

Maybe they just lucked out and found all teachers -- or they just went hunting for all the teachers that actually care about kids and stuck them in alternate. Because, my best teachers that I've had, *ever*, are in alternate.

Generally the students' comments about their alternative education teachers were warm and respectful. Many of the same kind of things were mentioned. For example, many students commented that these teachers "really listened to you", they "notice if you have a problem", you "can talk to them about anything". The word "good" was used by seven students to describe their teachers. Words such as: "understanding", "helpful", and "supportive" were also used. Teachers were also referred to as "Mom". Even one male teacher was described as "kind of like my mother". Another student referred to teachers as "kind of your brother or sister"; you may fight with them but you will not stay angry. One student said that alternate education teachers "treat you more like family" than like students.

Teachers were seen as easy-going regarding classroom discipline and organization. They were described as sharing the responsibility with students for establishing rules on how the classroom would be run. They were also seen as respectful in their treatment of students. "They treat us real good" was one comment by a student. Another student said: "They treat you like adults, which is really important." Teachers were also seen as having a sense of humour. One student complained that her teacher would break into song and dance routines at times and "tell

really stupid jokes and stuff" but she was clearly amused by this lack of dignity. A student in another program described her fondest memory of her alternate classroom as days when the teacher shut the classroom door and told the students his latest collection of jokes.

Several students reported having received help and advice with personal problems. The issue of trust was brought up in student comments such as: "You feel you can just open up and tell them anything." Several students also talked about the importance of receiving encouragement from their teachers stating that "they're . . . pretty much trying to get me to do my best, even when I didn't want to." Another student said that "the encouragement part" from teachers is helpful. "It's good to have somebody say: 'Way to go! You did it!'"

The students interviewed perceived that they receive more attention from alternative education teachers because the alternative education classes are "smaller". There are fewer students in the classroom. A number of students described having received immediate attention if they were experiencing difficulty understanding their work.

Say I'll be sitting down on the computer, and I'll go: Hey Shirley, I can't understand how to do this! And she'll come running over right away and show me, and then I'll know how to do it.

Others said they had received individual help with personal problems stating that the teachers are "always there if you need them." One sixteen-year-old male described having lost his temper tantrums because ". . . down here they've [teachers] been helping me out [with] that. They've been working one-on-one with me." The youngest student, the one from the "transition" classroom was very clear on the benefits of a smaller classroom:

There is not very many people. It's not very loud. You can get work done. Teachers give out more help 'cause there is less people in the classroom. There are only four or six of us. And it's quiet. You can go to your own spot in the classroom without people walking around the classroom.

Another student was aware that because the classrooms had fewer students the teacher had more time to spend with students who needed help. He said:

They all sit down and take the time to talk to you and teach you how it's done and how to learn it easier . . . . [If you were in another classroom [regular classroom] your teacher would be working with somebody else . . . .

Another area students reported on spontaneously was the apparent lack of pressure in an alternative classroom. In particular, they talked about being allowed to work at their own pace. In fact, ten students mentioned being able to work at their own pace. One student compared his alternative education classroom to what he remembered about the regular classroom: "You gotta



jump from here to there . . . . And you gotta get done certain subjects in certain times . . . . And here you just do it at your own pace." Students said teachers "don't push you as hard to finish your work, and deadlines, They tell you to work at your own pace." Students also talked about being able to choose not to work if their "brain [is] straining". One student described his teacher accepting a student's choice not to work for a day:

[He] is kind of an easy-going guy as long as you're not screwing around or making a whole bunch of noise. If you don't feel like working that day, you just sit there and keep to yourself and don't disturb anybody else."

A student from another alternative classroom described her classroom atmosphere. She said, "you're not nagged all the time by teachers" about finishing work. "You do your own work when you want to do it. That way it doesn't put pressures on anyone."

Three students discussed the lack of pressure in that they only have four subjects to deal with each day in an alternative program. Students had complained that there was "way too much" to do in the regular program and said they could not keep eight different subjects in their heads "all at once". When one student was asked: "Is this an important issue for you, that you don't have to do eight things in one day, you have four instead?" his response was "Yes, because at the end of the day you don't feel like quitting."

As mentioned earlier teachers in these alternative settings do not appear to feel "tied down" to curricula and schedules. They are comfortable with taking time out of a class to talk to individual students who are experiencing either academic or personal problems. They appear to be aware of the energy shifts in their students and do not hesitate to tell jokes, act silly, or become involved in a classroom conversation about "anything" that happens to interest the students at that time, politics for example, to relieve stress or boredom. This comfort level on the part of the teachers may also help to create the feeling for students that the alternative education classrooms are more "relaxed".

Nine students talked about the "fun" they have in their alternative education classes. A tenth student said he "enjoyed" coming to the class. Often the fun was associated with the special outings, the hikes, skiing trips, and in particular the trip to Mount Robson. Some students associated the fun with the friends, teachers, and the support they received in the classroom. Several students actually said that completing a big units of work and "acing" them was fun.

#### **Initial Reaction to Placement in Alternative Education Programs**

Although students generally described their alternative education programs in positive terms, many of the students had not initially been happy with their placement in an alternative setting. Students described being "uneasy" and "scared". One student said: "I thought I was

stupid or dumb or something because they're taking me out of the regular program . . . ." Others feared the program "would suck" having heard that there were "a whole bunch of geeks" in the program. Others thought they were being sent to an "idiot class". Not all students immediately liked their new program. One student said she had had a "rough" start in the alternate education class. She had been involved in many fights but ". . . everything sort of improved when you get to know everybody." Also, not all the students had felt isolated in their regular classrooms, they had had friends there and they missed these friends. Over time the students came to realize that they were being helped and that the program was, in fact, "good" for them.

There were a few students whose initial reaction to their placement in an alternative education class was positive. Some described being "pleased" because they had friends in the program who had said good things about it. Some students felt relieved since they had "not been making it" in the regular program. One student described her first day in her pre-employment classroom as "the happiest day of my life". She is a student from an immigrant family. She had originally been placed in a class for mildly mentally retarded students, possibly because of an error in judgement. This writer's guess is that the problem with this student was lack of proficiency in the English language and not lack of intelligence. Nevertheless, this student had spent one year in a special education classroom. She was naturally delighted with her move up into what she had hoped would be a more challenging atmosphere.

#### **Students' Observations for Improvements to the Alternative Education Programs**

Not all students believed that alternative education programs were perfect. There were more complaints about the pre-employment program shortcomings than about the shortcomings of the alternate education program. One student, who had initially been misplaced in a pre-employment program, saw both benefits and disadvantages in the pre-employment program. In particular he believed that the work experience and the feedback from work experience "were worth a lot". Before the pre-employment program this student said he had not had "much of an outlook on the future". He had no goals.

Being in pre-employment gave me sort of a shot in the butt . . . and made me stand up and realize what I have to do [regarding education and training for heavy duty mechanics].

And once it's there in black and white, what you have to do to succeed, well, you're going to do it.

But he complained about the "educational aspect" of the program:

Well, you see, in the pre-employment [program], the stuff I was doing there, I was doing [when I was] at elementary school . . . so, you weren't learning anything. It seemed like just a quick way out, for, like kids who didn't want to learn. And I'm sure there are kids

like that in there. But I mean, I had problems in the regular program. That didn't mean I didn't want to learn. It just meant I had trouble learning.

His comments about the alternate education program on the whole were very positive. He felt it had been "a great way to boost myself back into the regular stream." His one complaint about the alternate education program is that the mathematics instruction he received at the Grade 10 level had not adequately prepared him for integration into a regular Grade 11 mathematics course. "I'm holding down about a 53%," he said, "but it's been very, very difficult because most of the concepts the other kids knew going into the course, I had to learn when I went into it."

Two other alternate education students mentioned that the work was too easy. One student said he had been looking at this sister's Grade 9 science text book and had discovered that "half the things [in the text] I didn't even know and I was done my Science 10. It was stuff we were supposed to do, I guess, but never did." This student said he wanted to be a chemical scientist and it worried him that they were not doing the experiments they should be doing and that they were not covering as much material as students in the regular science program cover. The other student wished to have more work and he wished to have electives such as woodworking again.

One pre-employment student, the one who had spent a year misplaced in the special education classroom, complained that the only thing they learn in her classroom is work experience. She said they do contracts, and letters. She said they prepare to go on work experience and after work experience they write thank you letters to employers and discuss what they learned or what went wrong. She said she had enjoyed her work experience placements, so far. She believed they have helped her to "grow up a lot". But she said she was bored in the pre-employment classroom and wished she could have more English, social studies, mathematics, and science.

### **Students' Pictures of Their Own Future**

The response to this question was somewhat disappointing in that the responses did not reveal much about what the students dreamed about or what they wanted for themselves in the future. Also, several students claimed that the few pictures they had had before they entered alternative education programs had not changed as a result of their experiences in the alternative education programs. The interviewer had thought that if regular classrooms had failed to teach these students anything relevant or anything they could apply to their future lives, the alternative education programs with their emphasis on work experience, extra activities, and on helping students experience successes would certainly impact on their pictures of the future. This was the case for only a few of the students interviewed.

Several students said that while they were still in the regular program they had had no

pictures of their own future. They said they had "lived for today". One young girl, with a good sense of humour, admitted that the only picture she had had of her future was of working at a fast food restaurant endlessly asking: "Would you like fries with that?" Some students admitted to having some pictures but they described their pictures as "dim", or said: "my future was very dull". One student laughed when he was asked the question. He said he had pictured "being in school for a really long time" because he had failed several courses and his parents would not have permitted him to drop out of school. He saw himself "suffer[ing] through it". One young woman's picture of the future was "working for minimum wage in a gas station" for life. The student who had had to enter an alternative education class due to medical problems, had hoped to finish Grade 12 and then go to college. Now he feared that he could not pursue that plan because he was not sure if he would be admitted to college from an alternative education class. Two students, one male and one female, had pictures of getting married and having a family. These pictures had not changed. One other student said he could not remember if he had had any pictures of his future. He was still unclear on what he wanted. He said he would probably take a year off then "try to get a job in a sawmill or something." One student had more of a fantasy than a picture of his future. He said he dreamed about being at the "starting lineup at Daytona 500, Florida". He could even see that the race car would be red and blue. He said he also dreamed of being a lawyer and wearing "a nice tux"! This student says these are still his pictures of his future. So, having been in an alternative education class had not helped him to see his future in more realistic terms.

One other very quiet student said his picture was to play his guitar in bars and clubs for a living. This also sounded like a fantasy rather than a real picture the student could work toward. However, his teacher revealed after the interview that this student has a friend living in the Lower Mainland who actually does earn a living playing a guitar in bars and clubs. Also, the teacher explained that this student lives in a small community north of Prince George which has only one main employer, a sawmill. But there are no future jobs for him. The sawmill has automated the production lines and as a result new workers are not being hired. Therefore, if students see nothing going on in their community perhaps it is not surprising that they cannot form good pictures of their future in that community.

A few of the students who said that they had not had any pictures or had had dim pictures of their futures were helped by their experiences in alternative education classes. Particularly the students who had had work experience now were able to form realistic pictures of jobs they might actually be able to do. One pre-employment student said she now wanted to work in a daycare centre after having had successful experiences in daycares and in kindergarten classrooms. A

young male student, also from the pre-employment program, said his experiences at heavy duty mechanics shops and in autobody shops had helped him to decide that he wanted to become a transport truck driver. He said that having been out on work experience helped him to think about the future by showing him jobs he might want to do in the future and by showing him what subjects he needed in order to do those jobs later. Another pre-employment student claimed to be "full of hope now". Work experience had shown her that she could do a job and she stated: "Right now I have a picture that I can get a job and that I am really ready to do anything right now."

Students in alternate education classes stated that their futures now appeared "brighter" and that they now had "many options open" to them because they had discovered that they could do well in school. They had started to think about, and to work toward jobs such as heavy duty mechanics, social work, a group home worker helping troubled youngsters, and aircraft maintenance mechanic. The student who thought she might end up serving hamburgers and fries for the rest of her life is now seriously considering becoming a teacher.

#### **Peer Influence - Negative**

Peer influence is recognized as having a powerful impact on students. The sixteen students interviewed for this study talked about their "friends" and "buddies" several times throughout the interview. Most of the information indicated positive influence from peers but there were a number of negative influences attributed to peers by the students. The student who had had drug and alcohol problems connected her difficulties to her "real fun set of friends". She stressed the word "fun" to indicate that she was being sarcastic. Two of the students stated that their friends who had already dropped out of school were a factor in helping these students to decide to leave school as well, stating, for example, that "all my friends were dropping out" and "I wanted to be with my friends". Three students indicated that they were easily distracted by their peers and therefore could not concentrate on their work. As one student put it:

I was having trouble in the regular program because I had too many friends. I'd get into class and I would be always talking. And somehow it just wasn't working out. And the work, I found it difficult because I couldn't keep my mind on track.

#### **Peer Influence - Positive**

As already stated, most comments about peers indicated they had been a very positive influence for most of these sixteen students. One student said that the reason he had investigated re-entering school after having dropped out for a while was because he had friends already in the program and they encouraged him to apply. While these students were in the classroom they "bonded" so well that the classroom became "a second home" to some of these students. One student explained that somehow in the "more relaxed atmosphere" of the alternate education

classroom the students and teachers became "family".

All the kids got along and if someone had a problem we could help each other out. And, you know, [Dave's] mom died and he'd already lost his dad a year before that. So, both his parents were dead. He was only fifteen. We all helped him out when his mom died. You know, stuck together. . . . If someone's in a bad mood in our class, everyone's involved. It's like you know, [Helen's] mom is in the hospital? And everyone is going: "How you doing [Hel]? And how's your mom? And we got pictures of baby [Helen's baby] on the wall and -- it's like a big family.

Two students from another program also spoke warmly about their peers in the classroom. One student described how students arrive a little early in the morning just for the opportunity to sit outside and talk to other students. She said that, for example in their daily physical education classes, "everybody has a lot of fun and everybody participates." She also said that on their special outings "a lot of communication" occurs and that ". . . everybody [is] laughing and having a good time" A male student described another special event, their twenty-two kilometre hike up Mount Robson. He actually used this information to answer what his "best day" in the program had been. What made it his best day was:

because everybody was working together. It just felt like you knew everybody so good. And we were helping each other out all the way up to Mount Robson . . . . Everybody worked so good together, so it was fun."

Other students talked about the encouragement they received from their friends in the class and how important that was. Another student talked about a friend of hers who is out of school now and is four months pregnant. She is attempting to talk her friend into returning to school through the alternate education route into the Pathways program which enrolls teen moms. The alternate program had been good for this student and she was certain her friend would also thrive in a similar setting.

This concern for others and the students' need to nurture and encourage others experiencing difficulties and the need to be a part of a "family" type of group appeared to be a common theme for many of the students who were interviewed. This supportive, family-like atmosphere may become possible in a smaller classroom, where there is less pressure, and more time to actually get to know each other well. It is unlikely to develop in a large setting where students "jump" from class to class and subject to subject. This "family" feeling may well be another big clue to the apparent success of alternative education programs.

### **Effects - Self-Esteem**

Low self-esteem has often been used in identifying students at risk and many alternative

programs have made improving students' self-esteem the main focus of the program. Building self-esteem and helping students meet their social and emotional needs is one of the major components of both the pre-employment program and the alternate education program in Prince George. Only one of the students appeared to have had a healthy self-concept even before entering the alternate education program. He knew he was "a pretty good student". Others had felt that they were a "loser", a "dummy", "stupid" because they were "not making" it in what they referred as the "normal" school or "real" school. And as already stated, being pulled out of the regular program was another blow to many of the students because they now had to go to an "idiot class" with a "bunch of geeks".

Once in the class these students began to experience success for the first time. They were learning, "getting good grades", completing work and "acing" it. Self-esteem improved dramatically for some of these students. The students who said they had been mad at everybody and hated everybody, now were feeling good enough about themselves to attempt to help others. Students said they feel more "confident" now and "way smarter". They had learned that, "if you can't do the work exactly the way they want you to do it, you're not an idiot. They find an easier way for you to do it." One student insisted that the reason she has "not even looked" at drugs or alcohol has to do with the fact that she now knows: "Hey, I can do this [school work]!" and realizes that she has future "And it's like -- wow! Maybe, I'm not a loser after all!"

Work experience has already been talked about in relation to its impact on the students' pictures of their future. Work experience has also had a positive effect on the students' self-esteem. These students say they now know what to do if they had to go looking for a job and they feel confident that they could get one. The students who received good reports on their performance and particularly the students who acquired paid work through their work experience feel extremely proud of themselves. They told the interviewer where they were working and how much money they were making.

#### **Effects - Academic**

Most of the alternate education students believe that their work is the same as that done in a regular classroom. They are aware that the format is different. There is far less writing since much of the work involves questions and answers. Some students say they do less work in alternative programs and others say the opposite, that there is far more reading to do in an alternate classroom. One student said that the social studies unit consisted of seven hundred pages of reading and that students do extra work on top of that.

Four of the alternate education students have upgraded their skills to the level where they have already started the process of re-entering the regular program. All four have been partially

integrated in regular classrooms over the last school year. One student expected to be fully integrated by September 1992. Two others will re-enter the regular program in February 1993. The fourth student has some more time left to complete her alternative program but she also is demonstrating her capacity to earn "real" graduation. These students are using the program in the way it was intended: to upgrade their skills re-enter the regular program. Two alternate education students indicated that they were possibly being academically disadvantaged by the program. One indicated that the work was too easy and that they were covering far less material in the alternate education program than students cover in the regular program. The other student was afraid that having been in "alternate" would hurt his chances of entering college.

Most of the pre-employment students interviewed for this study are satisfied with their alternative education program and believe that they are doing the "same" work as they would in the regular program. That unfortunately is not the case. They are receiving instruction only in the "basics", as well as, lifeskills and work experience. Some of them are integrated into regular electives but they are struggling there, again with the pace and volume of the work they are expected to do. One student complained of "not learning anything" except about work experience in her classroom. Academically there appears to be little progress for the pre-employment students. The gains from the program, as indicated by the students themselves, are in the areas of social and emotional growth.

### **The Most Striking Findings**

The students responses revealed some familiar themes, themes that authors dealing with at-risk students had identified as being important to students. Students' sense of isolation in the regular classroom, their distant and even hostile relationships with classroom teachers and administrators, their feelings of powerlessness and lack of freedom regarding choices on what to learn and how to learn it or in the schools' demands that they conform to rules which students considered to be meaningless, their struggles with personal problems, and their feelings of perceived inferiority were all familiar.

But the interviews also held several surprises for the researcher sometimes in what the students did not discuss. For example, students who were physically isolated from regular students in the school and sometimes in uncomfortable, cramped settings, like the mezzanine room in the library or the half-classrooms, did not complain about discomfort or embarrassment. The interviewer had expected that this physical isolation and the less-than-other-students-have atmosphere would impact on the students' self-esteem or self-concept and that they would mention this in their descriptions of their time in the alternate program. Physical isolation and the fact that alternate programs often have to do with what materials and equipment they can "scrounge up"



from items the regular classrooms have long discarded as outdated, has sometimes been mentioned in the literature as a demonstration by the school administration that these students were not considered equal or not as important as the regular students in the school. Perhaps if students from another Prince George secondary school had been interviewed this issue might have been discussed by students. At this particular school the pre-employment and alternate education classrooms are located in portables at the far end of the parking lot, a good city block away from the main building. Students must walk in rain, snow, or in bitter minus 40 degree weather just to pick up their messages or go to their lockers.

Another area of surprise was that although students talked about personal power and freedom issues as described by William Glasser (1986 & 1990), these issues were not discussed as much as the interviewer had expected. Glasser has stated that the power and freedom needs are most difficult for students to meet in school. What students did discuss with great intensity and enthusiasm was the relationship with teachers and peers in their alternate education classrooms. The love and belonging need appeared to be the most urgent need for these students.

One issue that was somewhat surprising to the interviewer was the degree of difference between pre-employment students and alternate education students in their ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Academically alternate education students are more capable than pre-employment students. Alternate education students do have the ability to graduate from the regular program. The best pre-employment students have on occasion enrolled in some academic courses in an attempt to achieve "real" high school graduation. Only a handful have succeeded and over recent years fewer students have bothered to attempt regular courses. This part was well known to the interviewer.

What became apparent during the interview is that pre-employment students either are not able to, or simply are not used to reflecting on their own thoughts and feelings. Only one article read for this thesis listed the inability of at-risk students to "communicate thought and feeling on an intimate level" (Rogus & Wildenhaus, 1991, p. 2). The pre-employment students had a very difficult time even attempting to interpret what was being asked of them. As mentioned earlier, questions needed to be rephrased in very personal terms before the students could respond. When they did respond their answers were very short, coming in phrases or sometimes only a word at a time, requiring the interviewer to probe further and further, one level at a time. Even when these students knew what they wanted to say, they were unable to find the words to explain their thoughts. One young man attempted to explain how it was now possible for him to "get" his education in an alternate education classroom when it had not been possible in the regular classroom:

I can understand my work more better than in the regular program because -- I don't really know why I can. It's just -- it's the same work, and that, but it's just a lot easier to do here, and that, than doing it in the regular program.

The alternate education students, on the other hand, were very articulate. They had strong opinions and apparently enjoyed the opportunity to discuss them. They generally spoke in full sentences and used clear, powerful images. The interview transcripts for these students were up to five pages long, single-spaced.

Possibly the most striking finding was that these students, both pre-employment students and alternate education students were unwilling to use their imaginations during the interview. It is possible that these students do have dreams but are unable to articulate them or, they may simply be unwilling to share their dreams with strangers, with a researcher conducting a study, for example.

The most unsuccessful questions were the ones asking students for their "pictures" of the future, what would the "best day" in their alternate education class look like, and the "magic wand" question. The responses were mostly unrevealing. For the "best day" question, which offered wide freedom for the students to dream, most students elected to describe an actual day that they considered to be their best day. Usually their "best day" was the day of some special event at the program. Some students described personal victories: receiving a certificate for completing the Grade 10 program, or completing assignments and receiving excellent marks. Only one student described an imaginary day, her graduation day about two years in the future. She was able to see that day, anticipate her emotions, and even hear what she would say to her mother on that day. One student, who had been in the program for only about four or five months, said there were no "best days" in school!

For the "magic wand" question, which gave students the imaginary opportunity to make any changes they wanted to in the educational system, the responses came in one word answers or short phrases regarding very minimal issues, such as "coffee in the morning", "windows that open", "more incentive days", "allow smoking in school". Some students said they did not know what they would change. A few students attempted to discuss larger issues here, suggesting for example, that classrooms in the regular program should have fewer students and less pressure. One student suggested a form of student governance and establishing a student-run council. He stated that "the students know what they need" and these students could meet with teachers to give their (students') input. He also suggested that teachers need to "take ideas from kids" and then be prepared to act on that input. Another bright student discussed wanting to see the changes outlined in the Year 2000 document implemented. She said she refused to have children until the changes

were in effect. She particularly liked the idea of a continuous program and "the way they do their units".

Apparently, there is a great need to teach reflective thinking to students. Helping students plant "pictures" in their heads should be the first step in helping students to begin changing their ineffective behaviours. Students can begin taking more control of their lives by recognizing that various behaviours can be chosen in most situations and by attempting to visualize outcomes of these possible behaviours. In this way students can use the pictures in their heads to choose more effective behaviours for themselves at school and in their personal lives. The students interviewed appeared not to have the necessary thinking processes in place to permit them to visualize how they could change their own lives or what changes in their classroom processes would help them acquire the most benefit from their education.

#### **What Needs Did the Students' Descriptions of Life in the Regular Program and Life in an Alternative Education Program Identify?**

Finally, eleven of the students interviewed stated emphatically that they would stay in an alternative education class if they were given the choice of staying in alternate or returning into the regular classroom. This is evidence that the alternative education programs are, in fact, meeting the needs of students better than the regular classroom meets their needs.

What were those needs then? By looking at the issues the students discussed, certain needs can be identified. The students themselves, on the whole, were unable to say: "This is what I need in school" or "This is how I want school to be for me." But in their descriptions of their experiences in the regular program and of their experiences in the alternative education program, students brought up issues that they either liked or disliked. These likes and dislikes indicated what they perceived their wants and needs to be.

Students appeared to be saying that having a good relationships with teachers is of paramount importance to them. They need teachers who listen to students and who understand students. They need teachers who treat students with respect, who will take the time to sit with students and help them either with classroom assignments or with personal problems. They want teachers who are clear about expectations but who are also reasonably flexible about rules and about deadlines for completing work.

Almost as important for these students, is the need to be in a nurturing, supportive, family-like environment. Students appear to want to be in smaller classrooms where they can "get close" to other students. They like to be in a setting where everybody knows everyone else well and everyone helps each other through personal crises and encourages each other to do well in school. This can be described as the need to "bond" with others. Or it can be described as William Glasser

describes it: the need for love and belonging.

The next big issue that most students discussed was the need to have fun. This was one of the things missing from most regular classrooms in the experiences of these particular students. The students want to talk to each other, laugh, hear the teacher tell jokes, and they want to go on special outings because all these things are "fun".

The need for freedom was mentioned several times in the students' statements. Their need for freedom can be seen in that students like the more flexible rules in an alternative education class. They described being free to sit anywhere in the classroom, freedom to work at your own pace, and the freedom to choose not to do work for a day. Also, having fewer courses is a freedom issue in that students are free from worry and free from pressure. Not having enough time to do everything required in the regular classroom was mentioned often. Time is an important freedom issue. The feeling students have that in alternative education classes "you're not forced" to do things whereas in the regular program "you have to whether you want to or not", is a freedom issue as well.

There is also a strong need for students to feel competent. They want to feel that they are smart and capable of doing the work required at school. They want to be listened to. They want teachers to act on their (students') ideas. They want to be treated as adults and with respect. They want a good self concept. They do not want to think of themselves as losers, dummies, or idiots. These issues could be described as evidence of the students' the need for personal power.

Educationally, the students' main stated need is to graduate. Several students talked about the core subjects as being "what everybody needs for life." They also talked about needing lifeskills to help them cope with personal problems. They talked about needing family life, sex education, and work experience to help them with their lives. A number of students also talked about needing school to help them set goals. Without clear goals they said, you couldn't expect to go anywhere in life.

Other needs were brought up as well. Students apparently need a quiet classroom. They need more stimulation in the form of more outings and special activities. They need regular physical activity. They need private corners or their "own spot", or a couch to go to when their "brain is straining". For most of the students interviewed for this study, alternative education programs, specifically the pre-employment program and the alternate education program are meeting their needs.

## CHAPTER V

### THE FUTURE OF ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

#### Implications For Researchers

Most of the students interviewed for this thesis believe that alternative programs are good for them. Many of the researchers also believe that for the "vulnerable", "marginal", at-risk students alternative programs are "often the best option". There is enough evidence, and the students' own judgments that they simply were not "making it" in the regular program. In the regular program these students had found it impossible to meet any of their needs. Yet in their alternative classrooms, these same students are thriving. Particularly the students in the alternate education classes, find that in a warm supportive environment, surrounded by teachers who care about them and respect them and by their classmates who help and encourage them, school work now seems easy. They are getting good marks and are beginning to integrate themselves back into the regular program. They are heading toward graduation and post-secondary education.

The students in the pre-employment classes also feel that their teachers care about them. The students no longer live in fear of failing. They have experienced success on work experience and some are being introduced to higher thinking processes such as critical thinking and problem solving. These students feel safe in their pre-employment classrooms and are proud of the fact that they now know how to acquire paid employment. Some have actually already been hired by their work experience employers and are experiencing the pleasures and freedoms associated with having their own money.

Two strong points support the belief that alternative programs are meeting many of the students' needs. One is that the students are continuing on in school. Several of the students who had actually dropped out for as long as two-year periods have been drawn back by the alternative programs and by the opportunities the students perceive these programs could offer them. Also, most of the students interviewed state emphatically that they would remain in their alternative education classroom rather than return to the regular classroom if they had to make a choice between the two. There is strong evidence from research, as shown by the examples already given in this thesis, that many alternative programs are succeeding in meeting student needs - at least for now.

Students from both programs, however, did complain about the level, quantity, and quality of academic instruction they were receiving. They were concerned that the college would not accept them or that they did not have the skills required to pursue jobs that they had wanted. Although students did not mention this point, many pre-employment students are enrolled in classes only for a part of the school day, sometimes because no suitable electives are available for

them or because they find the work in an elective too difficult and choose not to attend. That is, they "skip out" until they are withdrawn from the elective class for excessive absences. Also, many of the alternate programs are only half-day programs. Students are, therefore, getting less instruction and less education than students in the regular program receive. These points again raise the issue discussed by Radwanski (1987), Goodlad (1984), Oakes (1992), LeCompte (1987) and others that alternative programs limit students' futures by offering them only a minimal education.

The rapid proliferation of alternative programs in our own province and the large number of students who are pulled out of the regular stream each year and placed in these programs should be of concern to educators and parents. It is especially troubling that most of these placements appear to be "terminal". Only alternate education students are able to successfully return to the regular stream and some of them are choosing not to return. Pre-employment students, who have been in modified programs for years, have virtually no hope of returning to the regular program. The gap between what they should know and what they actually know widens each year that they spend in a pre-employment program. A few pre-employment students have attempted to upgrade their academic skills through adult basic education programs offered by the community college. Very few of them manage to complete these programs. Therefore, no matter how warm and positive the students' comments are about the alternative programs, the fact remains that no one has studied the long-term effects of these programs on the students who were enrolled in them. No one can, as yet, state with confidence that the programs are effective in meeting the academic or the vocational needs of students.

It does appear, from the students' own comments, that alternative programs are meeting the social and emotional needs of students. But the only way to determine if alternative programs meet academic and vocational needs of students by adequately preparing them for successful participation in adult life, is to follow students who have graduated from alternative programs into their adult lives. Researchers must ask if former alternative education students have been able to continue with further education and training at a post secondary level. Are they in challenging jobs which reflect their abilities and skills? Are they earning the kind of wages that will permit them to live independently of their parents or to support families of their own? Are they being promoted into positions with more responsibility?

#### **What To Do While Waiting For New Research?**

It may be many years before research answers whether or not alternative programs meet the academic and vocational needs of at-risk students. In the meantime schools are failing to retain over thirty percent of its students and an unknown number of students are so disengaged from

school activities that they too will leave school deficient in the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the adult world. Educators are forced to respond to the problems of the at-risk students - now.

The literature has suggested a number of effective ways to help at-risk students. Many authors suggest that early identification and intervention are crucial to prevent at-risk students from remaining at risk. Finn and Radwanski are two authors who believe in the positive effects of early intervention. Radwanski suggested making early childhood education programs available to children at the age of three. It makes sense that if students are identified early and if they receive intensive, quality remediation at that early stage they will not remain at risk. Not all at-risk students, however, were at risk in their early years of schooling. Wehlage and his co-authors point out that many of the problems, such as pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, etc., develop in adolescence. Therefore, preschool and early school interventions will not work to prevent at-riskness for all students.

"Relevant alternative programs of good quality", as suggested by the Sullivan Commission in British Columbia, (p. 92) can legitimately be a part of the answer to help at-risk students. But these programs should only be used as a last resort and students should only be placed in an alternative program for a short period. Every effort should be made to help the student re-enter the regular stream. Researchers and those working in effective alternative programs, have stressed that alternative programs can offer more than a minimal education and are capable of, not only retaining students in high school, but also of convincing students of the need to pursue education and training at post-secondary levels.

The suggestion made by many of the students interviewed for this thesis is that regular classrooms should be made to function more like alternative classrooms. This is actually becoming a reality in some innovative schools which are experimenting with making the kind of fundamental changes in the school structures and policies that have been suggested by the authors studied for this thesis. The Thomas Haney Centre, which opened in September 1992 in Maple Ridge, British Columbia, is one such school. Students, except for the grade eights who are on a fully structured program, are all on individualized programs and are responsible for their own daily schedules. They choose how long they wish to work on a particular subject. They book their laboratories and their seminars and then are free to structure their work day as they see fit.

The school shares the facility with Douglas College. High school students can actually see the college students through the windows on the other side of the wall. Such close proximity of a post-secondary institution certainly emphasizes to the secondary students that education is expected to continue past grade twelve. This school, by its flexible structure, offers students the opportunity

to meet their freedom and personal power needs. The love and belonging need is addressed by the schools' mentoring philosophy. Each teacher is expected to mentor students, to act as their advisors, advocates, and friends. Each teacher is seen as a counsellor.

### **Reducing Alienation Through the Caring Ethic**

Another way to respond to the problems of the at-risk students suggested by the readings is to reduce the alienation students, particularly the at-risk students, feel in school. Alienation was mentioned in the at-risk literature many times. Sometimes authors used the word alienation itself. Other times they talked about students' sense of "isolation", "estrangement", or "disengagement" from school and a feeling of "distance" from their teachers, or about the "unresponsiveness" of schools. When discussing the effective alternative schools and programs, they used words which indicated that the opposite of alienation was occurring in the best alternative programs. These words were: "attachment", "bonding", "engagement", "commitment", "participation", "identification", "membership", "supportive", and "belonging". The students interviewed for this thesis talked with great enthusiasm about the close relationships they had formed with their teachers and classmates in the alternative classrooms. This feeling of belonging in a caring family setting appeared to be extremely important to the students' sense of well-being and self-esteem. It also appeared to be the reason they remained in school and attempted to do well in school.

The need of students to bond with others, to belong, and to feel nurtured and cared for deserves intense attention and action by educators. If regular schools are to become more like the best alternative classrooms they (schools) must adopt the "caring ethic" as described by Lynn Beck. (1992) Beck states that the topic of caring has already been explored by authors in the fields of family policy, social policy, social work and social welfare. She quotes from several authors in her discussion of caring and says that she is following in the footsteps of Nicholas Hobbs and his co-authors, Robert Bellah and his co-authors, Mary Brabeck, Paul Dokecki, Carol Gilligan, and Nel Noddings. Beck summarizes the writings of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings stating that "they [Gilligan and Noddings] claim that male-dominated views of life, ethics, and leadership have led our culture to value actions that lead to accomplishment and to devalue actions that nurture another if they involve some kind of personal sacrifice." (Beck, 1992, p. 468) This feminine concept of caring has tremendous potential to affect the leadership styles and the management strategies used in schools and would promote the development of school cultures where both teachers and students felt nurtured and cared for.

"Caring" has many different definitions. Its goal is to help another human being "grow and actualize" himself or herself. It involves accepting the other person without making judgements and seeing the other person's reality. Beck discusses Noddings who stresses that



along with the "motivational displacement" which occurs when one accepts the welfare of the other as the reason for action, there must also be a commitment, or what Noddings calls "engrossment". Beck quotes from Noddings work stating that when there is "motivational displacement" as well as "engrossment" the care giver will step "... out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's ... consider[ing] the other's point of view, his objective needs and what he expects of us ... ." (Beck, 1992, p. 458) Noddings sees that caring involves two different kinds of responsibility: one is natural, like a mother's, almost unconscious, sense of responsibility to her child which make caring actions "... instinctive and easy to carry out." (Beck, p. 464) The other is ethical caring which arises from a "... conscious decision to respond to another." (Beck, p. 464) It is based on the belief that one should do something "... in response to the need of the cared-for" (Beck, p. 464) Noddings adds that for both natural and ethical caring, that is, instinctive or planned, the caring must result in "... some kind of responsive action." (Beck, p. 465)

As already stated, caring must involve seeing, assessing, and responding to the other's needs and a "desire for the other's well-being". It assumes the willingness of one person to accept responsibility for another. Caring is possibly the ultimate way of nurturing belonging.

According to Beck, caring involves three activities:

"... (1) receiving the other's perspective, (2) responding to the awareness that comes from this reception, and (3) remaining in the caring relationship for an appropriate length of time." (Beck, 1992, p. 462) For caring to occur, one person must truly know the other, his/her limitations, and strengths as well as what his/her needs are. This knowing allows a person to understand and respect the other. A caring person must act responsively toward the one cared for, in such a way that the other's needs are lessened or removed. Beck quotes Fromm stating that four characteristics of loving actions are: "care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge." (Beck, 1992, 465). At some point, caring will require "sacrifice".

What this means for teachers and administrators is that they "must seek 'life-affirming' actions" and avoid any practices which result in "dehumanization in the classroom". Rather than attempt to produce an educated workforce and teach people how to compete, schools must proceed from an almost spiritual "belief in the intrinsic value of persons". Schools must make "personal development" and "community development" the fundamental purpose of education. Caring means that competition is not used in an attempt to motivate students to achieve. Instead, cooperative strategies, joint efforts, and committed personal relationships are used to increase students' academic achievement.

Beck is another author who recognizes that the well-being of teachers can impact on student achievement. She suggests that caring administrators can create a nurturing environment

where teachers feel a sense of efficacy and where they can have positive relationships with their students. Teachers who feel cared for are better able to nurture students. Beck states that by embracing a "caring ethic" schools ". . . will assert 'that the integrity of human relationships should be held sacred and that the school as an organization should hold the good of human beings within it as sacred.'" (Beck, p. 480)

In caring schools power would be used to "facilitate" rather than to "control". The emphasis would be on "cooperation and supportive interactions" both among the staff and students. Teachers' professional autonomy would be emphasized and "collaborative pedagogical and management strategies" would be valued. Communication would be "open, trusting", and "professional".

Fred Newmann (1989) also discusses reduction of alienation by promoting "communality" which can foster the development of caring relationships between teachers (and other adults in a school) and students, as an answer for some of the problems faced by at-risk students. He believes that student behaviours such as vandalism, absenteeism, low achievement, apathy, and hostility toward teachers are indicators of the extent of alienation felt by students. He states that, "reducing alienation . . . is not tantamount to eliminating stress or effort; rather it is arranging conditions so that people expend energy in ways that enhance engagement with work, people, and physical surroundings." (Newmann, 1989, p. 156)

He states that in order to minimize alienation three needs must be met: the needs for "integration", "individuality", and for "communality". Integration refers to a person's need for "consistency and continuity" in his/her experience. Individuality refers to a person "striving for personal competence" and for "personal choice". Communality refers to ". . . the tendency to affiliate with others, to identify oneself with human groups, organizations, and causes." (Newmann, 1989, p. 158)

Newmann suggests that six general issues have the capacity to reduce alienation in schools: ". . . voluntary choice, clear and consistent goals, small size, participation, extended and cooperative roles, and integrated work." (Newmann, 1989, p. 159) These guidelines refer to students and parents having the right to choose the school the student will attend, maximizing student participation and contribution to school policy and management, and teachers accepting extended and cooperative roles instead of their traditional role. Smaller schools offer students and teachers the opportunity to develop trusting and caring relationships. School relationships can also be extended beyond the classroom to recreation, counselling, dining together, working together at school maintenance, fund-raising, and tutoring. The end result of the extended contact between students and teachers is ". . . a greater sense of communality, mutual caring [emphasis mine] and

responsibility . . . ." (Newmann, 1989, p. 163)

William Glasser's control theory also has the potential to promote the kind of caring that would work to reduce alienation in schools, especially if teachers, administrators, and students knew and used the theory. Control theory is essentially a theory about human behavior. It states that all human behavior is purposeful. Human beings "behave" in an attempt to meet their basic needs for survival, personal power, love and belonging, fun, and freedom. The behaviours people choose may not always be the most effective behaviours to meet their needs but the behaviours are always their best attempt to meet those needs at that time. Therefore, judgement and criticism of another's behaviour is not used by anyone who understands the principles of control theory and of reality therapy, the counselling procedure based on control theory. When students are guided to make more effective choices, the value judgement that what they are doing is not getting them what they want, is always made by the students, not by the counsellor or by the teacher. Control theory concerns itself with the present behaviors and therefore frees people of the need to "guilt" over past mistakes. It teaches people to say, "next time I will . . . ." not "why did I? or "how could I be so stupid?"

Control theory has great potential to defuse anger and accusations because control theory says that people "choose" all their own behaviours. Nobody, and no outside force, can "make" people do anything they do not want to do. It, therefore, promotes in people a strong sense that they are in control of their lives. It also teaches people how to find emotional balance again after they have experienced anger, pain, or fear.

Control theory and reality therapy can also promote respect and understanding between teachers and students if both understand the theory and the process for change that reality therapy teaches. Both teachers and students would recognize and respect the others' attempts to meet their needs. Both would know that one should not attempt to meet one's own needs at the expense of the other's. Teachers, knowing that students have needs to meet in the classroom, could structure activities in such a way that students could to meet their needs for power, freedom, fun, and for love and belonging. Teachers would experience less burnout, stress, and alienation themselves, if they were aware of their own needs and attempted to meet them. This fits in well with what Nel Noddings says about caring, that caring is a ". . . concern for 'the welfare, protection or enhancement of the cared for' as well as for oneself."

(Beck, 1992, p. 458)

Control theory and reality therapy have, in fact, found their way into schools. The Apollo School in California and the Thomas Haney Centre in Maple Ridge, British Columbia are using Glasser's ideas. Many school districts in British Columbia have recognized the value of control

theory and reality therapy. School districts have arranged for reality therapy training to occur in their districts. They have also supported the program by partially paying for the fees of teachers, administrators, counsellors, and teacher aides to pursue reality therapy training.

There is evidence in the literature that some alternative schools and programs are already using a caring ethic and it is helping to reduce alienation. Many of the authors used the word "caring" in describing effective alternative programs. For example, "care" is one of the "four Cs" (care, cash, coalitions, and computers) Dale Mann (1986) stated were essential for the success of alternative programs. Some of the ways caring has been used to reduce alienation is by attempting to involve students in as many school activities as possible so that they can feel they belong, so that they can identify with school and school activities. Wehlage and his co-authors saw schools which had become "communities of support" for students. In these schools teachers accepted responsibility for the performance of their students and made "sacrifices" in terms of giving up more of their time to students and by accepting more work for themselves in allowing their roles to be extended beyond that of a mere giver of information. In many schools cooperative learning and peer tutoring are used to show students that they are cared for. Personal counselling is offered by many alternative programs and mentorship is now in use in many innovative schools and has been recommended for inclusion in regular schools.

These strategies all have the capacity to reduce alienation. All could be included, without tremendous effort or expense, in regular classrooms. Indications are strong that if at-risk students were cared for, respected and helped in the ways that Beck and others describe, they would not remain at risk.

### **How To Help Regular Classroom Teachers Demonstrate Caring**

The students interviewed for this thesis perceived that alternative education teachers are more caring and supportive and available to help individuals than regular classroom teachers. What students do not understand is the fact that in alternative programs teachers receive more support in terms of teacher aides, time, and smaller enrollments. At Storefront for example, there is a ratio of five adults to twenty-four students. As mentioned in the program description in Chapter III, this program employs two full-time teachers, two teacher aides, and a youth care worker. In the largest secondary school, teacher aides are present in alternate education classes but not in pre-employment classes. Most of the students do not differentiate between teacher, aides, or youth care workers. During the interviews, they were all referred to as "teachers." So, when students perceived that there was always someone there who had time to listen to them, they were correct. Also, non-instructional time is built in the weekly schedule of alternative programs permitting teachers time to prepare, mark, or meet with students to talk or to do counselling, etc.

Regular classroom teachers, with their many large classes full of students at greatly varying ability levels, do not receive the support of teacher aides unless there is a severely handicapped or a behaviourally disturbed student in the classroom. Some regular classroom teachers in schools with a rotating timetable, can conceivably see 210 students a day. Some days they have no spare blocks and teachers are also required to do hall supervision during their lunch hours and bus supervision before and after school. It is difficult for even the most sensitive and caring regular classroom teachers to spend time getting to know their students and helping them with academic problems, much less with personal problems.

If teachers are what really matter, that is, if students perceive teachers to be the main reason why the alternative education programs are so much better than regular programs, then administrators and school district-level supervisors need to recognize that and give regular classroom teachers the support, the funding, and the training they require to do their jobs effectively. The teachers in many of the alternate programs are highly educated and have had much additional training. For example, one of the teachers in the Storefront program holds a master's degree in counselling psychology, is a certified reality therapist (using Glasser's control theory), and has had additional training of various kinds. Many of her students were the ones who talked so gratefully about having received one-on-one help and counselling with personal problems.

The Prince George school district has been generous in supporting training, inservice, professional development, and additional education for alternative program teachers. However, more regular classroom teachers also need additional training and support so that they will know how to meet their own needs and the needs of their students. Support for regular classroom teachers must also come in the form of reduced class sizes and time free from assigned duties so that if they want to talk to a student, or work, or plan with a colleague, they are able to do so. These are costly solutions, but it is clear that teachers in regular classrooms need this type of support. If regular classroom teachers could be perceived as caring and supportive by students, fewer students would elect to walk out of school.

### **Teach Students How to Dream**

The inability of the students interviewed for this thesis, to dream indicates that students need regular practice using their imaginations. Students need "pictures" in their heads about what they want out of life. If their own home lives are so impoverished and so lacking in any kind of stimulation that they are unable to picture possibilities of what they might wish to have, accomplish, or experience, teachers can incorporate activities into their classrooms to explode the awareness of their students. Reading to and with students is one way good teachers stimulate

thinking and imagination. Anything from Shakespeare to the National Enquirer can work as long as the subject is interesting enough to appeal to students.

People in the community should be accessed more by teachers. There is expertise of all kinds available for schools to tap in the community. Employers, adventurers, business leaders, athletes, politicians from school board members to members of parliament, and secretaries who took a year off work to travel around the world, are out there, willing to share what they know and to show students what is possible for them.

Work experience, job shadowing, and interviewing workers are excellent ways to learn about possible future jobs. Any one of these assignments will quickly teach students the advantages and disadvantages of particular jobs, the working conditions, pay, possibilities for advancement, requirements in terms of education, training, physical and mental abilities, and in personal qualifications. Students will have pictures in their heads about what they want and do not want from a job and they may be able to develop, at least, vague pictures of the type of working conditions they want for themselves. The relevance of school to future work becomes apparent to students almost immediately when they see what is required on a particular job.

Students having difficulty expressing their feelings and thoughts only need to be given constant opportunities to practice. Role playing eases self-consciousness as students can play someone other than themselves, or they can play themselves but pretend that the person they are role playing is someone with whom they are merely acquainted. According to Rogus and Wildenhaus students also need to be given time to reflect on important life questions such as:

What do I want from life? What is the role of fear, pain, and disappointment in life, and how do I cope with each? What can I realistically expect from my parents and friends? And what can they expect from me?" (Rogus & Wildenhaus, 1991, p. 5)

Rogus and Wildenhaus also encourage journal writing. Journals are excellent private ways to encourage students to be reflective about their thoughts, feelings, dreams, and experiences without fear of exposing their souls to others. Students may write private journals for themselves, or may write ones they are willing to share with a trusted teacher.

Weekly, or even daily, writing assignments need not be stressful to students. Effective teachers choose current controversial topics to discuss in class. Discussion stimulates thoughts and opinions and as students express them, words which the students use in discussion can be written on the board, in case students are not certain how to spell them. The words can remain on the board for students to refer to and new words may be added to the list as students come up against words they want to use but do not know how to spell.

These suggestions may appear simplistic. They are certainly not new ideas. Many

effective teachers in both regular and alternative education classrooms are already using all these techniques. This writer believes that without "pictures in their heads" students have no motivation to attempt anything and no incentive for changing their ineffective behaviors. Without pictures of their own future students will be unable to set goals for themselves or they may set unrealistic goals. Also, without pictures and without imagination students will be unable to see any value to staying in school and, if they have already dropped out, they will remain the young people who do not know anything better than to "just hang around with friends". They may be bored but they will not know which way to move or what to do to help themselves. Teachers in both the regular classrooms and in alternative education program classrooms must devote more time to reflective type of activities if they are going to successfully prepare young people for adult life.

### **Still At Risk?**

To finally answer the question: are alternative programs meeting the needs of at-risk students? The answer appears to be yes, some programs are. Other programs appear to be unable to meet student needs any better than the regular program. In Prince George, most of the alternate education students interviewed are successfully completing their education but many of the pre-employment students may still be at risk. Perhaps they are no longer at risk of dropping out, but they are at risk of getting a minimal education and therefore at risk of achieving only a minimal lifestyle. More attention to the core curriculum is necessary. Basic academic skills must be taught. They cannot be dropped in favour of lifeskills or work experience. All three need to be components of the pre-employment program.

### **Implications for School and District-Level Administration**

One strong implication for school administration and district-level administration is the need for supervision and evaluation of the pre-employment program, in particular. Parent and/or student surveys could be employed to gather information about the successes or failures of the program. Administrators from the school and from the district should also spend more time visiting alternative program classrooms. The frequent physical presence of administrators in these classrooms would demonstrate to teachers and students that what occurs in these classrooms is of interest and of importance to school and district-level administration.

The other strong implication for school administration is the selection of teachers for alternative programs. As already stated, many of the alternate education teachers are highly educated and skilled for working with at-risk students, as are many of the pre-employment teachers. There are some teachers, however, in both alternate education and in pre-employment classes, who "fell in" to these jobs by accident. There are also teachers in these programs who deliberately sought these positions perceiving them to be "easier" than regular classroom

situations. These teachers are the ones who were already struggling in regular classrooms because they lacked the skills necessary to be effective. Their performance does not automatically improve because they are now in a smaller classroom. Their lack of skills becomes even more evident in the programs designed for at-risk students and their behaviours toward students become increasingly coercive.

Many authors stress that the best and most skilled teachers should be employed to work with the at-risk students. Larry Cuban (1989), for example, states that teachers must "choose" to work with at-risk students because they (teachers) are committed to at-risk students, willing to form "enduring relationships" with students and willing "to experiment" with teaching methods, willing to spend large amounts of time each day with students and willing to stay with them over a period of several years. These kinds of teachers are the ones who can create in their classrooms the kind of caring, supportive "extended family" that students interviewed for this thesis described as being so need-fulfilling. This description of teachers also calls for a certain amount of courage and strength from teachers and indicates that alternative programs should not be used by struggling teachers to "hide out" from the mainstream. Caring must be demonstrated by administrators, therefore, in selecting the best possible teachers for the most needy students and in removing ineffective teachers from alternative education classrooms.

#### **Alternative Programs Will Continue to Exist**

At least for the near future, alternative programs will continue to exist in British Columbia, especially in light of the approval "high quality" alternative programs have received from the Sullivan Commission. Also, alternative programs will continue to exist because retaining students in school to graduation benefits schools financially. The amount of funding each school in a district receives is dependent on the number of students enrolled in the school. There are many students who do not have the academic skills or the emotional stamina to cope with the regular classroom and, at some point in the school year, these students will drop out or will be "withdrawn" from school once they have managed to attract the attention of administrators by their (the students') absences and various other discipline problems. In very literal terms, schools cannot afford to lose so many students and administrators know that one way to help retain them in school is to provide alternative education programs for them.

Unfortunately, when the "bodies" are safely counted and are occupying seats in an alternative classroom, the students and their needs are often forgotten. This "forgetting" occurs mainly in the pre-employment program. As already mentioned, the classrooms are often isolated from the rest of the school building or are even separated by several city blocks from the schools which have administrative responsibility for the program. The evidence that these at-risk students



are forgotten is the number of absences, lates, failures in electives and on work experience that these students are permitted without any action from administrators. The lack of care is also evident in that no one seems to notice that students have quietly withdrawn from their elective classes or that they did not bother to sign up for electives in the first place. Also, the lack of care is demonstrated by the infrequency of administrator visits to the alternative education classrooms and by the fact that the alternative programs often operate with minimal resources and have to "make do" with whatever they can get.

Educators must be aware that the impact of these programs on the future of the young people enrolled in them is still unknown and that it is possible that, in the long run, alternative programs are actually harming students. Greater care in identifying at-risk students should be taken. There should be some hesitation and some "soul-searching" about whether a placement in an alternative program is, in fact, the best choice for a student. Assessments that a student simply cannot "make it" in the regular program should be revisited on a regular basis. No placement should be a "terminal" placement. Greater monitoring and more frequent evaluation of these programs is necessary.

At some time, educators and policy makers will also need to ask if alternative education programs should exist at all. This author believes that the best possible way to meet the needs of students is to improve mainstream schools to such an extent that most students will never become at risk. Many changes must occur in our society and economy before schools can begin to make changes toward excellence and equity that will not be doomed from the beginning the way many reform movements have been. Society must value many different kinds of intelligence and competence in people, not just academic intelligence and competence. Society must also stop placing people in have/ have-not, employable/unemployable, success/failure piles. Employers who have basic jobs to offer must stop using the grade twelve graduation requirement as a screening device when they hire people. Governments must begin to fund elementary schools especially well so that smaller classroom enrollments will be possible and elementary school teachers will be able to give more individual attention and intensive assistance to any student who appears to be struggling. Universities must select and train future teachers with more care. When these kinds of changes occur, large-scale changes will become possible for schools. Students will then be able to meet success in the regular classroom and there will be no need for alternative education programs.

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**APPENDIX**

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I would like to hear about your **experiences** as a student in an alternate program and about your **observations, feelings, and thoughts** about the alternate program in which you are currently enrolled.

1. First, I would like you to think back to the time **just before** you were in PEP/ALT ED, what stands out in your mind about that time?

**OPTIONAL PROBES:**

Did anything at that time give you that impression?

Can you tell me more about . . . ?

How do you mean . . . ?

How did you feel when . . . ?

What do you remember thinking?

2. Now, I would like you to think back to the time when you first had to consider leaving the regular program and entering PEP/ALT Ed. When you think back on that time, does any part of it stand out in your mind?

**OPTIONAL PROBES:**

Did anything at that time give you that impression?

Can you tell me more about . . . ?

How do you mean . . . ?

How did you feel when . . . ?

What do you remember thinking?

3. Again, thinking back to the time **before** you were in PEP/ALT ED, describe what pictures of your own future you had in your mind? What do you remember **thinking** about your own future . . . ? What pictures or thoughts do you **now** have of your own future?

4. You have now been in the PEP/ALT ED program for \_\_\_\_\_ (how long?) Thinking back on your time in this program, what particularly stands out in your mind about your experiences as a student in this program?

**OPTIONAL PROBES:**

Did anything at that time give you that impression?

Can you tell me more about . . . ?

How do you mean . . . ?

How did you feel when . . . ?

What do you remember thinking?

5. If you had had the best day ever in your PEP/ALT ED class, what would that day have looked like? What would I have seen you doing, if I had been an observer in your classroom?

**OPTIONAL PROBES:**

What might your thoughts be at the end of such a day?

What might your feelings be at the end of such a day?

6. How do you act when you are involved in a discipline or a classroom control issue in your PEP/ALT ED class ?

**OPTIONAL PROBES:**

What are your thoughts during such a situation?

What are your feelings during such a situation?

- 6a. How do you act when you observe other students involved in a discipline or a classroom control issue in your PEP/ALT ED class?

**OPTIONAL PROBES:**

What are your thoughts during such a situation?

What are your feelings during such a situation?

7. What are your thoughts, feelings, or observations about the **kinds** of things you learn in your PEP/ALT ED class?
- 7a. What are your thoughts, feelings, or observations about the way learning occurs or the way instruction is given in your PEP/ALT ED classroom?
8. What are your thoughts, feelings, or observations about your teachers/administrators in your PEP/ALT ED classroom?
9. If you had a **magic wand** allowing you to make any changes in your alternate program classroom or in the regular program classroom, what changes would you make?
10. If it were possible for you tomorrow to go back into a regular classroom situation, would you go back or would you stay in your alternate education classroom? Why/why not?
11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience in PEP/ALT ED, anything I haven't asked you about, something you feel is important? If you would like to share it, I would like to hear about it.

QUESTIONS 6, 6a, 7 & 7a caused confusion for students, particularly for the PEP students.

When I got an "I-don't-know-what-you-mean" response, I asked instead:

How is your classroom run?

Describe a typical day in your PEP/ALT ED classroom.