

THE ODYSSEY:
REACHING AN UNDERSTANDING OF ACADEMICALLY UNDERACHIEVING GIFTED
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BOREDOM

by

Tacey Keighley

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Author:

J

(Signature)

(Name)

November 25 1990

(Date)

APPROVAL

NAME Tacey Keighley
DEGREE Master of Arts
TITLE The Odyssey: Reaching an Understanding of
Academically Underachieving Gifted Students'
Perceptions of Boredom

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Chair Mike Maniey-Casimir

Lannie Kanevsky
Senior Supervisor

Celia Haig-Brown
Associate Professor
Member

Dr. James R. Delisle
Professor, Kent State University,
Educational Foundations & Special
Services, 405, White Hall, Kent, Ohio 44242-001
External Examiner

Date: November 25, 1996

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine academically underachieving gifted students' perceptions of boredom. The academic literature in the education of gifted students, underachievement and dropping out affirmed my professional and personal experiences: many gifted students (as well as numerous other students) characterize their classroom tasks and activities as boring. Researchers have ascribed and assumed meanings for these students' boredom. Scant research exists which directly asks gifted students to describe and elaborate upon their boredom. To understand and perhaps ameliorate, if not alleviate, these gifted students' boredom they need to be given an opportunity to be heard. This research gave ten academically underachieving gifted students in a large Canadian suburb a chance to have their perceptions initially heard by an interested graduate student / professional educator, and later read by other concerned educators.

The ten students (7 girls, 3 boys) ranging from 15 - 18 years of age were interviewed using an open-ended format. The objective of the interviews was to encourage the students to give a rich description and explanation of their perceptions of boredom. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The complexity of these gifted students' boredom and the resultant challenge in reaching a coherently written understanding of their boredom led to the title "The Odyssey." This thesis describes that arduous academic journey.

These gifted students made a clear distinction between their learning and their schooling experiences. Boredom characterized only their schooling, not their learning experiences. The students perceived learning as vital and lively, from which they derived a sense of personal control, choice and challenge. Their learning was often self-directed and facilitated by caring teachers. Schooling, on the other hand, was generally a tiring frustrating experience from which these gifted students passively or actively disengaged as their boredom evolved and escalated. This disengagement occurred and intensified when

these gifted students perceived a lack of personal control, choice or challenge within each classroom setting. An uncaring teacher could generate or exacerbate their boredom. A sense of frustration, disappointment and injustice emerges from the students' stories. These gifted students perceived cherished learning moments in classrooms were generally overwhelmed by boring schooling experiences.

My hope is that this thesis moves other educators to ask many other students their perceptions of boredom. My understanding of the complexity and intensity of these gifted students' boredom has deepened and affected my professional practice. I trust it may the reader's. Further research will be necessary to determine the effectiveness of interventions which may offer gifted underachieving students the personal control, choice, challenge and caring teachers they claim distinguishes their learning from their schooling.

DEDICATION

To my sons, Jonathan and Jeremy
with love

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This work could never have been completed without the support and encouragement of my friends, colleagues, and of course the students who so graciously volunteered to share their stories. Without my friend, Melody, this odyssey would still be a handwritten record of my most challenging academic journey. I can never repay the countless hours she spent in front of the computer typing my words and the endless encouragement she gave me.

This odyssey's clarity stems from the numerous conversations I had with many academic mentors. I would like to thank Michael Kamann who encouraged me to enter graduate studies, and helped me so much both as a teacher and a student. Mike Manley-Casimir introduced me to the world of qualitative research. He led me to Farrell's (1990) work which guided my research questions. Michael Roth helped me refine my topic and research. Celia Haig-Brown ensured the students' stories came alive for the reader. She and Lannie Kanevsky, my senior supervisor, sharpened my writing skills. Lannie deserves my most heartfelt thanks for introducing me to the fascinating worlds of gifted students and researchers. Her passion for gifted students has become mine.

A special thanks goes to Faye who read my drafts ensuring not only academic eyes, but all eyes can read the students' stories.

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CHAPTER 1

BOREDOM

A student's boredom with school learning may have significant consequences for both the individual and society. Boredom in school may be the first stepping stone toward dropping out (Farrell, 1990). It may begin as early as Grade 3 or 4 (Lloyd, 1978; Runco & Sakamoto, 1993). Dropping out is the last step in a gradual process of withdrawing from active involvement in school learning (Whelage, 1988). A student may suffer social stigma and trauma (King, 1988), not to mention financial difficulties, from dropping out. This suffering has not deterred approximately 30% of Canadian students from leaving school early (Statistics Canada, 1990). Dropouts frequently state boredom as a reason for early school leaving (Karp, 1988).

Society also suffers because of students' boredom with their schooling and their eventual departure from school. Tremendous social and financial costs are borne by Canadian citizens because in a highly technological age; uneducated dropouts become dependent upon society (Radwanski, 1986). The dropouts, who cite boredom as a factor suffer the most, often becoming caught in an unending cycle of poverty and hopelessness (Cervantes, 1965).

Boredom holds both personal and professional significance for me. I teach adolescents. Often, I am frustrated because they say they are bored. Sometimes, I am hurt and angered by their comments because I strive to create interesting lessons. I have learned, ruefully, that what is interesting to me is not necessarily interesting to my students. I have tried to rationalize their boredom by telling myself that their comments about my lessons have more to do with adolescents' beliefs that adult-initiated tasks are inherently boring. I have also hoped that if my students would just become active in their learning, and my teaching, they would not be bored.

I had not created an opportunity to ask my students to explain their boredom, in part, because until recently, I assumed I knew. If I had erroneously assumed a task might be as interesting to them as to myself, might I also be incorrect in my assumptions regarding the meaning of their boredom? This question became increasingly intriguing. If I made time for it, could I achieve an understanding of their boredom? Would these students be able to explain their boredom?

Although all students interest me, students with extraordinary abilities who do not do well in school, interest and fascinate me the most. Sometimes, these students have been “identified” as gifted underachievers. They show extraordinary aptitude for learning and perhaps creative talents, but their academic record does not reflect their aptitude. Many of them claim school is boring.

The experts on gifted learners led me to believe these students might be more articulate and perceptive about their boredom than the general population (Delisle, 1992; Freeman, 1985). Two frequently cited characteristics of adolescents with gifts are a more extensive vocabulary and an ability to articulate their thoughts more clearly than their peers (Davis & Rimm, 1989; Delisle, 1992). Many adolescents identified as gifted think about their thinking and feelings (e.g. their boredom) more frequently, critically and intensely than other adolescents (Borkowski, 1986; Delisle, 1992; Piechowski, 1989). Some of these students are more sensitive and more attuned to nuances of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Delisle, 1992; Gardner, 1986; Piechowski, 1989; Silverman, 1990). They might be more aware of the dynamics of teacher / student relationships. Would these students with gifts, who are underachieving academically, be able to help me come to an understanding of their boredom?

I undertook this project expecting boredom to be more complex than I had originally assumed. I may only partially understand another person’s boredom. That which is boring to one person may be exciting to another. Each individual constructs a personal meaning for boredom. That meaning is often assumed to be synonymous with another

person's meaning. Misunderstandings may arise because these personal meanings may even be contrary rather than congruent.

In my learning, boredom occurs only in situations where I am required to attend to a task that I perceive to be repetitious, superficial or irrelevant. My physical mobility is limited. A lack of choice, novelty, personal relevance and definite challenge feed my boredom.

In addition, my mood creates a context that influences the way I approach a task. My moods change. My boredom also changes. It becomes more or less intense according to my mood, and my interactions with the context, content, and people in the learning environment. The people, especially the teacher, affect my willingness to put aside my bad mood in order to engage in my learning. A positive role model, a witty professor who is passionate about the art of teaching, compassionate and caring about the students we are discussing, can engage me in tasks I might have initially thought would be boring. My personal boredom is a very complex, dynamic process that is ever evolving from intricately entangled issues of personal choice, my teacher's methods, learning challenges, interpersonal relationships and my mood.

Boredom holds professional significance for me as well. As a resource teacher, I meet many students who are not successful in some academic classrooms. Many say they are bored. In my daily professional life, I try to cope with, and understand my students' boredom. I need to gain deeper understanding - at least begin to develop an operational, basic understanding before I can respond to it.

Sometimes, images flash by as I remember students who probably were gifted underachievers in school. I say probably because some of these students had not been labeled as such. They haunt me after twenty years. Mike, a clown, thrived in my Drama class and later became a playwright. He was intensely witty and perceptive. He was always very intense while writing, rehearsing and performing. He was constantly in the Drama room. His passion became his vocation. Yet, his bizarre, energetic humor, high energy and

mobility, and perceptive, analytic wit was not appreciated in the regular classroom context. He said classrooms were boring.

Melissa was a powerful writer, even at 11. She wrote constantly, to satisfy a need to express thoughts and feelings that her peers might have thought, but never expressed. She had attempted suicide and her writing, at times, reflected her personal pain. At other times, her poetry reflected questions and feelings common to most adolescents. She hid her writing gifts from her peers and teachers, until she learned to trust someone. Then she allowed her poetry to be published. She still haunts me.

I have met many other extraordinarily capable learners who did not do well in the classroom. Each was unique, yet they all seemed to have an intense need for justice and fairness. They all generated complex, abstract, adult questions. They did not merely ask or answer content, grade-level, schoolroom questions. They all seemed to have original, intricate thinking skills. They were intense, sensitive students with glimmers of light in their eyes that briefly shone, then dimmed, faded and disappeared. All seemed to have had an inner spark that was dead or dying. They all claimed they were bored in some classes.

The death of their creativity left me feeling helpless and frustrated. Some of these students actually attempted suicide, or spoke so sincerely about it that I never doubted their intent. Their suicidal wishes scared and anguished me. My concern for them became a professional challenge to gain an understanding of their boredom.

Boredom's professional significance began to merge with an academic significance for me. I discovered a connection between some gifted students' boredom and suicide in the literature (Lajoie & Shore, 1981). A suicidal patient's most common emotion is depression, and in adolescents, one of the symptoms of depression is boredom (Lajoie & Shore, 1981). Depressed adolescents share a characteristic behavior with gifted underachievers and gifted dropouts: boredom (Lajoie & Shore, 1981). Delisle (1990) feels that emotionally gifted students experience boredom more intensely than the general student population. These experts enhanced my search for an understanding of boredom.

They led me to believe my professional insights and questions might be validated and answered by researchers and other authorities.

I searched for boredom's meaning discovering "bore" was a buzzword of the 1760's (Ayto, 1990), and has perhaps reappeared as the buzzword of the 1990's, especially, for adolescents. The Synonym Finder (1978, p. 126) offers the following:

n. 1. ennui, U.S. Sl. the blahs, low spirits, doldrums, malaise; tedium, monotony, repetition, routine, schedule; dullness, humdrum, deadness, flatness; dreariness, stuffiness. 2. apathy, impassivity, dispassion, lack of feeling or emotion, insentience, insensibility, unfeelingness; lethargy, languor, listlessness, dullness, stolidity, sluggishness; indifference, unconcern, unresponsiveness, uninterestedness, disinterest.

Of particular interest to me were: deadness, apathy, lack of feeling or emotion, indifference, unresponsiveness. I found, as a teacher, a "deadness" academically, in some courses, for students who claim to be bored, but not a lack of feeling or emotion. I believed that boredom might be very much connected with a student's emotional state.

My personal and professional experiences highlight the inadequacy of the dictionary definitions for boredom. When compared to my personal construction, these meanings did not capture the process, the fluidity and dynamism of boredom. In relation to my professional experience, these meanings did not capture the affective nature of some of my students' boredom. Some were sullen and uncommunicative students, masking their emotions and their thoughts.

Rimm (1986) sees boredom as a construct used by these students in their power struggle with parents and teachers. Boredom, Rimm contends, means different things for different students. Rimm also believes students may blame the teachers for their boring teaching style and materials. Certainly, Rimm describes boredom as a weapon in the larger power conflict between some gifted students and teachers. Bored students refuse to work in school to the chagrin of their parents and teachers.

Farrell's (1990) research in dropout prevention, takes a very different perspective, characterizing boredom as socially constructed by adolescents. In their daily dialogues, an adolescent's peer group may shape and reinforce an individual's boredom. Through these daily dialogues with their peers, adolescents determine what activities and classes are boring. Their peer groups help individuals determine their selves in society and school. These "selves" (Farrell, 1990) are the roles individuals act out in society; the professional and social faces individuals present to society. Some students cannot find successful career or student selves; some create the roles of bored students (Farrell, 1990). They mentally dropout of school. Farrell's concept of boredom might be seen as a defense mechanism for some adolescents. They develop a seemingly safe place for themselves in school. Boredom, an internal manifestation of dropping out may escalate to an external, active withdrawal from school (Farrell, 1990).

My readings revealed diverse meanings for boredom and its sources. Boredom seems dynamic, mutable and multi-leveled. Its meaning is like mercury, slipping from everyone's grasp. Erickson (1986) suggests an individual's culture plays a significant role in the construction of meanings. Within each culture, subcultures may have different meaning systems from the majority. Between individuals, similar surface meaning systems may "mask an underlying diversity" (Erickson, 1986, p. 126). Gilligan (1982) discusses how men and women experience an event and relationship differently because of their diverse meaning systems. Gender influences ways of making sense of their environment. Consequently, we may construct our meaning for boredom based upon our cultural values, our individual personalities and our gender.

I assume I understand a friend's boredom because I may share similar meaning systems. We are generally contemporaries. We have shared similar experiences and ideas. Then again, the underlying diversity Erickson (1986) refers to, the personal imprint of

culturally derived meaning systems, may mean my friends and I are talking at cross purposes.

When I assume I have the same meaning systems as my students, I may create, not eliminate, academic problems. Farrell (1990) contends that teachers and students do not share the same meaning systems. Teachers are always older than their students, and sometimes from a different culture than their students. Yet, we often believe our meanings are our students'. Adults assume their reality is the only reality (Barrett, 1989).

Unwittingly in our schools, we may not value students' thinking when we impose our reality upon them. Schools are based upon adult value systems and are perhaps, unreceptive to another meaning system (Barrett, 1989).

I came to university to find answers to my questions, especially about the boredom of underachieving gifted students. I found very little in the literature on this (see Chapter 2) and what I had found, raised more questions than it answered. I sensed from my daily professional work with students who are bored that boredom was more than tiresomeness, more than a power struggle between adolescents and teachers. I needed to know how I might ensure my teaching (and my students' subsequent learning) was stimulating, not boring. Farrell (1990) had, at least, paid students to interview their peers and analyze the transcripts. Perhaps, I too needed to interview students.

To reach an understanding of my students' perceptions of boredom, I embarked on an academic quest, my odyssey: a search for the meaning of boredom as perceived by gifted students who are academically underachieving. The choice of the word odyssey is deliberate. It is a long journey filled with challenges. My odyssey is documented here.

I review the literature that initiated my journey in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I discuss the journey's design and evolution. In Chapter 4 you will meet the students who made my journey possible. I present my discoveries in Chapter 5 and in Chapter 6, I close the odyssey. I believe I now have a deeper understanding of these students' boredom that

has enabled me to propose a definition of that boredom. Their voices reached me. The power of this thesis lies in whether their voices also reach the reader.

CHAPTER 2

ORIENTATION

The literature that influenced my thinking, my questions and research is reviewed in this chapter. Initially, I briefly address the difficulties I have had in reaching understandings (personally, professionally and academically) of all the related concepts in my study. I read very widely across fields of study in adolescence, giftedness, underachievement, motivation, schooling and dropping out. This chapter is merely a review of the most significant concepts and concerns related to my study. I, like other researchers, am still struggling and searching for clearer understandings of the concepts. More importantly, I still struggle with reaching deeper understandings of the individuals who are characterized as gifted and have left school before graduation.

After briefly addressing the conceptual and methodological concerns related to the individuals in my study, I then describe the students characterized by the literature as adolescents, gifted, underachievers or dropouts. Next, I review the literature on schooling and learning, with a focus on motivation and the sense of control learners must have to successfully engage in their school learning. Gifted students' distinctive learning needs are included in this section. The final section explores and examines the various meanings of boredom alluded to in the previous sections. My examination of these meanings led me to believe a missing piece exists in the literature: an understanding of the meaning of boredom as perceived by academically underachieving gifted adolescent students.

CONCERNS ABOUT THE LITERATURE

Confused, contrary and complex operational and conceptual definitions abound in much of the literature on giftedness, underachievement and dropping out. "The hopeless lack of definitional consensus" (Gagné, 1993, p. 3) regarding the terms giftedness and

talent is bemoaned by many authors (Barrow, 1990; Newland, 1963; Pringle, 1970). This has contributed to the “epidemic of errors” which has led to the mis-identification or non-identification of many gifted students (Richert, 1991). Subsequently, inadequate or non-existent programming results in less than optimum learning conditions for many students.

To complicate matters, Dowdall & Colangelo (1981) assert the research on underachievement has produced “more confusion and circularity than direction” (p. 82) making the concept of an underachieving gifted student “almost meaningless” (p. 79). Many definitional controversies also exist in the literature on dropouts (Bachman, 1972; LeCompte, 1987; Morris, 1990; Natriello et al, 1986; Rumberger, 1983; Whelage, 1989).

The controversies within and across the bodies of literature regarding definition may arise because these terms, “gifted”, “underachiever” and “dropout”, are constructed nouns (Carr et al, 1981; Fetterman, 1989; McDermott, 1989; Ziv, 1977). Researchers construct terms to explain individual differences. These terms are influenced by the researchers’ cultural values and methodological orientations (Bailin, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi, 1986; Erickson, 1986; Feldhusen, 1986; Freeman, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tannenbaum, 1983). I realized that I could only reach understandings, not absolute truths, about these terms in my search for answers (Erickson, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These understandings are always subject to reinterpretation and change (Erickson, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reaching understandings will always be a dynamic process, constantly impacted upon by prevailing and changeable methodological and personal perspectives.

These constructed nouns classify and label individuals with some common characteristics as a group; for example, “adolescent”, “gifted”, “underachiever” or “dropout”. At all times, I am very aware that individuals, not clones, compose these groups; hence, the individuals within these groups are much more heterogeneous in nature than their classification might imply.

ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is a transitional stage from childhood to adulthood (Buescher, 1991). Some aspects of adolescence may have greater impact on gifted adolescents (Buescher, 1991; Piechowski, 1991; Silverman, 1991). These are discussed next. I organized the review in this manner because gifted adolescents are adolescents first, then gifted (Buescher, 1991; Whitmore, 1980). Nonetheless their gifts may heighten their sensitivity to interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, may make them experience adolescence more intensely, may make them more vulnerable to life experiences (Buescher, 1991; Piechowski, 1991; Whitmore, 1980). At the same time, the characteristics of adolescence and gifted adolescence does not necessarily impact to the same degree upon each individual.

Adolescence, a culturally defined, psychological and social process (Buescher, 1987), is the beginning of self-discovery. It is called “the age of identity” (Mitchell, 1992). The essential question of adolescents in their search for a personal identity is “Who am I?” An adolescent grapples with various possible roles or selves. Farrell (1990) discusses the struggle adolescents face attempting to balance their “self in family”, “sexual self,” “self as loyal friend”, “self in peer group”, and “self as student”. For some adolescents, pressures from their “self as parent” and “self as my work” must also be balanced. Teen mothers and part-time working students may have to choose or be enticed to choose between school and dropping out (Radwanski, 1986). Some adolescents struggle with their past, present and future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Cycles of past failure in school have been noted to impede future academic success (Finn, 1989). Students’ past achievements or failures affect their present selves.

An adolescent is supposed to balance this sense of personal identity with the ability to belong and fit into the adult world eventually (Buescher, 1987). The greater concern for many adolescents is to fit in with their peers. Adolescents like many adults tend to

fictionalize life and are prone to self-deceptions (Mitchell, 1992). They believe that they must have, indeed are dependent upon their peers' acceptance. A teen's self-concept seems to be integrally linked to peer acceptance (Buescher, 1991; Mitchell, 1992). Most young adolescents attend school which becomes the arena for them to explore their various selves. Acceptance or rejection by peers largely occurs in schools. Indeed, school's major attraction may be that it holds the largest collection of peers possible in any one setting (Farrell, 1990). Some adolescents may find the social pressures of school burdensome.

Farrell (1990) sought to understand at risk students' lives and how schools fit into their lives. All 73 students who were interviewed, ages 14 - 19, were involved in a drop out prevention program housed at the City College of New York. All had histories of poor school achievement, absences and skipping classes. Most of the students were Black and Hispanic from various city high schools. Once a week, these students took high school credit courses at the college. Farrell hoped to create a viable program by reaching a greater understanding of these students' lives.

Farrell (1990) enlisted the help of three students in the program to engage their peers in a total of 91 half-hour taped dialogues. Farrell's study is valuable for two reasons. He recruited students (collaborators) to interview their peers. Farrell's collaborators spoke the various students' dialects, gathered in adolescent hang-outs, analyzed the dialogues and told Farrell when the respondents were dishonest. The students' responses were probably richer and more open because their peers not Farrell (a middle-aged, middle-class, white teacher) interviewed them. Secondly, Farrell provides preliminary insight into boredom's pervasiveness in students' lives. Farrell had not intended to have a chapter in his book totally devoted to students' boredom. The students' dialogues shaped his work.

While this study did not involve identified gifted students, Farrell (1990) recognized that former "nerds" may be part of his population. They may have stopped achieving in order to belong to a larger peer group. The problems experienced by Farrell's

students do seem to involve problems similar to other dropouts. For example, Farrell's students consistently mentioned boredom in connection with their schooling. School classes were boring; they felt pressured by school demands, boredom allowed them to mentally drop out. Farrell believed a student who perceived too much pressure from society, school or peers developed a new role as bored student.

Farrell (1990) believed at risk students could not integrate their competing selves into a single identity. Many teachers seemed to believe that self as student, the ideal student totally absorbed in schooling, should

Be the primary self of the adolescent in spite of the pull from other selves . . . In light of the various conflicting selves, it is unrealistic of educators to hold this image up and potentially frustrating for students who won't or can't become part of it (Farrell, 1990, p. 4).

Students bored with school and classes, feeling they could not find a role, created one: the bored student.

Peer pressure is a far more powerful influence in the development of an adolescent's sense of self than teacher reinforcement (Farrell, 1990). An adolescent finds refuge from fears and anxieties in friendships, especially if no student/teacher bonds exist (Farrell, 1990). An adolescent may conform to the bored student role because of the need to belong to the group (Buescher, 1991; Glasser, 1990). Some adolescents may also adopt a bored student role because of the desire to avoid the perceived challenges, commitments and controls inherent in the education system (Barrett, 1989; Farrell, 1990; Glasser, 1990). Some students may adapt their peers' values because the students had a say in their development and experienced them directly (Csikszentmihalyi & McCormack, 1986).

Adolescents may have little sense of personal worth because our society has "infantilized adolescents" (Mitchell, 1992, p. 204). To feel worthy adolescents must be given valued and genuine activities. Mitchell contends when adolescents lack a sense of worthiness they become bored. This boredom "nourishes a wide range of emotional disturbances since it contributes to both moral disenchantment and behavioral

disengagement” (Mitchell, 1992, p. 202). Teenagers do not have many things to do in relation to adults (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Teens’ actions have no real consequence. They are in a moratorium stage in the life cycle, waiting for adulthood. Starved for a sense of worth, they develop their own social system, one that could include more delinquent and dropping out activities. “The more students feel both bored and bossed in school the more they will be attracted to the easy immediate pleasure of drugs” (Glasser, 1990, p. 83).

In 1970, Heath warned that boredom was rising within adolescent ranks. He felt youths were becoming increasingly alienated from familial and community values. Increasingly youths were attached to mass media and peer influences. Heath felt that “boredom, loneliness and meaninglessness are the emerging leitmotifs” (p. 517). Adolescents had to remain “cool” at all costs so that they avoided risks, rejection and vulnerability. He foresaw a generation of students he called “the walking dead”, full of depression and hopelessness. Heath argued that TV helped foster adolescents’ boredom because it had to constantly provide novelty to keep the public’s attention. The child no longer learned how to seek novelty in order to cope with boredom.

Heath (1970) referred to Bob Dylan and Mick Jagger, still famous if not influential, popular music artists, as “the real educators of our adolescents’ values” (p. 524). Today parents and teachers are unpleasantly aware of the pervasive and often negative effects of the media upon adolescents’ values. These effects have probably accelerated much more quickly than Heath would have dreamed. At the same time his comment upon adolescents’ schooling in 1970 still may all too true:

Because most of us do not understand the hidden needs of our students or the effects that the mass media and their peer culture have upon them, we institute innovations in our schools that only accentuate the alienation of students (p. 525).

Heath (1970) believed boredom was exacerbated by teachers with authoritarian and domineering attitudes who relied heavily on a lecturing format to instruct.

Csikszentmihalyi (1993) contended talented teens are much more discerning of the quality

of teaching especially in their areas of talent and passion than their peers. He found these students to be very specific in recalling teachers' styles and their positive or negative effects upon the students' willingness to engage in classroom tasks. They were especially "intolerant of teachers who go through the motions" (p. 185). A teacher's style of teaching, not the content, may be critical to students' perceptions of boredom. Teachers could conceivably be perceived very differently depending upon a student's fit with the teacher's style. Students' boredom might be specifically related to teachers' styles rather than pervasive throughout a whole school system.

Students can be perceived very differently by their parents and teachers. They assume different personalities for different teachers and in different contexts. In part, this may be dependent upon the compatibility of the teacher's style with the student's learning needs. As well, individuals are like chameleons, adapting themselves to various situations. All individuals have a number of different selves to suit various situations (Griffen, 1988). Students have a school self which is further broken down into subject-specific school personalities; i.e. an English self, a Math self (Griffen, 1988). Subject specific school selves differ in important ways; some students may always be bored Math students. The roles of bored students are context specific (Griffen, 1988). Students do not necessarily spend their whole school day bored; generally at least one subject holds some interest for them. Certainly lunch time and extra-curricular activities often are very interesting experiences in an adolescent's school day (Csikszentmihalyi & McCormack, 1986; Farrell, 1990; Glasser, 1990). Then again these activities also satisfy adolescents' needs of belonging and socializing.

Bishop (1989) believed the classroom did not promote senses of belonging and team work; rather it focused on individual competition and rivalry. He believed "when students try hard to excel they set themselves apart, cause rivalries and make things worse for their friends" (p. 9). To offset the competitive atmosphere around academic performance, Bishop believed teens set up other, more attainable criteria to become "cool"

based upon athletics, clothing, dating, socializing. Gifted adolescents are the only competitors in a competition their peers do not necessarily value or feel they will only have limited success in. The gifted adolescent may please parents and teachers but alienate peers (Delisle, 1985).

All adolescents search for identity and struggle with the need for belonging. Adolescents simultaneously feel pressures from parents, peers, society and self. Peers and their influence, which may be media-directed, become a major factor in an adolescent's self-discovery. A gifted adolescent's pathway to self-discovery may hold even more pressures because they have additional pressures to excel, to follow individual pursuits and passions.

Gifted Adolescents

Adolescents with gifts may suffer the pressures of adolescence more intensely than their age mates (Buescher, 1987, 1991; Delisle, 1992). The task of balancing their individual identity and their need for social belonging may be more difficult for gifted students than the general population of adolescents. Their search for identity is further complicated by concerns arising from their giftedness. "Who says I am gifted anyhow?" may be a major question in addition to "Who am I?" (Buescher, 1987).

Gifted adolescents are often perceived and perceive themselves as different (Buescher, 1991; Piechowski, 1991, Whitmore, 1980). Younger, junior high adolescents believe being different means being inferior (Buescher, 1991). Over 600 highly talented adolescents from 12 - 20 years old were asked to describe the coping patterns they use to reduce the pressures of feeling different (Buescher & Higham, 1987). Eight major strategies were identified and used by these academically talented adolescents. "Positive" strategies meant having the most acceptability for the students and their friends; "negative" the least positive in furthering talent development. Buescher & Higham (1987) discovered the more independent, sensitive and flexible talented adolescents were the

more likely they were to choose positive coping strategies. These strategies included: helping peers in class, adjusting their language and actions to minimize their peers' awareness of their talents, attempting to do well in a non-academic area so a second label was also gained. The more anxious, conforming rigid students masked their talents so no one was aware of them and avoided any programs that developed talent (Buescher, 1991).

Buescher & Higham's (1987) most disturbing finding was that "even controlling levels of ability and range of family factors" (Buescher, 1991, p. 395), at the ages of 16, more boys than girls still continue to develop their talents. They concluded, "it appears that adolescent girls were more at risk for losing the earlier momentum for talent development" (p. 395). Other researchers have also noted the tendency for adolescent girls to mask or deny their gifts (Deci, 1975; Delisle, 1992; Kerr, 1991; Whitmore, 1980). Gifted girls often do very well in elementary school. They face the tremendous pressures to be popular, especially with boys, that all adolescent girls face in the junior high years. Combining these pressures with fewer role models in mathematical and scientific disciplines in high school may result in much less participation by adolescent girls in advanced math, science and engineering courses (Kerr, 1991). Some girls who are gifted do not want to be different. They choose belonging over achieving.

Buescher (1987) feels bright adolescents may find secondary schools especially challenging because "for many it is clearly a stressful ordeal of alienation, isolation and missed opportunities" (p.19). The students feel alienated and isolated from their age mates. Parke (1989) believes gifted adolescents find their giftedness a burden because their learning characteristics differ greatly from their age peers. Their faster processing and greater depth of comprehension of material as well as their often uniquely different interests (which they address with persistence and independence, even non-conformity), causes them social and emotional difficulties. Cross, Coleman & Terhaar (1990) discovered gifted adolescents struggle very much with the social stigma which is attached to their label "gifted". It would seem that contrary to those who argue that gifted

individuals become arrogant and elitist regarding their identification, rather gifted adolescents become troubled perceiving their gifts as a burden, not a blessing.

A gifted adolescent may feel forced to reject an already manifested talent. An adolescent faces the power of peer pressure, conformity, and a wavering sense of personal identity (Buescher, 1987). Resisting the pull of friends and peers to skip classes requires incredible determination. The penalty may be ostracism and derision from the group (Buescher, 1987).

The gifted find they must battle apathy or resentment of peers and many lapse into mediocrity in the belief that they can avoid rejection thereby. Those who possess the necessary drive and doggedness to risk ostracism are not always the highly able (Tannenbaum, 1962, p. 76).

Highly able students must constantly juggle between pursuing and developing either their gifts or relationships. Very few are successful at doing both. Conforming to their peers' expectations of acceptable behavior and adopting the bored student role, they may ensure acceptance in the group. Otherwise, social rejection rather than social acceptance, the most critical concern for most adolescent individuals, may occur. This is a cruel dilemma for any adolescent, but for the gifted even more so. To deny their abilities and their development may be to deny their own individuality.

All adolescents are developing self-awareness and self-understanding. The gifted individual's development is distinctive because of its acceleration and intense existential questioning (Piechowski, 1991). Sometimes a very uneven development pattern exists (Delisle, 1992; Freeman, 1985; Piechowski, 1991). Delisle (1992) calls this development dyssynchronous. Gifted children's "thoughts, ideas and mental acuity" (Delisle, 1992, p. 31) are often viewed by peers and adults as too mature for their chronological age. These individuals are told they are too young to discuss existential, ethical and emotional issues. The struggle for identity for intellectual youth frequently combines with a struggle for meaning, purpose and destiny, making their search for identity even more painful and intense than for most adolescents (Mitchell, 1992).

Gifted adolescents are very aware of the precarious nature of our world because of their great emotional intensity and sensitivity combined with high intelligence (Piechowski, 1991). Young gifted adolescents may have the emotional maturity and sensitivity of older adolescents or adults (Piechowski). They often perceive inconsistencies and injustices in school rules, procedures and discipline because of their extraordinary perception and problem-solving abilities and intense moral and ethical values (Silverman, 1991; Piechowski, 1989). Especially if they are non-conformists, they may find it difficult to comply with school rules. They may be very intolerant of what they perceive as coercive rules and discipline (Delisle, 1985).

A sense of perfectionism and idealism may exist for gifted adolescents both for their own work and the state of the world. They may envision a perfect world and experience frustration when no one adopts their viewpoint (Delisle, 1992; Silverman, 1991). Colangelo (1982) gave 125 gifted adolescents, Grades 9 - 12, the task of creating and solving moral dilemmas through story writing. A system of rating and analyzing the content for moral issues was then devised. Colangelo discovered 36 different moral issues relating to relationships, ethics, justice, addictions and death. Gifted adolescents perceive moral issues throughout their daily life situations. They, more than most adolescents, think frequently and more sensitively in their daily lives about ethical and moral issues. Their search for identity and self-concept is closely connected to clarification of their moral values (Colangelo, 1991).

A perfectionistic, supersensitive nature may create internal pressures in gifted children (Whitmore, 1980). High ability children are characterized as perfectionistic (Freeman, 1985; Rimm, 1991; Whitmore, 1980). Gifted individuals do seek out excellence or are expected to seek out excellence in tasks (Rimm, 1991; Whitmore, 1980). Such individuals may become frustrated by their need for perfection or others' expectations of perfection.

Lack of appropriate educational opportunities combined with perfectionism can give rise to conflict in the school setting (Whitmore, 1980). The gifted students' internal needs may come into conflict with the educational philosophy, curriculum and peer group within a classroom (Whitmore, 1980). If a conflict arises, a gifted student may react by complying with the status quo, withdrawing from the activities or confronting the teachers and perhaps the administration.

Connected with this drive for perfection may be the need to develop skills in a chosen field to exceptionally high levels. This perseverance may be crucial for artistic talent (Bloom, 1985). Young artists may need to spend many hours developing a personal aesthetic preference; their own sense of the ideal perfection or beauty in their talent field with the ultimate end being their own unique product (Kay, 1994). They may persist at copying or working in one medium even when they are told they should move on to other areas.

Kay (1994) reported one case study, although she has studied four other emerging artists. This participant had a Masters of Fine Art in Painting and was showing work in art galleries and shows. Kay collected past and current art work from the participant and his family. She studied the portfolio without the participant noting recurrent themes, subjects and changes stylistically or technically. She then interviewed the participant as he looked at his past work. Kay concluded choices made in childhood regarding style, material and technique may be the start of an individual's personal aesthetic. This participant liked to draw, but neither he nor his family thought he was artistic. He was investigating a medium. This investigation led to his developing a personal sense of beauty while showing exceptional inner drive and a focused, indeed, inflexible concentration on one skill. Kay wondered whether "focused attention to specific consistencies or aesthetic preferences is an early indicator of artistic potential adult giftedness" (p. 14). Kay hypothesized that the seemingly stubborn persistence in one area be it skills, materials or themes may be an early

indicator of talent. Perfectionistic tendencies may therefore be critical and beneficial for giftedness to become talent (Bloom, 1985, Gagné, 1993).

Gifted adolescents may expect themselves to be consistently capable of exceptional performance levels (Buescher, 1991). They may chastise themselves severely when they feel they have not reached them. Often they have set unreasonably high expectations and become their own worst critics (Buescher, 1991). A contrary facet regarding exceptional performance occurs when bright adolescents may have used little of their abilities in elementary school (Pringle, 1970). More complex concepts or skills, which may take more time and effort to master are taught in later grades. A gifted student may now have to expend effort and face challenges to achieve the same high grades. A gifted adolescent may feel this as a decline in formerly extraordinary thinking abilities. This is termed “negative acceleration” - the apparent slowing down of cognitive acumen (Buescher, 1987, p.18).

Some gifted adolescents choose to do nothing rather than risk failure. Seeking safety, they may work only in areas where they have already achieved expertise, not risking more complex or novel tasks within that area in school (Buescher, 1987). Some gifted students experience a more negative emotional response to failure than their non-gifted peers because of their perfectionistic tendencies (Roberts & Lovett, 1994). “Persons with a strong need to achieve may also have an intense fear of failure . . . a near perfect description of underachievers” (Covington & Beery, 1976, p. 51).

This is a paradoxical situation: to need to achieve, to need perfection, to need success so much that doing nothing is seen to be better than risking failure. Risk-taking, learning from errors and accepting challenges are all facets of learning. Some gifted students may be immobilized by their perfectionism and simultaneous fear of failure.

Gifted adolescents may perceive their giftedness as a burden, not a blessing. They may believe giftedness is a stigma (Cross et al, 1991). Cross interviewed 15 gifted adolescents and then asked them to respond to six school based scenarios (Cross et al,

1991). Results indicated that gifted students tend to play down their differences in order to cope with their giftedness. Cross concluded that “Students are attempting to control the information others have about them in an effort to engage in and maintain social interactions” (p. 53).

Tomlinson (1992) argues that no middle school adolescent should have to choose between achievement and belonging. Weighing the price of achievement and the price of belonging puts tremendous pressure upon a student. Achievement may result in a loss of intimate friendship with agemates or worse, social ostracism. Deciding to belong, conforming to peer expectations may deny intrinsic needs for intellectual stimulation and moral development.

Some gifted adolescents seem to suffer even more pressure, more burdens and more stigma than their agemates because of their giftedness. In adolescence, "normal" is defined by one's peers. Peer acceptance or rejection is critical to the adolescent individual's sense of belonging, well-being and identity (Buescher, 1991). Gifted individuals seem to have to balance their innate exceptionalities, their noted differences, with the strong adolescent developmental need to belong. Their giftedness may be perceived as an additional pressure in an already highly pressurized developmental stage of life (Delisle, 1985). These pressures may be further confounded because the term “giftedness” has as many meanings as there are individuals. Adolescents classified gifted may be unsure of the personal implications of their label. Should I be smart in everything? Does this mean I have to work hard all the time? Is everything supposed to be easy for me?

GIFTEDNESS

Stigma? Burden? Blessing? What is giftedness? Many conceptual definitions exist in the literature (Sternberg & Davidson, 1988). My concern lies with definitions related to students because it is in the schools that many students are identified as gifted, while many others who may well be gifted, may not be identified. Richert (1991) clearly argues that

schools may overly identify high achievers rewarding them for their conformity to adult and teacher expectations and values by giving them gifted programs. Components of her “giftedness” are “originality, risk-taking and intrinsic motivation” (Richert, 1991; p. 83); hardly the attributes of the more conformist high achievers. She contends sub-populations such as underachievers, learning disabled and minority students, and creative divergent thinkers are often screened out. She believes this allows for charges of elitism regarding gifted programs because white middle class academic achievers are generally the recipients of the programs. As well Richert (1991) believes students with very high IQ’s may be underachieving because the curriculum is so inappropriate for their abilities and miss being identified. Intellectually creative students or independent, rebellious, non-conformist students may also be missed. The identification process for gifted students does seem problematic.

Gagné’s Model of Giftedness and Talent (1993) addresses the problematic issues associated with giftedness. These issues include the nature of giftedness, the differentiation between giftedness and talent and the clarification of associated concepts such as enrichment or acceleration (Gagné, 1995). Basically Gagné’s model made sense to me as a teacher. Multiple gifts are recognized. As well as their diversity of gifts (Delisle, 1985) individuals have diverse personalities and come from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, no list of attributes for the gifted, the underachiever or the dropout describes any one individual completely (Betts, 1983; Delisle, 1992; Whitmore, 1980). A student must always be seen first as an individual. The conceptions and typologies provide only a framework for discussion about the nature and nurture of giftedness.

Individuals who possess a spontaneous untrained exceptional ability in intellectual, creative, socio-affective sensorimotor and personal / paranormal domains may be classified as gifted (Gagné, 1993). Historically, giftedness has been seen to be predominantly exceptional intellectual ability i.e., “cognocentricism” (Gagné, 1993). Schools have been most concerned with high academic achievers (Gagné, 1993; Whitmore, 1980). Today

“multiple intelligences” (Gardner, 1986) and “emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1995) for example are being investigated as perspectives of human potential are broadened.

Gifted individuals become talented through learning, training, practice and the impact of catalysts (Gagné, 1993). Gagné’s catalysts are divided into intrapersonal and environmental change agents. Intrapersonal factors include: motivation (initiative, needs, interests, perseverance) and temperament / personality (adaptability, attitudes, competitiveness, independence, self-esteem values). People’s personality and motivation impact upon the development of abilities but do not diminish the abilities. The environmental catalysts: surroundings, persons, undertakings and events interact with the intrapersonal catalysts in the development process. Chance factors also uncontrollable play a role in talent development.

A gifted student may not achieve academically (Gagné, 1993). A student talented in specific courses possesses above average intellectual abilities and has had sustained development of those abilities via the catalysts. Underachieving students may possess equal intellectual ability to those of achieving students, but have not developed the ability (gift) into academic talent. This may arise due to the effects of intrapersonal catalysts or environmental catalysts upon a particular gifted student. The first influence is a personal one. Gifted individuals may possess a more intense, sensitive affective nature which drives their personality. Dabrowski’s (1967) theory of Developmental Potential offers a unique understanding of the intrapersonal catalysts included in Gagné’s Model. Dabrowski explains intensity as critical in the creative and developmental potential of gifted individuals.

Dabrowski’s (1967) Theory has evolved through counseling, questioning and interviewing gifted individuals and clinical, autobiographical and case studies of gifted adolescents and adults (Piechowski, 1991, May; Piechowski, & Colangelo, 1984; Silverman, 1991). This research is subject to the potential for inaccurate recollection of past events and biased self-perceptions inherent in self-report techniques (Gronlund &

Linn 1990). Nonetheless, frequent consistent patterns emerge that are more characteristic of Dabrowski's creative subjects than most individuals. Dabrowski believed intellectually and artistically gifted youths' intensity and sensitivity and tendency to emotional extremes were essential forces in the development of their creative potentials (Piechowski, 1991).

Individuals are endowed with differing degrees of psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, emotional and intellectual capacities (Dabrowski, 1967). A gifted individual possesses these five special "modes of experiencing" or "channels of information" (Piechowski, 1991, p. 287) that give talent power. These channels have been labeled "overexcitabilities". This is an unfortunate term because it may connote "too much". "Overexcitabilities" might be better termed "the building blocks" (Silverman, 1991) for development. The greater their intensity, the greater the potential for higher development.

Dabrowski's (1967) overexcitabilities help to explain gifted adolescents' intensity and sensitivity to questions of morality and idealism. Although we may admire the talents of creative individuals very much, we may have extreme difficulty living with or teaching them (Piechowski, 1991). They can be very demanding, very imaginative, and very active (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi & Gardner, 1984). Yet these characteristics are integral to the development of their gifts and their potential to be highly creative and moral leaders (Dabrowski, 1967; Piechowski, 1991).

Overexcitabilities In the Classroom

Gifted students must balance their overexcitabilities with the dynamics of each setting they enter. Those students who possess strong intellectual overexcitabilities (similar to Gagné's academic aptitude) may constantly question their teachers. They may be rebuffed because the teachers need to get through the content. They do not have time to address the insightful and perhaps tangential questions which gifted students can generate. Such students need an opportunity to work with highly complex tasks, generating more and more questions rather than merely consuming knowledge

(Tomlinson, 1992). Teachers may inadvertently engage a pattern of underachievement by setting low standards or less challenging tasks than their students need. Gifted students are more likely to withdraw when they feel their questions are being ignored (Whitmore, 1980).

Those students who possess strong imaginal overexcitabilities (similar to Gagné's creative aptitudes) may be mocked for their vivid fantasies, their imaginary friends, or their tendency to humanize inanimate objects. They may turn their imaginal abilities to daydreaming during their lessons (Whitmore, 1980). In the face of rigid or dogmatic teaching methods, they may minimize or disengage their imaginative capabilities.

Some students possessing strong emotional overexcitabilities may be perceived by their classmates and teachers as too sensitive, intense, and vulnerable (Buescher, 1987; Freeman, 1985; Piechowski, 1991; Whitmore, 1980). These overexcitabilities may manifest themselves as compulsive talking, delinquent behavior, or adjustment difficulties (Piechowski, 1991, p. 288). Similar behaviors are reflected in Rimm's (1991) prototypes of gifted underachievers; especially her dependent and dominant non-conformers.

These students may not be able to balance or restrain their psychomotor overexcitabilities in the classroom (Piechowski, 1991). Their drive and energy may be blocked by the rigid structuring and scheduling within the classroom. They may be forced to sit for long periods of time; a subtle form of torture (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) for very physical individuals. The classroom setting may have a very negative impact. Certainly research has shown some creative geniuses have been very poor students (Runco & Sakamoto, 1993).

Gifted Underachievers

Whitmore (1980) believes that in general gifted children have positive self-images as learners when they enter school. Like all children, they develop a self-concept for

school achievement in the first few years of schooling. Their positive self-concept, developed from non-school learning, may begin to conflict with a negative self-concept developing from school experiences. This conflict may manifest itself in covert or overt underachievement behaviors. Whitmore (1980) believes these problem behaviors of underachievement are defense mechanisms.

Even though identification limitations exist, a stereotype of the gifted underachiever has evolved (Whitmore, 1980). The gifted underachiever will be bored and cynical (Freeman, 1985), “lazy, unmotivated. . . and probably a disturbing problem to the classroom teacher” (Whitmore, 1980, p. 95). A teacher's mental pictures of an underachiever (the non-working student as capable, but whining and willfully non-compliant), may become mental blocks (Delisle, 1992). A vicious cycle of “increasing dislike, distrust and hostility” (Glasser, 1990, p. 70) may emerge between students and teachers.

Students and teachers may choose to withdraw or to confront each other. Either way the focus of both students and teachers becomes blaming each other and neither students nor teachers can fulfill their role effectively (Delisle, 1992; Farrell, 1990). This atmosphere of anger and frustration may become “a sullen apathetic truce: I won't bother you, if you don't bother me” (Glasser, 1990, p. 51). For example, dozing (Farrell, 1990) is overlooked by some teachers. They may be grateful that the student is not being actively disruptive (Farrell, 1990). “Benign neglect” (Everhart, 1983) becomes the coping strategy for the teacher in avoiding open hostility: the teacher neglects to note skipping, tardiness or sleeping.

An individual is always motivated, but not necessarily toward school work (Glasser, 1990; Whitmore, 1980). Noddings (1992) contends that because students reject the teacher's goals and tasks, it is assumed the students have no personal goals or tasks. However, it may be these students are bored by the “combination of narrowly stated learning objectives and pat routine lessons” (Noddings, 1992, p. 18). “Random” or “off

task” behaviors (Noddings, 1992) include social interaction, other learning activities and day dreaming which the students find much more rewarding (Whitmore, 1980).

All labels, including “underachievers”, minimize individual differences and focus on similarities within groups resulting in confusion. Many researchers and teachers find that not all underachievers seem to be unmotivated or have low self-esteem. To reduce the confusion Delisle (1992) differentiates between underachievers and non-producers. Non-producers make “an active decision to not participate fully in the classroom ritual” (Delisle, 1985, p. 191) generally by performing to their own minimal expectations rather than higher adult expectations. Rimm (1991) distinguishes between dominant and dependent, conformist and non-conformist gifted underachievers; Whitmore (1980) between compliant and disruptive gifted underachievers. Rimm based her distinction upon whether students covered their underachievement in a dependent or dominating manner. The conforming students are less visibly underachieving than the non-conforming dependent or dominating students.

Often the disruptive non-conformist receives attention and the underachievement pattern is broken before it is too well learned (Whitmore, 1980). Those inconsistent underachievers (non-producers) who turn their underachieving pattern on and off, who are more non-conformist in nature may be able to abandon their underachievement. They may be choosing to fulfill needs for belonging, fun or power (Glasser, 1990) and may possess positive self-concepts (Delisle, 1992). Students with more chronic underachievement, who are helpless and withdrawn, may have hidden learning disabilities and emotional difficulties (Silverman, 1991; Rimm, 1991). They may be trying to avoid failure and protect their feelings of self-worth (Covington & Beery, 1976). It is likely they may have little understanding of why they are underachieving or how to change it.

The grades earned by an underachiever and a non-producer may be identical although their report card comments may be very different (Delisle, 1992). The teacher

may make many more negative comments if the belief is the underachiever is choosing low grades. The gifted underachiever rejects adult expectations and approval.

Boredom may also result from a mismatch between gifted students' needs, the curriculum and methods of the system (Freeman, 1985; Marland, 1972; Whitmore, 1980). "Textbooks are too easy for able students" (Delisle, 1992, p. 118). They are designed for average students with little challenge for gifted students (Whitmore, 1980). Gifted students often find the content is not stimulating, challenging or relevant. "Too easy simple curricula can be boring and unsatisfying, making escape into stimulating day dreams or social interaction more rewarding" (Whitmore, 1980, p. 66). This poor fit may enable a learned pattern of underachievement (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986; Delisle, 1992; Freeman, 1985; Pringle, 1970; Strang, 1951; Whitmore, 1980). If the gifted students' needs for faster pacing and a more stimulating approach are unmet, boredom occurs (Pringle, 1970). Whitmore (1980) and Freeman (1985) contend that gifted students are even more vulnerable to boredom in school today. When back-to-basic skills work dominates the school day the repetitive work is especially boring for gifted students. All that is required is memorization, depriving gifted students of their need for higher levels of thinking: analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating and divergent or creative thinking (Whitmore, 1980).

Students need to be directly asked what makes them choose to underachieve. Is it boredom? Does choosing to underachieve become a permanent pattern, trapping the non-producer into an underachieving cycle? Does a gap occur between the non-producer's skill level and the academic work which widens until the student feels compelled to drop out because suddenly skills and abilities lag far behind task demands?

Gifted Dropouts

Certainly dropouts, "the classic underachievers" (MacDonald, 1989), cite boredom as a major cause for leaving school (Mutadi, 1990; Naylor, 1990; Luby, 1989;

MacDonald, 1989, Karp, 1988). Since school is perceived as so “boring” and “a waste of time” many students leave for the work force even though they have high regard for education and learning (Tidwell, 1988, p.953). Conceptual and methodological difficulties related to the definition of dropout and gifted lead to difficulty in establishing a clear sense of the actual number of students (gifted) dropping out (Lajoie & Shore, 1981).

Nonetheless, gifted individuals do drop out (Lajoie & Shore, 1981; B.C. Ministry of Education Study, 1990; Pringle, 1970; Raph, 1966, 1985; Selby, 1990). Karp (1988) compared dropouts and graduates through questionnaires and interviews to reach understandings of what factors led to one group staying, the other leaving. She found a larger proportion of dropouts had skipped a grade or completed more than one in a year. Karp recognized a core of very bright students may exist who drop out having become bored with the secondary curriculum. Barrington & Hendricks (1989) studied the characteristics of high school graduates, dropouts and non-graduates. They classified non-graduate 4 (NG4) as students who stayed but did not have enough credits to graduate. NG4s were bright, but bored students who perceived little challenge in their classrooms. Lajoie & Shore (1981) believe the gifted as a group are “likely to be equally represented among dropouts” (p. 141). They warn that the myth of all gifted students making it on their own must be dispelled. “Some do not and there may be more than are apparent now” (p 141). If uniform definitions of “gifted” and “dropout” were adopted, the number of gifted dropouts might be more accurately computed.

The students, not the numbers, are the concern. Betts & Neihart (1983) focused on individual needs, feelings and behaviors rather than intellectual abilities, talents or interests to develop the profiles. Betts & Neihart’s (1983) typology may help us picture these students more clearly although more research is needed to validate Betts & Neihart’s observations. At this point we can identify these typologies as interesting potential research areas. Betts & Neihart (1983) created six profiles of the gifted and talented: Successful, Challenging, Underground, Dropouts, Double-Labeled, and Autonomous.

Angry with a system which did not meet their needs they become withdrawn or disruptive. They may see school as hostile and irrelevant, similar to the feelings of alienation that some gifted adolescents' experience in high school (Buescher, 1990). Gifted Dropouts are high school students who began to withdraw from school characterized by sporadic attendance earlier in elementary school (Betts & Neihart, 1983; Lloyd, 1977). These students are seen by adults and peers as loners, dopers, dropouts, or as air heads. In the classroom, they are seen as "spaced out", as average or below average and work inconsistently, similar to Delisle's (1992) non-producers.

Betts characterizes Type I Successful and Type II Challenging students who may become Gifted Dropouts as bored. The Type I Successful gifted students

Often become bored with school and learn to use the system in order to get by with as little effort as possible. Rather than pursue their own interests and goals in school, they tend to go through the motions of schooling seeking structure and direction from instructors (p. 249).

Betts says gifted young adults who underachieve in college and later life come from Type I Successful. They cannot cope with heavier demands and more independent learning so they drop out (Gagné, 1991; Pringle, 1970). Even if these Successful Gifted students graduate, they are still bored, compliant, dependent students. Type II are: challenging, divergently gifted and similar to Rimm's (1991) typology of the non-conformists and Whitmore's (1980) rebellious students. They are characterized as: bored, impatient, highly sensitive; questioning authority and overtly challenging the teacher. Parents of Gifted Dropouts noted that their children were similar to Type II in lower grades. Boredom, then, has some significance in the attitudes of Type I and Type II gifted students who may drop out of school later on. They may be the "stay ins" of the dropout literature (Pawlovich, 1986).

Statistics Canada's (1990) typology of dropouts including Creative Independents overlaps with Betts' (1983) categories Type II and IV. The Creative Independents were generally from well off financially, professional homes. They had gone through elementary

school reasonably well (Betts, Type II). They faced troubles in high school (Betts, Type IV). They perceived themselves as creative, artistic and self-assured, true individuals, consistent with Betts' "loners". They viewed high schools as clique-dominated with confining rules and structures (Betts, Type II).

Getzels & Similansky (1983) studied pupils' perceptions of school problems. They discovered pupils scoring high on divergent thinking abilities related to creativity, expressed more concern regarding boring teachers than all other students. Only students with superior divergent thinking abilities saw boring teachers as a critical problem. Those students with higher scores on intelligence tests and divergent thinking expressed concern about pupil cliques (Betts, Type II).

In summary, the critical problem with schooling, according to the superior divergent thinkers, is boring teachers. Anger, which may be an outgrowth of boredom and concomitant frustration with their schooling, characterizes Gifted Dropouts. Individual motivation and boredom are in some way connected. Many gifted underachievers are bored with their schooling and are also described as unmotivated. Yet these same individuals may achieve very well in their homes and community. They may be bored with their schooling because of a mismatch between their learning needs and the offered curriculum.

The next section provides a review of literature on school learning and intrinsic motivation. Learning and motivation seem to be linked to issues of power and control. The next section pursues the complex issues of learning, motivation, power and control. The central question becomes what makes these students learn so well in their larger informal worldly environments and so poorly in their smaller formal school environments?

SCHOOLING

This section explores various perspectives on learning and schooling which guided my thinking. The references to the literature are very brief and connected to students'

boredom as much as possible. Distinctions between learning and schooling became apparent as I read across the fields of literature. The authors I read, Erickson (1986), Glasser (1990), Sarason (1983) among others, seemed to agree that “learning is a natural activity of children” (Whitmore, 1980, p. 67). The concern is some students begin to lose this joy of learning, as early as Grade 3 or 4 (Lloyd, 1977; Runco & Sakamoto, 1993). Schooling may have much to do with this loss of joy, since it is acknowledged that most children enter school eager to learn (Glasser, 1990). Gifted underachievers, “puzzling paradoxes,” (Whitmore, 1986) learn very well in other contexts.

Farrell’s (1990) respondents were not happy by the time they reached high school. He wondered what characterized the best years of their educational lives. He discovered two significant reasons for a year being determined the best: a relationship with a caring teacher and social year. A caring teacher was one who treated the student as an individual, usually in elementary school and usually female. This finding supports the perception of a lack of caring teachers in upper school grades which has been reported in other literature on school leaving (King, 1988; Pawlovich, 1986). The second reason reflects the role of the school as a social meeting place in upper intermediate or junior high years. Peers became the dominant force in students' lives. This connects directly with the previous discussion on power of peers on adolescents.

By junior high school, the majority of children find school unsatisfying (Glasser, 1990). They go to school because their friends go (Farrell, 1990; Glasser, 1990). Lunch is the most important time in school. It’s “the longest time in the school day when you can hangout with young friends legitimately” (Farrell, 1990, p. 99). They come to school, not to learn what is required, but to socialize.

In 1827 Pestalozzi (in Barrett, 1989) argued that if children were inattentive in school teachers needed to look at themselves. Pestalozzi bemoaned the neglect of students being left to themselves, being forced to listen passively and being harshly treated. Pestalozzi believed children needed stimulating questions, instructions with many

examples, and kind teachers to avoid suffering tedious and irrelevant instruction and curriculum.

Educational principles may not have advanced very far since Pestalozzi's time. More than 150 years since Pestalozzi, Sarason (1990) contends it would be surprising if students did not “generally experience school as boring and uninteresting” (p. 162). Boredom about their school work is the main and most frequently heard complaint students always have had (Farrell, 1990; Glasser, 1990; Karp, 1988). Students see little relationship between their school work and their futures (Farrell, 1990; Glasser, 1990; Karp, 1988).

Children in school must learn to distinguish between their personal curiosity, interests and knowledge and what they are supposed to be curious about, interested in and knowledgeable about (Sarason, 1990). Friedenberg (1965) believes schools exist to socialize students; make them good, not necessarily thoughtful citizens. Students who are characterized by a high curiosity, need to know and drive to learn (Whitmore, 1980, Piechowski, 1989; Delisle, 1992) may find making Sarason's (1990) distinction too difficult. Runco & Sakamoto (1993) found that creative individuals need both emotional and intellectual autonomy and independence. They benefit from working things out by themselves. Barrett (1989) says many children appear to want to learn when there is some intellectual stimulation, and an opportunity for discovery; if they do not have this chance they become bored and reluctant to attempt tasks.

Students perceive schools as institutions of evaluation, judgment and control of learning (Covington & Beery, 1976; Farrell, 1990). School procedures in which a student perceives academic failure as inevitable and teachers as judgmental contribute to a students' boredom (Covington & Beery, 1976; Farrell, 1990). Unfortunately, many teachers may be just as bored as their students because they are told what and how to teach (Covington & Beery, 1976; Glasser, 1990; Sarason, 1990). Teachers and students

alike may be bored with a low quality, fragmentized standardized approach to schooling (Glasser, 1990).

School learning is not satisfying, because boredom and a lack of personal challenge and meaning exists (Sarason, 1983, p. 76). “Schools are intellectually boring places” (Sarason, 1990, p. 111). Sarason (1983) distinguishes between “laboring” where there is no personal stamp on the end product and “work” with a personal stamp. The hallmark of laboring is boredom. Teachers may be “information technicians” rather than passionate experts or practitioners in their discipline (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 177). A prevailing sense of a lack of personal challenge and meaning may exist for both the teacher and the students in the classroom. Bored teachers may help produce bored students (Farrell, 1990; Glasser, 1990).

Noddings (1992) is very concerned with schools as communities of caring and intellectual pursuits. She perceives schools as unsupportive places for children with “genuine intellectual or intrinsic interests” (p. 60). She does not blame teachers because teachers cannot provide academic challenges when they are “bogged down in administrative trivia, in disciplining unruly students, in motivating those whose interests are elsewhere” (p. 60). Our public, compulsory and uniform education system's purpose is to serve all students. The individual needs of both students and teachers may have to be compromised to fulfill this purpose. Quality work is not necessarily the goal of administrators or students (Glasser, 1990; Whitmore, 1980). Everhart (1983), Farrell (1990), Friedenberg (1965), Glasser (1990) and Sarason (1990) also comment upon the tremendous pressures and difficulties teachers must cope with daily; be they bureaucratic, systemic or on a more personal level within the classroom.

Schooling, compulsory, clock-driven and custodial, has been likened to other custodial institutions: prisons and mental health clinics (Miller, 1970). Students are not supposed to leave and may suffer stigma if they do (King, 1980). Students must constantly balance their personal needs and desires with school's expectations (Miller, 1970). These

expectations and values “may or may not value children and their thinking” (Barrett, 1989, p. 6). Little consideration is given to personal growth in school learning (Barrett, 1989). As well, students rarely get to choose how or what they learn. These elements of choice may be critical to an individual’s learning (Runco & Sakamoto, 1993).

Noddings (1992) contends schooling’s primary goal is successful instruction which is guided by an “ideology of control” (p. 10). As well as minimizing the student / teacher relationships schooling attempts to seduce students to academic achievement, purportedly for the students’ gain. Noddings says students claim teachers “don’t care” suspecting that “we want their success for our own purposes, to advance our own records, and too often they are right” (p. 13). She concludes by saying students who don’t try “are made to feel traitors, even though they may work very hard at tasks over which they have some control and choice” (p. 13). Csikszentmihalyi (1993) believes unless choice is integral to classroom learning, intrinsic rewards cannot be realized and “schooling has traditionally militated against individual expression” (p. 190). Dunn (1993) further suggests that gifted students may be more non-conformist than their age mates. They may need to see the relevance of the task, to be treated as equals with adults and given choice or options rather than demands.

As mentioned earlier, teachers and students may be working at cross purposes, with different meaning systems (Farrell, 1990). Teachers may support academic achievement as the pathway to future gratification. In contrast, society as represented by the media seems to support mediocrity, entertainment, instant and easy gratification (Griffen, 1988; Heath, 1970; Sullivan Commission, 1988; Whitmore, 1980). To adolescents the future may seem very far away (Glasser, 1990). The media may make adolescents believe they are to be entertained and passive. They may perceive no need “to student” (Griffen, 1988) while their teachers teach. As well, schools may emphasize academics and college entrance which the majority of students may feel irrelevant to their

future lives (Farrell, 1990, Gagné, 1993). Students may see little relationship between the school content and their present or future lives.

Schools may indeed be losing their holding power (Goetz & LeCompte, 1987; Sarason, 1990) as students become truant, seeing little relationship between their schooling and their needs and eventually drop out (Raph, 1966, 1985). Those students who experience a poor fit between their needs and their school programs do dropout (MacDonald, 1989; Mutadi, 1990; Pawlovich, 1986).

POWER

Sarason (1990) bluntly states “the name of the game is power” (p. 79) “the classroom is a political organization” (p. 78). Power, an ability to coerce the actions of others, lies in the hands of both students and teachers (Erickson, 1986). Teachers must somehow convince students their guidance is legitimate and in the interests of the individual students (Erickson, 1986). A teacher must persuade students that their needs for belonging, power, fun and freedom will be satisfied (Glasser, 1990).

Certainly as Delisle (1992) aptly phrased it: “you can lead a child to knowledge but you can’t make him think” (p. 122). All students possess the ability to resist learning; for many they may perceive resistance as their only power (Barrett, 1989; Erickson, 1986). Even passive covert resistance still holds power. Discipline problems “might be seen as a form of interactional judo control of the ostensibly stronger party by the ostensibly weaker one” (Erickson, 1986, p. 137). Covertly or overtly students do manage to show their resistance. Unfortunately, learning becomes superseded by power games. Teachers and students may become warriors in a confined battlefield, the classroom.

Glasser (1990) says all individuals must satisfy the 5 basic needs: survival, love, power, fun and freedom. These are built into each human being’s structure. Young people’s need for power in school is satisfied only in extracurricular activities. Here they feel important, they help one another, they have fun. “They are comfortable and less bored

in these situations because it is accepted that they socialize while they work, which is unacceptable in their regular classes” (Glasser, 1990, p. 48). Learning in a team may satisfy the strong needs for power and belonging that adolescents have (Glasser, 1990; Buescher, 1987).

Buescher (1991) says all adolescents have a need to “seek a sense of power in the face of powerlessness and being controlled” (p. 392). Adelman & Taylor (1990) contend that students misbehave to increase “feelings of control, competence and connectedness” (p. 553). They warn that only teachers and administrators may see the logic of their consequences for student misbehavior. The student may view the consequences as punitive and irrelevant to the act. Noddings (1992) says that students may perceive teachers as “enemies to be outwitted” and “bumbling authorities” (p. 108).

The picture of schooling painted in the literature is not the happy stereotypical one of smiling teachers and students. Rather a controlling, custodial atmosphere exists where students and teachers are forced to frequently engage in boring tasks. Students and teachers might both be victims of a system (Friedenberg, 1965) which seems to ignore or cannot accommodate individual expression (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993) be it the teacher’s or the student’s.

Unfortunately, schools become institutes of schooling rather than learning. Learning includes a personal stamp (Sarason, 1990), personal expression (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993) and personal relevance (Glasser, 1990); schooling holds little opportunity for these. Learning allows for exploration, discovery (Barrett, 1989), for challenge and stimulation (Whitmore, 1980). The school system has been accused of generally providing a poor fit between gifted students and students in general, learning styles and the curriculum content and teacher’s methods (Sullivan Commission, 1988; Whitmore, 1980). The problems of underachievement and misbehavior in gifted students are symptomatic “of conflict between internal needs for acceptance, success and meaningful learning and the external conditions of the classroom environment”

(Whitmore, 1980, p. 194). Runco & Sakamoto (1993) states that “attention seeking behavior was a reflection of boredom with conventional classroom activity and eagerness to propose divergent ideas” (p. 105).

A question which needs to be addressed by the school system is why some students learn and achieve very well in their larger worlds and so poorly in their schools (Freeman; 1985). If we believe that all people are motivated, but not necessarily to engage in schoolwork (Glasser, 1990) we must question what schools are doing or not doing that makes schoolwork boring and students unmotivated to engage in classroom tasks. This next section focuses on school-based research on motivation and it is by no means meant as a comprehensive review of the broad fields of literature on motivation.

MOTIVATION

Motivation is essentially “the why” of human behavior (Deci, 1975). “Motives initiate or activate behavior, they direct and guide it and they maintain it in the presence of obstacles until satisfaction of the need” (Gagné, 1993, p. 73). Motivation might be seen as the key to human behavior; hence its fascination for educators. Our assumption is once we understand what motivates individuals to learn we can ensure all students learn to their potential.

Glasser (1990) maintains we are always motivated to satisfy basic needs for survival, love, power, fun and freedom. We choose our behaviors. He believes students choose to underachieve because much schoolwork is boring, having little intrinsic quality and worth or relevance for adolescents. He and Brophy (1983) believe people are not motivated to do work they do not value. Schools must motivate students offering valuable quality cooperative work rather than managing students with coercion. In high school, ironically, when adolescents’ needs for power and belonging are especially strong, schools manage students coercively (Buescher, 1991; Glasser, 1990). The student may be choosing not to work, but the teacher may also be choosing to manage students

coercively, with anger and power (Glasser, 1990). The teacher's coercive style may push bored students to choose very disruptive behaviors in order to satisfy their needs for power (Glasser, 1990). School activities which encourage discussion, team work and give students a feeling of importance are not boring (Glasser, 1990). Unfortunately, these activities generally occur outside academic classrooms in extra-curricular or team settings.

Students' behavior is usually controlled through rewards or punishment. An assumption is made that people are motivated only by external rewards or by the fear of external punishment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Outside the laboratory and school people are motivated by many factors related to creating value and making meaning. The belief in an external motivational approach may be perceived as coercive by those students for whom a sense of independent control and choice are critical to their willingness to engage in tasks (Glasser, 1990). Adolescents who have strong needs for autonomy (Buescher, 1991) may find management by coercion, using rewards and punishment (Glasser, 1990; Kohn, 1994) ironically the catalysts to disengage rather than engage in their learning. Gifted students derive high levels of satisfaction from self-directed learning, often outside school (Whitmore, 1980). They may find a system of rewards and punishment to motivate them to learn unnecessary. Grades may be viewed as a controlling, not motivating, mechanism (Glasser, 1990).

Some students may not be interested in grades. Dweck (1988) posits that some people have learning, rather than performance goals. Those with learning goals seek challenges; they do not seek judgments of others to determine their successes. They may be bored or disappointed if they did not expend some effort in the task, even if a good grade is awarded. These students do not fear failure, they will not necessarily leave a challenging task, but persist. "Instead one would expect withdrawal from a task that has become useless or boring, even if it continued to promise favorable ability judgments" (Dweck, 1988, p. 262). Students who already "choose to expend energy for goals that carry no conventional material rewards" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 3) may perceive

external rewards such as grades as intrusive (Amabile, et al, 1986; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Deci, 1975; Kohn, 1993). Some school subjects are so “miserably boring” (Glasser, 1990, p. 46) that students choose to stop working in school; perhaps because the tasks are so useless and the rewards meaningless to students with strong learning, rather than performance, goals.

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) work presents an interesting parallel with Dweck’s regarding learning goals and challenge. Gifted students may find a challenge absent in schools. Boredom occurs when perceived challenges are too low (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). It “directs us to seek new challenges” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 190). School forces children into patterns over which they have little control. They cannot necessarily seek new challenges, at least new academic challenges.

FLOW

Gifted students are believed to need and thrive on challenges (Whitmore, 1980). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) has developed a theory of flow which maintains that when perceived skills and challenges are optimally balanced an individual experiences “flow”. It has become a technical term in the field of intrinsic motivation. The experience sampling method (ESM) was used to study flow in everyday life. A participant in the study filled out experience sampling forms each time a beeper buzzed, usually 8 times per day for a week. The 56 responses were analyzed. A series of interviews, questionnaires and self-report techniques have been analyzed to give substantial credibility to Csikszentmihalyi's theory (1975).

Flow, is a mental state akin to happiness, which occurs “when we are actively involved in a difficult enterprise, in a task that stretches our physical or mental abilities” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. xiii). A sense of the playful and the serious is integral to flow. We are focused on a clearly self-defined goal. The anxieties and boredom of everyday life are overshadowed by an intensity of involvement, concentration and absorption. In other

words, “we forget ourselves and become lost in the activity” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. xiv). The flow experience holds intrinsic worth. No external rewards are necessary. An individual’s sense of joy and discovery is the flow experience’s reward. A sense of joy exists because an individual masters new skills, new knowledge, new challenges.

Those teachers who give their students flow experiences “demand hard work but also have fun” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 255). Fun which is associated with challenging, not easy tasks, is also seen as critical to gifted students’ engagement in their learning in Emerick’s (1992) and Middleton’s (1992) work.

Emerick (1992) studied ten gifted students, 14 - 20 years old, to discover what factors were effective in moving them from patterns of chronic underachievement to academic success. She found six major factors which influenced this reversal. These were related to outside school interests, parents, the class, goals associated with grades, teachers and the individuals themselves. The outside activities gave students a greater degree of control, challenge and relevance than they found in school. The class, which the students found most rewarding was “fun”. Fun meant more difficult, eliminating already mastered material, an accelerated pace, challenging by going just beyond the student’s current skill or knowledge levels.

Middleton, Littlefield & Lehrer (1992) asked 85 gifted students to list their top ten fun aspects in school. The researchers then took the top 12 of these using the students’ ideas, including lunch, recess, rather than the authors’ perception of the most important aspects and randomly, but equally distributed them among 20 triads all related to fun. Then 221 students ranging from Grade 4 - 8, in a gifted summer program, were then asked to rate the top two aspects in each triad and tell why they were more fun than the third. The authors discovered these gifted students perceived the most fun in academic tasks which they found personally interesting, challenging and where they had control of the learning process. This perception of fun involving challenge, personal control of their

learning process seems analogous to Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) description of the flow experience.

"Fun" then seems to be a critical element of gifted students' learning needs. This fun is not equated with ease, rather with challenge, choice and control in their learning process. Glasser's (1990) Control Theory includes fun as a critical need of all individuals. Emerick (1992) and Middleton et al (1992) have demonstrated that gifted students' needs for fun and their understanding of fun may be significantly higher and more complex than the more simplistic understanding of fun as easy. Their sense of fun seems analogous to Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) flow experiences: challenging, self-chosen and controlled activities with inner satisfaction and fulfillment the reward.

Unfortunately, the elements of flow including a sense of control merging oneself in the activity and knowing the purpose of the activity may be missing in the classroom. Gifted students seem to need a greater degree of control, choice and sense of personal relevance to engage in classroom tasks than their average ability peers. Whitmore (1988) commented gifted students need "Individualized curriculum that is appropriately challenging, personally meaningful and rewarding, allows accelerated learning, accommodates the student's specific learning style (p. 14). The school system does not set up these conditions so necessary for a gifted student's learning (and analogous to flow experiences) argues Whitmore (1988). The chances of flow experiences at least for gifted students seem minimal in the regular classroom.

Even if flow occurs, the frequent disturbances and bells in classrooms interrupt flow and frustrate both students and teachers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). Everhart (1983) noted that 45% of a student's daily school experience is non-instructional time. Students wait to learn as record keeping, disciplining and leveling the pace and content to the average, takes up almost half the class time. Time does not lose meaning in the classroom; schedules and routines control learning time. Therefore, flow experiences are rare. For many students flow only occurs in sports and leisure activities with peers

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). They have fun, a sense of competency and belonging which may be another reason why peers are so significant for adolescents.

Some research indicates “intellectually more able students are more intrinsically motivated towards learning activities and school subjects” (Gagné, 1993, p. 75). High achievers experience flow in their school work and therefore invest more time in it than their peers (Nakamura, 1988). Unfortunately, many students seem to become less rather than more motivated to achieve in school tasks. Whitmore (1980) characterizes gifted children as deriving “very high levels of intrinsic satisfaction . . . from self-directed activities outside of school that makes it difficult for them to sustain disciplined effort to complete repetitive instructional tasks in school” (p. 67).

Consistently the literature indicates schools do not provide challenges which match the abilities or interests of gifted students (Freeman, 1985; Pringle, 1970; Whitmore, 1980). In fact, an orientation to text-based content and methods is in direct conflict with gifted students’ needs for creative, scientific problem solving and responses, for extensive discussion and the intense pursuit of advanced personal interests and goals (Whitmore, 1988). Emerick (1992) reported her gifted students believed independent study, student discussions which led to greater interest and relevance, hands-on experiments, like real scientists, rather than copying text questions and experiments, as well as “fun” in terms of challenge encouraged them to achieve, rather than underachieve.

Learning styles researchers also indicate that gifted learners have particular needs for discussion, independence, flexibility and are self-motivated in early school years e.g. Dunn, 1983; Hirsch, 1989; Milgrim et al, 1993; Stewart, 1981. Dunn (1993) notes the gifted prefer a hands on or experiential (direct, active involvement) approach, a very different approach from the more teacher dominant modes in high school (Farrell, 1990). Learning styles researchers may help support Delisle’s (1992) distinction between underachievers and non-producers. Dunn (1993) reports differences between extremely talented adolescents and underachievers. A preference for very direct involvement, to go

at their own pace without interruption for games, projects and independent studies is noted for gifted students, but they can easily learn through auditory and visual modalities. Underachievers seem to be able to only learn through tactile, kinesthetic modalities. While this needs more in depth research, it is interesting because underachievers may be inflexible learners, while gifted underachievers and / or non-producers may be flexible learners who turn off, if their preferred modality is missing.

Gifted students have different gifts but are often taught as if they learn identically (Dunn, 1993). A deeper understanding of gifted individuals' preferences while learning may help us understand or motivate their learning. Whitmore (1988) severely chastised the educational system because of its failure to recognize the unique learning needs of gifted students; Passow (1989) that gifted students' instruction must be differentiated regarding its breadth, depth and pace. These gifted students seem to need individual control, choice and challenge in their learning (Middleton et al, 1992). These needs cannot be met through textbook based teaching which aims at leveling students' abilities and pace (Everhart, 1983). Easy, simple, repetitive classroom content and processes lead to gifted students' dissatisfaction and boredom (Whitmore, 1980); perhaps, even driving students to seek challenges elsewhere (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993).

Gifted students also have preferences for certain teaching styles and teachers. Csikszentmihalyi (1993) found talented teenagers "are unusually sensitive to the quality of teaching in their talent area" (p. 183). In general, students' intrinsic motivation and self-esteem with caring and supportive, rather than controlling, teachers is much higher (Deci, 1986). Emerick (1992) concluded that teachers make a significant difference to students reversing patterns of underachievement. Her students each credited a specific teacher for having the greatest positive impact upon their reversal in achievement. Interestingly, Emerick (1992) like Farrell (1990) found no common personality traits existed across "caring" teachers. Emerick (1992) found all the teachers regardless of personality shared this common factor; students believed the teacher cared about them as individuals. Caring

teachers were like peers or equals and facilitators of learning. Students felt drawn to work even in a subject they did not like, if the teacher was passionate, enthusiastic and knowledgeable. A caring teacher's top priority is student participation which is encouraged by using wide ranges of resources, and strategies far beyond the textbook and lectures. A caring teacher was flexible in content and process, but a caring teacher was not easy. A caring teacher pushed the student just beyond their current academic threshold, much like individuals in flow experiences who perceive challenge and skill levels are at an optimal level to produce intense absorption and concentration in an activity and mastery of new knowledge and skills. The "caring" teacher in Emerick's study is very close to a flow teacher (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) who demonstrates such passion for a subject area, such enthusiasm for the challenges inherent in learning that both teacher and students learn joyfully with a sense of absorption and discovery which transcends school schedules and skills.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) believes that students' learning could be made enjoyable very simply. "Enjoyable" does not mean easy. It means looking at a student's skills and levels and gradually creating opportunities for flow experiences, where challenges are balanced optimally with skill levels. Students must feel they are producing quality and valuable work (Glasser, 1990).

Two issues immediately arise in making learning enjoyable. Schools may be too massive and too impersonal to allow this. Attending to individual's needs may be too overwhelming in highly populated schools. School administrators have traditionally made the decisions. They hold control and power over all facets of students' learning. Giving up some power and decision-making however limited, may be difficult for administrators.

School learning is not necessary for basic survival. However, in our highly technological, skilled society it is increasingly essential for economic and social survival. We know all individuals must and do learn. At present, school learning is characterized by the majority of adolescents, be they gifted or non-gifted, as boring. Boredom still exists

for them, no matter how we perceive their boredom and its meanings. Boredom acts as a catalyst in their withdrawal from school (Farrell, 1990).

Farrell believes boredom is a social construction. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) believes boredom is a psychological state brought on by a lack of challenge. Neither boredom's existence nor boredom's description is in question; boredom's meaning is. Even Farrell's collaborators could only arrive at examples, not meanings for boredom. We can only reach a clearer understanding of gifted underachieving students' boredom by asking them what they mean by boredom. To date they have not been asked. I believe it is a critical question. Rather than speculating about or constructing a definition for them, we can ask them. Then educators may be able to minimize boring school experiences and maximize optimal school experiences for not only the gifted, but for all students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Chapter 3, describes the pathway of my academic odyssey. I explain the process I undertook in designing, implementing, analyzing and reporting my research. I begin with my rationale for using a qualitative approach. Next, I explain how I selected and identified the ten students in my study. I then discuss the interviewing process. In the next section I describe the iterative process of reviewing fieldnotes, analyzing and transcribing the audio-taped interviews and conferring with the students to clarify and validate my interpretations of their boredom. The literature on qualitative methods, particularly Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Goetz & LeCompte (1984) helped shape, support and ground my study. I conclude my chapter with the odyssey's most arduous challenge - the writing of my thesis.

THE DESIGN

My intention was to gain a deeper understanding of academically underachieving gifted students' perceptions of boredom. The intention was two-fold: first, to give the students an opportunity to discuss their perceptions of boredom; and secondly, to analyze these perceptions, in the hope of reaching a clearer, richer sense of their perceptions of boredom regardless of their congruence with my own perceptions of boredom.

As Farrell (1988) stated about his at-risk group of dropouts, "It seems imperative to give some kind of voice to the people most affected by the problem" (p. 500). I needed to use a design which would allow the participants' constructs to structure my research (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). A personal open-ended interview seemed the most appropriate method to gain richer understandings of these students' boredom. The actor's point of view, the actor's words, (Erickson, 1986) (in my case, the actors being the ten students) rather than an enumerative account, might prove to be more convincing and powerful to myself and the reader. I could explore and probe the students' meanings of

boredom more deeply through the individual interview process, than a group survey asking about their boredom. I could tell students' stories. As Miles and Huberman (1984) write,

Words especially when they are organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing to a reader - another researcher, a policy maker, a practitioner - than pages of numbers (p. 15).

I was concerned my professional role might influence the students' responses. I might be seen as a representative of the system, which the students seemed to be challenging through passive or aggressive resistance to its rules and expectations. Did I engender feelings of reticence in speaking up which a non-teacher might have avoided? I did not sense that my fears arose or distorted the interviews. Indeed, Jill, one of the students, said it was okay for her to talk to me. I was not her teacher and therefore, had no power over her.

I would never lie to a teacher on a personal basis. Like now, there's no point because I mean, you are not in charge of me right now or anything like that and you're not threatening to call my parents about anything and teachers are like that, because they have to be, because they do represent the system. I do talk to teachers on a social basis . . . whatever they ask, that's fine, but when they are representing the system as, like a prison guard, then I lie (Jill, 1/6/94).

Personal interviews are essentially self-reports or self-recollections subject to the limitations of selective recounting of past events and self-bias (Gronlund & Linn, 1990). I believe the students did their best to be as accurate and fair as possible, because they often self-corrected and some asked their parents for verification of events.

The ten students were all Caucasian and came from what is loosely termed, "the middle class". They were all students who had been asked to or had chosen to leave the school system at some point in their high school education. They may have been a particularly willing or vocal group. They may have appreciated an opportunity to be

personally interviewed about their boredom with an eager adult willing to hear their stories.

My understandings of these ten academically underachieving gifted students' perceptions of boredom were mutually and simultaneously shaped (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They arose from the interaction between myself and the students, and their responses to my inquiries about their boredom. In Chapter 1, I described my personal, professional and academic beliefs regarding boredom. This insight is necessary because all inquiries are value-bound. My values influence this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Knowing this, I took great care to ensure the credibility of this study by following Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness. I owed no less to the students involved in this study than to follow these steps (which are explained more fully throughout this chapter) so readers see their stories as credible.

Lincoln & Guba (1985) believe the credible researcher has "prolonged engagement" (p. 301) in the setting with the participants to gain understanding of the culture, check for distortions in information made by participants or by the researcher and to gain trust. I was not a teacher in these students' schools, but I am very familiar with the classroom and school settings. The students perhaps felt freer to discuss their teachers (although I cautioned them that I did not want names since I may know some of them as colleagues) because I was not working in any of the students' schools. Also as a resource teacher I often observe in classrooms, so I can be distanced from the "teacher" role and be more aware of classroom dynamics especially the relationship between students and the teacher. This role has made me see teachers, if not through students' eyes, at least through an observer's. As a classroom teacher, I did not nor could have experienced as many classroom situations as I have as a resource teacher. I also felt the students might have been more comfortable with me because they did not have to explain their environment (the semester system, timetable for classes, etc.) and could get directly to their classroom

experiences. I believe I was very “open to the multiple influences, the mutual shapes and contextual factors” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304) which interact upon boredom.

A credible researcher also carries out a “persistent observation” (Lincoln & Guba, 1984, p. 304); for the depth, the characteristics and elements which are most salient to the phenomenon being studied. This observation was harder for me because I found it difficult to dismiss things that did not directly relate to students’ boredom; for example, discussions about clothes and stereotyping. The comments were interesting, but not pertinent to their perceptions of boredom. I consistently referred to others (teachers, counselors, parents) and school records to verify students’ recollections of grades and behaviors throughout their schooling. I received some report cards from the parents of Dave, Jill and Sarah. I saw the school files and permanent record cards of all but Garfunkel while visiting their school. Garfunkel had neglected to give me a letter of permission from his mother to see his files at his school; so he went personally to get copies of his reports for me. I “triangulated” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.305) my information. The most important criteria for trustworthiness, “the member check” checking my interpretations with the students was continuously done throughout the odyssey. As well a series of peer debriefers were constantly giving me feedback and helping me clarify my thinking and understandings of the students’ boredom. At all times I kept copious notes, about my understandings of their boredom and my progress in analyzing and interpreting the students’ words throughout the odyssey.

THE PROPOSAL

My written proposal was submitted to Simon Fraser University’s Ethics Review Committee in September (1993). The proposal emerged from my earlier studies on gifted underachievers and dropouts. I was intrigued by their boredom as described in the literature basically, because their meanings for boredom seemed imposed upon them; rather than elicited from them. Many questions arose for me about their collective boredom. I

knew I had to narrow my focus to one particular group of students because logically, I had a limited amount of time and could interview only a few students within any group.

Sketchy information was available on academically gifted underachievers who dropped out and their perceptions of boredom. I proposed that my study might create a clearer picture of these students' boredom. Appendix A contains the letters of information and consent forms for the students and their parents. I described how I would ensure confidentiality, the findings' credibility and presented a time line.

As this chapter progresses, I will discuss how confidentiality and credibility were attained. I will also discuss how optimistic the time line suggested became in the face of professional and personal commitments. The University Committee approved my proposal within a week of submission, mid-September (1993). Once approved by the University, the proposal was sent to and reviewed by the school district in which the study was undertaken. I received approval from the school district in mid-November (1993). This two month time gap was a foreshadowing of how much of my research lay within and became impeded by the time frames of others (the students and my supervisors) and also by my own personal and professional commitments.

Once approved by the district, I contacted counselors and teachers at two junior highs, one senior secondary and one alternative school. I did not know these contacts personally or professionally. Their names were given to me by other colleagues.

I explained to the teachers and counselors I contacted that I was looking for students, ages 15 - 18 years old, who fit the following criteria:

- 1) The district had identified the students as gifted. This identification may have been made through psychometric testing, teacher nomination or some combination of aptitude testing and teacher nomination. The students may have been involved in the district's special school based enrichment programs at some point in their schooling. The procedure for identification of gifted students from the 1988 district handbook on giftedness and enrichment was used to select participants. Each possessed abilities and

strengths in more than one of the following areas: skills and knowledge; creativity; personal characteristics.

2) Teachers had identified the students as underachievers. The teachers believed there was a marked discrepancy between each students' aptitude (ability to achieve academic excellence) and their academic achievement, as indicated in their report cards.

3) The teachers and counselors saw the students as potential dropouts. Dropping out meant students leaving school of their own volition usually preceded by extensive skipping of classes or high absenteeism, having been suspended for various actions, or having become "seat warmers". Seat warmers did not appear to be actively engaged in their learning. According to their teachers, they put in minimal effort and wait for graduation.

The contact teachers gave me a dozen names immediately. One teacher involved with gifted students suggested two boys from his junior high. Another English teacher in an alternative school suggested three girls. Two of these girls were teen parents. The counselor in the senior high suggested two boys and three girls. The school based team in another junior high school decided to veto any participation by their students in my study because they believed the students might be even more at risk if they participated. Ironically, three of the senior high students in this study were former students who experienced difficulties in that same junior high. The immediacy of the teachers' responses with names made me wonder how many students might have been available for this study had I investigated more schools, or given teachers more time to reflect on suitable students for this study.

The district coordinator for the gifted program also gave me three names as possible candidates. I did not need to follow up on those students. The two teachers and the counselor agreed to meet with me to discuss the study further. They then agreed to meet with the students and explain the study. They took copies of my introductory letters

and consent forms to give to the students and their parents [Appendix A]. All ten of the students told their teachers or counselor they would participate in the study.

I was struck by the teachers' and counselors' genuine interest in my proposal and their eagerness to help. They continued to be encouraging and helpful throughout the study. For example, once I had the students' and parents' permission to look at the students' school records, the teachers helped me locate them. They also told me why they believed the students were gifted, but at risk of dropping out.

CONTACTING THE STUDENTS

Once I had the consent forms, I phoned the students. In about half the cases my initial contact was with the parents, since they answered the phone. The students all talked to me directly on the phone before the interview dates were initiated. We discussed any concerns the students or parents had about the study. Anita's mom told me Anita was worried teachers wanted her to work harder at school. Dennis' mother was concerned about the confidentiality of the study. Jill expressed surprise at being chosen, saying, "I'm not the stereotypical smart person" (12/23/93). I addressed all of their concerns before proceeding.

I arranged an interview with each student during the initial telephone introduction and conversation. We discussed the use of pseudonyms which they chose in the first interview. Two interviews took place at my former school because this was mutually convenient for Sarah, Garfunkel and myself. Eight of the interviews took place at the students' homes because their homes were the most convenient places for them. Many of the initial interviews took place over the Christmas school holidays in 1993 because our time was most flexible during the break.

The students seemed pleased to be involved in the study. They greeted me warmly when I entered their homes or when they came to my school. They often did not want to stop within the first hour. Sometimes we continued to another 60 minute audio tape to

finish a point in our discussion. We then agreed to meet a second, or in Sarah's case, a third time. These second or third meetings occurred because students like Garfunkel, Anita, Jill and Sarah had very definite ideas and the time and desire to discuss them. Karen and Andrea, the teen mothers balancing school and the work of raising children, had very little time. My interviews with them were at the alternative school on their lunch breaks. A second session with Karen and Andrea together proved interesting. They helped clarify each others thoughts and seemed to enjoy sharing their school experiences related to their boredom. Again time and their parental commitments cut short that dual interview. Brenda traveled from the city to the alternative school. She was difficult to schedule. Dennis and Dave were the most laconic of the students. We seemed to have covered all they had to say in one session.

All the interviews took place between November (1993) and June (1994). One of the major challenges was arranging meeting times with the students and others who were integral to the whole study. I was grateful for, and encouraged by, the cooperation I received from everyone involved.

The format of the interview is in Appendix B. I did not use these questions in a formal script; I allowed the students to direct the interviews' flow. I only re-directed them towards the questions at the end as I reiterated what we had covered and what was needed to finish that session. I deliberately avoided "interesting" as an opposite of boring; wanting the students to give me their words and descriptions for boring and boredom and their opposites.

THE INTERVIEWS

I opened the interviews by reiterating the study's purpose and the safeguards for confidentiality. Each student chose a pseudonym. They chose a first name beginning with the same letter as their real name, because I could more easily remember what their real

names were if both names began with the same letter. Ironically, in later conversations with them or about them, I often referred to them by their pseudonym.

The interview was “fully overt” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 269). That is, each student was fully aware that an interview was taking place, its purpose and how I would use the interview’s information. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state “ethical practice requires that the interview be fully overt” (p. 269). Certainly the University and the District Screening Committee ensured my intent was ethical in that it fulfilled legal obligations which was particularly important because my participants were minors.

I believe the students and their parents were comfortable with the study’s purpose. As it happened, Dennis’, Dave’s, Jill’s and Anita’s parents were at home while the initial interview occurred. They did not sit in on the interviews, but were in the general vicinity. In fact, Dennis’ mother interrupted our discussion because Dennis’ dad came home and something needed to be quickly discussed. Anita’s mom provided coffee during one interview. Another time she had to interrupt our discussion to tell Anita that she was going out to pick up Anita’s sister. Anita’s mom allowed and encouraged me to take home the book she had made for Anita of all her memorable accomplishments in soccer, dancing, acting, writing and volunteer work. Jill’s parents were very willing and eager to talk to me about my study and about Jill’s habitual skipping out in junior and senior high school. Anita’s, Sarah’s and Jill’s mom continued to be very supportive and encouraging throughout the study.

The parents were also sources of clarification about the sequence of events - was that in Grade 3 or Grade 6? - and academic and personal achievements. They and the students’ report cards and personal record cards served as part of the process of verifying the credibility of the selection of these students according to the identification criteria set out for the study.

After the initial greetings, I asked the students various questions related to their ages and school history. These questions served as ice-breakers. Lincoln & Guba (1985)

stress warming up the respondents in an interview so that they become more relaxed. My questions were easy to answer. They also provided me with the students' school history, especially verification of their involvement in the gifted district program. I asked the students which Enrichment Program they had been in and when. In the majority of cases, their experiences with Enrichment were in the elementary years, although Jill repeatedly discussed her positive experiences in a junior high gifted program. (See Chapter 4: Silhouettes for more extensive descriptions of each student).

I needed to know the number of schools the students had attended, since the more moves students experience, the more likely they are to drop out. Andrea had many moves throughout her elementary and junior high school years. Patterns of high absenteeism and skipping out are strong precursors to students dropping out (Statistics Canada, 1992).

These initial questions served a more utilitarian purpose. They allowed me to stop the tape, rewind it and play it again. This ensured that my equipment worked. It also allowed the student and myself a chance to laugh about how funny our voices sounded. Any initial nervousness seemed to lessen. Once I was assured the equipment worked we proceeded to the core of the interview. The core question was "What is boredom? What does it mean to you?"

Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss the interview as "A conversation with a purpose The problem of interest is expected to arise from the respondent's reaction to the broad issue raised by the interviewer" (p. 268). I wanted to stress the students' definitions of their boredom. They determined what was relevant to their boredom. I wanted to know what each student thought about boredom. What I hoped to discover "was a unique, an idiosyncratic, and a wholly individual viewpoint" (p. 269). I kept referring to the individual's specific examples of where, when, why and how they became bored. I did not know what I did not know and when this is the case, Lincoln & Guba (1985) advocate the unstructured interview. As I stated earlier, the students and their responses determined the

direction of the interview, but the initial questions and probes [Appendix B] were covered at some point within the interviews.

The interviews did become more structured in the later stages when I sought validation and feedback (member checks). For example, I would say, "Tell me more about what you mean by waiting" They may have meant waiting for the other students, their teachers or just waiting in line to use the printer in computer class. Some types of waiting (especially for other students to catch up) had greater significance in contributing to their boredom. Or I would ask them to clarify what they meant by "by the book". Frustration with a text-oriented course or the rule book of the administration had very different manifestations. Many of the students used the term "no clue". I needed to explore what they meant: stupidity, carelessness or disinterest on the part of themselves or their teachers. These questions became more focused as I began to see connections or contradictions with the student's previous ideas or with the other students' comments. This process of moving from the unstructured interview to a more a more comprehensive process was a very smooth progression in the qualitative interview process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

I believe that a rapport developed between myself with the majority of the students. Dennis and Dave were polite and willing participants, but more distant in their responses. Indeed, Dennis' counselor believed that I had done very well to get Dennis to engage in a lengthy conversation for the hour. Neither of these two boys indicated unease. They were merely more prone to succinct comments than the other students. In June (1995) Dave's mother told me Dave was in difficult straits having dropped out of Grade 11. She would try to encourage him to talk to me. He didn't call back then, but in June (1996) I did talk to Dave on the phone when I phoned for his school records and later after I received them. He seemed pleasant enough, but he was preoccupied with getting ready for work. Dennis never returned my telephone calls.

All other students were always very welcoming when future interviews or telephone conversations occurred. Kelly, came unannounced, to my school to see how I was doing and to tell me about how she was doing in her first year at UBC. Garfunkel, came to see me and often greeted me in the neighborhood to tell me how he was doing.

I was able to visit in June and July (1995) with all the students except Dave and Dennis whom I could not contact and Brenda who lived in the city. I gave them copies of the rough draft of the findings pertaining to their comments and their silhouettes. All of them were very encouraging and corroborated my transcriptions and my interpretations in the visits conducted at my school and home or their homes. After I spoke to Brenda on the phone, I mailed her a copy but she did not send it back. I had contact again with Karen, Garfunkel and Dave in July (1996). I do not believe the majority would have been so cooperative during the course of the study if I had not achieved a measure of rapport with them.

I found the interviewing process very demanding. I had to concentrate on listening to and not feeding the students answers. My professional role has always been one of directing discussion, leading students towards various conclusions. I had to become an active, but mute listener. The students were very conscientious about answering my questions. They took their time and expanded upon their initial responses with examples of their teachers' and their own behaviors.

Sometimes they wanted me to give them some hints about the responses I wanted. I kept saying that I could not feed them any answers. They needed to tell me what their boredom meant to them. I did not want their responses to be echoes or mirrors of my perceptions of boredom. I told them I could only ask questions. If they could not answer immediately, we could return to the question later. The interviews closed when the information became redundant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or when the hour session was nearly over.

Before actually closing the interviews, I referred to the notes I had taken as the interview was being taped. These notes allowed me to refer to statements that I felt were contradictory, unfinished or needed clarification. I reviewed my notes with the students. They gave me feedback on the statements I had noted during the interviews. Lincoln & Guba (1985) call this playing back the participants' words to them. The authors say it is the first of a series of member checks. Member checks are the verification by the participants of the researcher's comments and interpretations. The students also became reminded of further details or clarifying events. These recollections often prompted the mutual desire for a second interview.

I ended the interviews by asking if they had any questions or if they felt a need to continue the discussion. I asked them if I could phone them when I replayed the tapes or during the course of my analysis of their tapes. I found the students very willing to engage in follow-up interviews or discussions over the phone. These follow-ups served to expand upon and clarify the initial points raised in the first interviews.

FIELDNOTES

Once the interview was finished, I immediately wrote more notes on my impressions of the interview. I would add to the notes I had made during the interview recording any other observations, or general comments about the interview. Most of the fieldnotes were made in my car after the interview. Notes on Sarah and Garfunkel were made in my classroom. The second interview with Sarah was very different. She was very tired and seemed unhappy. In the third interview she was much more optimistic. I asked her why she had been so different in the second interview. She was making some critical decisions about living at home, her boyfriend, and returning to school. Her comments during the second and third interviews reflected her differing moods. Had I not noted the non-verbal cues of sadness in the second interview I may have drawn other interpretations

about her agitated and rather abrupt manner in the second interview. Personal issues, not antipathy towards myself or the study, caused the moodiness in the second interview.

I kept a reflective journal that was a combination of musings and webblings. This journal was a continual and iterative work. I referred to my earlier notes often. This allowed me to see the growth in my ideas-moving from the collection and tallying of the students' comments to their synthesis and analysis. The journal also allowed me to re-discover ideas that gained a greater significance as my analysis and interpretation shifted. Gradually, I began to make mind maps in these journals that connected similar ideas.

I also listened to the tapes within twenty-four hours of the interviews. I made notes without referring to the previous notes made during the interview. I later compared the two sets of notes and highlighted similar notations as well as any comments which seemed significant. The tapes were transcribed verbatim by myself and another typist. Each transcription was then checked out for its fidelity to the tape. Then each transcript was highlighted using different colors for each of the responses. For example, I would highlight all references to waiting in blue, to repetition in orange. I listened to the tapes frequently. I compared my most recent notes with the notations in the transcripts and in my previous journal entries or webs.

This process of note-taking, and highlighting gave rise to emergent patterns that became the first step in data analysis. This analysis was iterative. There was constant referral to previous interviews while simultaneously collecting new and subsequent interviews. The students asked me what the other students had said, but I explained I could not tell them because it might "color" what they said. I wanted to be assured their words were not influenced by myself or others. While some of my readings had catchy phrases: "silencing" (Fine, 1990) and "benign neglect" (Everhart, 1983) the students did not use these phrases. I believed that the constructs should be emic (student generated) rather than etic (externally generated), if I was to be as true to the students' words as possible.

CONSTRUCTING MATRICES, DIAGRAMS, TABLES, WEBS AND MODELS

Initially, to make sense from copious field notes, reflective journal entries and transcripts, I constructed a matrix. Miles & Huberman (1984) suggest matrices as ways of discovering what is known and needs to be known. I filled the vertical axis with the students' names. I chose headings from the interview probes and questions. The headings along the horizontal axis were as follows: 1) Boring (where); 2) Boring (feels like mentally, physically); 3) Coping with boredom; 4) Good / Bad teachers; 5) Interesting (opposite of boredom); 6) Interesting (feels like mentally, physically); 7) Courses (boring / interesting); 8) Boredom's source. Later I realized that I could have grouped number 7 and 8 before 5 for easier cross referencing.

Interesting patterns emerged describing students' boredom. Some students said they were tired when they were bored [Dennis, Sarah, Karen]. The other students expressed a feeling of agitation, a need to move. Boredom seemed to manifest itself in both passive and more active ways, sometimes moving between passive to more active manifestations. Coping strategies seemed to be dependent upon whether the students felt tired or agitated while bored. The tired students coped by doodling, daydreaming, doing other work. In contrast, agitated students escaped the classroom for bathroom breaks, socialized or created challenges for themselves and their teachers. They did not share common subjects as interesting or boring. They did, however, share similar perspectives about what made a course boring. The students had similar perspectives on what constructed good and poor teachers. This was the first step towards analysis. A very long and challenging process to organize the information remained.

The matrix did highlight information for each student. The matrix allowed me to quantify or simplify responses. But it was too rigid and too confining. The students' comments were more unique than similar, but showed similar patterns. The unstructured

interview, as previously stated, was concerned with the unique viewpoint. The matrix seemed to hinder demonstration of that uniqueness.

I then attempted a model with arrows, Venn diagrams and overlapping circles. Multiple attempts to formulate an explicative model proved fruitless. The model was too static. It was too confusing to anyone who attempted to make sense of it. I had attempted to generalize complex interconnected and interactive concepts which proved fruitless.

A colleague, the school librarian, acted as my archivist. She is an experienced elementary school teacher. As well, she is very shrewd and honest. She had difficulty understanding the various iterations of models and diagrams. She too thought there had to be a better way to make sense of my information. She acted as my peer debriefer, a sounding board for the ideas and hypotheses I generated.

The inquirer's biases are probed, meanings explored, the basis for interpretations clarified. . . . The task of the debriefer is to be sure that the investigator is as fully aware of his or her posture and process as possible (remembering that while it is not possible to divest oneself of values, it is at least possible to be aware of the role they play) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308).

Three other debriefers were not my peers in the same sense as the librarian because they were my two academic supervisors and a doctoral student. Their role was one of "the devil's advocate" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 309). They did press me to clarify, condense and defend my understandings. My supervisors tried to be empathic, but the debriefing sessions while useful were indeed sobering. Sometimes the experiences were cathartic.

The loneliness I felt as an isolated researcher and working graduate student off campus was alleviated by these debriefing sessions. I also talked to anyone who would listen to my ideas and about my progress during the study. My friends provided insight and forced me to talk about my study without using academic jargon.

The creation of matrices, tables and models took the better part of my time in 1994. I began to despair feeling that this odyssey was to be eternal. I began to realize that

I was hoping for cause and effect. I was trying to make a tidy model to explain this untidy concept, boredom. I was attempting to quantify an abstract concept. I was trying to generalize when the purpose was to voice individual's perceptions.

My understanding of boredom had been changed by my interaction with ten individuals and by my interaction with their taped and transcribed words. I returned to my initial beliefs: the students should be heard. I should tell their stories as sensitively and accurately as I could. I initially decided to tell Jill's and Anita's stories more fully, because they chose to cope with their boredom in two very different ways. As I continued, my analyzing and writing, I began to write descriptions for each student which became silhouettes. All their stories assumed significance in developing themes. They breathed life into the study. They all had their place. So all ten stories were told in Chapter 4. The themes became the discoveries and are described in Chapter 5. How I arrived at them is described here.

THEMES

The Challenge

I felt overwhelmed by the vastness of the material. A total of 18 hours of transcribed taped interviews meant an incredible amount of paper as well as audio tapes. I found that I constantly referred to Lincoln & Guba (1985) as I tried to analyze the students' words. Their definition of data: "the constructions offered by or in the sources" and of data analysis: "reconstruction of those constructions" (p. 332) reassured me. The difficulties I was having in making sense of the numerous constructions seemed inherent to naturalistic inquiry. How could I "persuade" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 329) the reader that my interpretation of the data was credible?

I longed for the seemingly more straightforward simplistic analysis of quantitative data. It was necessary to persuade the reader that my analysis was credible. I had to

systematically write the process I had followed. Others could then clearly pursue any of my steps. All my models and drafts were filed with my archivist, the librarian. I kept all my tapes, transcripts and notes. The students were consulted about my interpretations of their words. These member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) are the most critical part of ensuring credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. I believed I was adhering to the criteria for ensuring trustworthiness of my understandings of the students' boredom.

The Pathway

Data analysis was a great challenge. I listened to the tapes several times and re-read the transcripts and my fieldnotes. I decided to loosely apply Spradley's (1979) "semantic domains" described in Lincoln & Guba (1985, p. 340). The students' words were the basis of the analyses. I used Spradley's (1979) domains as a general guide only when I felt the students' words fit into one of Spradley's specific categories. Finding common meanings or phases that could be grouped as semantic (meaning grounded) domains made sense to me. For example, I grouped comments under "no clue" which related to the teachers having "no clue" [Karen] about their students as individuals. Brenda used "no clue" to describe a teacher so busy making notes on the overhead; she did not see the students' behaviors. Kelly commented upon teachers who had no clue, that is little or no knowledge about their subject area. Other examples which were about a teachers lack of knowledge or insight into classroom dynamics, methods or content became grouped under "no clue". "By the book" referred to students' issues around their text-based schooling which they found boring. I also found some groupings according to Spradley's rationale domain (x is a reason for doing y). "I'm not really learning" and "What's the point?" for example fit in this domain since students used these points as the rationale to skip or drop out. The students felt there was "no point" "no purpose" in attending daily because "I'm not really learning."

Spradley's attribution domain (x is a characteristic of y) also proved useful to me. "Teenage rebellious thing"; "It's all a lot of threats" and "It's such a game" fit in this domain. The literature (Buescher, 1991) and my professional experience made me see "teenage rebellious thing" as an attribute to a lesser or greater degree of most teenagers (adolescents). Under schooling "it's all a game and it's a lot of threats" fit as attributes of schooling as these students characterized their classroom experiences and confrontations with teachers and administrators using these metaphors of games and threats. The "boredom beaters" was Brenda's term for various behaviors students engaged in to cope with their boredom. These were variously described by the students as sleeping, doodling, skipping, fighting, and drinking and might be seen to fit in both these domains.

Of course, other researchers might have arranged the words differently. Spradley provided me with a starting point. The themes and sub-themes shifted as the analysis progressed and became more complex. I understood from Lincoln & Guba (1985) that some shifting should occur within and throughout my analysis as I attempted to reach understandings. My confusion and frustration with the analysis process and my inability to find models and "truths" led me to understand the complex nature of qualitative research more fully. I was reassured that "each inquiry raises more questions than it answers" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37) and that eventually I would arrive at some level of understanding of boredom's complex, holistic, multi-layered nature. This understanding at all times was subject to the students' scrutiny.

I did find the mutual-shaping domain (x is shaped by y and vice versa) especially helpful because it helped explain the complexity of this construct, "boredom". There seemed to be no causes and effects. I searched all the transcripts for synonymous or analogous concepts hoping to find some common threads. At points, I numerically counted the frequency of certain words. How often did "waiting for others", "by the book" or "games" appear within and across transcripts? This accounting was not helpful because it did not aid me in making sense of the students' words. Certainly, there were

very few cases of identical wordings. I was interviewing individuals. The sleepy students were bored; so too were the fidgety students. Yet, tired behaviors and fidgety behaviors manifest themselves very differently in the classroom. Other complexities and seemingly contradictory facets of the students' boredom appeared. For example, Garfunkel and Jill loved Math. Andrea, Karen and Sarah said Math was the epitome of boredom. Personal elements as well as classroom dynamics, teachers' methods, curriculum content and institutional organization interacted in multiple and varied ways across individuals.

Even more distressing was the realization that I was very aware of the students' descriptors of their boredom: their bored feelings, actions, coping strategies and the description of the context in which they were bored. What I could not grasp was their meaning for their boredom. I wanted to arrive at a definition of, not descriptors, of their boredom.

I began to understand Lincoln & Guba's (1985) comment that realities are "multiple, constructed and holistic" (p. 37). If students had no common boring courses or teachers, no common emotional affect to describe boredom, no common coping strategies for boredom, how would I arrive at their meaning of boredom? Was I to be left with saying their boredom was a very individual uninterpretable construct?

I persevered. Using large scrapbooks to web the students' words certain similarities of phrasing started to emerge. For example, the words "no clue" appeared in many of the interviews. "No clue" referred to teachers teaching subjects they were not trained to teach; to teachers who did not understand or empathize with their students, to counselors who did "everything by the books". This phrase led to teachers who read straight from text books, whose assignments were text-oriented. Administrators used the rule book. This phrase led to issues of control, choice, fun, and relevance which led to what's the point? The words were like molecules bumping into one another, assuming different directions and colliding again to move off in another direction.

Prior to March (1995), I had three major labels. By March (1995), I thought “no reason” and “by the books” fit under what formerly was a sub heading “What’s the Point?” “By the books” and “no reason” seemed to fit better under “what’s the point” since the students perceived no reason to go to school because it was by the book, so much was repetitious and they had to wait for others. Their teachers had “no clue”, were “phony”. They didn’t feel they were learning anything.

“Make my own hoops” covered the sub-ideas of learning “just ‘cause” they wanted to as opposed to “on demand”. It also covered “the teenage rebellious thing”; and the dislike of stereotypes. These students were very aware of stereotypes regarding, giftedness, dropping out, and teenagers. They saw school as “a lot of threats”. They made their own hoops; played their own game. As with all games, some “won” and some “lost”.

These headings, while helpful in connecting the descriptors, did not give a meaning for the students’ boredom. How was I to define their boredom? The insight came in August (1995) when I was reading about another concept. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) analysis of his participants’ comments on the aesthetic experience made sense to me. I tried to frame my students’ definition of boredom in a similar manner. This tentative definition was as follows: Boredom is a process of passive or active disengagement from school learning. Academically underachieving gifted students perceive a lack of challenge, choice, control or caring in their schooling. One of these or a combination, especially if joined with a student’s bad mood, lack of interest in a course or poor student/teacher relationships will accelerate this process of boredom.

Using this definition, I was able to reconcile the almost contradictory descriptors of bored behaviors, boring courses and coping strategies that I had struggled with for so long. I was also able to include the four elements these students felt essential to alleviating their boredom: challenge, choice, control or caring. Later, in January (1996), I added fun. The students consistently mentioned fun as a crucial element to their learning. Fun is connected to challenge and eventually was grouped under challenge in the discussion on

learning. I believed I was finally on the viable pathway. I was finally discovering a semantic, rather than diagrammatic, interpretation for their boredom.

The process of revisiting the tapes, the transcripts, the fieldnotes and the scrapbooks continued until the summer (1996). Professional and personal commitments interrupted my analysis and writing necessitating an extension. Feedback was a continuous process starting from the initial member check at the closure of each interview. I consulted the students about the accuracy of my interpretation throughout the study. Friends and colleagues were encouraging and critically listened to my ideas. My academic supervisors provided consistent feedback on my interpretation and writing.

The writing proved to be the most arduous challenge. It took tremendous amounts of time to condense and clarify my interpretation of the students' words. Organizing my information and writing was a staggering task. I finally had a file for each student after I discovered that a binder system did not allow me to freely access the transcripts, school records or notes on the individual student. I put any notes on subsequent phone calls or visits with the students in their personal folders. My three scrapbooks were filled with webs of each major heading and then the subheadings. Eventually these pages were highlighted with colored markers corresponding to the headings as I searched for the most significant student quotes for that heading or sub heading. My reflective journal became a three inch binder. It was comprised of the notes I had made from various literary and human sources as I struggled with the interpretation of the information. My collection of literature related to my study was another massive stack of binders and files.

As my chapters were written and rewritten they were filed in colored files so that I could more easily refer to the chapter I needed. These files became massive. I was afraid to lose anything, in case a particular draft held the great clarifying sentence or paragraph. The drafts showed the changes and development in my thinking.

All the drafts, notes, diagrams, and webs satisfy another criteria for credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They and the students' transcripts and audio-tapes allow any

reader to see the actual development of my interpretation and how I stayed true to the students' words. The drafts were read by my supervisors. Redundant statements, faulty reasoning and unorganized writing were scrutinized and discussed. My friend, a non-academic, was the third reader because at all times this study was to be for more than just academic eyes. The students who were involved in my study should also be able to read and understand, indeed corroborate the interpretation, without difficulty.

The entire process of designing, implementing, analyzing and writing was challenging. I had no conception initially of how incredibly time consuming the odyssey would become. The initial excitement generated from meeting and interviewing the students drove me through the first stages of analyzing, synthesizing and interpreting their comments. Lincoln & Guba (1985) warn that the writing process is the most challenging task of any inquiry, becoming oppressive as the novelty of the discoveries and interpretations becomes much too familiar to the researcher. I became so close, perhaps too close, to the whole process. I began to believe that I would never be able to coherently write my understanding of the students' boredom. Unforeseen interruptions (professional and personal) allowed me to take a fresher look at the students' comments. I returned to the drafts of the chapter realizing that I had previously reached only the top level of the necessary analyses and interpretation. I needed to search much more deeply.

I also realized that if I was not clear in my understandings of the students' boredom, how could I expect my readers to be? I also had to become much more ruthless in my use of the students' words. The students had so much to say that I found relevant and interesting. Unfortunately, some of their comments were not necessarily relevant to my study. My supervisors' more objective eyes became very sharp at pruning excess material. Constantly I had to ask myself how is this central to boredom? If I could not answer this honestly, I had to leave it out.

My discussions with my supervisor in July (1996) were productive, if harrowing. I realized that I was beginning to see my work with more objective eyes. Simultaneously, I

felt so personally involved and attached to my writing, that distancing myself from it was difficult. At the time, I felt the work had little to say as I struggled through the summer heat trying to clarify and condense my interpretation. The times when a thought was clarified became so clear it made the times of self-doubt and self-criticism more bearable. Still I began to truly understand that the writing process, especially sharpening my writing skills, was the most painful part of the odyssey.

I was also sharpening my verbal skills as I discussed my ideas again with my peers and friends. They helped me not only clarify my ideas, but continue the odyssey. They also helped me remain a little objective about this study as it sometimes seemed to consume my every thought and action.

As I revisited the transcripts, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, in August (1996) the mutual shaping of various themes became very clear. I began to accept that all the themes were interconnected, but the student's personality and temporal, contextual variables influenced the individual strengths of the themes. The more numerous and active the themes the more likely a student became bored. I also realized that my initial beliefs that a perceived lack of personal control, choice, challenge and caring were integral to their boredom.

In August (1996) I finally understood why the models could never work; boredom is too dynamic and fluid a process to ever be represented by a static model or diagram. The essence of their boredom can only be captured by these students' words. The words they chose to describe and characterize their boredom were adjectives and verbs. They could not give me a synonymous noun for boredom. They convinced me their boredom is much more complex than I naively assumed. Their boredom was an evolutionary process which occurred in different classrooms each day, dependent upon the students' perceptions of the degree and lack of personal control, choice, challenge and caring existing within each classroom. As well the students' moods, interests and abilities interacted with their perceptions.

The students were always the driving force in bringing closure to this process. They had honored me with their time and stories. I needed to reciprocate by telling their stories (Chapter 4). I had to finish the arduous writing process, so that my interpretation of their boredom (Chapter 5) could be shared with the reader. I aimed to close this process by early September (1996). I say “close” because I believe this odyssey will never end. The students’ words and stories will always be with me. The power of my writing will lie in whether these students and their words also remain with the reader.

CHAPTER 4

STUDENTS' SILHOUETTES

The following are really silhouettes of the students, "simple cut-out pictures" (Ayto, 1990). The word "silhouette" seems most apt because a silhouette is an outline often filled in black against a contrasting white background. It is used to characterize or identify a person or thing (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1968). I am not presumptuous enough to claim to have come to "know" these students in the short time I was with them. So again silhouette seems the most apt term to use to describe the following stories. Each student is sharply distinct in my mind and in the minds of those teachers and counselors who nominated them for my study. These students stood out and stand out for their exceptional gifts and perhaps for their non-conformity.

As well, a silhouette is an outline meant to characterize or represent - in this case, a gifted underachieving student's perception of boredom. These silhouettes are accurate in so far as the students' comments about their boredom have been corroborated by either the students, their teachers, counselors and/or parents. Secondly, the students' school histories have been recorded as another source of verification of the students' comments and recollections.

Initially, I had included the students' school history in the silhouettes. I found this information too cumbersome interfering with the flow of my writing. Nonetheless, their school histories provide critical verification of their identified "giftedness" and testimony to the students' recollections of past school events and grades. The report card comments which are included indicate their strengths and highlight concerns regarding behavior (which eventually became patterns). These behaviors (skipping, incomplete assignments) are associated in the literature with underachievement and dropping out (Devereaux, 1993; Whitmore, 1980). These pieces of data were compiled in Tables I, II and III

reflecting the students' elementary (K- 7), junior high (8 - 10) and senior high (11 -12) histories.

The students were grouped by the setting they were in during the initial interviews: junior, senior or alternative high school which was part of the public school system. Students who had had academic, social and/or emotional difficulties in the District's junior or senior high schools were placed in the alternative school. Dave and Garfunkel, the youngest students, were from the same junior high. Kelly, Anita, Dennis, Jill and Sarah attended the same senior high. Brenda, Andrea and Karen were attending the alternative school.

Eight of the 10 students dropped out of junior or senior high school at some point. The term "dropout" is used here in its most comprehensive form (covering both psychological / physical dropping out). Four students were expelled , suspended, or asked to leave by the administration in their schools. Two students left because of pregnancy. One student felt she could no longer cope at school and dropped out. Five students left the system for only a short time. Eight students have not completed Grade 12.

The tables and the silhouettes explore the students' departures from school as they relate to their boredom. The tables include the raw data on school history, absences, programs, educational testing and warning signs indicating possible underachievement or dropping out. The silhouettes provide a more anecdotal record of my impressions of the students as gifted individuals. More personal aspects of their boredom are reflected here. Each silhouette begins with the student's pseudonym and the dates of the interviews are in brackets. A quotation which represents their unique response towards boredom follows the dates.

JUNIOR HIGH STUDENTS (DAVE, GARFUNKEL)

Dave and Garfunkel, the youngest students in my study, were nominated for my study by their junior high challenge teacher. Both were in Grade 10 at the time of the interviews.

Dave (12/23/93) “Time Isn’t An Issue”

I met Dave in December (1993) in his home on Christmas holidays. He was a slender, blond, athletic-looking boy. His Grade 6 and 7 teachers both independently said Dave was a really nice boy, personable, sociable and athletic. He wore a hoop in one ear and a stud in his other ear. He had just turned 15 and was the youngest student in the study. His birthdate is December 14, making him very young in his cohort group. His mother showed me Dave’s test for kindergarten readiness because he’s so young within his group. He was ready. Unfortunately ear infections impaired his hearing and his reading suffered. He had tubes in his ears for a year and primary learning assistance for reading. So poor health, rather than young age, gave him a difficult start. I found him very personable and articulate.

Nonetheless, Dave told me “most of my elementary was really good, like it was really fun.” He remembered his report cards as saying “needed to try a little harder on tests and put a little more effort into assignments.” Now, in junior high, he was only achieving C’s. Dave said when he reached junior high, “It started to get like boring. There wasn’t a lot to do. There wasn’t much excitement. . . . I just kind of gave up, sorta. I just didn’t want to listen anymore.” Dave became bored “doing the same stuff”. This example of boredom was reiterated by many of the other students. Many also echoed that junior high “started to get like boring”. He felt he didn’t learn a lot in school. “I figure I learn more from my friends than I learn in school. . . . All the essentials of living I learn from being outside with my friends.”

Dave continued to explain, “It just got harder and harder for me to keep up because I wasn’t doing my homework. I started to fall behind.” He didn’t do his homework because,

I was too busy talking to my friends and I wasn’t listening in class so I didn’t really know what I was supposed to be doing, so I didn’t understand it much. . . . My grades got lower in the classes. I didn’t do my homework. I got in trouble. . . . because as soon as the teacher finds out you’re getting a lower grade, he like keeps an eye on you more, and I was talking a lot and he didn’t notice it before, but he noticed it now. I’d get in trouble and I kept getting moved.

Consequently, Dave would “try harder not to get caught and socialize when he’s (the teacher’s) not looking and when he’s not paying attention to what I’m doing”. I said it sounded like a cat and mouse game. He replied, “It made it a little more exciting for me. I guess ‘cause I mean it’s not as easy for me to talk to my friends, so I have to try a little harder. I have to put a little more effort into it. . . . It’s a little more challenging.”

Classroom challenges came in outwitting the teacher, not from the curriculum.

Dave also found it difficult to accept being told what to do when he entered junior high. He said if people would ask him that was fine. His mother concurred that Dave became stubborn if told to do something. “I don’t like people telling me what I have to do. I like to be able to make my own decisions. I think I’m old enough now to make the right decisions on my own.”

Dave was not a troublemaker, but “If they get angry at me. . . . then it just makes me not want to do it. If they were to ask me. . . . I’d try and get it done.” Dave would show respect to those who respected him. Teachers who yelled at him received yelling back. “If they’re yelling (and) I figure if I haven’t done anything really wrong then I’ll start yelling.” He would be sent to the principal’s office.

According to Dave his talent and passion lie in drawing. “If I was allowed to draw for the whole class, I wouldn’t talk to anybody. Like I wouldn’t socialize because I’d be too busy drawing and trying to think about what I’m going to draw.” He drew at home.

I like to draw the same thing to get it to be good. . . . Add more things so it looks really neat. . . . I draw animals and flowers and I like drawing ships. . . . I don’t like doing art for like work, like I don’t consider art work, like I don’t like handing things in to get it marked.

I asked him if he wanted to be a professional artist. He said that he wasn’t sure about his future, but he believed he would become a mechanic because “I’m really good working on cars.”

Dave likes being active and being outdoors. “It’s [the outdoors] really unpredictable. . . . It’s better than sitting inside, because when you sit inside nothing ever changes.” Dave also likes to think and to jog to a place in the wilderness where he can think, where time in effect stops, where “time isn’t an issue, like it is in the classroom.”

Dave’s gifts, according to his teacher, were in leadership, discussion and creativity. Dave’s passion for drawing, movement and tinkering with machines were not compatible with schooling and freedom to move, discuss and socialize are not high priorities in most classroom settings. This lack of mobility and Dave’s knowledge that he was getting further behind may have precipitated his dropping out.

When I contacted him in February (1995), Dave said he had dropped out and was finishing a Math 11 course by correspondence. He was going to finish his other Grade 11 courses by correspondence in the future. He was working at a fast food restaurant and intended to return to school in September (1995) to complete his Grade 12.

In June (1995) his mother told me he was not taking his Math 11 course by correspondence. He was registering for Grade 11 in September (1995) and was working sporadically as a drywaller. In February (1996) Dave answered my phone messages and

told me he was in his second semester of Grade 11 and he felt he would stay in school and graduate.

In July (1996) I talked further with Dave and his mother. Dave had completed Grade 11 in 1996. He still believed and his mother hoped he would graduate in June (1997). She knew better than to force the issue because Dave truly would not be told what to do.

Garfunkel (1/2/94; 06/27/94) “Make My Own Hoops”

Garfunkel was the second youngest student in this study and had a November birthdate making him very young within his cohort group at school. Garfunkel and I were at the same school in his Grade 7 year although he was not my student. When we met we shared memories of incidents and teachers in his Grade 7 year. All our interviews took place at my school. Garfunkel perceived himself to be imaginative and dramatic. He arrived for the first interview on roller blades. The school secretary stopped him because he was skating down the hallways. She laughed when he removed his false mustache, recognizing him as the former Grade 6 / 7 school clown who had spent most of his Grade 7 year in the school office.

Garfunkel had a high absentee record and had been suspended for fighting in Grade 7. He said the principal's office was “my second home” in Grade 7. His elementary reports refer to his attention seeking behaviors which found some positive outlets in dramatic, dance and musical performances. Garfunkel also was involved in ballroom dance competitions in Grades 3 through 6 and Grades 8 and 9 outside of school (he broke his arm in Grade 7 and could not compete). He hid this activity from his friends.

Garfunkel said his Grade 8 year, “Was just a total socializing year.” Nonetheless in Grade 8 he made the honor roll both semesters. In Grade 9, his average dropped to B's

and in Grade 10 to C's. When I asked if he was contemplating dropping out, he replied, "If there was another way for me to get an education, I wouldn't be going there."

He was keenly interested in Drama and was in the advanced performance class in Grade 10. Playing football, chess, card games, and Dungeons and Dragons filled his time outside school. He liked "to basically outsmart" his opponents. "That's fun when you do". He enjoyed learning about anything related to electronics. He wanted to be a robotics engineer and excelled at Math. When he chose to work at it, he earned A's without much effort.

With reference to his marks, he said,

Why are they poor, if I'm so smart? Because in high school, it's not like it's your own opinion, it's what the teacher tells you to write, you have to write and I really don't want to. . . . I've been told to pass through high school you have to jump through hoops and I don't want to. I want to make my own hoops.

In the second interview, Garfunkel elaborated. "It's no fun if you play by the rules. It's a bore. . . . I want to weave, take some wrong turns, go party a little. . . . I want to experience life, not follow the arrow." The game was always to outsmart the teacher. "I love to annoy people. . . . To turn them up a little." He wanted them to weave, rather than follow.

When he was bored "sitting there twiddling my thumbs being class clown [he was] figuring out ways to stump the teacher. The only challenge is outsmarting the people." Later he said, "When I tell the kids at school, I'm one of the smart kids, they go like NO WAY, you're too much of a clown to be smart." He felt he always knew he was smart because "I was able to figure out things faster than anybody else could. Like everyone else was 'How do you do that?' I go it's so easy."

Garfunkel moved to new schools in Grade 2, 3 and 4. Perhaps these moves made it harder for him to settle down. All the report cards (K - 7) comment on Garfunkel's overly

social, attention seeking nature. He was often disruptive and outspoken. Teachers did note his exceptional imagination and verbal skills indicating they “augur well for a career in the courtroom” (Grade 3). His exceptional math ability was mentioned consistently. He was enrolled in the Challenge programs in Grades 1, 5, 6, and 7. His Grade 7 teacher said his “quick mind does not tolerate mundane tasks well” and Garfunkel would accept mediocre marks rather than working to his potential. Significant remarks appear in Garfunkel’s Grade 7 Challenge comments. He was seen as a risk-taking, self-assured, natural actor and leader. His challenge teacher felt he needed to use empathy and tolerance when he was frustrated and working in groups.

I found this interesting because Garfunkel did say challenging his Grade 7 teacher became “revenge” but the eventual suspension was “funny”. “I’ve never regretted an action I’ve ever done. . . . I’m kind to people who are to me.” The others, “I couldn’t care.” I asked him if he understood empathy. He said he wasn’t empathic because “People don’t do that to me.” He felt he had a few friends who understood him and felt it was very important to him to follow his own pathway.

Garfunkel’s Test of Cognitive Skills (TCS) scores (1991) reveal a very low memory score, 74th percentile which might have affected his ability to learn to read easily. Reading was difficult for him in early primary. His other scores were very high, 98 - 99 percentile in sequencing, verbal reasoning and analogies. Garfunkel’s assignments were very late or not handed in at all. Garfunkel mentioned, as did his report cards, his extremely poor spelling. Consistently in early grades Garfunkel was admonished to practice his reading. Perhaps his marks were poor because of some reading and memory related problems which may be very significant given the exceptional strengths in the other areas. He said, “I forgot how to spell ‘the’. I constantly get ‘who’ mixed up and ‘how’.” He said many teachers had suggested he might be learning disabled and “I probably am in

some way but a lot of gifted people are.” So he seemed to believe a learning disability was part of his giftedness.

When I contacted him in February (1995), he was still playing the game trying to outsmart his teachers and the administration. He had been caught skipping, been reprimanded and was about to start to skip again. In June (1995) Garfunkel said his grades in Grade 11 had fallen to a C / C- average. He had been on five different behavior contracts with two teachers and had failed Physics.

His goal was to learn to be a chef. He felt he would not have the money for university for the originally envisioned robotics engineering courses. Garfunkel also said he feared he might not stay in Grade 12. He still worked at the same restaurant. Now he was a cook. He planned to do his high school culinary program work experience there.

When he came to my school for the June (1995) interview, Garfunkel’s former music teacher recognized him. Her comment was, “Garfunkel let’s hug one another after all the grief we caused one another.” She had known him for many years in elementary school. She said to him, “You must do something in the arts.” She said to me later that he was one of the most gifted, natural musicians, performers and actors she had ever seen. She congratulated him on his choice of a profession as a chef saying he could indulge his creativity there.

When I met Garfunkel in January (1996), he had not yet graduated. He was going to do his high school courses by correspondence while continuing his work in the same restaurant. By June (1996), he was living with his girlfriend, working full time and had not graduated. Perhaps he truly will make his own hoops. He seems to have a very stable relationship and is living independently while apprenticing in his chosen vocation. He is following his own pathway and appears very happy.

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STUDENTS (BRENDA, ANDREA, KAREN)

Three students in my study experienced success at the alternative school. The alternative school has more flexible scheduling, smaller classes, more youth workers and counselors per student population than the main stream public system. The three alternative school students in my study were successful in this setting [Brenda, Andrea and Karen]. I interviewed Brenda and Karen at the alternative school and Andrea at home.

Brenda (12/06/93) “Boredom Beaters”

Brenda was 16 years old and in Grade 11. She was the most unconventionally dressed of all the students. She wore a black leather jacket, high leather boots and had a number of rings on her fingers. She said she was actually toned down somewhat because it was winter. She had been expelled from two junior high schools for fighting. She was bussing from Vancouver (a 45 minute one way trip) to come to this alternative school in a suburb (her former district). She had gone to live with her mother in the city after many years with her father in the suburbs. She was a tall, lean, very graceful girl. I later learned she had been passionately involved in jazz dancing for many years. Family problems made it impossible for her to continue. She had done very well in the band programs at junior high and had refereed community softball games.

Brenda’s English teacher at the alternative school showed me examples of her writing in our initial meeting. He felt, and I agreed, that Brenda was a very talented “natural” writer. In a later interview he indicated Brenda had difficulty “fine tuning” her writing so that her A-/ B marks could become solid A marks.

Her English teacher felt she was ready to return to the mainstream school, but Brenda felt she would not be able to cope with the way she would be treated by the students and teachers. Her “hard outside image”, said her teacher, masked a little girl who

was very private, closed and explosive. I found Brenda to be wary and restrained in the first moments of our interview. Gradually the little girl side of her, her giggle and her sensitivity became apparent during the interview. Her writing showed great sensitivity and empathy.

Brenda fought to manage her boredom. It, “Makes you want to do something. You don’t know what and you just sit there and fidget and you get all this energy stored up and you have nothing to do with it which is why you go out and pick a fight with somebody. So you get rid of it.”

Brenda began her elementary schooling with good grades and was ahead in Grade 4 and 5 by three grade levels in her language and reading skills on the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). A telling comment appeared in her Grade 4 November report card:

She uses her intelligence to avoid her tasks and diverts her energies into unacceptable behavior both in and out of the class. She needs to start listening to instructions, finishing her work neatly and completely, completing homework assignments, and remembering to bring all necessary equipment to class.

Brenda felt her boredom started after Grade 2 in Grade 3 or 4. “I started getting lazy I think. . . . Somewhere along there I just started getting bored.” She believed her Grade 3 teacher started her loss of respect for teachers.

He used to make stupid jokes and I found a lot of them really insulting and I told him so. . . . He wouldn’t take it seriously and I’d get all choked. . . . You just lose all respect for your teacher and next year at that young age, it holds over.

Brenda really became bored in Grade 8.

It started in Grade 8. I started getting really bored with everything and I think I started skipping in Grade 8. . . . I was really miserable going to classes because I’d just sit there and stare at the ceiling and do nothing. So I’d rather go somewhere with a friend of mine and stare at something else.

She continued to skip classes because,

I'd sit there and say I'm really sorry, it won't happen again. . . . They'd give me another chance and they'd say 'Well, but next time,' you know and after you hear that "next time" you want to see how long it's going to take.

Brenda sought the challenge of "calling teachers on what they said" would be the consequence for her misbehavior. They finally suspended her. Brenda became more and more aggressive as she grew older. This aggression culminated in her expulsion for drinking, fighting and harassment. In Grade 9, she had a two day suspension for harassment of a fellow student. In May of the same year she had a five day suspension. She ran away from the teachers and their hotel on a school band trip and met some boys. She quit school in January of her Grade 10 year.

The school system sucks. . . . They don't seem to know how to deal with people who either can't or don't know how to deal with the system. . . . I just thought it was all bullshit. . . . If you weren't getting A's in that class the teacher showed you no respect. Like when I was, I started to fail Math when I was skipping all the time, I mean before then I wasn't doing so hot in it anyway. I think I was getting C's or something but then I started skipping, like the marks really fell, because once you miss a few days of Math, in a regular school you can't catch up. And I'd go for help and they'd be, 'Well, you weren't here and you were supposed to be here, so I don't see why I should help you,' type thing. Which just makes you say, 'Fine, I'm not even going to show up for today's class 'cause what's the point? I have no idea what's going on.' So you'd leave again. . . . And then they'd say, 'Well, you know we have these tutorial sessions where you can come and. . . .' But who wants to go if you're going to get treated like you're nothing.

Her English teacher at the alternative school (04/08/94) concurred with Brenda's belief that the regular system cannot and will not handle students like Brenda. He felt the students see the system as set up to suit the teachers. They see "through the crap." Brenda truly could not tolerate the lack of respect some of her teachers showed her so she was disrespectful in turn. At the same time all this was happening, she was also having family problems. She believed that her boredom had a lot to do with judgmental teachers who did not care about her as a person. Why should she care about them or please them, when they made little effort to respect and care for her?

Brenda also resented being treated like a Grade 2 even though she admired teachers attempting to get students involved. She was at her last school where lunch intramurals were mandatory.

You had to go and I was only there for three weeks (she was suspended). I just basically said Fuck it I'm not doing this. You know running around the gym like Grade 2. There's no way. I mean you gotta give them credit for trying cause they were trying to make school a little more interesting, but when you don't have the option to do it or not and when you're going through your little rebellious stage you're not going to do it.

Brenda provided the term "boredom beater"; any activity which alleviated boredom from the covert forms of doodling, dozing and daydreaming to more overt forms such as: challenging teachers, skipping classes or becoming truant. "That was another boredom beater though. Fighting. . . . and drinking. . . . We used to skip school and go drink." Brenda's boredom beaters were extreme including drinking, fighting and eventually breaking and entering homes; which she stopped because she feared a criminal record. She and I both agreed that her particular boredom beaters were a little extreme and self-destructive. She said, "Actually in the end, (being kicked out and having to go to the alternative school) it was for the best 'cause now I'm actually working."

When I spoke to Brenda in March (1995), she sounded very happy. She was intending to go into social work or become a police officer. In June (1995) she said she would graduate the following June (1996). This was a year later than her cohort group. She still intended to be a police officer or go into social work.

In February (1996) I talked with Brenda's mother on the telephone. Her mother said Brenda arose at 5 AM to go to high school in her former district. Brenda still had goals to be in the police force or perhaps in wildlife conservation. Brenda's mother felt that Brenda had matured a great deal. She also felt the school system "did not empower students and bored them silly." The system tried "to smash Brenda down" every time Brenda tried again. Brenda's mother said her younger daughter (2 years younger than

Brenda) was an honor roll student. She felt Brenda would rebel whereas her younger daughter would “knuckle down” when admonished or upset. Brenda’s mother saw the school system as containing very few positives, and having a “hidden curriculum.” It may be that Brenda’s discontent with her schooling was exacerbated by her mother’s feelings about the system. Brenda admitted that in her teenage rebellious years when she lived with her father and step-mother she might have misbehaved in part to antagonize her father as well as her teachers.

Andrea (12/23/93) “You Never Get To Really Think”

Andrea is a teen parent who took advantage of the child care provided at the alternative school. Andrea was baby-sitting her step-siblings and caring for her own child the day I met her. We conducted the interview in her mother’s living room. Andrea lived in the basement suite with her baby. Her step-siblings, brother and her own baby occasionally interrupted the interview. Andrea’s mother had also been a teen parent. She was 16 when she had Andrea. Andrea said her mother did not believe school was very important.

Andrea had moved twice in kindergarten, once in Grade 1, and twice in Grade 2. These moves were across two school districts. In Grade 6 she was in the Challenge Program. She moved again in Grade 7, once in Grade 8 and three times in Grade 9. Andrea’s numerous moves were significant because they affected her ability to develop stable relationships. She said,

I never really talked back in those moves. I never really talked at all. I figured I wouldn’t be there long. I didn’t bother really listening well, I did but I never put myself into meeting anybody or becoming involved in anything.

She continued, “So when I was older I never really knew how because I hadn’t tried before, so I just went with a bad crowd because that’s the easiest one to get into.” In

Grade 8 she was suspended for one week for taking drugs in school. She was also involved with drugs in Grade 9, “Never to escape from school just to do stuff with friends just to have fun.” In Grade 9 she went to three different schools. “I failed Grade 9 because I never went.” She felt

I just didn't think there was a point in going. They were all the same. I mean even now they're all the same. I mean Grade 8, Grade 9, Grade 10, Grade 11 you learn the exact same thing with one new thing thrown in.

She did not avoid school because she lacked ability. Many teachers had commented on her abilities, especially her writing ability. Andrea said she wrote about “Just whatever I'm feeling I guess, short stories, everything.” I read her writing at the alternative school. It moved me to tears as it did her English teacher. Her writing is personal, powerful and emotional. She did not want it public because she did not feel it was good enough and she was self-conscious about it. Her writing expressed the abusive and intolerable situations she had lived with earlier in childhood.

She felt that no one helped her with her problems in school. “You weren't listened to really, . . . 'Cause I did like a lot of things like looking for help and I never got any, so kind of didn't trust these people, why listen to them?” Andrea's counselor at the alternative school (04/08/94) called Andrea “the invisible person” and said trust was a big issue for Andrea. Her English teacher (04/08/94) said Andrea was “wise beyond her years.” He said she “would not take crap from a teacher.” Andrea did not appear angry, in fact she appeared introspective and calm. Andrea said, “If you come from your house and there's abuse and you go to school and your teacher yells at you if you don't do this exam or whatever it's all a lot of threats.”

Andrea's picture of her schooling was bleak. Aside from her moves, her bad crowds, mistrust and the threats, school was boring. Andrea's boredom was connected to the repetitive nature of the course work. Her primary reasons for boredom seemed to be more related to her relationships with her teachers. Boring was “Listening to teachers talk

about themselves. . . . Wasting air.” She resented being treated “Like you’re still a kid. You might as well have stayed in elementary school. . . . They can’t really relate to you.”

She expanded upon this when she told me about speaking to teenagers about being a teen mom. She liked to, although she was very shy. Her counselor said she had excellent rapport with her audience. Andrea’s point was she felt adults do not know how to relate to teens because

I mean I know when you’re a teenager. I mean I still am, you think you know everything and you don’t but that’s how you think so they should be thinking of ways to get to the person that’s thinking like that instead of saying you think that you know everything but you don’t. This is what’s real. But you’re not going to listen to that right?

She believed teachers needed to be prepared to teach, to answer all questions, to make students feel part of the class so that “you feel you’re going to be involved” otherwise she would “warm the seat”.

Aside from student / teacher relationship issues, Andrea’s boredom arose because “you never get to really think” in school.

You had to do what they told you. Write a story about a leaf. You’d get a lot more creative people out of school if they could just use their own mind in their writing instead of just blending with the rest of the people and just being marked for the comma in the right place.

In February (1995) Andrea was completing her Grade 12 at the alternative school. She said she would finish her Grade 12, and hoped to enter SFU, possibly as a psychology major. She said her little boy motivated her to do as well as possible, to think about her future and to make a good future for herself and her child. In February (1996) Andrea was living independently on her own with her child. Her counselor at the alternative school felt this was better for Andrea.

In Andrea’s case family conflicts, numerous moves with consequent lack of bonding with peers and teachers and ultimately teen pregnancy contributed to her

dropping out. Her life experiences had certainly been less than idyllic. She had shown exceptional talent as a writer and speaker, incredible depth and understanding for her age.

Karen (12/9/93) “They Don’t Expect You To Understand”

Karen is also a teen parent. She is married to the father of their three children. Her appearance and demeanor were as she put it, very “straight”. “Like I’ve always been very straight. I never got into the regular stuff that teenagers did, trying different things, smoking. Right, I never did that.” She did however become involved with her present husband at a very young age. I had noted that she was very “clean cut looking.” She seemed shy and giggled in a self-conscious manner. She was very reflective and spoke quietly, but confidently.

Karen had consistently been praised for her talents as a writer in her report cards. She took Creative Writing 12 (A mark) while in Grade 10. At the same time she was encouraged to become more active in school (42 absences, Grade 10; 88, Grade 11). Certainly her high absenteeism hindered her ability to become active in other clubs, although she did work with the Drama club. Her English teacher at the alternative school encouraged her to submit her articles to local newspapers. He found her to be “incisive, intuitive, concerned with doing well.” He felt she “crafted” her writing very carefully.

Karen had an article published in the Vancouver Sun in June (1995), when she wrote about her life as a young parent.

In my circle of life I am a typical 19 year-old girl. I graduated with honors. I dream of a career in journalism. I enjoy camping and long walks on the beach with my guy. I love my parents (okay, maybe that’s not so typical). I have two children and a third on the way.

I am not a drug addict. I do not smoke. I don’t even drink. I’ve never run away. I’ve never spent a night on the street or been picked up by the police. I’ve never been abused by my parents and my dad was not an

alcoholic. . . So why did I get pregnant for the first time at fifteen? . . .
Because I WANTED to.

She goes on to explain that she was married at sixteen, and discovered she was pregnant again. She returned to school in January through the Teen Parenting program located at the alternative school. She has spoken to teens at high school about the realities of being a teen parent. She argues: “There are teens who should not be parents. Just as there are adults who should not be parents. In either case, no one deserves to be stereotyped by the actions of others.”

These brief quotes may indicate the passion that is hidden beneath Karen’s rather straight, quiet appearance. She writes to express her concerns about a number of issues. She wrote about a parent who had locked two small children in her car while she ran errands in a shopping mall. She later wrote about the home birth of her third child.

Her counselor (04/08/94) at the alternative school found her to be very “focused, internally directed, idealistic.” She felt Karen knew how the world should be and had difficulty dealing with the negativity in it. Karen very clearly had a focus at the alternative school to complete her education. She did so with honors.

Karen clearly knew why her mainstream schooling was boring. She was adamant that good teachers “get down in the dirt” with their students rather than sitting behind a desk. To her, this ability to “get down in the dirt” was linked very strongly to whether she was bored or not.

It’s almost like they think it’s a one way deal because we’re supposed to do everything that they say and be wonderful for them. But when they’re not going to give as well. . . . So a good teacher is one who is not afraid to get in there and help out. Doesn’t sit behind a desk all the time like a barrier between him and the kids. Yeah, someone who gets right in the dirt and helps you dig out the little pieces of clay pots, or whatever.

This is a reference to Karen's favorite field trip to an archeological dig in Grade 7. The good teacher is someone "really wanting to be with the kids, not just getting paid, goes past what the job requires."

Karen found schooling depersonalized; students were treated more like numbers than people. "I'm not a number, I'm a human being. . . . If I could give one message to teachers I'd say don't take the job unless you're really going to go out of your way to do it."

She resented the emphasis on memorization at the expense of understanding and inspiration, "We're never asked, we were never questioned, never inspired to ask why does this work? It was just, you know, do the work, hand it in, I'll mark it. You'll get a grade. That was it."

Karen liked to learn; she challenged herself. She taught herself languages, read philosophy and literature. "I go to the library at least once a week." Her first daughter,

Upped my desire to learn more because being a mom this kid is going to be asking me what life is and you want to know the answers. And for me the only way to get my life in order is to know everything, so I can decide what my principles and morals are.

In July (1995), I went to Karen's home to have her read the first draft of her silhouette and other comments she made within the draft of Chapter 5. Her two children, 2 and 3 years old, were mulling about. She had been laid off from her job and could not find another job. Since she was seven months pregnant, few people wanted to hire her. The daycare costs were high and many jobs did not prove worthwhile economically. Karen sent out articles to the local news; however, she received no pay. She intended to start her Bachelor of Arts through the Open Learning Institute because she needed her BA to be hired as a journalist. She was continuing her novel. She had chosen a challenging path.

In February (1996), Karen wrote an unpaid weekly column on life and family for a Gulf Island newspaper. She faxed this column from her home. She was still writing her

novel because “especially in my case there’s no other outlet.” With three children under five years, she was determined “to make my own life, make my own dent.” She felt compelled to write.

Karen chose to care for her family, balancing this caring with pursuing her goals and her gift for writing. She satisfied her thirst for knowledge by borrowing books weekly from the library on philosophy, religion, morality anything that interested her. She wrote her columns showing her passion for justice, fairness and respect which her teachers had noted many years earlier.

SENIOR HIGH STUDENTS (KELLY, ANITA, JILL, SARAH, DENNIS)

Kelly (01/9/94) “School Should Be A Wonderful Experience”

I met 17-year old Kelly at her home in January (1994). She was in Grade 12. She had been in the French Immersion program until Grade 11. I found her to be very poised, self-assured; almost cool. She was very serious and articulate. She had just returned from participating in a weekend girls’ wrestling tournament. The counselor who gave me her name said she was a challenge to her teachers and had skipped a lot. The counselors and her teachers described her as “very bright” in the sciences and math. She skipped classes often and she still achieved A’s.

Why was Kelly perceived by her teachers as academically underachieving? She did maintain an A average even though she skipped school. Her A’s were not the high A’s her teachers knew she could receive with more effort on her part. I interviewed one of Kelly’s senior high teachers (03/28/94) who said she felt Kelly was “the brightest young lady she had worked with in fourteen years of teaching.” The school-based team worried about her, “God what can we do for her?”(03/28/94). They decided Kelly’s work experience would involve participating in real research in a Science research lab at UBC. Kelly had a passion

for facts and Science. She mentioned that she was looking forward to this work experience.

Her senior high teacher felt Kelly “tried hard not to be a nerd.” Kelly said, “I spent a lot of my life, especially in elementary school trying to act as if I had very low grades.” Kelly contemplated whether she wanted to hide her giftedness to be popular. “I can’t really say, because I had a lot of friends, but I might still have those friends had I been honest about the marks I got. It was just something I did.” When she moved to her current district she was again nominated for the enrichment program. She liked this class because the activity was self-chosen and self-directed research.

Kelly’s junior high counselor (03/30/94) said Kelly was “so perfect (as a student) she gave new meaning to the word.” Both she and the senior high teacher had commented independently that Kelly had an almost “disdainful” attitude towards school. She tolerated the system using it to get what she needed to graduate. Certainly, Kelly admitted she had “little respect for high school as a concept anymore.” Her junior high counselor felt this disdainful attitude was attributable to Kelly’s feelings of anger towards the system.

Her senior high teacher felt that this attitude could be attributed to Kelly’s self-consciousness and her insecurity socially. Her senior high teacher felt that until Grade 12 Kelly’s involvement in the French Immersion Program was a safe place for her socially. Kelly said that she was very timid until she moved in Grade 7. She knew she’d have to speak to make new friends. “French Immersion helped me a lot, being with the same group over the years, I felt confident to speak up.” She felt that she was very direct. “This is the way I am. I don’t change for people. I’m me.”

Kelly said, “School should be a wonderful experience. . . . Sometimes it is, you have fun, you learn a lot, it’s great and then there’s all those other times. . . .”

I don’t expect to be bored at school. Like to me, the whole concept of school is great, but it tends to be just like communism. It doesn’t live up to

its ideals. . . . I have a choice of what I want to learn and they'll teach it to me for free. All they're asking of me is effort and if I give them that then I can do anything with it I want. It's like getting handed life on a silver platter.

Kelly felt she had teachers who didn't like teaching. She also found as she went on in high school that her courses weren't any more interesting or more challenging.

I don't know if they can't find enough teachers or what, but there's a lot of people there, that I have a sense, they don't want to be teaching and I'm not sure why they're teaching, but they don't like it. You can tell they don't like it. . . . Part of it is that I don't have that much respect for high school as a concept anymore. I just think you always say okay, when I get to high school, I'll get to pick my courses. It'll be more interesting. It'll be harder material. I guess the material's gotten harder but not very noticeably.

She felt she was "mean" to her teachers. If she felt "this (the class) is a joke" she would walk out. If, "I just don't like her. I want to make her life hell." She was very aware that there is no simple hierarchy of who was on the bottom, weak, or new in teaching. "If I knew I had more control than they did, I'd use it." She did not challenge department heads or the administration. She felt teachers had not put forth their best effort to teach her, so why should she have put forth her best effort to learn?

Kelly's brilliance was obvious to her teachers, but they could not give her the challenge she needed. As she said,

My mind draws a blank if I have been bored and I've been sitting there waiting to get the hell out of here. I tend to not hear when people are talking to me, not see what's going on around me. I'm just dazed and the bell will go and I'll go and get up and leave. Physically I get uncomfortable and jumpy and I feel like walking somewhere, anywhere.

She had managed in high school to have "three lunch hours in a day" because her teachers did not record nor report her class absences. She felt her teachers said to themselves, "we know she's getting a good mark" and let her skipping continue. Other teachers like her Physics teacher allowed her to do the last five questions of their assignments. The last questions are generally the most difficult. When Kelly finished these questions, she was allowed to leave class early.

Kelly did leave school early. She had compacted some of her courses and she had the credits required to graduate. She did not pick up the extra Calculus as she had intended. She said she had given the teachers just what they required and nothing more. She walked away from any further challenges in high school. She went to work at McDonald's in her last semester. She hoped university would provide the challenges she sought. In February (1995) her counselor told me that she was achieving a B average in Sciences at UBC.

Kelly dropped in to my school in April (1995). I had not seen her since our initial interview. I was surprised and flattered that she made the effort to see me. I felt the effort indicated she was comfortable with me and felt safe revealing her feelings. She had been unhappy at high school but she was glowing retelling her challenging but worthwhile university experiences. Perhaps her dream of combining teaching and learning at university would come true. For her that would not be work.

I'd like to just keep learning things and maybe take some time off to work. And then get back to it. Always people can combine teaching and being at the university. That's not really work to me. Like, it doesn't seem like work to me, because even if you have to teach this course, I've always found teaching things always heightens my understanding of them. Like it helps. It would become work, if like I say I had to teach the same course for ten years, then it would become mechanical, because that's what I think of as work.

Kelly had unfortunately found her high school years' work mechanical, routine and boring.

Anita (12/23/93, 01/12/94) "I Want To Learn Something"

I first met Anita at her home on the Christmas holidays. She was in Grade 12 and 17 years old. She had been in French Immersion throughout her schooling until Grade 11 and had participated in the Challenge Programs in elementary school. During Grade 6 she was often in the Principal's office. She felt her Grade 6 / 7 teacher had little classroom

management and was not educating her. Everything was repeated over and over again. She wanted to learn something new.

I was also mad at him because he wasn't giving me what, even when I was a little kid, I knew that I deserved education and deserved to say what I wanted to say. I always knew those things 'cause I always had these opinions that I would totally stick up for. And I knew we weren't doing the things that we should be doing and so did everybody else. . . . I remember always thinking I want to learn something and we're not learning anything and we did the same things over and over again. . . . Maybe that's why I was so mean, because when I get bored and not doing anything, I feel like punching and maybe I used to yell at my teacher, instead of punching him, I don't know.

Later, in junior high there were major outbursts between Anita and her teachers. Her junior high counselor (03/30/94) said "what a physical girl." She also said Anita "wore people out"; she was "a purposeful child." Indeed, her mother and school counselor corroborated that Anita had almost left school in her junior high years. She "stomped out of class, raging about boredom, injustice and the pacing of classes." Anita recognized her physical nature so much so that she said, "Whenever I'm not moving, I'm bored basically."

Anita felt she was recommended for my study because of her nonconformist dress.

I think that one of the reasons I got recommended or whatever, is because most of the teachers look at me and think, 'Oh she's just another weirdo,' and all that, 'She's stupid' When they find out that I am good, it's more surprising than to see a regular looking average person.

Anita obviously felt she was being judged by her appearance. She freely volunteered that, "I do dress a lot more normal. I've mellowed out ever since I was a freak in Grade 11." She claimed that she didn't dress to present an image, "Cause it's exactly the opposite. I don't dress that way to present an image. . . . This is just the way I like to dress. I feel better when I'm dressed comfortable like this." One of Anita's senior high teachers (03/30/94) said Anita had been "in grunge land" but "toned down a lot" in

Grade 12. She also said Anita had to learn in Grade 11 to become less “intolerant” and “not fly off the handle.”

In her teachers’ eyes Anita had chosen a relatively non-academic program. Her passions lay in Geography, English and Drama.

I think the reason I like geography is I like learning something and then I walk down the street and say, ‘Heh, I learned that in Geography. Oh it’s raining, because and oh I know why it’s going to be cold today and stuff like that’ and I like English because it makes you think about yourself and other people. . . . I don’t know why I like Drama. I just, I guess I like being the center of attention. I’m not an attention getter, but I like it when people watch me perform and I like performing and I can’t really explain about the drama thing, I just like it.

Anita’s mom said that Anita was given anger management training by her junior high counselor, her “guardian angel.” Anita’s mother also said that Anita’s medication for asthma tended to make her hyperactive. Certainly, all the adults I interviewed about Anita mentioned her purposefulness and her physicality. I had noted in my post interview reflections that Anita was incredibly busy, focused and seemed to have a great deal of energy. She moved around more than the others during the interviews.

Anita’s junior high counselor felt Anita’s passion for Drama “got her through a lot.” If Anita was very busy, she did not have time to worry or think about her concerns and frustrations with the classroom. She could focus on Drama, soccer and later an almost full time job at a gas station. Her mother felt Anita seemed to thrive on pressures and schedules.

In Grade 12, she worked at least 25 hours per week at a gas station. She had a major role in the Shakespearean school production. She had a strong background in singing, dancing and acting and she was an excellent soccer player. She won the award for creative writing as well as the award for public speaking at her school in Grade 12.

Anita’s following statement reflects her need for challenging activities.

All the teachers like my English teacher, Science teacher, Geography teacher and Drama teacher. They know that I need to be pushed further than most of the people. They go out of their way to like, my Earth Science teacher, he'd used to sometimes mark me harder than everybody. And other people would get 5 out of 5 for what they put and I'd have that and more, where he'd give me less. And that kind of made me mad, but that's cause he knew I could do better than that. And the same with my English teacher, he'll push me when he knows I can do better even though he knows he's pushing me farther than he is anyone else. And I like that cause it is more interesting to be doing things that make me think. Some of the things we're doing don't make me think and it's just a re-run of past blah that was Data Processing. I think I like to be challenged, sort of.

She said her peers called her the "Planner", because she carried a day-timer with her constantly, and used it. She knew that teachers thought she should be picking harder academic courses, but she picked exactly what she needed to get into Business Administration at SFU. She said, "I've always had a plan. I still have a plan."

I agree, if somebody looked at what I'm taking they would say, "oh, she's going to Douglas College," but I have what I need and I have a little more than that. And another thing, I could have taken all the sciences, but then I wouldn't have been able to take Geography. I would have had to take 5 classes a semester and I would have had to work and come back for another semester. I've always had a plan and I think it worked out pretty good.

In June (1995), when I contacted Anita's home she had gone to Europe until August (1995). She was visiting her father's former home in Croatia for a week. She was then going to be backpacking through Italy for the rest of the time. She had completed her first year at Simon Fraser University with a Grade Average of C+.

In February (1996) Anita was in her second year of Business Management at SFU. She worked 20 hours each week as a teller at a bank. She was planning to become a waitress at a good restaurant where she would make better money because of tips. She was planning to go to the University of Croatia (1997) for a six month business program. Anita was still planning her life and future goals.

Jill (12/23/93,01/06/94) “Chairman Of The Bored”

I first met Jill at her home on the Christmas holidays. She was 17 years old and in Grade 12. She was a petite girl with a ready smile and giggle. She was very forthright throughout the interview. She wore the current style, a dress and boots. She seemed almost child-like perhaps because of her small frame and rather child-like open nature. She said she loved reading fairy tales over and over again. She shunned the violence and sex of more popular writers. She said,

I still like children’s books a lot; you know, the fantasy, the fairy tale. I don’t like the death, killing, violence that’s what most books today seem to be about, the sex and everything. . . . I’m reading the Hobbit now. . . . Not really a children’s story. I like reading stories over again. That’s one repetition I don’t mind, if I like it.

Initially, in elementary school, Jill participated in enrichment activities in Grade 1 and Grade 2. In Grade 7, Jill’s final letter grades were still A’s. Some comments on her report card were:

Jill’s delightful personality compliments her academic ability and achievements. Jill could make more effort to keep her written work neater and her desk area tidy. She is one of our best leaders and group members. Although Jill does well in Math tests, she must learn to be neater and to complete all her assignments, including those dealing with material covered when she was absent.

The final comment described Jill “as a positive and productive young lady.” Neatness, organization and assignment completion seemed to be continuous concerns by Grade 7.

Difficulties with the quality of written production continued throughout Jill’s schooling. Jill found writing things out, especially copying and answering questions boring. Jill found writing boring; not because she was lazy, but because she could not write legibly.

Writing is boring for me. My mind starts to wander when I write. . . . I write very fast because my mind goes very fast. . . . I always have to write

it over because it's too messy. If I take the time to write neat I can't write what I am thinking at that time 'cause I start to lose what I'm thinking if I write that slow.

She felt she might have been able to cope with the volume of written material at high school if she'd had a typewriter or portable computer. Neither were financially feasible. She mentioned that she had poor hand / eye coordination, motor skills and manual dexterity. The district coordinator believed she might be gifted learning disabled.

She liked Math because lecturing by teachers was minimal. She could go on ahead. She also did not have to consider volumes of writing. Jill's marketing teacher said Jill was "Very mathematical, that's her gift." She said, "She is the first person to solve a problem, the first to leave." Jill liked to work quickly and accurately.

I always liked Math, that was never really boring. Science you had to write out labs and stuff and it was mostly copying out of text books. Lots of mundane questions over and over again. Same questions just reworking the answers, stuff like that. Things over and over again. Too much writing. . . . Too much writing, copying, teacher talking, never interesting. Math was never boring. . . . I always liked Math because Math isn't something the teachers really talked about. They just gave you an assignment and let you do it.

She felt so much of what she was forced to learn in school was "mundane" that she had "to wait for everyone else to practice and practice" and when was she going to use what she learned in school in real life? "All you really learn them for are to pass the high school tests. The things I want to do with my life I don't think I'm going to learn in high school." Jill truly felt learning occurred with people, not from inside books. "What are you ever going to get out of books in life? But you're going to get so much out of people." Jill was not afraid of challenges. Easy work was pointless. "Some easy things are fun, but if it's easy why bother 'cause you know you can do it. Why take the time? Why waste the time?"

Jill seemed to have experienced success only in the Challenge Program and when working with people in a real business environment. Jill had said, "I go to school because

there's people." Jill enjoyed her experiences in the Challenge Program because of the discussions and its team cooperative problem-solving activities. This was fun because she said,

It wasn't so much as a teacher telling us what to do. It was more like things that we discovered on our own that the teacher didn't even know about. And that's a good feeling. . . . It was really fun that we could do that, to know that we figured it out on our own, like sort of a teamwork thing. That was really interesting.

Jill really enjoyed her Challenge classes because "The people weren't afraid to show their opinions or who they were. They liked to speak out. They always seemed smarter than me to talk to like they'd know more things, more facts and stuff that I never bothered to learn." Jill's telling comment that no one was afraid to speak out in the Challenge Program reflected her belief that "student politics" especially in Grade 9 helped make school boring because students were too afraid to discuss or ask questions in class and be considered "uncool".

Jill was extremely funny when she discussed her peers' disbelief at her being part of the Challenge Program. She said,

'Jill, YOU'RE in gifted? Like not you! I don't believe you.' . . . Because really I don't sound like a totally intelligent person to talk to, I guess. I never was. I don't seem smart, I don't act smart. I'm not the stereotypical smart person. . . . I don't even know how they classified me as gifted. I take this test and they're like, 'Hey, you're gifted!' I always knew I did well, but I never thought I was outstanding.

I asked her to describe the "stereotypical smart person." She replied,

Like my best friend, they're all like in Advanced Placement literature, all these classes, and they're all getting A's and they really strive hard and they're all gifted too. And I was the only one in the whole class that didn't do well at school. And people think that gifted means an A student. . . . I don't even know the true definition of "gifted", what it is.

It's just something that teachers used to tell me and say this is what you are and I always knew that school was boring and a little too easy and that's all I know.

Jill's passions lay in problem-solving, "... hands on things. I liked that a lot and I learned better if I could touch things and see things like Math, the pictures, Geometry is the easiest - angles." So it is not surprising that neither Jill nor her peers thought she was gifted. Her gifts seemed to lie more in discussion and problem-solving than in areas that many of her teachers emphasized, for example, rote memory and text-oriented lessons. Jill's strengths were in working with and leading people. These strengths were not necessarily honed in daily classroom situations. Her marketing class, with its extra curricular focus gave her an arena for her interpersonal strengths.

Certainly, Jill's marketing teacher concurred that Jill had excellent interpersonal skills and could manage people and money quite well. She said Jill was "fabulous at responsibility." She also said she found Jill reasonable and that she took ownership for what she did. Jill liked marketing because,

we had to make new product packages and stuff like that. I did really good on that part. The creativeness of that part and stuff like it. . . . I can design it in my head and get someone else to do it, very easy. I'm good with being an authority. If I'm in charge or something, I'll do a good job if I know I'm important. . . . I know who is good at what in cooking class. . . . And they listen because they know I give them the best job that they like to do, I'm good at that. People always ask me what they should do.

Jill was brought to the attention of the District Consultant for Gifted Students in April (1992). Mr. K. used Kanevsky's Adaptation of Maker's "Characteristics of Gifted Students and Recommended Curriculum Modification." The recommended modifications for Math (an area of strength) were complexity, open-endedness, pacing, variety.

Jill wrote *Chairman of the Bored* to the District Consultant and her counselor as her assignment recommending what she felt needed in her schooling. Her suggestions were very similar to modifications recommended by Mr. K. It is included here because this

is a very honest and clear list of suggestions that Jill firmly believed would allow her to learn in a meaningful and challenging manner.

Chairman of the Bored

Science: In my Science 10 class I would like to learn more about the subject areas we are studying by researching more. Maybe I could get different books related to the topic area and write a short report or conclusion about my findings. It would also be better in science if we were able to do more “hands on” assignments rather than just copying question answers out of a book.

Math: In my Math 10 class I would like to do the thing we discussed where I would do five or so questions that were the hardest of the assignment. If I got those questions right, that would be my work for the day or I could get a harder question to work out. If I was confused or got them wrong, I would have to do the whole assignment.

Bus Ed: My Business Education class is going fine right now just a little slow. If there were anyway of speeding up the rate we are going at that would be fine. One thing, I don't know if it is possible, but it would be neat if I could do a business project such as, how much would it cost to start my own company and what would I need to know about costs, advertising and just basically staying in a good profitable business with a promising future.

Socials: I would like to study a more wider [sic] topics in socials than just certain events in Canadian history. I would like to know what was going on in other countries of the world at that time. Another thing would be to tie the socials and science together and see how they fit such as at what times were people inventing and making scientific discoveries and how they affected the people and the economy in this class it would also be better if we had more then and now discussions on maybe Government or taxes and what they did about it then and try to come to a conclusion of what we can do about it now.

* * *

Many of the suggestions: the need for challenge, the need for relevance, the need for integration with real world problems and concerns have been suggested by other students and teachers as necessary for many students. Jill would not have been bored if she could have done research, hands on assignments, rather than copying question and

answers in Science. In Math if she could have challenged the hardest questions and gone on to harder work. If she could not do them she would have to do the whole assignment. In Business she wished for an opportunity to create her own business. Most striking may be her comment combining Science and Socials so that she had a perspective of how Science, Economics and society were interconnected with what was happening in all the countries in the time period studied.

Jill felt hampered by the pacing; the mundane nature of her schooling. Science “was easy, but it was so boring. There’s so much they could have taught us faster.” In Computer Studies she felt “we never really advanced. . . . I was just waiting for him to teach the rest of the classes. . . . I knew most of the stuff already. I don’t like doing things over and over again when there’s no need.” In Socials “we always go so much by the book.” Always pacing, copying mundane work and her difficulties with the volume of handwriting arose. Jill said, “I like tests, short quizzes are fine for me” because she could not easily produce the volumes of handwritten work necessary for graduation.

Jill’s marketing teacher said that a teacher “cannot hold her prisoner.” This is an interesting comment because Jill referred to teachers in an authority position as being akin to prison guards. She said just as a prisoner wouldn’t tell a guard anything, she would not tell a teacher or counselor anything. Jill truly found school confining and boring.

Jill had chosen to challenge herself but not academically.

“I set up little challenges for myself taking the risk of getting into trouble by doing that [skipping]. I liked doing things like that, daily challenges. I don’t skip everyday, it’s not a big problem because I get the work done. . . . I beat the system.

By Grade 10 Jill, the positive, outgoing leader, became a deep concern for her teachers and the counselor. She was “having problems getting down to work,” noted her Challenge teacher. On her first report in Grade 10 teachers made similar comments about homework and assignments not being done. The Vice-Principal had written to Jill, “You

need to take a real close look at this report card. Things are not positive. We should sit down with your mother and counselor soon.”

In Grade 11 and 12, Jill skipped many classes. She was asked to leave in 1995, because she had missed too many classes. In effect, as she said, “they kicked me out.” She had dropped out of all three of her Science 11 courses. She still needed to get her Science 11 to graduate. She was taking English 12 for a second time when she dropped out and she needed one other Grade 12 course to graduate. In the interviews Jill had made it very clear that she found Science and English boring.

In February (1995), she had not graduated. She was taking a travel course and planned to get her Grade 12 Equivalency in the summer. Later when I spoke to her mother in June (1995), Jill still had not graduated and had no intentions of completing her graduation requirements. She was still concentrating her energies on a Hospitality and Travel course. Her mother stated that Jill had left school because she found it so boring she could not cope. Jill planned to work in Barbados in October (1995), at a tourist agency run by her friend’s mom.

Unfortunately, when I contacted Jill’s mother in February (1996), Jill had left the travel course. Jill’s mom said the very expensive course had been a sham. Jill had found no employment because even the Dairy Queen wanted Grade 12. Jill was becoming very depressed. To make matters worse, Jill’s parents within a year of each other had been laid off as their respective companies “down-sized.”

Sarah (11/24/93, 11/29/93, 12/07/93) “Just The Standstill Thing”

Sarah was 17 when she and I met at my school for the interviews. She dropped in and out of Grade 12 during the course of my study. Sarah was in French Immersion throughout elementary school until Spring Break of Grade 10.

Throughout elementary school and in Grades 8 and 9, Sarah achieved good grades. In her first term of Grade 10, her grade point average was 6.14 out of 7. In the middle of Grade 10, her marks rapidly declined. Sarah's counselor felt Sarah was emotionally at risk during the second and third terms. Sarah scored in the 98th percentile on Test Cognitive Skills (TCS) in 1988 which met District criteria for giftedness. In May (1992) Sarah, (Grade 10), was tested by the area counselor. The psycho educational report indicated that Sarah had high average ability on the Verbal, Performance, and Full Scale scores.

The report results had questionable validity because Sarah said she had not liked the tester and she didn't care about the test. She said,

I didn't really care. . . . She couldn't believe how little homework I did and that I should be doing more homework and I just wasn't really interested in anything she had to say after that so I thought. . . . It just sort of turned into a whole thing about how I should be doing more homework and how I should be spending more time in school and I just didn't want to hear it.

In 1992 Sarah did not care about school at all.

She left French Immersion and went to the regular English program. Even there she "found it really stupid."

On the other hand the English teacher excused quite a few people. I wasn't the only one, but you know it, it was just stupid that half of us didn't have an English class to go to because we're still learning how to capitalize and I just found it really stupid.

Sarah felt someone should have been giving her something new to learn. She said, "It was from Grade 8 to 10, I never learned a new thing. . . and I just found it really stupid the way they have it run. There's no way you can work ahead or anything."

In order to have something to do Sarah deliberately missed classes. "I just miss class on purpose, just so I'll have something to do when I get back. I'll just let myself get behind so I'll have all this catch up to do because if I'm just sitting there I just get bored."

Sarah felt that Grade 9 marked the downturn in her schooling.

I never really had a problem with elementary school and Grade 8 was fine. It was just when I got into Grade 9. Everything about the school, I didn't like any of my teachers, they had this big huge big involvement attitude, and I'm not into that at all. . . . There was no way for you to do anything individually and you couldn't choose anything you wanted to do and you couldn't do what you wanted to do. . . . In my junior high, I just got into my mind that I just HATED it. Every time I walked into the building I felt sick. I just talked myself into feeling it, I think.

Even in senior high, which she liked much better, she found it difficult to break her pattern of absences.

In Grade 11 English I just hated my teacher. I just didn't like her at all. I loved Social Studies but in Math I got too lost and too fast. I wasn't ready for it all. And just the English and Math together was just enough to say, "Okay, I've had enough of this. I'm out of here." . . . The Math has always been my big problem. It's not a boredom thing in Math. I'm always learning something in Math. But I get frustrated really easily and you know, the classes are big, the teachers are busy, they only want to explain it to you once so if somebody's talking they're not going to explain it again because you probably weren't listening. And it's really hard to get help and stuff. Once you get lost you're pretty lost and with English it was a combination, boredom/hate the teacher thing.

Sarah admitted to being easily frustrated and developing hatreds for certain teachers. She was the most overtly passionate and emotional student in the study. She vented her frustration and anger vehemently.

Some days I'll have days where I do try my best at everything, but there's nothing to challenge yourself there. . . . if I could just keep learning stuff, writing tests, keep learning different stuff then I'd be fine 'cause I'd always be progressing. It's just the standstill thing you're not doing anything.

Sarah could not "stand still". She was a very energetic talker, with a great deal of physical and verbal expressiveness. She was also very opinionated and disliked being told what to do. Her family recognized Sarah's intense nature. She was not willing to compromise. Her mother wondered if a car accident in Grade 1 where she sustained serious damage to her femur and shoulder had affected her. She was in traction for a month and in physiotherapy. Is she more willful than other children because of it?

For whatever reasons, Sarah challenged teachers and sought out challenges. She said she was bored. She coped by skipping classes, letting them slide as far as she could

before being told she would be “booted out.” Eventually she felt she could not stand school and she dropped out. In her opinion it was not because it was too hard but because it was too boring.

Lots of people that don't know anybody that's dropped out, like they think school is too hard for them and that's why they quit. . . . It's just 'cause, it's way too boring and you can't deal with it anymore. Just seems a total waste of your time, right.

When she returned to school in Grade 11 her attendance was becoming more and more erratic. Initially, she liked the semester system. She left in the second semester in February of Grade 11. She said, “The first semester seems new, exciting; and then you just get used to it and then just seems like school again. . . . And damn, that's boring and okay, that's enough of that.” Sarah admitted when the novelty wore off boredom set in. She wanted to move on, leave the situation. Since she could skip classes easily a pattern developed.

I had gotten so used to skipping and knowing that I can get away with it that I tended to do it more and more and in Grade 11. It was more like I was never in class and I'd get so behind and then when I did go I didn't want to be there that I finally just said, “forget it”.

Sarah had goals to go to university. She felt that at university education would be different. She said, “Nobody is telling me to go and I want to go, I want to learn stuff. And you can pick whatever interests you. . . . That's what I picture university as. A whole bunch of smart people. . . . having smart discussions.” Sarah idealistically kept believing that the new school, the semester system, or university would provide better learning situations for her. She wanted “to learn stuff.” She wanted choice, control and discussions.

Sarah's difficulties with authority combined with her knowledge that her friends had left school made it hard for her to stay in school. She still believed she needed to get an education.

I've seen so many of my friends leave school. . . and that was really hard for me having to be there when none of my friends were. . . . So I just have

to get through high school. So, like a lot of my friends work at Shell or McDonald's and that's just NOT GOOD and I don't want to end up like that. So I just keep going just to get through it 'cause I want to do something different.

This was not to be Sarah's last year. In February (1994), she again left school. In June (1994), she and her family were seriously considering private school, even though this would mean financial hardship. In September (1994), Sarah entered another high school. By June (1995), she still had to complete English Literature 12 by correspondence in order to graduate. She was to start a business school course in July (1995).

In February (1996), Sarah had not finished English Literature 12. However, she had so impressed her business school teachers with her performance and marks that she was hired to manage one of their satellite offices. Sarah had said she needed individual choice and control. Managing a small office may allow her to satisfy those needs.

Dennis (01/07/94) "I Don't Have To Be At School To Learn"

I met Dennis at his home in January (1994). He was 18 years old and in Grade 12. Dennis was very slim, had a ponytail and wore glasses. He smiled a lot and had a very gentle, humorous, almost lackadaisical manner. His counselor said that Dennis was not a talker, but when he talked he had something well thought out to say. Dennis' mother who had been apprehensive about his inclusion in the study (confidentiality was the issue) even engaged me in conversation about her psychology courses after the interview. I believe that while Dennis was the most taciturn of all the students he was comfortable with me and he did respond honestly and thoughtfully.

Dennis had a school history of high absenteeism. In Grade 6, he was absent 27 times and late 19 times. His teacher commented that Dennis "has the potential to accomplish great things if he wants to. This will require some conformity on his part." In Grade 7, 23 full day absences were recorded. His teacher commented on Dennis' lack of

conformity to behavioral expectations. The teacher also commented that assignment completion was his “nemesis” and “his innate ability to quickly grasp and retain information” had “enabled him to maintain an acceptable level of achievement without undue effort on his part”. This “nemesis” and reliance on “his innate ability” were to become Dennis’ academic pattern.

Report card comments indicated his need for challenge and warned of his tendency to procrastinate. Structure and self-discipline were seen as critical for Dennis’ success academically. Dennis’ absenteeism escalated through junior high peaking at 60 days in Grade 10. He still achieved a C+ average. In Grade 11, he was absent 46 5 days, but maintained a C+ average. Notes in his file indicated that in Grade 9 and Grade 11 the administration expressed concern about the number of absences. In the first semester of Grade 12, he had 42 absences.

I asked Dennis what had happened in Grade 12. He was absent for two months in the Fall (1993). He replied that halfway through the semester

I got kicked out. I was asked to leave. . . . I was not going to school. I was spending my days sleeping. . . . Only the administration had a problem. My teachers wanted me to stay. They didn’t care. I was keeping my marks up and everything. . . . I don’t have to be at school to learn. I think I demonstrated that in the last two months.

Dennis was irritated waiting for the others to catch up, to do their work, to settle down and listen to the teacher. He also felt frustrated with teachers who went by the book, becoming robots, rather than people.

Just as soon as they hit “teacher” they forget all about what they were like as students. . . . Someone who drones on all the way through the class, gets everything straight out of their text book and the reference material, never draws on their personal experience.

Dennis was going to school in January (1994) solely to graduate, to finish school. “That’s about it. . . . No longer having to go.” I gently teased him about his aspiration to

be an English teacher, which required further education. Aside from the fact that reading was Dennis' passion, he said,

I'm hoping for better teachers, but I think it's going to be me that's different. . . . Actually one day I'm going to have to take responsibility and go out and get a job and if I don't have some sort of educational background, then I'm not going to be able to get a job I can live off of. So I figure I'll have to grow up.

Dennis' comment was echoed by the others who saw Grade 12 as the time when acceptance of the structure, the system, the need for the graduation diploma made them "grow up." He was the only one to voice this so explicitly. Anita, Sarah and Kelly also believed that college or university would have better teachers than high school. As well, these students believed their attitude towards schooling would be better. They would be choosing and controlling much more of their learning than in high school.

Dennis' patterns of absenteeism and underachievement were reflected in the literature as precursors to dropping out (Devereaux, 1993). He was asked to leave although he could pass while not attending. Nonetheless, he had physically withdrawn himself from school, and dropped out long before he was asked to leave. He also felt a sense of growing autonomy as a teen. Being able to leave, to not be caught or to be allowed to absent himself from school during junior high made it easier and easier to continue the pattern of withdrawing from school. Sarah, Jill, Garfunkel, Brenda and Kelly had also commented on the ease of skipping because of boredom in school and the intrinsic challenge in seeing when they might, if ever, be caught.

Dennis also generated, "just 'cause". He would involve himself in an activity he wanted to, just because it was challenging and available. He meant that he followed his passion for reading with no thought of any consequences or rewards, just for the joy and discovery within reading. While reading he became totally absorbed in the book. This "just 'cause" was echoed in Dave's comment about going somewhere quiet to think where time

stops. Sarah's, Andrea's and Brenda's "just 'cause" was writing like Dave's drawing, until it was perfect, but not for an audience. Karen studied literature and philosophy and wrote. These students had interests that were intensely personally and intrinsically satisfying. They commented that they could become lost in the activity. This loss of self resonated with Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) flow theory and was iterated in various ways by the different students. Dennis' "just 'cause" was the intrinsically motivating aspect of the "flow" experience.

Later, in February (1995), when I spoke to Dennis he said that he had been asked to leave because he had turned 19 and was still not showing up for classes. He was attempting to finish his Grade 12 at night school to get his Grade 12 Equivalency.

I phoned Dennis in February (1996). His father said that Dennis was working in a factory. Dennis was short one course for graduation. His father said Dennis was a, "Smart boy. Wish I had his brains." Dennis' mother said Dennis was going to graduate in June (1996). I did not hear from Dennis personally.

CONCLUSION

These silhouettes represent my impressions of the students. Certainly, other people may have viewed them differently. I found each of them to be very clear and very concerned about their boredom. They had many examples of boring experiences and teachers which made me very aware that much of their schooling had been a disappointment and frustration to them.

Each and every one of these students had been identified by tests and teachers as gifted in some area. Eight of the ten students dropped out for some time in their schooling. Only Anita and Kelly stayed but Kelly skipped many classes. Anita kept herself busy in school, with outside work and social activities. The rest of the students left or were asked to leave. Every one of them said their boredom with schooling affected their

willingness to engage in their schooling. Many factors including family, emotional, and social issues as well as the students' boredom had led to their decision to drop out or to administrators' decisions to ask them to leave. Nonetheless, the students said their boredom played a part in their decisions to actively or passively disengage from their schooling. What did these students mean by their boredom?

Arrived from permanent record files across elementary, junior high and senior high school years.

Name	Grade Averages			Absenteeism Rate*		
	Elementary	Junior High	Senior High	Elementary	Junior High	Senior High
Garfunkel	Not Available	Honor Roll (Gr 8)	C average	High	High	High
Dave	C+ / B	C+ and dropping	C and dropping	High	High	High
Brenda	B average	B average (Gr 8,9) Dropped Out (Gr 10)	A / B average (Alternative School)	Low	High	At alternative school
Andrea	B average	B average	A / B average (Alternative School)	High	High	At alternative school
Karen	B / C+ average	B average (Gr 8) C / C+ average (Gr 9, 10)	A average (Alternative School)	High	High	At alternative school
Kelly	A average	Honor Roll	Honor Roll	Low	High (Gr 10)	High
Anita	A / B average	B average	B average	Low	High	High
Jill	A average	Honor Roll (Gr 8) Grades declined dramatically (Gr, 10)	C / C- average	Low	High (Gr 9/10)	High
Sarah	A / B average	B average C / C- average (Gr 10)	B / C+ average	Low	High	High
Dennis	A / B average (Gr 4, 5) B / C+ average (Gr 6, 7)	B average (Gr 8) C average (Gr 10)	B / C+ average (1 st semester) Pass (Gr 11 - 2 nd semester)	High Very High (Gr 6 / 7)	High Very High (Gr 10)	Very High (Gr. 11)

*Absenteeism rate: Low - 4 - 8; High - +15

Table I: Summary of Grade Averages and Absenteeism Rates

The results, the student's strengths and participation in special programs derived from permanent record files across elementary, junior high and senior high school years.

Name	Educational Testing*	Results**	Strengths	Participation in Special Programs
Garfunkel	TCS ('91)	99 th percentile 95-99 th percentile	Music Drama Math	Challenge (elementary, junior high)
Dave	WISC-R (Gr 4)	Verbally Superior	Art Natural Leader	Challenge (elementary, junior high) Learning Assistance (elementary)
Brenda	TCS (Gr 6) CTCS (Gr 5, 6)	96 th percentile GE 3 grades above	Writing Fine Arts Leadership	French Immersion (elementary) Challenge (junior high) Alternative school (senior high)
Andrea	CTCS (Gr 4) TCS (Gr 7)	GE 2 grades above	Writing	Challenge (elementary) Alternative school (senior high)
Karen	CTBS ('86, '87) MAT ('88)	90 th percentile 95 th percentile (Independent reading level Gr 10)	Creative Writing, Journalism	Creative Writing 12 (Gr 10) Alternative school (senior high)
	CCAT ('83, '84)	95-99 th percentile		
Kelly	TCS ('88) PSAT ('92)	99 th percentile 95 th percentile	Leadership, Creative, Analytic Mind, Science Math	French Immersion (elementary, junior high, senior high) Challenge (elementary, junior high)
Anita	Not tested	Not tested	Music, Drama, Athletic, Writing, Conservationist, Leadership	French Immersion (elementary, junior high) Challenge (elementary)
Jill	TCS (Gr 4)	96 th percentile	Humor, Curious, Leadership Math	Challenge (Gr 1, Gr 8, Gr 9, Gr 10)
Sarah	TCS (Gr 6)	98 th percentile	Creative Writing	French Immersion (elementary, junior high)
Dennis	TCS ('87) CTBS ('85)	95-99 th percentile GE 3 grades above in Reading and Writing	Quick to grasp and retain information; Excellent listening skills	Challenge (elementary) Late French Immersion (elementary) French Immersion (junior high)
	CTBS ('88)	GE 4 grades above	English	

*Expanded Test Names:

TCS - Test of Cognitive Skills
CTBS - Canadian Test of Basic Skills
CTCS - Canadian Test of Cognitive Skills
MAT - Metropolitan Achievement Test
PSAT - Provincial Scholarship Aptitude Test

**Results:

GE - Grade equivalent measured
against current grade level
≥95th percentile - District
Standards for Giftedness

Table II: Summary of Educational Testing

Derived from permanent record files across elementary, junior high and senior high years. The current status derived from conversations with the students.

Name	Warning Signs (Elementary, Grades 1 - 7)	Warning Signs (Junior high, Grades 8 - 10)	Warning Signs (Senior high, Grades 11 - 12)	Current Status
Garfunkel	Grade 7 Suspended At Principal's office often	Skipping At the office for misbehaviors	Skipping At the office for misbehaviors Elder siblings dropped out	Dropped Out Working
Dave	More effort needed Learning Assistance in Reading	More effort needed Wastes too much time talking & socializing (Grade 8, 9) Working far below capability Homework incomplete	More effort needed Easily distracted Grades affected by absences	Dropped Out (Grade 11, '95) Complete Grade 11 ('96) Working Returning for Grade 12
Brenda	Grade 4 - unacceptable behavior Negative use of leadership skills	Not working to potential Suspension for fighting & truancy	Not Applicable (Alternative School)	Will Graduate through Alternative School
Andrea	Multiple school moves (6) Attendance pattern irregular Missed or incomplete assignments	Multiple school moves (3) Attendance pattern irregular Missed or incomplete assignments "In with the wrong crowd" Pregnancy - Dropped out Grade 10 Failure to hand in assignments	Not Applicable (Teen Mom Program)	Will Graduate
Karen	Grade 6 - Incomplete assignments Grade 7 - Needs to be involved	Failure to hand in assignments	Not Applicable (Teen Mom Program)	Graduated Alternative School
Kelly	None	Skipping	Skipping (still maintained A's)	Graduated - Enrolled in University
Anita	Grade 6 - Explosive behavior	Time management problem Anger management	Outlandish Clothing / Underachievement (Grade 11) Goal oriented (Grade 12)	Graduated - Enrolled in University Working part-time
Jill	Grade 2 - Printing skills Grade 3 - Incomplete assignments Too much socializing Grade 6 - Disorganized; Handwriting poor	Homework incomplete Absences hindering progress	Homework incomplete Absences hindering progress	Dropped Out Looking for employment
Sarah	None	Peer group dropping out Attendance and personal problems	Dropping In and Out	Dropped Out - Short One Course Working as Office Manager
Dennis	Need for structure, challenge Lacks motivation; Procrastinates Much potential; Incomplete assignments	Incomplete work Sleeping in or "sick" Medical Note requested	Incomplete work Attendance Sleeping In or not coming in at all	Asked to leave school Working

Table III: Summary of Warning Signs for Dropping Out

CHAPTER 5

THE DISCOVERIES

These students clearly found much of their schooling boring. Their boredom did not simply appear; it evolved. In junior high “It started to get boring. There wasn’t a lot to do there. There wasn’t much excitement,” said Dave. Brenda felt school started to get boring in Grade 3, but was becoming really boring in Grade 8. Sarah, Jill and Andrea also pointed out Grades 8 and 9 as the beginnings of their boredom. All but Anita and Jill started to skip in junior high.

The students had very definite ideas about their boredom and made a clear distinction between their schooling and their learning. All found some aspects of their schooling boring; however, the intensity of their boredom varied according to their perceptions of the extent of personal control, choice and challenge they had in their learning. As well, the students’ perceptions of their teachers’ especially their level of caring for the students and their course content affected their degree of boredom. Consequently, the first section of the chapter begins with a discussion of the students’ distinction between their schooling and their learning.

The next section describes how the students characterized learning. These students voluntarily offered clear descriptions of their learning experiences as contrasts to their schooling experiences. This is not to say the students felt they never learned in school; only that their learning moments were seemingly rare, and consequently cherished.

The third section describes the students’ schooling experiences. These lacked the very characteristics so necessary in their learning experiences. The students’ perceptions of having little or no control, choice and challenge and uncaring teachers coupled with the personal characteristics of each student contributed to their boredom in school. The schooling section concludes with my understanding of these students’ meaning for

boredom. The final section connects the students' words and perceptions with the literature.

SECTION I: SCHOOLING WAS NOT LEARNING

Schooling did not provide these gifted students with a fulfilling education nor satisfy their needs for learning. Karen believed,

What sets off the group [gifted individuals] is not that you're smart, but willingness to learn, really interested in learning. . . . Want to know, always asking constantly. I deserve to know. Trying to get something from the teacher; trying to them to do their job.

Consistent with all the students were Karen's perceptions that teachers generally had to be forced by their students to do their jobs properly, to get connected with their material and most importantly with their students. Karen claimed, as did Andrea, that for them schooling was merely going through the motions. The students craved learning, inspiration and involvement.

The only thing you do at school is memorize. Anyway that's all they expect you to do. They don't expect you to understand. They just want you to remember that $2 + 2 = 4$ and not tell you why. . . . We're never asked, we were never questioned, never inspired to ask why does this work? It was just, you know, do the work, hand it in, I'll mark it. You'll get a grade. That was it.

Garfunkel distinguished between schooling and learning on the basis that teachers just baby-sit rather than teach. He said teachers don't care if students skip, implying they might be relieved to see him leave.

School is totally different. Mostly they are just baby-sitting the kids. That's what most of the teachers are doing. And the behavioral kids, and making sure their class . . . is under control. Some of them don't even care. I can go 'Hey teacher, I'm skipping' and the teacher goes, 'See you later.' So learning and school are totally different things.

Garfunkel felt if he could get an education any other way than by attending school he would do it. The students consistently talked about getting an "education". I have

interpreted education to mean learning because their descriptions of an education mirror their descriptions of learning, not schooling.

Sarah clearly stated the distinction between education and schooling. She said, “When I dropped out in Grade 10, I said to my dad, ‘I really want to get an education, I want to learn stuff, I’m just not learning anything at school’.” Sarah was the most expressive and emotional of the students. She was very explicit; learning made her feel alive, awake; schooling bored and sleepy. “Everyone was so bored, we’d all just fall asleep. . . . I’d just have no way of keeping myself awake because it was so boring.” She said that learning was a feeling of being, “Awake and just feeling alive. Feeling like you’re doing something. Feeling like you’re learning something.”

The students felt they were often taught by poor teachers who used boring repetitive methods and assigned boring unchallenging tasks. The students’ personal moods as well as their interests and their perceived abilities in a course affected their boredom. I might have been tempted to dismiss their comments regarding boredom as face-saving or scape-goating mechanisms to avoid acceptance of personal responsibility for their actions. I did not find this to be the case. The students all mentioned some school experiences and teachers with fondness. This was generally in elementary school. The students also honestly acknowledged their early teenage “rebellious years” [Sarah] and “student politics” [Jill] in junior high school very much affected their academic performance in the classroom setting. They were not attempting to absolve themselves. As Brenda said, “When you’re going through your little rebellious stage” in junior high she would not necessarily comply with an adult’s directions and expectations.

Seven of the students said their boredom began in junior high, especially Grade 9. Students in this grade are generally 14. In my professional experience and in discussion with colleagues, Grade 9 is a particularly difficult year for teachers and students. Teenagers in Grade 9 generally struggle with students’ needs for independence and belonging. Sarah, Dave, Brenda and Anita said if they felt someone was making, not

asking, them to do something, they would not engage in the task. They would not comply to an institutional rule.

Gifted individuals are noted for their abilities to think about their thinking, to be self-critical and self-analytical. These students, who possess an exceptional aptitude for learning in at least one domain, may have a greater awareness of what components are necessary for their learning. They may be more attuned to their mental processes (just as fine athletes are to their physiological processes) than their age-mates, so it is not surprising that they rebel when they perceive a conflict between the instruction and their needs. As well, curriculum generally aims for the abilities of average students which may be far below exceptional students' level. Consequently, gifted students may experience boredom more frequently in their classrooms than their age-mates.

The gifted students in my study did not necessarily have to attend school to learn their lessons. For example, Dennis maintained a B average even though he did not attend because he was sleeping away the day. He said only the administration had a problem with his non-attendance. However, he was asked to leave school. According to Dennis, some teachers tolerated his absences because he still did well. The administration could not or would not tolerate this behavior because Dennis was challenging the school system's rules. In effect, Dennis proved, as did Sarah, Jill, Garfunkel, Kelly, Andrea, Brenda and Karen, that these gifted students can pass (or in Kelly's case maintain an A average) without attending school daily.

Sarah mentioned she set a poor example for her less able peers because she could pass without attending. Her less fortunate peers were forced to attend by the administration. Sarah and Jill both felt the administration left them alone, allowing them to skip discreetly because they did not wish to have them leave. The administration wanted them in the building so badly it continually made "deals" [Jill] with them. The challenge for these students became "calling them" [Brenda] on their administrative threats.

The school system may be losing its holding power and control over some students. Perhaps 50% of students are unhappy with their schooling (King, 1988). Dropouts claim boredom and poor student / teacher relationships are primary reasons for their early school leaving. Controlling students more rigorously so that they attend may ironically be increasing the likelihood students will leave school early. As well, the contrary position of ignoring students' skipping and absences may escalate the process of dropping out, creating the pattern of skipping and absenteeism which plagued every student in this study except Anita.

Consistent across the students' descriptions of their boredom with their schooling were issues of control, choice, challenge and caring. At the outset, the reader must understand that these four issues were very interconnected. No clear distinction could be made between their influences on a student's boredom. This explained my struggle with developing models. The classroom might be viewed as a soup pot where these issues were bubbling. What surfaced was never uniform for any two individuals. The classroom simmered or boiled over as students with diverse backgrounds attempted to work cooperatively with an adult.

I will discuss the students' boredom within these themes in separate subsections. The first three (control, choice and challenge) are more related to the school systems' organization and curricula as well as teachers' methods; the last, to the critical teacher / student relationship. Throughout this chapter the focus will be on one of the issues, but often one or more of the others will enter the discussion because at no time is any one issue a separate entity. The sequencing of these themes is arbitrary. Although first, control and choice are not necessarily the most significant issues for all students. Within each subsection, the sub-themes derived from the students' comments will be used to describe how I reached my understandings.

SECTION II: LEARNING

This section highlights the comments students volunteered about their learning. Clearly, these students had thought deeply about their learning. They described the good times in school when they learned, had fun and were challenged. They mentioned many more learning experiences outside of school environments where they were actively learning “just ‘cause” [Dennis]. The first part of this section [gives more descriptions of these students’ general comments on their learning. The second part explores the nature of the students’ learning where control and choices about their learning were self-directed or teacher encouraged. The third part describes the various motivations for their self-directed learning while the last part explains the students’ firm beliefs that teachers do make a difference.

The students seldom found themselves bored outside of school. Their stories of learning were most often beyond their classroom experiences. They used school-based examples as a contrast or to elaborate upon their boring experiences in the classroom. My understanding of these gifted students’ drive to learn, to be challenged, to progress beyond “the standstill thing” [Sarah] which characterized their schooling deepened through the students’ comments on their learning. As well I began to realize the intensity of their frustration and boredom when their drive for learning was thwarted.

These students were not simply victims of teenage angst (Buescher, 1991; Whitmore, 1980). They were articulate, optimistic individuals who understood their responsibility for their learning at school. They had questions about their opportunities for their learning in school fully aware that their needs might require more challenging, accelerated, complex, intensive learning situations than they were usually offered in classroom assignments.

Learning was a personal, challenging, fun-filled experience for all. Karen and Andrea were very clear that the alternative school provided them with an education. They

had input into their program, learning “stuff that we asked for” [Karen]. In contrast, Karen believed schools were “supposed to be educating you, but they only want to be teaching you what they want to teach you, not what you want to learn.” As well, their teachers acted as mentors, and really became involved with their students as individuals. Personal control, choice and caring relationships were essential.

Related to personal control and choice are individual interests and perceptions of fun. Dave succinctly said, “If I like it I’ll stay and learn.” Jill, Garfunkel, Dave, Brenda, Karen, Sarah and Andrea all commented on the importance of fun in their learning. Jill felt “You have a lot more fun in Grade 12” because you “learn what you like.” Senior high students do have more choice than junior high students. Teachers at the senior high level may have been able to concentrate on teaching more than managing behaviors because the students were more interested or motivated to pass [Anita].

Challenge was critical to Jill’s, Sarah’s, Anita’s, Karen’s and Kelly’s learning. Dave, Dennis, Garfunkel, Brenda and Andrea also indicated that individual, deep and creative thought (which I interpreted as challenge) were critical elements of their learning. As well, all provided examples of learning just because something held challenge and fun.

The most critical element for Sarah was a caring teacher. She learned best when she felt challenged and liked the teacher. The other students also described various characteristics of caring teachers. They were “nice people” [Dennis], but not “lenient” [Garfunkel].

Control and Choice

The students’ perceptions of their ability to control and to choose their tasks were very different for learning and schooling. Interests often drove them to pursue certain activities. Given control over choices their interests could develop. When teachers take students’ personal interests into account the chance that learning will occur increases. As well, the student’s need to be perceived as “a human being” [Karen] is acknowledged. For

example, Karen really enjoyed a project on her life. She said it was “really fun to do and really interesting because it made you think about yourself.” Karen admitted she was introspective; she liked to be “into herself”

Karen loved English and wanted a career in writing. She made an interesting comment, “I’ve always been really good with words. . . just came naturally to me. English was always fun for me so I looked forward to that.” Consistently, these students looked forward to subjects they believed came naturally to them. For this reason Math especially appealed to Garfunkel and Jill because their needs for “faster, more efficient” [Garfunkel] pacing were met. They could work ahead independently. Jill liked Math’s logical right answer. Brenda, Sarah, Andrea, Anita, Dennis and Karen preferred English where sometimes their opinions and creativity were honored. Brenda, Andrea and Karen certainly found their abilities and interests fostered by their English teacher at the alternative school.

Dennis believed that he could never be bored in his English classes because English was his passion. “Reading interesting sorts of subjects, novels keeps me awake, keeps me paying attention.” He could become totally absorbed in his reading. Dennis’ passion for reading was so strong he had goals to be an English professor.

When students were learning, their concentration made time and setting meaningless. These students were very aware that learning did not need to be, in fact could be hindered, by clock-driven restrictions. Garfunkel said he could be very productive when he chose the time to work. He caught up on all his English assignments achieving in the high 90’s by blitzing through the assignments in an intensive twelve hour day.

These students had done well or very well in the elementary school system. They felt they learned a lot there. They felt connected to their teachers, their classmates and more actively engaged in their learning than in high school. They may have started to withdraw as they perceived control of their learning slip from their hands into their teachers’ hands as instruction shifted from problem-solving in a group to teacher-directed

lectures. Their elementary school learning experiences had elements of novelty, socializing, fun and spontaneity. Outside school, they learned and continued to learn through their high school years through playing games with their peers, with their parents or with older adults in mutually agreed upon activities [Sarah, Dave].

Karen talked about Mr. V. at the alternative school who let the students work independently at their own pace and schedule and was there to offer help immediately if the students requested it.

Mr. V. really gets in there. Let's you go on your own when you're able to but if you ask him for help he's right there to offer his advice and is willing to look at stuff, read over a piece you just wrote.

With this teacher, Karen, Brenda and Andrea worked at their own pace finishing the required curriculum very quickly. They felt they had learned something in English especially because Mr. V. let them choose their novels, their poetry, their whole course. He also encouraged them to write from their personal experience and to create stories and poems as much as possible. These students at the alternative school learned because they had teachers who were non-judgmental partners in their learning, giving them freedom of choice in content and process. Of course, each of these students was older and more mature than in junior high so maturity may have been a factor as well.

Challenge

These students experienced challenge in their classrooms when they were allowed to work ahead, or probe a subject area more deeply and intensely. They especially appreciated the opportunity to go faster and advance rather than repeat material they had mastered or wait for the other students to catch up. They were more comfortable with a faster pace because it matched their abilities to grasp many of the concepts more quickly than their classmates.

Jill enjoyed the opportunity to do her Math 8 independently because she loved Math and she was able to do the whole course quickly. “People made it interesting for me that way. I think probably because of Grade 8 is the reason I like Math so much. The only class I ever go to do that in, cram it.”

Kelly was able to do her French 12 independently. She did this because she felt her teacher was incompetent. She was frustrated because she knew more French than he did. She learned the material very quickly and received an A for the course. She had been very disappointed in the French Immersion program in Grade 11 and 12. Nevertheless, she felt she had benefited from learning the French previously in junior high and it was just fun to have French.

Garfunkel said he felt his boredom could be avoided if he could do things “faster, more efficient.” He was convinced that a faster pace meant he learned more. “When you’re going faster, you’re always changing subjects and you never know what’s going to happen. When you’re going slowly, it’s like oh no, not that again.” Kelly also mentioned being happier near the January exams because the courses were moving faster as teachers tried to finish everything.

In some cases, the desire to go “faster” might be partially attributable to an adolescent’s urge to get something over with quickly. But for these gifted students, “faster” more likely had to do with their ability to process information and make connections more quickly than their peers and teachers (Renzulli, 1991). Jill spoke of her thinking going much faster than her hand when she wrote. Garfunkel said, “I was able to figure things out faster than anybody else could.” His Grade 7 teacher agreed, especially in Mathematics where Garfunkel was exceptionally quick in grasping concepts and problem solving. Their learning had to keep pace with their abilities, there had to be constantly more challenge just within reach.

Some students associated challenge in learning with depth, not speed. Kelly said, “If there’s something I don’t understand, I’ll find it interesting because I want to

understand it.” She was disappointed that many of her teachers could not or would not answer her questions. She felt her French 10 teacher knew the curriculum, “but if you got the tiniest bit outside those border lines, she didn’t know it anymore, got very defensive. . . . That’s another thing about my style, I ask a lot of questions.” If her questions were not addressed she felt frustrated and withdrew becoming more and more bored with the repetitive, shallow questions asked by her teachers.

Gifted students often learn by questioning. Teachers who are unfamiliar with the content may feel threatened and defensive when bright students constantly question. They may feel that the student is trying to mock them or threaten their authority and knowledge. As Kelly explained, “If I’m interested in something, I’ll ask questions and questions and then I’ll understand it perfectly and I don’t ask questions again.” Kelly felt any good teachers would understand she was not trying to upset them, but she “just wanted to know”, to understand.

When Garfunkel asked questions, sometimes he did it to outwit his teachers, and sometimes he and the teacher thoroughly enjoyed debating and outsmarting one another. He enjoyed having a teacher become an intellectual sparring partner. Karen also loved a good debate on religious and philosophical ideas with her counselor (a strong Catholic) at the alternative school. While Karen respected the strength of her counselor’s faith, she continued to question and challenge her counselor’s beliefs. Karen and Garfunkel always wanted to go deeper; they felt they learned best this way. These students were fortunate; they found teachers who felt inspired, not threatened, by the questions. If their teachers did not know the answers, they searched for them with their students. They and their students intensified and broadened their mutual learning.

Caring

Learning also involved more of a mentorship role with teachers than the traditional autocratic role of some teachers. These teachers were not necessarily the younger ones

although Garfunkel mentioned that he felt most older teachers said, “Come in, sit down, listen, here’s your work, go home, do it.” He liked “the new teachers’ kind of innocence. . . they let you do stuff. They don’t stick with the routine that works. They try new things and if it works, it works and if it doesn’t, it doesn’t.” Novelty, discovery and exploration were part of “letting” the students be challenged.

The students felt they learned very well when their teachers used variety and fun in their lessons. One English teacher, especially, inspired Sarah’s passion for English, “Because you keep learning stuff and you’re reading stuff you’ve never done before.” This teacher used many different forms of media and methods allowing students to discuss, write or dramatize their reactions to the literature. Anita felt her English teacher was also non-judgmental, interested in and fair to his students. She said he challenged her to go further and deeper than the other students. As a result, Anita won the Public Speaking and Creative writing contests. Her passions for English and learning were satisfied in this teacher’s class.

Variety and being actively engaged were also elements of Jill’s learning. She said,

We play learning games in Spanish a lot because it’s like we are beginning and it’s very fun. It’s one of my favorite classes for actually learning. I’ve learnt the most in that class out of any classes.

She liked the simple rewards introduced in the games.

Nothing major, just something so there’s something to work towards. It gets everybody, not really friendships but a kind of special bond. You feel comfortable with them. It’s like a class you kind of can’t wait for.

A distinction has to be made between the students’ elementary school and high school experiences. Overall the students enjoyed their earlier learning experiences. Only Garfunkel liked junior high better because he preferred having many teachers in high school. Anita and Brenda believed their boredom with their schooling began in elementary school because of the repetitive nature of much of the work and poor teachers. The rest of the students spoke highly of their elementary schooling.

This praise raises significant points. Generally in my professional experience, elementary schools are organized such that students spend most of their time with one teacher and the same classmates all day. Elementary teachers are generally much more aware of their thirty students' needs, than high school teachers of their one hundred fifty students' needs; consequently, elementary teachers and their students usually become very close.

Elementary school teachers use markedly different methods than high school teachers who, according to the students in this study, rely on lecture and text-oriented methods. Elementary teachers tend to incorporate visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic modalities in order to engage all their students and reinforce their learning. These students remembered the hands-on projects, the group work, the variety and novelty that were part of their elementary experience. "I really like things if there's a mix of all of them, not 'cause I can't learn from one of them, but because it's just more interesting" [Anita]. The high school did not provide this mix, nor did it promote social interaction for problem-solving or peer tutoring within the classroom.

To allow students to explore, discover and discuss on their own or in groups takes more organization and time than delivering a lecture. But some of these students (Jill especially) felt they learned much better interacting with people, problem-solving, doing hands-on activities. She remembered many elementary school projects as challenging and fun; she achieved excellence in these tasks.

The only time Jill believed she was learning in high school was when she worked with her peers, to discuss ideas and to lead the catering group in their preparations. Catering had a practical real world applicability Jill liked being an authority figure. "I'm good with being an authority figure. If I'm in charge, I'll do a good job if I'm important." She felt the students listened to her "because they know I give them the best job that they like to do. . . . People always ask me what they should do." She liked to be in control to feel important. She also liked to work cooperatively with others problem-solving.

She remembered Grade 8 group work, “I think a student can learn better off a student than a teacher because the student has just learned something too. If you’ve just learned something it’s easier to teach. . . . In Grade 9 it wasn’t like that.” Dave, Kelly and Andrea too, felt peer teaching worked very well.

Jill thrived in atmospheres where she could discover the solutions herself with her peers. She also thrived on hands-on things. “If I can touch things and see things like Math, the pictures, geometry is the easiest, the angles.” Jill fondly remembered her challenge classes in junior high as I indicated in Chapter 4. She had enjoyed her Challenge class especially because the students directed their learning. They took control of how to figure out something out through discussion and perhaps hands-on problem-solving. Brenda commented on her challenge class as “fun” when “we have like all of us doing it [problem-solving] at once.” This comment echoes Jill on her challenge program experiences.

For these students fun was not synonymous with easy. Jill was adamant that easy activities were not sufficient to inspire learning. “Easy has no challenge. Some easy things are fun, but if it’s easy why bother ‘cause you know you can do it. Why take the time? Why waste your time?” Fun had components of challenge embedded within it. Kelly wanted the material to become harder. “I guess the material’s gotten harder but not very noticeably.” Sarah said learning Spanish initially was “challenging, new and exciting. . . . It just got a little too easy too fast. . . . It seemed really boring.”

These students really believed “it is more interesting to be doing things that make one think” [Anita]. Anita really wanted the opportunity “to use my mind to do something.” Andrea felt students’ creativity would increase overall if “they could just use their own mind in writing instead of just blending with the rest of the people.” Garfunke¹, Andrea, Brenda and Sarah commented upon the childish nature of some of their tasks. They wanted more challenging, mature tasks.

These students thrived when they were given opportunities to think, to challenge themselves, to perfect some task or product. They all had activities outside of school

which satisfied their needs for challenge and perfection. Many of the activities were engaged in “just ‘cause” as Dennis said; just ‘cause an opportunity, an interest, a passion existed within the individuals which caused them to explore, discover and often attempt to perfect it. In other words they learned from personal choice and motivation, becoming totally absorbed in the task or activity. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the objects of these intense interests varied. They were not lazy and unmotivated as often characterized in the literature on underachievement (Whitmore, 1986). They learned many things well outside of school.

While the students were absorbed in their passions, they tried to make something perfect for their eyes only not necessarily someone else’s. The students engaged in their chosen passions and did not need external pressures to complete and perfect their chosen tasks. Sarah describes this in her writing:

It’s something I want to be able to do, not that I have to do. I had a diary and . . . I write short stories all the time. My dad wrote a book too. We just have this thing in our family where we want to write. . . . I’ll just get in the mood where I want to write something and I want to write it really well and it might only be a page but I’ll do it over, like five times to get it right, the way I want it, you know. . . . It’s just a good relaxation thing for me. I’ve never even really showed it to anyone. It’s just mostly just for me. Just to relax me. Just to get it how I think it should be to get it right.

Sarah’s satisfaction arose from the relaxation and the perfection she discovered in wanting and choosing to write something.

Caring

The students mentioned some teachers with fondness. These teachers were caring; that is, they cared about their students and sought to challenge them in their learning. When these students felt some degree of choice, control and challenge and a bond with a caring teacher learning experiences were joyfully recounted. The English teacher and the

counselor at the alternative school provided such experiences for Andrea, Brenda and Karen.

Karen's English teacher noted she crafted her writing. Without his encouragement to publish, she might still be writing just for herself. Currently she is a published news writer building a portfolio towards a career in journalism. She continues to work on her novel to relax herself and seemed surprised that others saw her writing abilities as exceptional.

Garfunkel believed only a couple of good teachers taught at his school. They were good because "they all made you want to do the work." His math teacher was "totally fun. . . he let's you go ahead. He pushes you hard when you get behind, but he's funny, he's nice." Garfunkel even liked a good, strict, older Socials teacher who marked hard because he was funny. A caring teacher had a sense of humor and a sense of fun (a novel, flexible, approach) which appealed to Garfunkel, Dennis, Brenda, Sarah and Andrea.

The students truly believed nice teachers "respect their students. Not many adults respect teenagers. They just expect respect without giving it" said Karen. Andrea fondly remembered one teacher. "He was really interested in you, like he would notice you as a person, not just as another student like if you were depressed or something, he would talk to you." This sense of mutual respect seemed integral to the students' perceptions of their teachers. If they believed the teachers respected them as individuals and were interested enough in them to inspire and challenge their learning they engaged more readily.

Caring for these students as well meant caring about their own learning. Perhaps their caring was an extension of the degree of personal control, choice, challenge, relevance and worth embedded in their self-directed learning. They were free to express their intensity, sensitivity, idealism and perfection in such activities. The students, believing they knew themselves best, created optimal learning conditions for themselves. They chose and controlled personally relevant processes and products which reflected their skills,

abilities and interests. They judged their work. They controlled their time frames and output. They chose to perfect the activity or craft. They chose whether to reveal their products to a wider audience. They were absorbed, challenged and enjoyed these activities. They lavished caring attention on their just 'cause pursuits. They all cared about a subject, the process or product in their "just 'cause" pursuits. Generally they did not care for their schooling process or products to the same extent. Their learning was in their hands; their schooling was generally in the hands of others.

SECTION III: SCHOOLING

These students felt deprived, especially in high school, of opportunities to learn and found their schooling boring. Schooling was too easy. It lacked challenge and depth, social interaction, novelty, relevance and fun within the classroom setting. As well as lacking challenge their schooling seemed dominated largely by uncaring, boring teachers.

The students perceived their schooling as controlled and chosen by others. The students felt schooling demanded rigid time frames which were much too slow and redundant text-based material which was not challenging. The context (relating to mandatory hours of school attendance) and content (heavily text-orientated curriculum) was controlled by Ministry guidelines. The students consistently felt the curriculum and attendance decisions made for all students were not necessarily appropriate or beneficial for their individual learning needs.

Control and Choice

Control and choice issues are intricately entwined. Students felt they had little of either in course selection and content. In part their desire for recognition as individuals with special interests and needs, and the right to choose courses confronted the school system's desire to control individuals and maintain order. Frustrated with school rules and

regulations which seemed impersonal and irrelevant to these students' needs, they chose to take control. They decided to actively engage or disengage in their classroom tasks.

The students were basically frustrated by the school system's cardinal rule that everyone (unless ill) must attend school daily. Sarah so succinctly stated school was, "the only place I have to go where I don't want to be. Other places I can leave if I don't want to be there, but school you just have to." School controlled and confined these students making them feel "stuck there" [Karen and Andrea]. As these students moved to junior high school, they began to perceive that perhaps they might be able to question having to attend.

They chose not to attend because as Sarah said, "The curriculum obviously bored me right to death. . . . I found it a waste of time. . . . It's just that everything's so scheduled." Essentially the students felt they were wasting their time. Consistently the students used "have to" and "had to" to describe their school attendance, but their question remained, "Why do we have to attend?" Still, they had strategies for passing.

Sarah would, "Call somebody, get the assignment, hand it in. . . . I was never behind. I was just never there. But I still knew what was going on." Sarah and Jill set up "little challenges" [Jill] like catching up later [Sarah and Jill] to avoid boredom. Everyone, except Anita, challenged the attendance regulations. Anita always attended, but even Anita admitted she did not actively engage in her schooling although she was physically present. She said, "I'll come and not pay attention, but I'll always come." Andrea said, "I think I could do as much in one day as you do in a week. Just not having to listen to the teacher and not having to get up so early. I hate it."

Andrea, Dave, Sarah and Dennis were frustrated by bell schedules and time tables. As an example, complying with the 9 to 3 framework did not suit Dennis. He said he worked best in the afternoon, "I'm still half asleep in the morning. I don't wake up 'til noon." As an adult, he may be able to choose an occupation that allows him to set his own hours or work evening shifts. As a public school student, he had to fit into the time

schedule. These gifted students, who may become absorbed in their learning, resented and were frustrated by arbitrary time controls.

In schools, students who want time to reflect or relax are often forced to continue production. Andrea said,

When you're at school, if you're not working, then you're in trouble if you just want to sit there. I mean sometimes when I was in Math, you just cannot put your mind into Math and there's nothing you can do about it. You just can't so you have to like stop and think about something else and relax and start again. But if you do that at school, then they get mad, so you have to pretend you're doing something, so you write a note and then you get in trouble for writing a note.

Time frames were not necessarily respected by teachers. They demanded assignments in on due dates, but could be lackadaisical about promptly returning them.

If I do something, if I do a test, a quiz I WANT IT BACK THE NEXT DAY or the Monday if it's a Friday. I don't want to wait two weeks for my stuff back. That is something that really ticks me off. They tell you I'll get around to it or they do it in class. They're marking someone else's homework in your class and they tell you 'oh I'm busy right now.' [Karen]

A subtle message was sent when a teacher would not help a student, claiming to be busy while marking homework in the class. The teacher was demonstrating that grading was a higher priority activity than the immediate needs of the student. The critical moment for learning through discussion and problem solving with a teacher was lost. These gifted students seemed to desire more complex interaction and discussion than their classmates, but their teachers' attention was often directed to marking others work [Karen, Dennis, Andrea] or controlling the class [Garfunkel, Anita, Dennis].

In a sense, these teachers might have been demonstrating their control. Teachers can control when an assignment is due. Teachers can choose when to mark and return those assignments. Teachers are not penalized for slow returns. Students seldom control assignment dates. Karen's comment characterizes the sense of injustice Kelly and Andrea also felt when teachers did not reciprocate with the same punctuality they expected of

their students. In a sense they believed good teachers model the behaviors they expect of their students.

The students also had little opportunity to work ahead. Sarah bluntly said, “There’s no way you can work ahead in anything.” Karen felt her boredom in school arose when she could not go ahead and she had “nothing else to do.” Except for Jill in a challenge course (Math 8), Karen (Creative writing in Grade 10), and Kelly (compacted French 12) the students did not mention acceleration or compacting courses. At the outset, one must remember these gifted students were identified because of their ability to grasp skills and concepts far beyond and much more rapidly than their average ability classmates. It is not surprising they found the pace too slow.

Jill said, “Why should I have to wait if I got it the first time?” She believed if she had been allowed to go more quickly she could have graduated earlier than her friends. She would have been successful, rather than dropping out. She really wanted the opportunity to, “Go at my own rate. If I had my way I would only eat and sleep and do the course until it was finished, like in weeks” echoing Andrea’s previous comment. The “standstill thing” [Sarah] frustrated all the students.

If students attempted to go ahead or beyond they often found themselves in trouble. Dennis recalled being reprimanded by his English teacher because he read ahead. Dennis said,

I'll be 5 or 6 chapters ahead, and then when it comes time for the exam, I know things that will happen that the other students don't and it reflects on the exam. For some reason the teachers don't seem to like it. They think you should be reading exactly what was assigned when it was assigned.

When teachers attempted to fill these gifted students’ waiting times, some of the students experienced even greater frustration [Anita, Andrea, Karen, Jill, Sarah, Kelly]. Again the teacher controlled and chose the activities to fill in the time. The teachers had not asked for the students’ input. They gave more of the same work, rather than more challenging work to keep these students occupied while the others caught up [Jill].

Sometimes a teacher put a less able student beside them so they acted as a tutor [Anita, Karen, Brenda, Garfunkel]. When Karen and Andrea came together to a follow-up interview, it included, on their initiative, a discussion about being forced to help others. Karen added, “I don’t mind helping, but if you’re going to force it on me,” Andrea completed the discussion with “What would they say if you said no. ‘Well tough! Do it anyway’.” Karen and Andrea resented being used rather than given an opportunity for personally challenging and stimulating learning.

Some teachers simply let students leave classes early [Kelly] or gave them breaks [Anita] if they finished their work before their classmates. In a sense an English teacher who tried to alleviate Sarah’s boredom by allowing her to leave may have encouraged Sarah to miss other classes.

. . . the English teacher excused quite a few people. I wasn’t the only one, but you know it, it was just stupid that half of us didn’t have an English class to go to because we’re still learning how to capitalize. . .

This is a significant point. Why did half the class, in Sarah’s estimation, forego learning because the slower students had not mastered previous materials? What made their needs for mastering more important than Sarah’s need to be challenged with novel material? The teacher let Sarah leave. This reinforced Sarah’s belief that school was a waste of time. The teacher might have believed Sarah was being given freedom from the boring classroom instead of being forced to wait for the others.

For some students, their boredom took on physical manifestations. Anita became anxious and physically agitated, “I get like anxious, like I want to punch somebody so I can’t sit unless I’m interested or doing something. . . . When I’m bored, I just, I would rather be running laps then sitting there or something.” Brenda’s anxiety also turned to aggression. “You have nothing to do with it which is why you go out and pick a fight with somebody. So you get rid of it.” Andrea developed headaches and found herself very irritated when she was confined in the classroom and bored listening to nothing.

She felt it was hard “to keep yourself physically down, like physically sit there and listen mentally, and not be able to do anything physically.” These students painted a picture of increasing tension arising because of the controlling and physically confining classroom environment.

The students sought to be heard and to listen to more than their teachers’ voices. They felt they learned best from talking with their peers [Dave, Jill, Andrea and Brenda]; instead they were usually told to work independently at their desks. They were reprimanded for and prohibited from talking with their classmates in many courses. Teachers very definitely controlled the amount of talk and discussion which these students believed was very limited. The students were expected to satisfy their needs for belonging and discussion in hallway travels and lunch hours.

Just as the context of their schooling was controlled so was the content. Repetitive textbooks, questions and drilling killed the students’ desire to do the work because they knew and could prove they had mastered the material. Sarah said her Socials 10 correspondence text was “really redundant in a lot of places.” She found “a lot of textbooks are.” The teachers taught without asking if the students already knew the content [Anita, Sarah, Andrea, Garfunkel]. They never asked them to do something - they told students to do it over and over. As Garfunkel said, “Most of the things I get told once, then I get told over, and over, and over again ‘cause they figure the repetition method works, but most kids get bored and just sit there.”

Some repetition was tolerable if it had real applicability and worth. Anita believed that Drama held meaningful repetition. She had a lead role in *Midsummer-Night’s Dream*.

So I never get bored doing a scene over and over again, never. . . . ‘cause it’s sorta like you have to make it new every time you do it or else it just gets boring and repetitive, also for the audience, but also for yourself. I guess if you get into something enough it feels like you're doing it for the first time. . . . So when you end up and you have to perform it, it's not repetitive no matter how many times you do it. I guess ‘cause I can get into it and really feel it.

Anita's comment identified some interesting attributes of meaningful repetition. This repetition made the ideas new. It had a purpose. The play would be performed. Anita could "get into it" and "really feel it." She found meaning in her Dramatic activities.

Anita also found her Earth Science and English classes worthwhile. She applied Geography to her physical world, English to the people around her and Drama to her pleasure in performing. In effect she took control of her learning by finding personal connections between these subjects and her life. She said that she planned her courses in line with her goals. She said someone might believe she could have chosen more academic subjects but she took what was required to enter Business Administration at Simon Fraser University. She said, "I had it planned the whole time and I'm glad I chose it this way. I would feel that I was taking classes that were wasting my time." In essence, Anita stayed in school and was not as bored as some of the others because her courses were relevant to her future.

Sometimes other students wasted these gifted students' time [Dennis, Anita, Sarah]. Dennis was upset "with people who seem to have no idea with what is going on. . . . In Math you've got people who don't grasp the concept and they take up the whole class trying to get the teacher to explain it. . . . Sometimes they're just wasting time."

Wasted time spent on worksheets, copying from textbooks and doing homework was an issue for Sarah, Brenda, Anita, Kelly, Dave, Garfunkel, Karen, and Andrea. Homework epitomized why Kelly, Sarah, Andrea, Brenda, Dennis and Garfunkel felt school was boring. Homework was generally mandatory and usually repetitive arising from text-oriented daily lessons. They felt they had already mastered the work, why repeat it? As a result, the students often did not do their homework.

When we have to do questions, and write them out, I'll never do them and I'll wait and I'll answer the question out loud, orally, when she asks so she thinks I have my homework done and I never do. She doesn't really come around and check. . . . But sometimes she will ask to have them handed in after we've read them out loud. And she knows I know the answers, she

wants them written down. . . . I see no point to it. Then teachers get offended if you say, 'No point to it,' because that's their job to make you write this down and teach you [Jill].

Teachers were the enforcers. It was "their job to make you"[Jill] do any task they decided upon. A conflict developed. Most teachers assigned homework. All of the students except Anita and Kelly felt there was little point in doing it. They refused. They proved on their exams that they did not need the repetition of homework exercises to achieve good grades.

Early on in their schooling, they did quite well. Later on, some like Brenda started failing. Overall, the students did not do as well in junior high school as they had in elementary, especially in Grades 9 and 10. Jill wistfully commented she had not developed any good study habits because she found no purpose in study and note-taking because she could just pass the exams.

I never really learned how to study or take notes or things because they were always so boring and with no purpose because I could write the tests all the time. So I thought I could write the test all the time now. Why can't I do that in Grade 12? . . . But for 16 years of my life I've never had to work so, kind of hard just to start now in the last year.

As the amount of content increased and the concepts became more complex, some students found relying on their memories was not enough.

Brenda, Garfunkel and Karen disputed the integrity and value of grades. Garfunkel felt "there's no real purpose" to getting good grades. When these students perceived school was a waste of time they saw no point in regularly attending classes. They saw no point or purpose in achieving their previous levels of academic success. Garfunkel, Dennis and Kelly had better ways to spend their time than studying for higher grades they did not value. Dennis said A's would be great but if they, "cut in too much on my free time visiting friends" why bother? Certainly they felt the effort required to attain A's or high A's, as in Kelly's case, was a waste of time. In effect, these students might have viewed the grading system as one more way to control their academic behavior. Teachers

constantly cautioned students [Dennis, Garfunkel and Dave] about a grim economic future if they did not do well in school. Garfunkel did not believe he had to ace his courses only pass them. He exercised control over his productivity and its level of excellence as did the others.

Peers affected these gifted students willingness to or opportunity to engage in classroom tasks. Jill, Karen and Kelly seemed to feel they had to choose between their peer group or unpopularity. Jill coined “student politics” to describe the control cool and popular students have over their classmates. Jill believed, especially in junior high, “student politics” thwarted students’ contributions to discussions and activities that could have been learning experiences. Instead they became more schooling.

So social stuff has a lot to do with class things. Because people who are so called cool and stuff in school aren’t going to say what they really feel and stuff, so discussions are not interesting. Or if a popular person does speak out everybody in the class is going to agree with them. . . .

Jill was very expressive; she liked to discuss, to interact with others. She believed she learned best from people, not books. In classrooms, if the teachers did not prohibit discussion; her cool peers might. Discussions were boring for Jill because questions were teacher-initiated and answers, if given by cool students, were often accepted unconditionally by her classmates. Jill thrived on debating, but her needs were lost in “student politics.”

Jill loved socializing but she was grimly aware that peer pressures forced students to make choices to avoid being termed “a geek.” Jill believed these politics diminished in Grade 11 and 12 as students had gained more “individuality.” I asked her to elaborate and explain how Grade 11 and 12 had changed; “You start picking more classes and stuff like that. In Grade 8 it was like a big thing, did you pick Drama or did you pick Band? If you picked Band, you were a geek.”

The “cool” students clearly sent messages, for example calling students “geek”, regarding acceptable behavior. Misreading or ignoring these messages could mean

loneliness, mockery or worse ostracism. Andrea said the students were “too nervous to say anything in case they are laughed at.” She agreed that often if someone was brave enough to ask a question in class then the others felt free to say they did not know something. Without discussion many opportunities for extending the focus and bringing relevance through personal narratives were lost in a classroom. Students feel safer in revealing their knowledge or lack of it when all individuals in a classroom respect individual student’s needs to question, discuss and learn. Andrea really enjoyed student led questions and discussions. She was much more interested in a course if she heard more of the students’ voices and less of the teachers’ voices.

Garfunkel was especially scornful of the “cool” crowds who tormented other students because he said, “They [the “cool” group] can’t make decisions for themselves.” Karen followed her own path. She chose not to go with the crowd; she also chose to do her work.

And that was a strike against me because if somebody wanted me to do something I didn’t agree with I didn’t go. Also, because when I was in school, I was working, like I would do my work, grit my teeth and do my work while everybody else was goofing off. I had some courses I really liked and some I didn’t, and I just wanted to get through so that I could do the stuff that I liked.

Even if Karen was bored she would “grit her teeth”, finish her work and get on with her passion, writing. Sarah, on the other hand, wistfully described how falling in with a bad crowd had helped make her become one of them, a dropout. In hindsight she said, “People just don’t realize when you hang out with people you start to think like them.”

Throughout this discussion on control two points must be clear. First, the students perceived teachers had control of much more than teachers actually have. As a practicing teacher, I know that I do not control our schedules, the curricular content or basic textbooks. As a practicing teacher I can control, to a large extent, how I teach the curriculum, how I assess students’ work and how I interact with my students. In general,

the gifted students in my study were much more concerned with the process of teaching, the controlling aspects of a teacher's classroom management, and the negative impact the "Hitlers" [Anita] have on the classroom dynamics than with the actual content to be learned.

Second, the students spoke about control as noun, at other points as a verb. While they were not aware of the significance of this grammatical distinction, I gradually became aware that the process of controlling was more frustrating to them than the necessary institutional controls of set time frames and schedules. Nonetheless, the students felt that the institutional controls and organizational structures were not necessarily beneficial or even logical. Even more importantly, compulsory attendance forces students to attend as well as forbidding them the opportunity to leave of their own volition. Once students are in school they are to stay for the duration of the day, the term, the year and realistically the years until they graduate. Only then are they free to leave for other experiences where there may be fewer (at least as they perceive it) constraints on their time and more choices for them.

Students perceived their personal interests, needs and moods were ignored in their schooling. They were not given opportunities to choose various learning options. According to Andrea, wanting to learn the course had a great deal to do with her interest. Many of these gifted students felt their passions and choices remained generally unacknowledged.

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage in establishment of personal identity and autonomy (Buescher, 1991). Sarah, Garfunkel, Andrea, Brenda and Jill had very strong senses of their abilities. They were frustrated by the few choices given to them. In junior high they might choose between Band and Drama [Jill], but essentially choices were limited. In senior high they had more choices [Jill], but again the actual courses, materials and products were determined by their teachers. They had to fit into the pre-chosen program structure. Most of the students in this study chose as Garfunkel said to "make

their own hoops” rather than jump the school’s even though making their own choices meant some trouble for them.

Sarah felt indignant that her self-knowledge and her ability to make personal choices were not honored. As she said,

If there’s a rule that tells me I shouldn’t do something and I want to do it then I’m just going to go ahead and do it. . . . Rules are so general they can’t be good for everybody. . . . ‘Cause I know what’s best for myself and it keeps me from being bored. . . . Other people like school boards and stuff don’t know what’s best exactly for me.

She knew what she needed to remain interested in her schooling. The rules in school bored her because they made little sense to her. For example, she did not need to be in school every day to learn; she did not need nor want to work with a group. She was an independent person and learner. She could motivate herself; she did not need nor respect the rewards (grades, team awards) offered by the system.

The students questioned the necessity of many mandatory courses, in part because only the rote memorization of facts was required. No contextual real world applicability occurred. These students understood they could not choose only courses that interested them, but what they consistently remarked upon was the lack of opportunity to use their course-based knowledge or to develop interconnections with their reality. Gifted students make connections across different fields more quickly and frequently than their average peers. They often have a very extensive base of prior knowledge to draw upon. Much of the time the only purpose the students saw for studying was to pass a test. Jill provided an example from Social Studies. Since the content concerns world issues it seemed very sad that the students never saw the relationship between past and present events or different cultures and their own. Jill said,

Social Studies is always boring. Just a lot of facts repeated. Socials is good for field trips. If we did stuff like that it would have been interesting or had a costume day, or anything. But all we really do is read, memorize facts and write tests on it. You don’t apply History or Socials facts.

Karen and Andrea did not see any application to their real lives from their Math. Aside from adding and subtracting, what possible use, asked Andrea, could there be for Math?

It's my worse subject [Math] because it's so boring, like I know you need to know some things in life like adding and subtracting, but what else do you need to know? You know, if you want to be a mathematician, take algebra or whatever. I've never found a use for it yet, and if I did I'd just ask someone else. Just get a mathematician, go there and ask them.

In this age of consulting experts, Andrea has a point.

Karen chose not to bother to learn Math. Anita, Sarah and Andrea also chose to learn only a minimal amount of Math. Garfunkel and Jili put forth minimal effort in English. For all these students, their interests, perceived abilities and fun stimulated their decision to actively engage or passively withdraw in their courses. All the students, according to their teachers and test scores, had the ability to pass their courses; however, they chose to disengage from classroom tasks instead.

In their authoritarian role, schools sometimes treat adolescent students as children. Brenda, Andrea and Garfunkel made references to childish activities or content in their classrooms. Brenda admitted she understood why teachers required participation in lunch time intramural team sports in an effort to make school more interesting. Sarah felt she was an individual not a team member. She resented mandatory involvement. Andrea wondered why adults did not ask instead of tell, especially given most adults know that most teenagers go through stages of rebellion against adult demands and authority.

Within the school system is a general push for students to bond with and participate in school activities. Those who are predisposed to make their own hoops may be the most resentful, perceiving "choices" as "commands". Sarah, Karen and Dave needed time on their own. Ironically, students like Sarah and Brenda were further alienated from school by the very policy administrators believed would bring students closer to their schooling. Adolescents will (unless they lack social skills) become involved

with individuals and activities they choose where their interests are shared. The students in my study had many interests outside the school. They did not need school as their primary place of socializing. In fact, their willingness to engage in an activity had to do with the degree of choice they had in their involvement.

Challenge

The word “challenge” can be used as a noun or a verb. These students needed a challenge to feel they were learning. If no challenge existed some students created a challenge. They attempted to stretch school rules [Brenda, Jill, Sarah, Dennis] or outwit and irritate the teachers [Garfunkel, Andrea, Dave]. If they perceived their teachers were ignorant or uncaring, they would challenge their teachers’ knowledge or authority, even if the price was high.

Underlying the students challenging teacher and rules was the belief that adult rules, expectations and individuals do not automatically deserve respect. Teachers must earn it. Garfunkel made this point. He felt no awe for those older than himself. He felt most teenagers, unlike himself, looked at adults like “high authority.” He believed all individuals, regardless of age, should be treated equally. He said, “Some people figure that just because they are a little older they should be treated with more authority, but I don’t put them in front of anyone else. I treat everybody equal.” He believed that some teachers believed he should be looking up to them; “It gets him kind of pissed off so he doesn’t like me.” Garfunkel felt some teachers thought he was stupid because he goofed around, but if they questioned him he had the answer. He said, “It’s a big game. . . see which one of us can outsmart the other one.” Sadly, Garfunkel believed his only challenge in school was outwitting his teachers and administrators.

Sometimes challenge was lacking even in enrichment classes. Kelly made it clear her boredom levels were raised by the repetitive nature of her schooling. She wanted to learn new things; instead her Challenge teacher forced her to reread a novel. “She made us

read *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and I had already read it and she didn't care. That's not the point of enrichment. . . go read it again!" She contrasted that teacher's controlling style with another teacher who would tell her, "Go see if you can find something you want to do and if you can find something, do it." Kelly was given control and choice. She had a similar experience in her Grade 7 Challenge program. "We got to pick a topic and do research. . . its not a usual experience you get in Grade 7 to go into the library, look for books, take notes, so it was interesting." Again Kelly was allowed to choose. Researching facts was her passion. She could follow that passion. Kelly did not find these interesting, challenging experiences again in her schooling, especially in text-oriented classrooms.

Textbooks provided little challenge for Kelly and the other students. Brenda, Dave, Andrea, Sarah and Karen described "going by the book" as another major catalyst in the development of their boredom. These students needed more depth, novelty and challenge than the texts or their text-oriented teachers provided. Teachers often introduced their lessons by opening the text, reading from the text and assigning the text questions. Students were expected to copy notes and questions from the text. They were given text-based worksheets or tests. These worksheets and tests were often prepared by the text publishers, not their teachers. Karen said when she woke up in the morning she realized "You're just going to be doing another worksheet, what's the point? I'll just make it up tomorrow." Then she rolled over and went back to sleep.

The textbook was perceived as a barrier to going deeper into thought, to being immersed in the activity. Dave, Andrea and Kelly all discussed their teachers' concentration on the textbook and its questions often ignoring the questions they generated. This issue of questioning is discussed more fully in the section on "caring" because the students perceived permission to question was connected to the teacher's caring for the teaching profession and their students. Dave wanted teachers who, "Like to improvise with things. They use things. They tell you about it and they go into deep thought and I like that." Dennis also believed good teachers didn't "just read straight from

the textbook, tell you to make notes on it.” They tried, “To put in a bit of their own insight.” When teachers offered their views students were more likely to engage in assigned tasks [Karen]. This created a sense of reciprocity; teachers put personal effort and thought into the material just as they expected from their students.

Kelly, Anita, Andrea, Dave and Garfunkel were very willing to challenge their teachers if they felt their teachers were unprepared, ignorant or unjust. They, in essence, believed that their teachers’ lack of preparation, ignorance or injustice exacerbated to the students’ boredom with basic curriculum. They both learned that they could not win. Kelly said, “Honesty doesn’t work that well, causes more problems than it’s worth.” She spoke of her Grade 10 teacher whom she felt,

Didn’t know enough about French. . . . She was very European and had some old style attitude that the teacher said anything she wanted to say and the students couldn’t challenge any of it even if she said something wrong. And I disagree with that. I will not challenge a teacher or make life miserable for them if they’re teaching me something and they know.

Kelly found she disliked the teacher’s manner and her ignorance. She challenged her and often left that teacher’s class. Kelly said she had a passion for accurate facts. She wanted correct answers. She could not tolerate wrong information from a teacher. She felt teachers should put forth their best efforts just as they demanded the best efforts from their students. Kelly really believed she should challenge a teacher who was not teaching her or was providing incorrect information because she became bored under these conditions. “I’m bored in my classes. . . . I couldn’t sit like 5 hours a week in somebody’s class if they don’t know what they’re doing.”

Challenge (as with control, choice and caring) had multiple meanings. A challenge in these students’ learning meant accelerated pacing [Garfunkel, Jill, Andrea], deeper thought [Karen, Dave, Kelly, Dennis] and personal relevance [especially Anita]. Challenge certainly did not mean “by the book” [Karen]. A challenge might occur in the regular classroom under the direction of an understanding, caring teacher [Anita, Garfunkel,

Sarah] and not necessarily in enrichment classes as Kelly indicated. Sometimes a less socially approved behavior (verb) to challenge, such as outwitting the teacher and playing games was created especially by Andrea, Brenda, Garfunkel, Jill, Dave and Kelly. They especially targeted those teachers they perceived as uncaring and controlling.

Caring

Caring is a very broad term which umbrellas students' descriptions of good, fair, interesting teachers in contrast to poor, unfair, boring teachers. Caring also involves teachers and students valuing each others' work, mutually respecting each other as individuals and creating safe comfortable classrooms. For many students as the literature on dropping out has indicated, a prevailing sense that no one in the system cares, is akin to turning up the heat under the soup pot I referred to earlier when students perceive a lack of control, choice and challenge regarding their learning.

The students were concerned with their teachers' abilities to interact and connect with them. Kelly, Andrea and Karen thought teachers should demonstrate their care for their subjects and their students' engagement in those subjects by being prepared. A reciprocal effort and mutual respect was integral to a caring atmosphere [Kelly, Anita, Andrea, Garfunkel, Dennis]. As well, caring meant the teachers understood these students needs to question, to explore, to be challenged. A caring, understanding teacher made time for them; didn't "brush you off and say go read a book about it" [Karen].

At the outset, I must stress these students did not have a vendetta to blame the teachers. As Karen so succinctly commented, "Some of them were good; some of them were bad. Well, not bad, but just not very good at teaching."

The teachers, they make the class, even if it's really boring, if your teacher is there to help you do it even if you don't like it. Just inspiring you to get on with it. It makes it so much better because a lot of it is just getting along with people. And even for me English 10 and 11 were the worst English classes I ever had because the teacher was an idiot. She just had no

clue [in terms of the kids]. . . . and she was going by the book you know. . . . I find teachers are very superficial. . . . They're not open, they're not willing to share parts of themselves in order to get the kids to share.

Karen's passion was English, but this particular teacher made English 10 and 11 boring for Karen. Embedded within this quote were the issues of caring teachers helping, inspiring and getting along with their students. These teachers shared parts of themselves to get "the kids to share." A reciprocity of respect, effort and understanding existed.

Kelly, Dennis and Sarah all recalled teachers who had lacked empathy and understanding. Those unempathic teachers alienated rather than engaged their students. The students felt many of their teachers had "no clue" [Karen]. The teachers did not concentrate their efforts on knowing either their material or their students. They had only a minimal understanding of both; hence, they had "no clue". Brenda recalled her Socials 9 teacher. She was so busy copying notes on the overhead that she had no clue what her class was doing.

And they're not paying any attention to their kids. They're not actually looking at what's going on in the classroom. . . . They didn't have a clue what they were doing in their classroom. . . . There was no real relationship, student / teacher.

Andiea had difficulty understanding why a teacher would want to be a teacher when, "He doesn't like kids, and most of them don't." She said, "Teachers were putting their time in for summer vacation." Dennis said, "Teachers forget what they were like as students." He felt when an individual became "teacher" many interpersonal skills like socializing, joking, relating to students were ignored. Not only did some teachers seem to dislike their students, but also their teaching role. If teachers did not appear to like their students nor subjects they were teaching, students disengaged from the classroom activities. In part, they felt it was not worth making an effort if their teachers were not making an effort. It was a waste of time.

Dennis' Art 9 teacher frequently left the classroom. Karen's Math teacher, ". . . . was a soccer coach. He would come in, give out 10 or 12 worksheets and leave and go

play soccer and just leave us there.” Karen particularly resented this teacher’s actions because worksheets were not interesting to her. As well she truly believed teachers should connect with their students. The teacher’s job was to engage the students and be engaged in their learning throughout the class time. Teachers must help inspire and facilitate learning [Karen, Andrea, Dennis]. That is difficult if they are not in the room.

Too often students readily gave examples of uncaring, dictatorial teachers who put their needs for control over the students’ needs. Anita made the contrast between a caring English teacher with control and a dictatorial, uncaring Data Processing teacher.

Mr. _____ had been teaching data processing and doing it the same way for as long as he’s been teaching which must have been like 20 years. . . . Nobody in the class liked it, . . . he’d just wouldn’t listen no matter what and he used to get in fights with just everybody everyday. And he used to kick people out everyday and erase peoples’ discs everyday and he was winning.

The tension in the classroom is evident in Anita’s comment. The students were compelled to follow the teacher’s methods. In contrast, Anita’s English teacher who also had control, managed using understanding and fair methods.

My English teacher, he has control, but it’s like a different kind of control. He knows how to keep people interested, he knows how to, if he’s not happy with the way people are turning in their assignments, then he’ll do something about it, but he won’t be so unfair, like ‘Okay, 20 page essay tomorrow’ that’s something that Mr. _____ [Data Processing teacher] would have done. . . . I think that Mr. _____ doesn’t understand that you can’t be a Hitler anymore.

The sad consequence of the lack of teacher / student trust, respect and caring, whether it be teacher or student driven was that the students became lost. Sarah said, “Once you get lost you’re pretty lost and with English it was a combination, boredom / hate the teacher thing.” The student / teacher relationship was incredibly important in exacerbating or alleviating the students’ boredom. All the students felt they deserved their teachers’ respect. They were willing to respect their teachers. They expected respect in

return. When they perceived a lack of caring or respect for them as individuals they were more likely to be bored.

Schooling bored the students. They became sleepy, dozey or frustrated or angry. Sometimes they “gritted their teeth” like Karen. Sometimes they challenged the teachers and the rules (Garfunkel, Dave, Jill, Dennis, Anita, Kelly, Sarah, Brenda, Andrea). They all generally felt as Karen and Andrea did, “anger, frustration and disappointment” about their overall school experiences.

Eight of the students withdrew for a time from their schooling. Only two eventually graduated from the regular public system. These students did truly drop out. Boredom, if not the cause, was certainly a critical factor in their decision to leave school. The students felt no point in attending regularly, feeling they were wasting their time going through repetitive steps and thoroughly mastered materials. They felt resentful that their time and schooling was so controlled, so lacking in choice, challenge and caring. They sought personal control, choice, challenge. They also expected teachers would be caring about their students as individuals and about actively participating with and facilitating their students’ learning. This participation and facilitation was only possible if the teachers were prepared to teach, to inspire and to engage their students. In essence, the students believed their teachers had to care about what and how they taught as much as they cared about who they taught. The students sought learning and challenge in their classrooms, but found schooling and boredom.

The divergence of learning from schooling began for Brenda, Anita and Garfunkel in elementary school. The other seven students claimed the process began in junior high. Certainly all the students believed no one cause initiated their disengagement from their classroom learning activities. Consistently issues of control, choice, challenge, caring arose in the process of becoming bored. These issues were interdependent. The students all described various school experiences using the gerund “boring” or the verb forms of “to bore” rather than “boredom”.

I began my odyssey to reach a greater understanding of gifted, academically, underachieving students' perceptions of boredom. I gained an understanding of boredom's complexity as I futilely searched for a tidy, one-word definition of boredom. They told me how, when, where and why they were bored; they provided examples of adjectives, verbs, and adverbs to describe boredom; not a definition. Boredom did not exist; it evolved.

Boredom for these students was the result of the gradual process of disengagement from their schooling. It occurred when students perceived a lack of personal control, choice and challenge in their schooling. Their personal relationships with their teachers could help escalate or help alleviate their boredom. Their personal interests, abilities and moods also determined the extent of their boredom. Their boredom was mutable, dynamic and fluid. Their boredom haunted them throughout their schooling as it has haunted me throughout this whole odyssey.

SECTION IV: CONNECTIONS WITH THE LITERATURE

In Chapter 2, I indicated a need for clarity in the meanings of "gifted" (Richert, 1991) and "underachievement" (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1981). Seemingly the gifted students in my study (and might I add many of their teachers) are struggling like the researchers with the terms "gifted" [Karen, Jill, Garfunkel]. Karen believed gifted people were not necessarily smarter, just more driven to learn which connects to Gagné's (1993) intellectual abilities and Piechowski's (1991) intellectual overexcitabilities. Karen said she was always naturally good with words. Gagné (1993) clearly states exceptional natural ability denotes giftedness in a domain. Karen was a "gifted" writer who became a "talented" writer according to Gagné's (1993) model. In part, Karen's talent developed through her "just 'cause" activities and her teacher's encouragement at the alternative school. These influences may be viewed as part of Gagné's environmental and intrapersonal catalysts which affect a particular gift and its ultimate manifestation as a

talent. Gagné's (1993) model works to explain my students' experience when the personal and environmental catalysts do not encourage talent development.

Certainly, the students in this study seemed to possess the overexcitabilities which are integral to Dabrowski's (1964) conceptualization of gifted individuals. I have noted the students' names in square brackets as I describe these overexcitabilities. These students have difficulty conforming to the rules and more likelihood of being bored because they possessed these overexcitabilities. Csikszentmihalyi (1986) indicates that creative gifted individuals have more difficulty in school because they are intrinsically motivated and problem finders as well as problem solvers. Indeed Piechowski (1991) states forms of expression for intellectual overexcitabilities include: probing questions [Kelly], problem solving [Brenda, Jill], introspection and moral thinking [Karen, Dennis] and extensive reading [Dennis, Karen, Sarah, Andrea]. Many of the students in this study also manifested forms of emotional overexcitabilities (Piechowski, 1991) especially empathy [Sarah, Dennis, Kelly], conflict with others [Anita, Garfunkel, Sarah, Brenda], complex and extreme feelings [Sarah]. Jill and Garfunkel made spontaneous metaphors an indicator of imaginative overexcitabilities (Piechowski, 1991). Certainly, Sarah, Anita, Jill, Garfunkel and Karen seemed to be very capable of strong visualization and visual recall so much so that I could almost see their teachers and classroom experiences. This strong visualization is another form of imaginal overexcitabilities (Piechowski, 1991).

"Underachievement" did not fit the students I interviewed. They were not characterized by low self-esteem which is the predominant trait associated with underachievers (Delisle, 1992; McCall, 1992) and dropouts (Neufeld, 1991) who are viewed as "classic underachievers" (MacDonald, 1988). The students I interviewed seemed much more akin to students described by Betts & Neihart (1988) as successful, challenging or Gifted Dropouts; by Statistics Canada (1990) as Creative Independents and by Barrington & Hendricks (1989) as Nongraduates (NG 4). They seemed self-assured, poised and generally content with their choices, if not the reasons they felt compelled to

make them. Kelly and Anita were successful, but bored in school (Betts, Type I) although were also challenging teachers on their knowledge and rules (Betts Type II). All the students were like Betts Type I in that elementary school experiences went reasonably, if not, very well. Sarah especially seemed to fit Betts Gifted Dropout (angry, a loner, working very inconsistently).

Perhaps, as Delisle (1992) and McCall (1992) suggest, the underachievement is, in the eyes of the parents and teachers, not the students themselves. Gallagher (1991) and Ziv (1977) suggest that underachievement is a cultural phenomenon which seems disproportionately high in America compared to Europe. Boys supposedly underachieve 2 to 1 in relation to girls (Gallagher, 1964). In my study seven of the participants were girls. Perhaps this preponderance of girls is related to studies which indicate girls tend to underachieve more in high school than elementary (Whitmore, 1980). Certainly, Anita, Sarah, Jill, Karen, Kelly, Andrea and Brenda did well in their elementary school years. All the students regardless of gender made it very clear as Anita stated that they achieve in the places they want to.

Boredom: A Process

The students in my study, much like in Farrell's (1988) distinguished between boring and interesting classes primarily on the basis of process rather than content. Farrell (1988) discovered his collaborators described rather than defined their boredom. Interestingly, one collaborator described boring as "That's when everybody put their head down on the desk" (p. 499). This comment resonated with Sarah's, Brenda's and Dennis' comments regarding sleeping or dozing students (including themselves) in the classroom. I did find the gifted students in my study referred to text-oriented materials and methods more than Farrell's (1988) less selective sample, perhaps because gifted students find these more boring than their average ability classmates (Delisle, 1990; Whitmore, 1980).

A critical element or perhaps catalyst in the process of becoming bored is the teacher's personal characteristics as both my students and Farrell's (1988) indicated. The difficulty arises in explaining the specific nature of an interesting or boring teacher. Both Farrell's (1988) students and mine indicated that a teacher's nonjudgmental behavior was crucial to positive student / teacher relationships. My students were very concerned as well, with issues of mutual respect, effort and empathy often described as "caring". This may be because gifted students are characterized as having greater sensitivity, idealism and intensity concerning moral and ethical issues (Colangelo, 1991; Silverman, 1991). A non-caring teacher might disturb a gifted student more because of their emotional and intellectual overexcitabilities (Piechowski, 1991), their intense sensitivity (Whitmore, 1980) and their acute sense of fairness and justice (Silverman, 1991). Certainly, Sarah, Kelly, Garfunkel, Dennis, Anita, Karen, Andrea and Brenda were very concerned about the overall lack of caring teachers (in terms of mutual respect, empathy and effort) within their high school experiences.

The students clearly indicated a stage in their schooling when they believed their boredom began; Garfunkel, Anita and Brenda indicated their elementary school years; the others their junior high school years. Lloyd (1978) and Runco & Sakamoto (1993) indicated that early school leaving (of which boredom is a precursor and warning sign) began in elementary school. The Coquitlam Study of Early School Leavers (1991) tend to leave soon after a transition year: from elementary to junior high school or to senior high. For example, Dave dropped out in Grade 11. The students who cited junior high as the beginning of their boredom began to demonstrate increasing absenteeism and underachievement [Sarah, Jill, Garfunkel], withdrawal from school activities [Brenda; Grade 9] and a generally poor attitude towards their schooling. (Coquitlam Early School Leavers, 1991; Devereaux, 1993). Boredom seemed to be the first internal step in dropping out (Farrell, 1988).

The students in my study acknowledged that their personal attributes, abilities and attitudes affected their willingness to engage in classroom tasks which they felt to be schooling rather than learning. Delisle (1992) adapted the adage of “leading the horse to water...”, stating we can lead students to knowledge, but cannot make them think. The students in my study felt they were not led towards new knowledge rather they were led too often to already mastered knowledge with little opportunity to go beyond the classroom’s pace or text-based content [Sarah, Jill, Andrea, Garfunkel]. They were desperate for thoughtful, insightful, relevant thinking and learning. They did not need to be made to think rather they needed to be given an opportunity to think. Frustrated, disappointed and angered they chose to give minimal effort to become non-producers (Delisle, 1992) to the chagrin of their parents and teachers.

Garfunkel, Jill and Sarah especially saw no purpose in jumping through the hoops. Perhaps these students were akin to the “rational altruistic” gifted adolescents described by Piechowski (1989). These individuals wanted activities they would use someday [Karen, Dave, Andrea, Jill] and could apply to their daily lives [Anita]. Much like Anita, Jill and Sarah, the gifted adolescents described by Piechowski (1989) were satisfied when they were highly involved in many activities. They disliked as did Kelly, Andrea, Karen and Garfunkel activities which they perceived had no purpose.

They did not attempt to save face (Morris, 1990, Pawlovich, 1986) by justifying “their failure to resolve a critically important task of adolescence” as Morris (1990, p. 15) so harshly refers to dropping out by “projecting their limitations on their teachers.” They recognized their role especially in their “teenage rebellious years” [Sarah] and the effects of “student politics” [Jill] in their negative perceptions of schooling.

The students seemed to honestly wish to be heard, to give me, as a researcher, a greater understanding of their boredom. Perhaps they hoped if I shared my understanding, other teachers might assume less boredom and ask more about their students’ boredom in order to alleviate it.

Control

The depersonalized and autocratic nature of the school system frustrated the students, especially Karen, Jill and Sarah. These students wanted to be treated as “human beings” [Karen] who were interacting with real people, not representatives of the system [Sarah, Jill], akin to prison guards [Jill]. Schools are “political organizations” (Sarason, 1990). They do not necessarily recognize children’s values and needs (Barrett, 1989; Noddings, 1992). The students resented this power hierarchy, but were resigned in some cases with jumping through the system’s hoops rather than their own, in order to graduate. Eight of the ten found that an almost impossible task.

Friedenberg’s (1965) contention is that school’s basic function is to socialize students. He felt highly creative individuals become bored, frustrated and annoyed, staying only because there is no viable alternative. Garfunkel was extremely creative and imaginative according to his teachers and his own perceptions. If he could have found any alternative to going to high school, to get an education, he would have taken it. None existed. He did not want to conform to the rules; he wanted like Sarah, Anita and Jill to make his own. Jill believed school provided only “the social thing”; all the rest she needed for life including learning she could find outside school. Dennis and Dave felt essentially the same way.

Sarason (1990) contended that when individuals feel powerless, then passionless, conformity akin to Karen’s gritting her teeth occurs and at its worst, a total rejection of learning. Perhaps as Barrett (1989) suggested, students withdraw their engagement in their classroom activities because choosing to withdraw or engage in their learning is the only power or control they have. The students in my study admitted they chose to withdraw and to only pass boring classroom activities. The basic needs for control, power, belonging and fun (Glasser, 1990) were not satisfied in these students’ eyes in the majority of their classrooms. The students perceived their essential needs were generally ignored.

The critical needs of gifted students for personal control and choice (Whitmore, 1980) in their learning were also often denied.

The students understood that all students deserved an education. Their complaint was that others received an education while theirs was put on hold. The system controlled and leveled the pace (Everhart, 1983), the curriculum (Whitmore, 1980) and the process (Whitmore, 1980) in ways that created a poor fit between the students' needs and interests, and their classroom processes and environment (Delisle, 1992, Whitmore, 1980). The "ideology of control" (Noddings, 1992) which organizes schools was anathema to these gifted students. In part, a basic issue may have been the injustice and unfairness embedded in the system's organization. Silverman (1989) noted that gifted students spot "double standards" (p. 33) and inconsistencies in rules very quickly. Students in my study questioned the fairness and logic of teacher's methods consistently especially as it related to their having to do boring text-oriented tasks and to wait for others to catch up.

In part, they questioned the teacher's logic and fairness because they possess this astute sense of justice. They do not necessarily respect adults simply because tradition dictates we should. Silverman (1991) termed this belief "ageism" and said "gifted students do not share this assumption" (p. 309). In their earlier adolescence, they often refused to do anything or achieve anywhere except when a request, not a command, was made by generally a caring, respectful adult, not simply an authority figure.

The students especially questioned the time they spent waiting, their time wasted because of slower students, behavioral and classroom management issues. The "standstill thing" [Sarah] frustrated and bored all the students. Everhart (1983) said at least 45% of every school day is involved in non-instructional activities. Within the instructional activities, especially in teacher-dominated classrooms, assigned work acted as a controlling technique (Everhart, 1983). The teacher assigned text-based questions and worksheets so all students were at the same spot at the same time. Dennis, especially

commented on the frustration and boredom he experienced in English, being forced to maintain the slow pace of the class.

Students were not encouraged to ask questions in their classrooms [Kelly, Karen, Andrea, Jill]. In part, teachers perhaps perceive their role is to ask, not answer questions since Sarason (1990) said for every two questions generated by students, there are 40 generated by teachers in a classroom period. The questions the teachers asked, in the students' eyes, were literal and boring; basically they required rote memory not the higher thinking and problem solving experiences so essential to gifted students' learning (Whitmore, 1980).

Since teachers dominated classroom discussion or relied on lecturing [Karen, Andrea, Garfunkel, Dave], the students' opportunities for active discussion with like peers (Silverman, 1991) were often limited to their challenge programs. Even here, as Kelly and Brenda indicated, some controlling teachers gave students boring work, rather than inspiring, novel, hands-on tasks. The students in my study characterized their school day much like the adolescents in Csikszentmihalyi & Larson's (1984) study, as two valleys of boring classroom experiences separated by one peak of interest, lunch time. Farrell (1990) too indicated that lunch time or exchanges in the hallway relieved the deadening, boring, lack of social connectedness in adolescents' lives. Jill said she only went to school for lunch when she skipped, because that was the only aspect of school she missed, the "social thing". Ironically, in an especially critical time for social belonging and discussion, high schools seem to limit these exchanges to students' free time. For these gifted students who thrive on "smart discussions with smart people" [Sarah] such limitations were especially frustrating and contributed to their boredom.

When adults do not control discussion, peers sometimes do as Jill indicated in "student politics". Buescher (1987) raised the issues of peer pressures as did Farrell (1990), especially related to students being forced to hide their giftedness in order to

belong. Certainly, peer pressures did influence these students, but their desire to “make their own hoops” seem to outweigh their needs to conform to their peers.

Grades too seemed to be a control, not a reward for these students. They seemed to perceive grades as a sham and a bribe coinciding with Kohn’s (1993) perceptions that rewards may be the same as punishment, controlling mechanisms. The grading system for these students like those in Emerick’s (1992) had little meaning or importance for them. They neither desired nor appreciated these external awards. In fact, they seemed hampered by them at times much like participants in (Amabile, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Deci, 1975).

I do not believe the students would shun an A if it were given to them, but they did not believe the effort expended for high marks was worth the loss of free time for socializing and fun. They said they felt happier with B’s or lower marks. They did not believe “the self as student” (Farrell, 1990) was their most important role. They believed “self as loyal friend” and “self as peer” were equally, if not more important.

Admittedly, Jill said she loved the learning games and the little prizes. But Jill derived most satisfaction, and felt she learned best when she was put in charge of the catering group. She received satisfaction in knowing that she was liked and appreciated by both students and teachers because of her great interpersonal and leadership abilities. “I’m good as an authority figure” [Jill]. The learning games were tangential and associated with the source of Jill’s satisfaction and learning: working, discussing and problem solving with others. This sense of personal joy and discovery when Jill and her group solved a problem, created an aesthetically pleasing catering tray or developed a marketing strategy were Jill’s rewards. A position of leadership, the spontaneity, novelty and personal relevance of Jill’s learning experiences, not the grades, were the rewards.

Those who were disruptive forced the teachers to notice them and were frequently sent to a higher authority, the principal. Anita’s and Dave’s principal sympathetically sent them back telling them to just cope and finish the work. Brenda’s principal finally had to

expel her, but Brenda said that was good because she ended up at the alternative school. The “threats”, as the students perceived the rules and consequences, became challenges pushing both students and teachers to the limits. A hostile environment between teacher and student could develop (Glasser, 1990; Noddings, 1992). Garfunkel, Anita, Brenda and Sarah certainly described such hostile environments. Adelman and Taylor (1990) warned that students did not necessarily perceive administrators’ consequences as logical consequences, but as punitive, demeaning retaliation. Treating the students as “nothing” [Brenda]; not understanding that the students believed they knew what was “best for them” [Sarah] were grievous sins of the system. How could the administration know individuals’ needs when the rules are so general [Sarah]? How could a system work when it could not, or would not, work with students who felt the system was flawed [Brenda]?

These students felt the system was flawed because they did not need to attend to pass. They might eventually fail having relied on memory (Barbe, 1956) and having not developed study skills (Gagné, 1993; French, 1964; Pringle, 1970), but in junior high and often senior high they could stay home, write the exam and pass the courses. They did not believe the perceived adult propaganda that dropping out meant the end of their lives (Ristow, 1965). Sarah and Dave had friends and knew significant adults whom they considered smart who were fine without Grade 12 graduation. Garfunkel’s siblings had left school, returning later. This familial pattern of dropping out is consistent with Cervantes’ (1965) work. Even if they believed they should persevere, they still were bored. Those graduating students still only warmed the seat (Pawlovich, 1986) rather than engaged in learning.

Choice

The gifted adolescents in my study indicated they fully expected their opinions, their choices and interests would or should be taken into account in planning their learning. Delisle (1990) indicates adolescents must be taken seriously by adults and peers;

their opinions must be considered and honored. The students, perhaps idealistically, believed that they could help create a better school world, if not real world if their suggestions were honored. Piechowski (1991) says gifted individuals struggle very much with their perceptions of the ideal world and the real world. Gifted individuals cannot understand why adults are unwilling to correct the errors and injustices in the world which are so crystal clear to them. Sometimes this passionate idealism leads to gifted adolescents becoming world leaders known for their high moral and ethical sense (Piechowski, 1991). Anita was a passionate conservationist in Grade 7 and a strong advocate for teens speaking in adult forums about teen issues. Karen's writings reveal a strong sense of morality and ethics. Dennis and Karen sought philosophical discussions. A strong sense of caring and empathy for Sarah's less fortunate peers who suffered family and addiction problems led her to question how school could be demanding her attendance when her friends needed her so much. Even though Sarah said she was not affected by their dilemmas, she later demonstrated she understood how their needs and beliefs had contributed to her eventual withdrawal from school.

When these students fell behind in their studies, they had chosen to do so. It is possible that Jill, Garfunkel and Dave are learning disabled as well as gifted. Nonetheless, they were aware of why they were underachieving. Delisle's (1992) "non-producers" seem to be kindred spirits with the students in this study. Without question, these students passionately believed there was no point in wasting their time doing much of their repetitive, mundane, irrelevant and easy, therefore, "boring" classroom and homework. Their needs for power, as Rimm (1986) suggests, did not fuel their underachievement rather their unmet needs for control and choice novel, relevant, challenging tasks and projects did.

School was not generally the place the students chose to achieve. Kelly was nominated for my study as an underachiever and at risk of dropping out because she skipped (1½ times a week at the minimum she said). Her teachers felt she was

underachieving even though she achieved As. She valued her time too much and felt the effort it would take was not worth the extra 5% to get 97% instead of 92% since she felt grades were of little worth. Brophy (1987) indicated even capable people do not put effort forth if they believe the tasks have no valid purposes or outcomes. These students were very motivated whether it was to succeed at self-directed and chosen tasks especially “just ‘cause” activities, or to avoid tedious repetitive tasks (such as homework).

Challenge

These students sought a challenge, when bored they created challenges for themselves. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) believed all people desire a balance between challenges and skill levels to experience “flow”. When skill levels are higher than the challenge provided boredom occurs. They will seek or create challenges because “flow”, which is critically connected to learning, is a pleasant absorbing joyous experience. When challenge was missing, when the poor fit between curriculum and process and the students’ needs was obvious, the students chose to withdraw from, endure or disrupt classroom tasks.

Dave told me he loved going outside to think where time became unimportant. The activity, not the clock or schedule, becomes the focus in a flow activity. Andrea resented bells and schedules forcing her to switch her brain on to another activity. All the students described their “just ‘cause” activities; as self-controlled, chosen and self-challenging. Caring teachers also enter into a student’s state of flow as individuals attempt to perfect or master the challenge leading to further flow experiences. These students perfected their drawings and writing according to their own criteria, much like the artist in Kay’s (1994) study of personal aesthetic. These gifted students might have placed higher value than their peers on the connection between the worthiness and personal relevance of a school task and the effort required because of their sense of perfectionism and their idealism regarding how things should be.

People seek fun, belonging, power and control; they are basic needs (Glasser, 1990). The students spoke often of the infrequent appearance of these characteristics in their schooling. Fun seemed to be especially critical. It was synonymous with that of Emerick's (1992) gifted underachievers' perceptions of factors which reverse underachievement. A "fun" class provided a challenge intellectually, a faster pace and more complexity. As well classes which would reverse underachievement, according to Emerick's (1992) students, provided independent study in their interest areas [Kelly], student discussion which made material more relevant and interesting [Andrea and Jill] and real application of skills and content and hands-on activities [Jill and Andrea] like doing science experiments rather than copying notes on experiments.

Gifted students become bored in classrooms where teachers lecture, dominate classroom discussions and where rote memorization and copying of text-based materials are the basic methods of classroom instruction. The underachievement of these students soon follows as the repetitive nature of their work induces students' disengagement from their classroom tasks. Perhaps "non or minimal production" rather than "underachievement" needs to characterize the deliberate choice of these students to withdraw from boring classroom tasks. The students in my study and many researchers (e.g., Passow, 1989; Treffinger, 1991; Whitmore, 1980) would argue for schools to implement diverse programs to accommodate many of the forms of giftedness (Gagné, 1993). To do otherwise is to perpetuate the disheartening cycle, for both teachers and students, of non or minimal production from students who keenly desire to learn and deserve to have their special needs for differentiated curriculum and programs met. Then these naturally gifted learners will be eager rather than bored students.

The students had some opportunities in part-time challenge programs, but broad, full-time adjustments in their education, such as acceleration or compacting course content did not occur. Noddings (1992) believes schools are generally unsupportive of students with genuine intellectual and intrinsic interests. Sarason (1990) and Csikszentmihalyi

(1975) claim the present organization of schools is so bureaucratic they cannot meet the interests nor satisfy the curiosity of children. The consensus in the research seems to be that gifted students benefit intellectually and emotionally by working with and being challenged by other gifted students (Siegler & Kotovsky, 1986; Silverman, 1991). They are less likely to be bored in a setting where as Sarah said smart people should be having smart discussions. The gifted students in my study did not wish opportunities to advance their own learning out of arrogance or to prove their superiority. They were not elitist in their thinking; rather as Colangelo & Davis (1989) so aptly phrased it they wanted “equality of opportunity” (p. 4) to pursue their particular learning strengths and needs.

They were driven to learn and created opportunities for learning outside of school. The students described their needs to perfect tasks and products they valued even if there was no intended audience. They polished and perfected their art [Dave], their writing [Karen, Andrea, Brenda, Sarah], their dramatic roles [Anita] in much the same manner as the artist described in Kay’s (1994) study. They had a vision of the ideal, the perfect. Perhaps school work could not hold the same attraction for perfection and absorption because it was externally controlled and chosen with little regard to its level of personal challenge. The students learned not to care; perhaps the teachers did not care either.

Caring

A caring teacher is more than an information technician (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) perhaps akin to mentor. The students wanted a teacher who cared if not passionately for the subject, at least enough to make the effort to come prepared to teach and to answer or discover the answer to students’ questions; to connect and interact with the students. They wanted someone nonjudgmental (Farrell, 1990) who truly respected them as individuals. Some teachers were caring. Many unfortunately seemed as bored as the students (Sarason, 1990); their teaching lacking a personal stamp (Sarason, 1983), merely laboring rather than encouraging learning and producing challenge.

Ironically “caring” teachers are crucial in these students’ eyes, but what constitutes a caring teacher can seem almost contradictory. Emerick’s (1992) students claimed that caring teachers had the most significant and positive effect upon reversing underachievement. Emerick (1992) and Farrell (1990) also discovered “caring” teachers are widely and sometime contrarily described; for example “strict” or “easy going” were Garfunkel’s adjectives for two different but caring teachers. These two teachers shared a common characteristic of humor, something a clown like Garfunkel appreciated. I discovered, as did Emerick (1992), that caring teachers taught “human beings” [Karen]. They saw the individual first then the student. They looked to understanding the students’ individual needs and interests rather than simply presenting information. They truly heard the students’ opinions and problems. The students felt some teachers “honestly cared” [Brenda] about their problems and took time or made time in their day to meet and listen to their students. My students, as did Emerick’s (1992), viewed caring teachers as equals [Garfunkel], facilitators [Karen, Andrea] in their learning who were inspired and knowledgeable [Anita, Kelly, Karen, Dennis, Dave].

A caring teacher in Emerick’s (1992) study interacted with the materials and the students [Karen]. Novel and flexible methods are used by caring teachers [Anita, Sarah, Garfunkel]. These teachers tried out novel approaches, listened to students’ ideas and entertained more varied, individual, hands-on approaches than less flexible, uncaring teachers. The caring teacher led the students [Garfunkel, Anita, Sarah] in much the same way Emerick’s (1992) teachers did, making the students climb to higher levels by going slightly over their heads. This aspect of expecting a student to go beyond, as an aspect of challenge and caring by teachers is also akin to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) description of flow where challenges and skills are optimally balanced.

Caring has another aspect in terms of caring for one another. This aspect of moral development and ethical concerns for all people’s well-being is perhaps a critical aspect of education for gifted students. Silverman (1991) indicates a much more intense sense of

justice, morality and ethics in gifted individuals. Sarah, Anita, Kelly, Dennis, Andrea, Karen and Brenda were very clear on what they perceived to be unfair, insensitive or disrespectful teacher behaviors. As well, issues of philosophy were extremely interesting to Dennis, Karen and Sarah. Sarah and Anita were very interested in people's personalities and behaviors both in literature and in their everyday lives. Noddings (1992) believes schools must become communities of caring. She emphasizes the need for interpersonal connections between teachers and students and the discussion of ethical and moral issues with mutual respect and understanding. The students in my study explicitly stated a need for reciprocal effort and respect between teachers and students. The literature on caring does not explicitly refer to reciprocity in this manner.

CLOSING

These students chose to offer me their perceptions of boredom. They controlled and directed the course of the interviews. We both cared very much about their perceptions. They made me very careful not to assume my understanding was theirs as Erickson (1986) had warned. We mutually respected and sought to understand the different meaning systems (Farrell, 1990) from which teachers and students act.

School systems classify students as "gifted" or "underachievers" for administrative purposes; to facilitate budgeting and communications. These classifications make it easy for teachers to forget that these students are more heterogeneous than homogeneous (Gagné, 1993). All that the students in my study really desired was that the system attempt to see them primarily as individuals with special needs and interests related to their gifts. The students felt the system was too impersonal, controlling, unchallenging and uncaring for them to value their schooling.

These students were bursting, wanting to be heard. They had reflected upon their schooling and their learning. They knew that the adolescent struggle between belonging and identity reflected in the literature was part of their struggle. They acknowledged

teenage rebellion and adolescent moodiness affected their perceptions of their schooling. Nonetheless, they were not engaging in my study just to complain. They provided reflective insights into the complexity of their boredom in order to enlighten me in hopes that educators might change the system and its practices.

The task of addressing these gifted students' boredom is challenging because of its complexity. It is more than simply a social construction (Farrell, 1990); it is not simply a noun constructed by teachers and students to explain behaviors resulting from perceived pressures. School is not "cool" for most adolescents. The holding power of school is perhaps weakening (LeCompte, 1987) but administrators and teachers might strengthen its hold if they listened and gave students an active role, including control and choice, in their learning.

A student's boredom seems to be connected to Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) belief that when challenges are lower than skill levels boredom occurs. Internally driven to learn, the students became stuck in an academic traffic jam frustrated, unchallenged and angry waiting for the others to move on so they could progress. Even when they were allowed to go forward, the pace and the content were predetermined. Stripped of personal choice, challenge and control in their classrooms, their academic learning stopped. Their boring schooling and uncaring teachers confined them physically and academically. This combination of boredom / hate the teacher was lethal to learning and often resulted in long periods of episodic dropping out. When they were fortunate, this pattern was broken by caring teachers who taught with passion and understanding. The students' drive for challenge and learning was satisfied. Then schools became what they were meant to be, places of learning.

CHAPTER 6

CLOSURE

My odyssey has reached closure. I have chosen “closure” rather than conclusion, because my interest in and questioning about students’ boredom has not concluded. I may have reached a deeper and richer understanding of “boredom,” but I am also overwhelmed by its complexity and intricacy. Numerous questions have arisen. Like many travelers, I have found several areas I would like to explore more deeply.

In closing this particular odyssey I recognize that the interpretations and the definitions of these students’ boredom arise from my personal, professional and academic perspectives. I have verified these interpretations using methods advised by Lincoln & Guba (1985). My interpretation is not the only one, but it is credible. The students validated my understandings frequently.

The students in my study are not representative of all students. They are all Caucasian, gifted, underachieving, middle class, suburban Canadian students. Their perceptions of boredom may well differ from students with different economic, cultural or social backgrounds. I believe their giftedness made their boredom more intense and frustrating than their classmates’. Of course, such a claim could only be investigated through a comparative analysis involving various groups of adolescents. Then we might know if similar perspectives on boredom exist across adolescent groups. For the gifted students’ in this study, their perceptions of a lack of personal challenge, control, choice and caring within the school system led to their boredom. Perhaps other groups of adolescents perceive their boredom differently.

All the students in my study were performing satisfactorily in school but they were bored. Andrea, Kelly, Anita and Karen were stay-ins (Pawlovich, 1986); seat warmers who endured repetitive schooling tasks for future goals. Dennis and Brenda were pushed out by administrators who lost patience with their truancy. Sarah, Jill, Dave and Garfunkel

were bored, lost tolerance for the system and dropped out. All the students clearly distinguished between their learning and their schooling. Boredom was only an issue with their schooling. These students perceived a lack of personal control, choice, and challenge in their classroom activities and had a prevailing sense that few, if any, teachers cared for them as individuals. If the students' boredom escalated and the students found no point in attending school, early school leaving seemed the best or only choice. Devereaux (1993) and Luby (1989) also found boredom and uncaring teachers led students in their studies to drop out.

In the following sections I will reflect on my odyssey. In the first, *Personal Reflections*, I discuss how my perceptions of boredom have altered. Within, *Professional Reflections*, I indicate my discoveries' influence upon my practice. The third part, *Academic Reflections*, expresses my growing understanding of boredom's complexity.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

While reflecting upon my personal understandings of my boredom, I realized that much like these students, I experience disappointment, frustration and sometimes anger when I am bored. I discovered I too become agitated, wanting to escape the activity or environment. I am more aware of my own personal triggers for boredom and coping strategies for that boredom. My teachers are usually my age, so it is likely our student / teacher relationship is not affected by generational issues and values as these adolescents' relationships with their teachers might be. As well these students seem to be freer than my generation was in expressing their opinions and challenging their teachers. Perhaps their extraordinary intensity and sensitivity and voluntary admission that they were outspoken [Anita, Sarah, Brenda, Dave, Garfunkel] drove them to speak up when they felt an injustice occurred. Anita often spoke up for her whole class, Sarah for her less fortunate friends. These students may well possess those overexcitabilities which lead to confronting

and challenging others whom they feel are unjust as they struggle towards moral development.

PROFESSIONAL REFLECTIONS

My odyssey covered three years of my professional life. I discovered that I have become slower to judge students' boredom. I now attempt to gently question and actively listen, not interrogate, them about their boredom. I use more eclectic methods in my challenge program, allowing students personal choice and control in their programming. Some prefer individual to group work. Some prefer speed to depth.

All the students in my study mentioned the importance of caring teachers but their descriptions of such individuals varied from informal to strict, humorous to serious. They all agreed that such teachers were respectful and nonjudgmental; individuals the students could trust who made the classroom a safe place in which to take risks with learning. This safety is a component of caring teachers who allow and encourage questioning. They challenge their students and give them the opportunity to explore and develop new knowledge and skills. These teachers acknowledge their gifted students' exceptional strengths and interests. They make their classroom places of personal choice, control and challenge.

Those students who are choosing to disengage in their classroom activities may give very good reasons for their behaviors. They may have alternative suggestions which would engage them in their learning. Essentially, while I have always believed learning is a two-way process, I have not always included students in decisions regarding that process.

Throughout my odyssey I have become even more aware that gifted adolescent students do have very strong feelings. Those feelings are just as valued and real to them as mine are to me. Their willingness to engage in my teaching is affected by their emotions. Dismissing these feelings, telling students to get down to work, makes students believe teachers do not care for them as "human beings" [Karen]. I will continue to watch for the

nonverbal cues which indicate the student is having a bad day or more severe, family difficulties and attempt to provide the time, encouragement and understanding necessary for that student to feel secure and understood in my classroom.

While adults might endure boring courses for a more secure economic future, these students, especially in junior high, would not. They believed their teachers did not help them make connections to their worlds with the courses, so much as threaten them with a grim economic future if they did not engage in their schooling. Skeptical at best, defiant at worst, these students expected personal choice and control in their learning; failing that they withdrew. They felt that they deserved to be given those opportunities because they felt capable of handling them. They resented being treated like children yet exhorted to behave like adults by practicing diligence and responsibility in menial mundane tasks for future gratification. They did not see their underachieving and dropping out behaviors as anything but a natural evolutionary process stemming from their boredom with their schooling.

The students in my study painted a disappointing and frustrating scenario of schooling experiences. Anita, Kelly and Karen adapted to these but did flourish. Human beings adapt to very adverse, alienating environments (Newman, 1981). This does not excuse perpetuating such environments including our schools. On the other hand, educators need not assume total responsibility for students' boredom. Our students' difficulties involve peer pressures and larger social issues emanating from an instant gratification, entertainment focused society. Schools are microcosms of a larger world which operate under an adult value and meaning system (Barrett, 1989; Farrell, 1990; Noddings, 1992). Some conflict seems to exist between the outside world's values and the schools (Sarason, 1991).

Schools are meant to educate not entertain (Griffen, 1988). These students were not asking for entertainment, but they felt they were denied an education. Education for these students meant learning, having a sense of personal control, choice and challenge

with the guidance of a caring teacher. They felt they were schooled and consequently bored. They perceived their teachers as uncaring. Karen said they were individuals not numbers. The students seemed to feel their individual needs were unaddressed, especially their needs for control, choice and challenge.

As teachers we must understand there is no panacea for boredom. At the same time none of us can afford to dismiss students' boredom. The price these gifted underachievers paid was the loss of the very characteristics which made them special; their thirst for knowledge, their insatiable curiosity and their strong intellectual needs (Ziv, 1977). We must address students' learning needs because we genuinely value and wish to inspire and preserve learning in all settings.

As a teacher I am and will be constantly juggling the issues of control, choice, challenge and caring in my practice. I will as always be reflecting and monitoring my ability to balance these issues with expectations of colleagues, parents, administrators and the Ministry; especially now that I have become so much more aware of their critical role in students' boredom. In a sense, my academic odyssey may be closing; however, my professional journey is becoming more complex. I must attempt to face all the challenges inherent in that odyssey, if I am to practice what the students in my study believe is integral to their learning. After all my primary purpose as a teacher is to have my students as actively engaged as I am in their learning.

ACADEMIC REFLECTIONS

When I examined my odyssey in light of what I have learned about boredom from these students I gained a fuller appreciation for the intricacies in this concept. I found that I experienced "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) often throughout this odyssey. Without the sense of discovery and joy which occurs in flow, I would not have been able to continue. I could become so absorbed in my research that time became irrelevant; in fact, my everyday world disappeared. I lost all sense of myself as I worked with a very clear goal in

mind. I set up my challenges and overcame them feeling in control, feeling like I was learning. My rewards were the inner satisfaction from accomplishing my set tasks. I did not suffer from boredom during my odyssey. Instead I suffered from anxiety when I was sure my skills were far lower than the task demands, especially during the analysis and writing processes. Sometimes the challenges and criteria of qualitative research seemed overwhelming. My writing reflected my anxiety corresponding very much to the styles displayed in Larson's (1994) discussion on flow and writing. I was very fortunate that the majority of my odyssey was a flow experience. This stands to reason because I had personal control, choice and challenge. I was learning and the flow experience is integral to learning.

I now understand how complicated each person's meaning system is. Each of these students felt that their perspectives were valid. As well the research process is much more complex than I ever imagined when I commenced this odyssey. Researchers too come with intricate, personal and cultural meaning systems to which they add an academic component. Farrell (1990) seems to have a sociological perspective, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) a psychological. My interpretation of these students' boredom is affected by my blended professional and academic background. My understanding of the complexity of qualitative research has been raised significantly. Complexity seems to be the underlying element of all that I have learned.

Sanborn (1979) said feelings of frustration and anger indicate that students care about schooling. Initially, these students did care very much. If we look at these students over time, we see they all achieved very well at the elementary level. School was fun and novel. They may have been eager to please their teachers and parents. In junior high achievement levels fell. Teachers' methods and student / teacher interactions were very different from the elementary school. Students were struggling to become individuals and yet belong to a group. Students were realizing they could choose to attend. In senior high they were older and had some personal goals for after graduation. They endured boredom

hoping future education and careers would be stimulating. They started elementary school eager and willing to learn. They ended high school disappointed with and angered by their schooling.

The students' anger and frustration arose as they began to perceive a difference between their learning and their schooling. These natural gifted learners experienced boredom as they perceived a decreasing level of personal control, choice and challenge in their classroom activities. As well some teachers were perceived as uncaring, disinterested in their students as individuals and uninterested in preparing challenging lessons. The students' boredom was an evolutionary process which unfortunately emerged in elementary or early junior high. "Boredom" no longer exists in my mind as a noun. I can find no crisp, explicit definition for this chaotic, dynamic process whose intricacy still intrigues, fascinates and frustrates me.

In closing, I know that I still have many more odysseys to undertake in my future explorations of academic underachiever's boredom. I know as well that these students' sincerity and frustration might well entice me to plan another journey. I only hope others will join me. The students' boredom is too pervasive and too debilitating to be dismissed. They believed that they had a right to the same opportunities many other students enjoy: to learn, to be challenged, to be fulfilled. Surely we owe their younger counterparts the learning opportunities these students believe were denied them. A sense of personal control, choice, and challenge within a caring relationship and environment seemed critical to the students' learning. All students within their classrooms, unquestionably deserve the opportunities to discover challenge and learning rather than boredom and schooling.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMATION SHEET

Tacey Keighley
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University

TITLE OF PROJECT: Academically Underachieving Gifted Students' Perceptions of Boredom.

This research is aimed at gaining a better understanding of academically underachieving gifted students' perceptions of boredom.

The subjects will participate in approximately 2-3 interview sessions lasting approximately an hour. The interviews will be conducted in settings determined by the subjects to be most comfortable for them; for example, their homes, their schools. The researcher, a qualified special education teacher and graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, will be the sole interviewer.

The audio recordings of the sessions will become the property of the research project and rigorous steps will be taken to safeguard their confidentiality. These tapes may be reviewed by the researcher or supervisory staff for the purpose of data analysis.

The subjects' full identities will be known only to the researcher. In any publication of the research, the anonymity of the subjects and the confidentiality of the actual content of the sessions will be safeguarded.

The subjects' cooperation with all aspects of the research is important to me. However, if the subjects cannot continue the research they may withdraw.

Please feel free to ask any questions or discuss any aspect of the research that is unclear or that you feel uncomfortable about with me. You may contact me at: 464-3902 (home) or 942-0241 (school).

APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENT

Please complete this form and return to the school.

I, _____ have read the information sheet on the research
(participant's name)
study. I understand that I can contact Tacey Keighley to answer any questions before or during the research if I have any concerns. If I choose, I may withdraw from the study at any time.

Signature:

(Signature of student)

(Please print full name)

(Student's birth date)

(School and Grade)

(Today's Date)

If you would like to obtain results of this project upon its completion please provide your complete mailing address below:

APPENDIX A

LETTER FOR PARENT

Tacey Keighley
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University

Date:

Dear Parent / Guardian:

I am a qualified special education teacher and graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, and will be the sole interviewer for this research study on Academically Underachieving Gifted Students' Perceptions of Boredom.

This research is aimed at gaining a better understanding of academically underachieving gifted students' perceptions of boredom.

The subjects will participate in approximately 2-3 interview sessions lasting approximately an hour each. The interviews will be conducted in settings determined by the subjects to be most comfortable for them; for example, their homes, their schools.

The audio recordings of the sessions will become the property of the research project and rigorous steps will be taken to ensure their confidentiality. These tapes may be reviewed by the researcher or supervisory staff for the purpose of data analysis.

The subjects' full identities will be known only to the researcher. In any publication of the research, the anonymity of the subjects and the confidentiality of the actual content of the sessions will be safeguarded.

The subjects' cooperation with all aspects of the research is important to me. However, if the subjects choose not to continue the research, they may withdraw.

Please feel free to ask any questions or discuss any aspect of the research that is unclear or that you feel uncomfortable about with me. You may contact me at: 464-3902 (home) or 942-0241 (school).

Sincerely,

Tacey Keighley

APPENDIX A
CONSENT FORM FOR PARENT

Please complete this form and return to the school.

As the parent/guardian of _____,
(child's name)

I consent to my child's participation in the research study described in the preceding letter. I understand that I can contact Tacey Keighley to answer questions before or during the research if I have any concerns. If I choose, or if my child chooses, I may withdraw my child from the study at any time.

Signature:

(Signature of parent / guardian)

(Please print full name)

(Today's date)

If you would like to obtain results of this project upon its completion please provide your complete mailing address below:

APPENDIX B

FRAMEWORK FOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The purpose of these set of probes is to discover the students' perceptions of boredom in the school setting and also in their everyday living.

Where are you bored?

When are you bored?

How do you feel when you are bored?

What do you do to overcome being bored?

What is the opposite of boredom for you?

The purpose of this set of probes is to discover the students' perceptions of the opposite to boredom in the school setting and their everyday living. The researcher will not lead with her opposite to boredom hence the blank spaces.

Where are you _____?

When are you _____?

How do feel when you are _____?

What would you do to make school more _____?