Education for At-risk Youth:

Have we moved away from the alternatives movement and to what effects?

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Abstract

This paper explores the origins and intentions of the alternative education movement and puzzles over the apparent reduction of alternative education in one school district in a medium-size city in British Columbia, Canada. The impetus for the review arose out of research that documented the conditions necessary for effective practice within an integrated childcare-lifeskills-academic program for young mothers. While funding appears to be available for young mothers to continue their education, the research simultaneously highlighted the plethora of alternative educational options for at-risk girls and boys. This paper explores possible explanations for the current situation.

The impetus for this paper emerged during research aimed at documenting the conditions necessary for effective practice within an integrated childcare-lifeskills-academic program for young mothers. Our research indicated that while funding appears to be available for young mothers to continue their education, there appears to be a plethora of alternative educational options for at-risk girls and boys. In interviews with program staff and ex-participants from one community-based alternative program we learned about the relatively recent decrease in funding support for alternative programs. Interviewees struggled to make sense of this lack of support, knowing full-well the incredible benefits that arise from the work they do. This paper constitutes our contribution to making sense of a situation that bears examination.

This paper begins with a description of the impetus for the alternatives movement in education and its intended benefits. While researching literature on the emergence of the alternatives movement, we were struck by the parallel emergence in the same historical period of the movement to mainstream children with disabilities into regular classrooms. We touch on the mainstream movement and then contemplate the present situation of provincial funding for students with diverse kinds of special needs. In the final section of the literature review, we consider the role that the current standards-based reform movement in education may be playing in constraining the provision of alternatives for students with special needs.

The literature provides a backdrop for situating and interpreting findings from interviews with staff in an alternative program for at-risk, pregnant, and parenting girls. We invite others to participate with us in exploring the current situation in search of

understanding that could be used to help reinvigorate the commitment to providing more educational alternatives for at-risk youth.

Literature Review

The Alternative Education Movement

The rise of alternative educational options in North America was prompted in large part by the civil rights movement of the 1960s in the United States and its quest for desegregation (Fantini, 1976). The Vietnam war also contributed by provoking the populace in the United States to be suspicious of the integrity between the professed and the actual goals of the government (Young, 1990).

By the early 1970s progressive educational reform focused on how to educate a pluralistic student body and was bolstered by legislation that banned sex and race discrimination. Proponents of alternative schools argued that “educational strength lies not in teaching to a common denominator and ignoring those who are uncommon, but in valuing and fostering respect among those who are different” (Broad, 1977, p.11). As North American society began to view rapid and pervasive change to be constants in life, society also began to see education as more of a process than a product. Student apathy towards school combined with drop-out and absentee rates were viewed as additional indicators that the provision of alternatives was justified (Broad, 1977).

The alternatives movement enjoyed both a meteoric rise in support while also never quite managing to shake persistent criticism from some quarters. Alternative schools experienced their hey-day in the 1970s and early 1980s but when they first sprang up in the early 1970s the public was skeptical of their benefits. The early existence of most alternative programs was tenuous due to insecure funding. Even at the

height of its acclaim the alternatives movement had to deal with accusations of lacking structure and promoting counter-culture attitudes among young people (Fantini, 1976). By the early 1980s however, a myriad of government-funded programs flourished in North America and were valued for providing students with choices that made education more personally relevant (De Rosenroll, 1980, 1981; Fantini, 1976). A report published in the United States revealed that the number of alternative schools grew from a few hundred in 1973 to a few thousand in 1975 (Broad, 1977).

Alternative programs are, by definition, unique educational spaces that offer an alternative to what is conventional. The movement encompassed a variety of educational alternatives and included alternatives within regular classrooms, schools within schools, and separate alternative schools. Labels used to commonly identify alternative programs have included free schools, open classrooms, continuous progress schools, community schools, continuation schools, and schools without walls (Young, 1990). Preparatory and conventional (also known as traditional or contemporary) schools were considered to be part of the array of educational alternatives to which students should have access. One can expect to find more variability between the structures and processes of alternative schools than one would find between conventional schools (Fantini, 1976). This variability is, not surprisingly, due to the fact that alternative schools are committed to continually assessing their ability to be responsive to student needs and are ever-ready to revise their structures and processes to optimize their ability to meet student needs (Smith, Gregory & Pugh, 1981).

By contrast, conventional schools aim to provide something for all students through a “smorgasbord approach under a single administration” (Howell, 1976, p.205).

What is provided reflects an averaging of the needs of the masses. For students that come close to the average, conventional schools may in fact serve their needs relatively well. However, students whose needs do not approximate the average tend to be underserved by the offerings of conventional schools. Howell (1976) warns that structuring schools around the notion of averaging needs can easily become something that reflects the needs of an organization rather than the needs of its students.

In addition to the positives associated with providing options in education, alternative education has encountered some persistent challenges. Questions commonly arise about whom should be involved in, and how best to go about making choices among multiple educational options. There have also been long-standing worries that programs tailored to be responsive to particular needs may become identified so closely with particular groups of students that they unintentionally promote the labeling, classifying and future-tracking of students. All of these are critiqued for inadvertently perpetuating class isolation through restricting young people's future education opportunities (Brand, 1977).

Little mention of, let alone support for, alternative education can be found in the literature after the mid-1980s. Our search for literature on alternative education and alternative programs yielded negligible results for anything published in the last 20 years. It appears that Fantini's (1976) fear of alternative education being seen as another fad among many fads in education may have been well-founded. It is also possible that rather than having represented a fad in education, mandates for responsiveness to student needs have been overshadowed by the movement for inclusion of special needs students

in regular classrooms and the rhetoric of performance-focused accountability in education.

A Parallel Movement for Inclusive Education: Mainstreaming

At around the same time as alternative schools were thriving in North America, policies that banned sex and race discrimination in education extended also to banning discrimination based on ability (Paul, Turnbull & Cruickshank, 1977). The push to integrate students with special needs into classrooms in conventional schools – the mainstreaming movement – happened alongside the alternative education movement.

In the late 1960s a movement was afoot to make possible the education of "educationally mentally retarded" in conventional classrooms. Parents of "handicapped" children in the United States successfully contested in the courts their children's ability to learn and the right of their children to receive an education in the least restrictive environment (Higgins, 1976; Kaufman, Agard & Semmel, 1985). It was agreed that "if the state provides a publicly supported program of education, it must be made available to all on an equal basis" and that "the most appropriate placement for all students is the normal heterogeneous classroom" (Higgins, 1976, p.11/12). At the same time, the fact that admission to special education classes was based on results of intelligence testing was being recognized as biased towards white, middle-class children. Concerns were raised about the disproportionate number of minority children placed in special classes for mentally retarded students (Kaufman, Agard & Semmel, 1985).

While the original intent was to effect a change in "educational programs for socioculturally deprived slow-learning children" the mainstreaming initiative was extended, and some might even say co-opted by people wishing to see the total abolition

of self-contained special classes (Higgins, 1976, p.7). Those who wanted to see the end of separate special education argued that the homogenous grouping of students with special needs in separate classes often overlooked the particular and unique needs of individual children and thus placed them at a disadvantage in terms of their education (Kaufman, Agard & Semmel, 1985).

Mainstreaming emerged as the organizational response to providing education for all children in the least restrictive environment (Paul, Turnbull & Cruickshank, 1977). Mainstreaming was defined as an endeavour "to place handicapped[1] children into the same programs as non-handicapped students, but with the assistance provided by resource teachers and other specialists to help maintain progress and to prevent failure" (Higgins, 1976, p.14).

Proponents of mainstreaming stressed that effective mainstreaming must involve changing policies, school structures, administrative behaviours, teaching practices, language use, classification systems, and referral and placement procedures within entire school systems (Paul, Turnbull & Cruickshank, 1977). They also contended that effective mainstreaming ensures that all children receive the support they need in regular classrooms and that they also have continued access to specialized programs when the general education program cannot meet their individual needs (Kaufman, Agard & Semmel, 1985; Paul, Turnbull & Cruickshank, 1977). In order to counter the stigmatizing effects of labeling children, mainstreaming supporters also asked that attention be focused on children's behavioural abilities and that connections be made between their abilities and instructional goals (Higgins, 1976).

[1] In the early 1970s the term *handicapped* child was commonly used to refer to a child whose skill levels were below the skill levels of his cultural and/or ethnic group age peers (Higgins, 1976).

Even though mainstreaming arose to address the need of children designated as mentally retarded, it came to encompass students who experienced emotional disturbances and general learning challenges. Mainstreaming advocates remind us that decisions about the optimal learning arrangement – the fit between a child and his/her environment – "must be a dynamic concept implemented in a system with policies and procedures that support ongoing review of that match and make possible, and indeed require, changes when mismatches occur. This kind of flexibility is possible only if alternative services are available, the attitudes of staff are supportive, and the competencies of staff are sufficient to make the concept work" (Paul, Turnbull & Cruickshank, 1977, p.5).

Although the alternative education and mainstreaming movements arose out of values associated with inclusivity, they also focused upon creating and sustaining options that were targeted at meeting the needs of a pluralistic society rather than trying to meet the diverse needs of all within a single setting. Today conventional schools tend to have highly diverse populations of students under a single roof and most are hard-pressed to adequately meet the needs of all their students. Diversity in B.C. schools includes students whose first language is other than English, who come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who experience various emotional, behavioural, physical, and learning challenges. The BC Teachers' Federation estimates that over 10,000 classrooms province-wide have four or more students with special education needs (BCTF, 2008). And while the diversity of needs continues to rise in B.C. classrooms, the support that is crucial to effective inclusion is decreasing (Naylor, 2005).

Along with others who are concerned with responsive education, we wish to disrupt the belief that all students can be well-served in a conventional school. A key question that requires posing is how realistic is it to think that schools can effectively address the myriad of needs of an extremely diverse student body?

In order to assess how the program of interest in our study is situated within the overall context of regional alternatives in education, we now turn to look at how students with special needs are served in the public school system in B.C.

The Current Status of Alternatives in B.C. Public School Education

The B.C. Ministry of Education states that alternative programs fall under the jurisdiction of local school districts and are funded and administered by the districts involved (Myers, Ministry of Education, personal communication, February 2008). That is, the existence of alternative programs in B.C. is not dependent upon a provincial mandate for the provision of educational alternatives but by each school district's identification of the need for and ability to fund the provision of alternatives within their own jurisdiction. Thus, the existence of alternative programs varies considerably between school districts in the province. For example, the Victoria school district – a district with a total of 47 K-12 schools – lists on their website three alternative programs: one for girls, one for children who are physically dependent and have complex needs, and one large school offering credit courses for students in grades 9-11 (www.sd61.bc.ca/school/alted). Under their alternative umbrella, the Victoria district also has three "access" programs for youth in a mental health treatment centre, a secure custody facility, or a hospital. In contrast, the Delta school district – a district with 33 K-

12 schools – lists twelve distinct programs that offer alternatives for students in grades 8 through 12 (web.deltasd.bc.ca/ourprograms).

Since the early 2000s in B.C. the provision of "alternatives" in education has been subsumed largely under the umbrella of services provided within conventional schools for students with special needs. The provincial government in B.C. uses the following categories to distinguish between the varying needs of students designated as having special needs: sensory disabilities, learning disabilities, behaviour disabilities, and gifted students (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2006). Within each disability category are several subcategories. For example, the learning disability category includes autism, mild intellectual disability and learning disability. Behaviour disabilities include the subcategories of moderate behaviour support/mental illness and intensive behaviour support/serious mental illness. In order to receive special support within the publicly-funded school system students must undergo a formal assessment and meet the criteria for support established within a disability category. However, Ministry of Education policy states that the standard amount of money provided per student – the Basic Allocation of $5,830 in 2007 – *includes* funds to support the learning needs of students who are identified as having learning disabilities, mild intellectual disabilities, students requiring moderate behaviour supports and students who are gifted while also supporting Boards of Education in providing learning assistance, speech-language pathology services, hospital homebound services, and assessment services (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2002, 2007a). Supplementary funding is provided only for students with certain special needs. Only children who are designated in the following categories are considered to be in need of additional funding to support their access and participation in

educational programs: dependent handicapped, deafblind, moderate to profound intellectual disabled, physically disabled/chronic health impaired, visually impaired, deaf/hard of hearing, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and intensive behaviour intervention or serious mental illness (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2002, 2007a). The amount of additional funding allocated to a student who has been "appropriately assessed and identified" ranges from $8,000 per FTE for children with an intensive behaviour disorder or serious mental illness to $32,000 FTE for children classified as dependent handicapped (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2002, 2007a). The Ministry documents cited above stress that funding for all students with special needs has not decreased in the past 5 years and also maintains that the number of students with special needs who do not qualify for supplemental funding has declined over the past 5 years.

Information on funding previously allocated to distinct alternative programs across the province is disseminated to the public at the provincial level. In order to determine changes in the provision of educational alternatives in programs separate from conventional schools one would have to make inquiries of each individual school district. Thus, it is not possible to compare alongside changes in the funding scheme for students designated as having special needs, the status of funding for distinct educational alternatives over the past 5 years. What we do know, however, is that in the Greater Victoria region, several distinct alternative programs have been shut down since 2000 (e.g., Warehouse School, New Dimensions).

Confusing Equality with Treating Everyone the Same

It becomes possible to see from our review of the issues above, that perceptions of the meaning of *quality* in education can vary. Quality can be defined as providing

alternatives that respond appropriately to the diverse needs of children. Quality is also defined by some people as high performance on desired outcomes of learning. What we must be careful to avoid at all costs is confusing equality with sameness and by extension, assuming that all differences are bad (Young, 1990).

Equality and quality reside in opposition in a system of education that does not provide alternatives to conventional schools *nor* adequately supports the inclusion of students with diverse needs within conventional schools. Critics who accuse education of promoting the welfare of the most able are commonly counter-accused of being pro-equality and anti-quality. Smith and Lusthaus (1995) explain that such accusations tend to fluctuate according to economic health. They state that in times of economic prosperity, stakeholders are more likely to view the equality agenda as something which can be accommodated through the application of additional funds, while in hard times similar demands tend to be viewed as competing for existing funds. This begs the question: Where are we now? Since British Columbia is not presently experiencing economic hardship that would require us to carefully guard public funds and thus avoid providing educational options *and* fully-supported inclusion, might our present era be more appropriately characterized by not caring enough to ensure that these are provided to all children?

The answer to this question may be found in a relatively new prevailing force within education: the preoccupation with evidence-based accountability in education, also known as the standards movement. For nearly a decade now administrators and educators in North America and England have been asked to attend increasingly to meeting standards of “accountability” derived from standardized outcomes measures

(Darling-Hammond, 2004; Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting & Whitty, 2000). The goal of creating a national framework of accountability is seen by some as the way to enhancing quality in education but it leaves little room for the existence of unique and responsive schools.

The underlying goal of standardized testing is to achieve learning excellence. However, accountability systems that promote excellence removes attention and support away from students who are unable to meet the standards (Naylor, 2005). The standards movement stresses that all students can and should be held to high levels of performance, however, as Deschenes, Cuban and Tyack (2001) explain,

> The structure of schools still does not allow for the variety of students and the variety of areas in which they might excel. As a result, students who do not excel in the age-graded, narrowly academic world may once again be subject to the same kinds of labeling and failure that their predecessors were (p.539).

The demand for standardized educational processes has many negative impacts on effective pedagogy and learning outcomes, including the result that atypical schools and programs that cannot be made to fit the demands of accountability measures become administrative liabilities (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The BC Teachers' Federation expresses concern that language in provincial policy documents emphasizes a very narrow definition of achievement as measured by standardized tests and that this focus detracts from targeting resources that help all students to reach their potential (Naylor, 2005). Quality in education should be viewed as being much more than what can be measured on a standardized test (Smith & Lusthaus, 1995).

The mandate to define, regulate and control according to rigid standards inhibits variation and responsiveness in education settings. As Naylor states, "When system

accountability is measured by tests, and schools are designated on a continuum from 'good' to 'bad,' then the capacity of the school to maximize test results is crucial to the school rating and placement on the continuum. Too many students with exceptionalities may skew the results and create the impression that the school is not performing well" (2005, p.19). Administrators faced with low-performing students can be tempted to leave those students behind and focus their energies instead on those students who are likely to help the school meet its performance standards.

One of the issues related to providing distinct educational alternatives is that the definition of alternative education has included the clause that alternatives are to be provided at no extra cost (Young, 1990). Approaches to providing choice, options, or alternatives within the public school system are increasingly more conservative; they are less inclined to reflect the need to experiment in order to learn how to meet the needs of target populations (Young, 1990). Additionally, as mentioned above, school districts in B.C. must find ways to meet the needs of students with less-severe behavioural challenges and learning disabilities without supplementary funding. While conventional schools, especially at the high school level, fail to meet the needs and interests of a varied student body, the provision of variety and choice – characteristics associated with a free society – are restricted to conservative options when diverse alternative programs are not part of the available options. Increased pressure for school districts and schools to meet rigid performance standards leads to "more competition within the schools and inevitable hostility, disorder, and withdrawal from the 50 percent who have trouble competing" (Young, 1990, p.26). Further, "success at competition, in turn, is affected by the relative economic, social, racial, and sexual advantages or disadvantages students bring with them

to the schools" and accepting mandates for accountability as defined by performance on standardized measures, "schools do little to compensate for and, in fact, may accentuate the differences students bring with them" (Young, 1990, p.27).

Advantage and Disadvantage

There is a long history in education of blaming individual and cultural deficits – not systems – for students' failure in school (Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001). The social inequalities that extend beyond the school have been blamed, along with students' personal failings for problems in school, but there has not been any real change in the structure and administration of schools since the age-graded school model emerged in the 1920s and was lauded for its efficiency at moving large numbers of students through a standardized curriculum (Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001).

Nearly 20 years ago Young (1990) stated that one-quarter of students in the United States lived in poverty. The Canadian national estimate of children living in poverty was 16.8% in 2005 (First Call, 2007). B.C.'s rate of child poverty in 2005 was 20.9%; substantially higher than the 2005 national average. The risk of families living in poverty varies by family type. In 2005 in B.C. lone-parent mothers represented 48.1% of all families living in poverty (First Call, 2007). The disparity between B.C.'s poorest and richest families has increased over the past 10 years. Families with children who had income of $146,492 in 1993 reported income of $224,665 in 2005, while families reporting an income of $15,150 in 1993 saw their income increase to only $16,520 in 2005 (First Call, 2007). Families on welfare survive on incomes well below the poverty rate.

The increasing economic inequality experienced by Canadian families has important implications for the future of young Canadians. Children from poor families are more than twice as likely to drop out of high school as are children from non-poor families (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2000). Family income also appears to pose a barrier to attending university insofar as families with less resources are likely to be able to pay for quality daycare in the early years and books for their children, have less money to attend museums, live in neighbourhoods with better schools and provide a more school-oriented home environment from early ages (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Conversations about Alternative Education

Our conversations about alternative educational options for at-risk youth occurred within a study in which practitioners in a community-based alternative education program spoke about the conditions that supported their practice and also the changes to funding over time that have challenged their ability to enact good practice. In addition to interviewing staff in the community-based program, interviews were also conducted with some women who had attended the program in the past. These women reflected on what participation in the program meant for them: how it differed from their past school experiences and how it influenced where they are in their lives today.

The Conversation Context: The Girls Alternative Program/Options Daycare

The Victoria Society for Educational Alternatives (VSEA) which established the Girls Alternative Program (GAP) has effectively supported at-risk pregnant and parenting teens since the early 1970s. The addition of the on-site Options Daycare to the program in 1989 made it possible for young mothers to continue their education in the same facility in which their children received childcare. Since its inception, the GAP/Options

program has served over 1,000 at-risk teenage girls and over 130 infants and toddlers. The majority of the girls who attend the program are White, yet typically close to one-third are also of First Nations heritage. The girls tend to be referred to the program by school counselors, community agencies, or friends who either know of or have attended the program.

In its first decade, academics and life skills formed the core of the integrated program. Over the past 20 plus years, layer upon layer of challenging issues have meant that the provision of support that responds to the varied needs of at-risk girls (pregnant, parenting, and non-parenting/at-risk) has become more complex (Victoria Society for Educational Alternatives records). Most all the girls in the program have histories of enduring challenges that extend back to their childhoods. Involvement with drugs, past experiences with and current risks for sexual exploitation, mental health issues, poverty, and family instability are realities for most of the girls; rarely does a girl enter the program with an intact family and a stable social safety net.

Program records for the 2002-2003 school year show 58% of the girls had histories that included physical abuse and 38% experienced childhood neglect. Over one-quarter of the girls had parents with substance abuse issues and/or mental illness, and a similar proportion of the girls reported having their own mental health issues. Two out of ten girls experienced unstable living arrangements and 15% were known to be at-risk for sexually exploitation.

In 2004, three Youth and Family counselors supported teachers to provide individualized programs to meet the educational and social-emotional needs of the girls in the program. Individual and group counseling sessions are part of the program as are

group work on life issues related to substance use and healthy relationships. Conflict resolution training, invited guest speakers and recreational and cultural activities further complement the learning opportunities for girls in the program. Funding changes over the past several years have resulted in changes in enrolment space, and affected staffing ratios and the provision of various program components.

Changes in Funding Support

The Girls Alternative Program and the Options daycare are funded jointly by two provincial ministries. The Ministry for Children and Family development provides funds for the daycare facility, including caregivers' wages and a salary for a coordinator. Young mothers who have children in the daycare receive the maximum subsidy for childcare and end up not having to pay any childcare fees. The Ministry of Education provides funding for the local school district which in turn provides the facility, maintenance, a secretary and one teacher. The Society which runs the program, while appreciative of the support of the school district, has long desired more autonomy in terms of the hiring of teachers and determining eligibility for enrollment in the program.

We heard unanimous agreement among program staff and ex-participants in the program about the beneficial outcomes of the integrated program. Several staff members spoke about the satisfaction they experienced being involved with a program that really worked when so many practitioners are involved in initiatives where they cannot enact efficacious practice because of structural constraints and philosophical differences. However, beginning in the early 2000s the GAP/Options program experienced a number of changes that resulted in decreased funding for staff positions which in turn constrained their ability to engage in practice closely-aligned with their philosophical beliefs.

> *[Change] wasn't instantaneous. …Somewhere around 7-8 years ago …there had been a push to put more and more students within the 2 programs, Options and Gap …to fill it up beyond what staff and the [VSEA] Board felt was optimum. …And then there started to be the push towards less staff so they started taking away …we could see that it was going to get to the point very quickly to not only not being effective but even to the point where it could be dangerous to have this high need, high level in the high numbers [of participants] without the proper support around it.* –Sally, Ex-participant and Board Member

The effect of reduced funding for staff has resulted in a less dynamic program and the need to utilize outside professionals to conduct in-service groups. Both have significant impacts on practice in the program.

> *Originally, there were 3 full-time counselors, 3 full-time teachers, and …you could work in the team. …A staff member took on a group of girls too and followed them through their academic process and life skills and they would be the same. …So I would only work with 1 staff and we had the same girls you see. …So I would hear about their academic stuff and they might hear about their parenting. We kind of almost share the counseling part of it. So it was a little more formalized that way. And there's just no way people can stretch like that now with the cutbacks.…we don't have those individual meeting times so much. …I've seen a dramatic shift. …Like someone's having a crisis, we sort of joke, 'Can you hold it until 10 o'clock until M's on shift?' I mean you can't. Before there was always 3 people and maybe you weren't that person's counselor or mentor or whatever but there was always somebody here right who could help and now there's not the resources available.* –Delia

> *We get a lot of in service and …all kinds of groups come in and do things …but that's different than the people that you've already got an established relationship with, you know, running groups and picking up on these little things that [you] can then maybe take with you and do a one-on-one after.* –Delia

The reasons proposed for funding cuts to the program reflected the assumption that equality means treating all students the same.

> *When that funding [for youth and family counselors] was taken from the Ministry for Children and Families and given to the Ministry of Education …then given to the School Districts to use as they saw would best work for the students. And within this School District, as I said, there was this really strong idea that students… their needs should be met within their schools. …That's the bigger picture …if you don't put kids in special schools, that's a good thing. …I think they [the School District] thought it [GAP/Options] was certainly high-priced for*

> *a number of kids. …And there was also the ideal that every student should be welcomed in the school. …Unfortunately there will always be students who aren't going to …within a huge school…have their needs met …as they would in a program that is self-contained and it's a community within itself.* –Sally, Ex-participant and Board Member

Many staff reported feeling that the integrated program and the girls it serves have never been well-understood by the school district. Calls for pushing GAP participants quickly back into regular schools signaled a lack of appreciation for the needs of the girls who attend the program.

> *When I first started there were lots of quote 'alternative kids' …just there because they wanted a different way of learning. …[Over time] the issues with drugs, alcohol, got stronger, sexual exploitation. …More intense problems. A wider range of problems, I think. … The academic component was always there and the students always wanted it and it was always there as a tool. …It was clear to us that it was somewhat secondary. I mean you first have to deal with what's in front of you. I mean if someone can even learn or even pay attention …if someone is being up all night and they don't get a night's sleep; or there's no food, or whatever. …You're going to have to go through the process that we go through, making them feel safe, and they have a community and they could be okay and come regularly and then start to move in then on the academics. …And they [school district] wanted shorter and shorter time periods …I used to say that we couldn't do a good job under 3 years and they wanted us to, you know, in and out: 'How quickly can you get them back into the regular school?' The schools aren't dealing with those issues as much and it just doesn't occur to them [what's needed].* –Edith

> *They [girls] all come in at different levels of the stress and the instability. And for some, they might quite easily start to feel comfortable and relax and start to be able to think about things beyond food and shelter, and who's abusing them. But for others it's a very long process, a very long process. And for us, we had a different definition of success for every girl in the program. For some …just the fact that they came, that they chose to come, 1 or 2 days a week, was a huge success for someone who hasn't been at school for maybe 5 or 6 years. …Some kids did come from regular school so they were already more acclimatized to getting up in the morning and turning up at the school and so they had a faster moving in and starting to be able to be on an agenda. And it all takes time and that's one of the difficulties because the school district wanted to say they could only be there for a certain length of time. And so for some of them that might have worked but for others it didn't quite follow. We had some girls who were there for*

> *5 years at a time when we were able to do that and they needed all of those 5 years to change how they felt inside, started to see themselves.* –Pauline

Pauline also noted the assumption held by the school district that some girls choose to attend the program in order to get around the expectations for achievement in regular schools. This assumption represented another example of the program clientele not being well-understood.

> *People weren't calling to come to GAP who didn't need GAP. I mean, that's one of the things that the school district was often concerned about …[that] we were coddling these girls and people were choosing to come and be coddled. We never had a girl come who really didn't need to be there. On paper it might have looked like she didn't, but once she got to trust her counselor a little bit, the stories that come out that no one had ever heard before. I mean something from her past that was so destructive.* –Pauline

The typical evidence gathered to assess program effectiveness were also considered inappropriate when applied to the GAP program, especially those that equated program effectiveness with academic course completions.

> *They [school district] asked teachers for evidence because that's how they….that's how they manage success. How many courses are people getting through? And attendance, they wanted to know attendance and they wanted to know course completion right. And if you know, if you're going to run a program based on attendance and course completion you'd never open an alternative program. But that's why you open them because these people can't attend and don't complete anything in regular school. It's a vicious circle right?* –Pauline

Interestingly, the school district has rescinded their long-held policy of requiring young mothers to leave the program and attend an adult education facility s soon as they turn 19 year of age. Staff in the integrated program see this shift as a step in the right direction.

> *We got permission for the first time to have 19 year olds. So we've been able to help a couple of girls who are going to college who were here. So they're at college. They're part-time afternoon students; they can come in the afternoon and do studies. So their children are in the daycare. So that's really unique and*

> *really kind of neat because [before] it was sort of like, 'Sorry, you're 19 or you're child's 3, good bye. Can't serve you any more.' …I've always wanted to see if we could support them in the next step into maybe the work force, or another kind of job training situation.* –Delia

Reconsidering Quality

If children come to school with disparate resources and conventional schools tend to accentuate rather than compensate for differences (Young, 1990), the question of whether public education should include an abundance of educational options is easily answered. The alternative education movement is known for its commitment to being responsive to student needs. This appears to be a time when responsive schools are sorely needed to help address inequities in the life and educational experiences of many children.

Carrie, a young mother who attended the integrated program for a few years offers insight into how poverty and unstable family lives effect children in schools. She reminds us that although poverty is a systemic issue there are ways in which schools can respond more effectively to the needs of children affected by poverty.

> *I went to Grade 9 three times. When I was there I got 89, 96%. Like I had 96% in my Science class in Grade 9. …They wouldn't let me pass because I hadn't been there the 60 out of the 90 days. …[I said] 'I just don't have a home so I can't come here everyday because I don't have the money to come here.' … Like when I would find a place to stay, like a couch or something to stay on, I'd try to get a job because like you can't stay somewhere for free and so then it was 'work or school,' 'work or school' and you're 14 years old – you shouldn't have to do those kinds of things right?*
> *…So that's how screwed up the system is. You have this intelligent, intelligent child and its like instead, let's take you and close the door on you and take away support and take away self-esteem and stuff. So then you go on this path, where you're like well, you know if they don't care about me and they're the system, and they're supposed to care about me then why care about myself.*
> *Why isn't that just a right of children to be able to turn and say 'Well I want support wherever I go?' 'I want my school to tell me I'm good.' Like I don't want my school to judge me because I'm poor.*

Young (1990) outlines the characteristics of effective alternative schools while noting that these characteristics are also the same ones which characterize a supportive learning environment in *any* school. The characteristics are small size, concern for the whole child, a supportive environment, and a sense of community. Schools that are smaller in size are better able to foster a sense of community, nurture informal relationships, and make it possible for everyone to become familiar with and committed to common goals and philosophies. Concern with the whole student refers to students having many opportunities for informal interaction with adults in the environment and students perceiving teachers as being concerned with their feelings, needs and taking their abilities into consideration when assessing their learning.

Sally, who attended the integrated program in its early days recalled her experiences in a regular school before coming to GAP/Options:

> *I was not one of those angry, loud, acting out kids …I was one of the ones that was more quiet and just didn't engage and didn't go. …I didn't have a lot of friends or even anybody that I felt comfortable with. I didn't have connections with any teachers or staff – it was a very uncomfortable and unpleasant experience being there. …I was very strongly getting the message that …I was stupid that I didn't know what was going on.*

A supportive environment is one in which everyone present feels like a part of a family and the atmosphere is cooperative rather than competitive (Young, 1990). Belonging is particularly important to at-risk youth and few people advocate for their needs within the regular school system.

A sense of community includes collaboration aimed at a positive school environment, the existence of a clear mission, and the development of shared values, and commitment to the shared purpose of meeting students' needs. It is high time that we

refocus our definitions of what constitutes effective education and insist that our School Districts uphold and enact a broad understanding of the many ways of defining successful learning and become more responsive to diverse student learning needs (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001).

Rose' description of the collaborative relational approach to practice that characterizes GAP/Options exemplifies a positive climate which focuses upon meetings students' needs:

> *The number one is, if you want to help kids there's nothing that does consistently make a difference for kids than the size of grouping they are in. …I don't care whether you're in a regular school classroom or you're in an alternative program. So that's the first thing. That's one of the reasons that helped us be as successful as we are, is the ratio of adults to children. At the most we've got up to 40 students and probably say 6 staff. So every day after the kids would leave, we could meet as a whole group of people. And every Friday we had a meeting even more major. So we were incredibly in tune with each other. …You can become very individualized in the way you work with them; and we worked really hard on relationships. So relationships and size they're now two big things that I think make it work.*

Sandy, a woman who attended the program in its early years, recounted her delight at the atmosphere engendered by workers in the program; an atmosphere that gave her her first experience with being respected.

> *I fell in love with that school from the moment I walked through the front doors. …The teachers and counselors were helping me at the beginning so I just felt at home and at peace and I knew right away that was where I wanted to be. I think for the first time in my 14 years I had adults that were asking me questions about me that were respectful and that they cared about me and were interested. …Those people, the teachers and counselors just treated me like I was a human being for the first time ever. …I remember sitting around the living room being able to talk about what I wanted for my education, even what I wanted for that day, that week. …So yeah, it was amazing. I was never allowed to have that kind of input into my life before.*

Kelsey, a recent graduate of the integrated program made a plea for not only the continuation of the program but also for its expansion. Her words remind us of the rationale for providing educational alternatives: the provision of hope:

> *I think if it ever closes down that it would just be horrible for all the young moms and the Gappers [non-pregnant/parenting girls]. …I just wished it was one big school, with one big huge daycare and there was just more money and more funding and more space so that every girl who needs to go there can. And can take that and not feel hopeless.*

Closing Invitation

By writing this paper we hope to provoke questioning about the apparent constriction of alternative options in education. We suspect that many people share our beliefs regarding the importance of providing children with flexible learning environments that can effectively respond to their learning needs. We know there are others who join us in insisting that successful learning is defined broadly to include the whole child, not merely a child's achievement on standardized tests in academic subjects. Indeed, as the Select Standing Committee on Education recognized in 2002,

> A system that is driven by rules and regulations can become insensitive and less able to respond to the needs of individuals and exceptions to the rule. …Service providers often are compelled to resort to the rules and deny the requests of service consumers for alternate considerations. Added to the rules and regulations of the education system are many statutes and requirements of other agencies and spheres of governance that demand compliance. As a result there is a growing feeling by parents, learners, and taxpayers that they are being asked to pay for and receive a service that they have not, and in many instances would not, choose – a service that is far less responsive than if the system was less bureaucratic. (Legislative Assembly of B.C., 2002, p.27)

Low satisfaction levels among parents and youth were captured in a provincial school surveys conducted in 2006/2007 school year. Less than 2/3 of parents (63%) with children in secondary schools were satisfied with the educational program choices

available and less than half (48%) of secondary school students reported satisfaction (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2007b).

So what is at work in the current situation whereby we are seeing the closure of alternative programs for at-risk youth and reduced funding for remaining alternative programs? To what extent does the goal to meet the needs of all students in regular schools inhibit the ability to be truly responsive to the diverse needs of so many students, including students designated as having "special needs?" To what extent does the current standards-based reform movement inhibit the ability of administrators to entertain funding alternatives because of their lack of fit with standards-based criteria? To what extent might it simply feel too threatening for those of us that see the harm we are doing to many children, to speak up as individuals and demand the provision of alternatives? Perhaps we have become cynical about the possibility of change within our school system?

Regardless of our ability to pinpoint the relative contribution of the potential issues involved in reduced educational alternatives, we assert that we must begin to speak out. If we all commit to vocalizing our dissatisfaction with the number of children who are left feeling stupid, disengaged from education and positive social interaction in learning environments, who essentially have lost hope in their ability to succeed, our collective voice may spur change where it is needed. We have initiated the dialogue. Please add your voice to it. What do our children really need? Are we doing enough to meet the needs of our more vulnerable young people – both girls and boys?

We can't leave practitioners in alternative programs to fight this battle alone. As Pauline pointed out, when staff in alternative programs voice concerns over the closing of

programs their expressions are met with suspicion rather than taken as genuine attempts to advocate on behalf of the needs of the young people they serve.

> *There aren't parents to come out for these kids. …The only advocates for these kids are the people who are the staff and then it looks self-serving, and we're out there saying 'Don't shut this program,' [People assume] 'Ah well, you just want to keep your jobs.'* –Pauline

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