SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM IN PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The central idea of social constructivist thought is that knowledge is not objective but characterized by interpretation. Because knowledge is seen as deriving from individual interpretations of reality, knowledge is subject to change. This understanding contrasts with the present transmission approach taught in public schools. If knowledge is individual and socially constructed, then teachers employing the social constructivist approach in the classroom may be able to move education toward a more pluralistic and inclusive model. Interestingly, it seems that in public alternate education classrooms, many teachers may have avoided the traditional model of school, in which rewards and penalties dominate student-teacher relationships. A focus group research design was used to explore teacher-student relationships in public alternate schools, focusing on the use of social constructivist principles and practices. Data were collected through five focus groups, four groups of students and one group of teachers. All participants were drawn from public alternate schools in northern British Columbia. The results of the focus group study indicated that public alternate teachers rely on some components of a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning. For example, students have been provided with a student-centered learning environment. Findings also reveal that a strong relationship has developed between the teachers and the students in these alternate schools. It seems important for alternate school teachers to become aware that they are exercising some social constructivist learning practices so that a common approach and purpose can be employed in all alternate settings. The implications for counsellors using a social constructivist approach to counselling is discussed.

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CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, postmodern theories have increasingly impacted educational discourse and study. As a way of understanding the world, postmodernism has challenged a number of assumptions which underlie the modern view of the world, particularly the modernist notion of attempting to ground knowledge in stable, universal, truths (Hytten, 1994). Postmodernists argue that there are no such truths. The world, they suggest, is characterized instead by instability and uncertainty and, as such, all theories which attempt to conceptualize it are partial and hypothetical (Hytten, 1994). A central idea is that knowledge is not objective but constructed and interpreted. The potential impact postmodernist thought may have on educational discourse is significant. Postmodern theorists have initiated critical re-evaluation of the foundations of education. Postmodernists, such as Lyotard, Foucault and Baudrillard, have also drawn attention to the role of power in school and society. Social constructivist thought and practice, which is strongly influenced by postmodernism, has evolved to advocate for the voices and understandings of exploited and marginalized peoples. Particularly, the hierarchical power structure on which schools and Western society are founded have been exposed as reinforcing economic, racial and sexual inequalities.

The promise of social constructivism is that because knowledge is seen as deriving from individual interpretations of reality, knowledge is therefore subject to change. This understanding contrasts with the transmission approach typically found in schools, which is based on the notion of conveying unchanged truths. If knowledge is

individually and socially constructed as espoused by social constructivists, then teachers

employing the social constructivist approach may be able to move education toward a

more pluralistic and inclusive model. If teachers encourage students to use their own

understanding and language to express and share their reality in the world, together they

may respectfully negotiate a more tolerant and humane educational environment. Many

researchers have argued that the transmission model of education, which is grounded in

Enlightenment and modernist ideology, has out lived its usefulness (Kieny, 1994; Reid,

Kurkjian & Carruthers, 1994; Postman, 1996). However, most educators continue to

teach the same way they always have, as though the postmodernist dialogue does not

exist. Others have perhaps utilized some of the new social constructivist materials, but

have adapted them to fit transmissive patterns of instruction (Bell & Gilbert, 1994;

Lapadat, 1995). Interestingly, it seems that in public alternative education classrooms,

many teachers have avoided the traditional model of school, in which rewards and

penalties dominate the teacher-student relationship. Students are encouraged more often

to be active participants in creating a trusting, respectful and cooperative learning

environment which suits their psychological and emotional needs as well as intellectual

needs (Conant, 1992; Hill, Foster & Gendler, 1990; Kershaw & Blank, 1993; Raywid,

1982; Raywid, 1994; Thomas & Smith, 1983). Teachers in the alternate education

system have managed to avoid the transmission trap because they have been given the

latitude in their educational environments to interact intimately with their students, and

thus create and design a curriculum that respectfully meets the needs of each individual in

the classroom (Kershaw & Blank 1993; Young, 1990).

A public alternative education setting was selected for this study of the implicit existence of social constructivist approaches to instruction. As a teacher of alternative education for six years, I believe that it is probable that many of the public alternative schools are presently practicing according to the social constructivist paradigm. Moreover, the smaller size and the greater autonomy, combined with the program flexibility, make public alternative education classrooms easily adaptable to research opportunities.. Findings in the public alternate schools may then have significant implications for the larger, conventional public schools.

I have been a teacher in the public education system for eleven years, six of those years have been spent teaching in two alternative public high schools. It has only been over the past two years that I have begun to critically examine the theoretical underpinnings of my role as an educator. A consistency in my life is that learning has always been important, however this interest has often been extinguished by the constraints of the formal type of education. Although formal learning has often been stimulating, it is often rote and repetitive. My increased desire to return to school to complete a masters degree, was in-part, to take a break from teaching to rejuvenate myself. When reflecting on the reasons for needing to be rejuvenated, I realized that I was struggling with the structure of the system more than with the students.

My frustration with the public system became clear as I experienced the role of being a student again. Although I have considerably more personal autonomy and educational latitude at the university level, I find it easy to identify with my own four children's experiences in the public education system, as well as with the students I have

taught. The insecurity and anxiety they are experiencing I understand with a renewed

empathy. The system that is responsible for educating our youth is designed to attend

primarily to the intellectual needs deemed necessary for a competitive market economy.

In my opinion a competitive and hierarchical structure is maintained at the expense of our

youths' social and emotional and psychological needs. Although I believe there are many

shortcomings in the public system, my assumptions at the time of writing this thesis

include a belief that all public schools have strengths and are practical because they draw

culturally diverse individuals together. Therefore there is a potential for students and

teachers to consensually negotiate a common vision with universal ideals that can ensure

the uniqueness and richness of all individuals in society if students are encouraged to

learn with their hearts as well as their heads.

As an experienced teacher who has spent six years in the public alternative

setting, I believe that successful public education depends absolutely on the existence of

shared narratives that are embodied in the social constructivist approach to teaching and

learning and the exclusion of narratives that lead to alienation and division. Mercer

(1992) explains that the narratives of powerful groups often dominate less powerful

groups and are able to enforce their norms, language and culture on those who are

subordinate. The life style of the subordinate groups is deemed unacceptable in this

discourse, therefore, disabling many members of the subordinate group by making them

ineligible for full participation in the most desirable roles in society. I agree with

Postman (1995) that too often the voices of those most intrinsic to the education process,

the students themselves, are silenced when those of us with access to privilege and

authoritative modes of discourse presume to speak for rather than with those we wish to educate. The value of public schools is not so much that schools have common goals, but that they have the potential to promote common narratives. Humanity, morality and equity are the ideal narratives that can be encouraged through social constructivist practices, and with these ideal narratives comes the possibility of creating a public, not serving it (Postman, 1995).

The assumption here is that the design and practice of our present institutions needs to be reexamined. The reexamination will begin with a look at public alternative programs that have consciously or unconsciously embraced social constructivist principles. Since the 1980s the number of published studies on public alternative schools have been relatively small, and as a result, much of the research base for alternative education has remained dependent on studies conducted during the 1970s (Young, 1990). Although little has been written, I suspect that Gail's experience, as a second-year English teacher at a New Jersey alternative high school, is not unlike alternative education teachers across Canada and the United States. Kellmayer (1995) quotes her as saying

> College and student teaching didn't begin to prepare me for what I have to face everyday in the classroom. Sometimes I feel like I'm responsible for everything that happens to these kids - not just when they're in school but for their lives outside of school, too... I spend a lot of time talking about dating, birth control, drinking and drugs, jobs, driving, laws... you name it. When I was hired, the principal told me that ... I was both a teacher and a counsellor and that if I

developed the right relationship with the students they would bring their personal problems to me. That's exactly what happened. The principal also told me that I would have to create my own structure inside my classroom. He said that the traditional structures, mechanism, and processes that support teachers in traditional schools weren't a part of the alternative school culture ... I love teaching at the alternative school ... I feel like I'm making a bigger difference in kid's lives teaching here than if I were teaching at a traditional high school. (Kellmayer, 1995 p. 103).

The purpose of this study then is to explore teachers' and students' perceptions of their learning and instructional environments in public alternate high school setting in northern British Columbia (with a focus on the use of social constructivist principles and practices). Focus groups are used to collect these data because this method is congruent with the topic to be explored. A focus group is a carefully planned multiple-person interview used to collect data about people's experiences and perceptions of a given situation of which they have detailed and particular knowledge (Krueger, 1994). A focus group format not only accepts, but fosters the social construction of knowledge.

CHAPTER TWO : LITERATURE REVIEW

Current Social Context

Giddens (1990) explains in his book The Consequences of Modernity that we live in a world stranded somewhere between a modern and postmodern discourse. Modernity grew out of the beginnings of the enlightenment age, with a quest for certainty. Linked with this quest for certainty is the modern glorification of rationality. To be rational, in the modernist sense, is to be able to free the mind of prejudice, biases, and superstitions and to see the world as it truly is, independent of the distortions of human perceptions (Hytten, 1994). The fundamental modernist assumption is that there is an ordered world that can be known, and that by cleansing operations of human reason, through decontextualizating them, one can come to know the truth. The modernist goal was to find universals in the laws of human nature, of the physical world and of political life. The focus was on comprehensive ideas and abstract generalizations, rather than varieties and diversities.

Postmodernism grows out of, and responds to, the experience of diverse cultures in the world and the impossibilities of universalizing and generalizing trends of modernity. Postmodernism espouses a skepticism toward grand narratives, such as Marxism, Judeo-Christianity, rationality and patriarchy (Hytten, 1994). Postmodernists find grand narratives objectionable because in offering one correct way of viewing the world and history, they suppress differences and privilege by promoting a single Western perspective. Postmodernists are thus critical of the assumptions that people are a unified human subject. A single view of humankind suggests that there is one unchanging human

essence. This view of humans delegitimizes any whose experience does not fit the given, acceptable mold of the white, male Christian who sustain power through the legitimization of colonial ideology (Hytten, 1994). Underlying the postmodern ideology is a desire to dismantle power structures which marginalize, and thus delegitmize the voices of those who, without power, have traditionally been oppressed and exploited, including women, ethnic minorities, and people of color. Finally, postmodernists view knowledge not as a given, but rather as being created by subjects acting in and upon the world (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Giddens, 1990; Hytten, 1994). Postmodernists, by disavowing grand narratives, and the notion of a unified subject, and by questioning the nature of knowledge, offer a world view that does not privy one group to some "authentic" view of reality.

Hytten (1994) suggests that it is useful to play postmodernity off modernity in order to characterize them, but it is important to keep in mind that both terms are an attempt to capture broad trends and overriding themes. Moreover, Giddens (1990) adds that trends and themes do not ease an individual's attempts to manage in a world that is constantly under the influence of information technology and new forms of mediated experience. People, he suggests, are forced to continually revise who they are in a complex society. He defines this constant revision as reflexivity. In the past, self identity and life roles were strongly influenced by traditions, cultural customs and stable norms. With the increased decay of all forms of tradition, due to the rapidly changing conditions brought on by science and technology, comes an increased doubt in the structures of society. With increased doubt comes increased uncertainty and social instability. As a

result people may have to depend much more on their own reflexivity as a means of development. In other words, people may find it necessary to reevaluate what they think and do to maintain a degree of personal coherence throughout society's rapid revision.

Why do we currently live in a runaway world so different from that which the Enlightenment thinkers anticipated? Why has the generalization of reason not produced a world subject to our prediction and control? Giddens explains that unintended consequences and the reflexivity or circularity of knowledge are the culprits. No matter how well a system is organized and designed, its introduction and functioning, within the social context of the operation of other systems and of human activity in general, cannot be wholly predicted. But even if it were conceivable that human action and physical environment could be a single design system, unintended consequences would persist. New knowledge, concepts, theories and findings do not simply render the social world more transparent, but alter its nature, spinning it off in novel directions. Postmodernism, therefore, may alter "the way things are" in an ever changing world, with a set of consequences that are still relatively unknown to us.

Giddens believes that when Western people are faced with the uncertainty that postmodernism offers, they cling more feverishly to the familiarly of modernity. The resulting confusion has effectively institutionalized a society of doubt (Giddens, 1990). Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) agree, as they explain that our youth feel betrayed by a society that has silenced their voice in social, political and educational systems where they may have the potential to make changes. A common complaint against conventional schools is that they are more concerned with process and product. This over concern with

process and product effectively limits a dialogue that could produce change. Public alternative schools may be providing conditions necessary to address many of the weaknesses of conventional schools by focusing on the needs of disenfranchised youth (Kershaw & Blank, 1993).

Although the majority of students continue to attend conventional schools, this system offers little assistance in coping with institutionalized doubt. Given this situation, some youth faced with an uncertain future have chosen roles which society sees as subverting existing institutions. A "gang member" is an example of such a role. However, the individual gang member's need for power, to live out a dream in a disadvantaged existence, is not unlike a large corporate take-over. Contenta (1992) believes that this is an example of how our culture teaches by example of its actions and not by its lofty rhetoric. There is a failure to realize the connection between what is espoused in a society and what is practiced. It is not surprising that subcultures reproduce the same non-forgiving hierarchical structure that exists within the larger institutional order. In this culture of doubt, although individuals rebel against the status-quo, they are left to frame the acceptable and the unacceptable within their social subcultures. If their thoughts and actions are imbedded in the ideology of modernity, then their attempts to gain status in the culture of power is a duplication of existing structure, albeit through a substitute venue. Therefore they remain in a culture or subculture of conflict and uncertainty. These "rebellious" students and students that are defined as "others" or "at-risk" by society's evolving definition of normalcy are often students who become candidates for the public alternative schools.

Foucault (1970) explains that people have power in society in direct proportion to their ability to participate in the various discourses that shape society. He argues that there is an inseparable link between knowledge and power because the discourses of a society determine what knowledge is held to be true. White (1993), following Foucault, writes that we tend to internalize the preestablished beliefs or "dominant narratives" of our culture, easily believing that they speak the truth of our identities. Dominant narratives tend to blind us to the possibilities that other narratives might offer us. Lave (1988) agrees that universalist, decontextualized, rational models of thinking are themselves cultural constructions, which only seem natural to us because they have long been presented to us as "the way things are."

The "moral" sciences of sociology, education and psychology embody an emphasis on this natural scientific reasoning and in turn produce knowledge that is used to discipline the colonial and industrial orders and to refine the operation of the dominant society (Foucault, 1977). The dominant society has rationalized "the way things are" through an elaborate network of institutions that create narratives of truths. Once a narrative of truth is introduced, policy and legislation can be employed to limit the voices of many people in society. Moreover, and possibly more damaging, many people embrace the dialogue that marginalizes and limits their participation in society, thus they become self-regulated and self-oppressed through the internalization of the modernist discourse.

An alternative to modernist discourse may lie in social constructivist thought which has evolved from postmodernist ideology. To begin to characterize social constructivism,

it is useful to start with a description of the transmission model of education which is based on the universal and the general.

Transmission Model of Education

Current educational institutions are structured on modernist narratives of truth. For example, developmental psychology, which evolved from the hypo-deductive scientific model of inquiry, assumes the truth that individuals develop in a linear fashion, completing one developmental task and moving on to the next (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Although linear development is not a satisfactory way of describing current lives, our present society clings to this truth because it allows the continuation of predominant societal roles, and acceptable cultural norms. Similarly, the transmission model attempts to articulate not only linear development, but also universal stages of development. With respect to cognitive development, for example, the instructional recommendations follow directly from empirical research in stage theory (O'Loughlin, 1992). Schools see themselves as a discourse with scientific status (O'Loughlin, 1992). When a school is considered a regime for the truth, educational legislation and policy legitimizes the teacher's role. In turn, schools become institutions which objectify the students in a ritual of subjugation (Foucault, 1970). With this understanding, we can see how schools are inherently biased and distorted by this partiality. Through a network of discourses, roles, aspirations, and desires, teachers and students are (re)constituted to fit the dominant narrative of western society.

Theorists and researchers have always questioned whether schools, especially conventional high schools, could meet the needs of all students (Kershaw & Blank, 1993;

Raywid, 1992; Young, 1990). Often teachers are unaware that institutionalized colonial truths are being propagated. A study by Solomon and Levin-Rasky (1996) found that a majority of teachers had internalized the dominant educational discourse. The quantitative component of the study included 1002 surveys and 227 additional information sheets completed by teachers in 57 elementary and secondary schools across Canada. Teachers from five urban centers were selected because their schools revealed the presence of racial and ethnocultural diversity, as well as a formal antiracist education policy. The qualitative portion involved the interviewing of three groups of educators. The educators included 35 teachers, 10 administrators (at least one from each school) and six race and ethnocultural equity advisors (one from each school) who had participated in the survey. Purposeful sampling ensured a balanced representation of sex, years of experience, and grade level or subjects taught. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for coding and analysis. Analysis involved simple frequencies and cross tabulations of responses. Although there were some supportive responses to antiracist education, the responses that expressed resistance represented the larger portion of the findings.

When teachers were asked about a more inclusive model of education, that could possibly accommodate a more tolerant discourse, they responded that it was a threat to the core principles of the educational enterprise. Assimilation, group discipline and physical control would be lost, they explained (Solomon & Levin-Rasky, 1996). These are the words of a culture-bound educators. Everytime the notion of objectivity is used to rationalize "the way things are," we are using an interpretive framework that maintains

Eurocentric classroom practices that discourage and devalue the cultural forms, traditions, and experiences of Others. The attitude of over one-third of the teachers interviewed is summarized by this teacher:

> I think the majority of staff probably find it [antiracist education] a waste of time.
> Their reaction to it is negative ... It's just sort of red-neck attitude among
> teachers. I think that the teachers I know aren't really racist, but they see it as an
> artsy fartsy sort of thing to do. Their concern is with the 3 Rs (Solomon & Levin-
> Rasky, 1996 p.26).

Many educators believe themselves to be fair but Solomon and Levine-Rasky (1996) show that teachers across Canada have internalized a reality that results in the marginalization of many students' voices.

Another example of modernist influence that has promoted unequal power dynamics is revealed in the past research on intelligence. Although intelligence testing has been disguised in a scientific cloak of legitimacy, it is common knowledge that the politically motivated writing and thinking about race and intelligence can be traced to scientific racism influenced by European ethnocentrism (Pederson 1995). Structures of inequality such as the silencing of student voices and intelligence testing rooted in the modernist, transmission model of education reinforce the reality of inequality, and in effect, blame individuals for their marginalized conditions. Freire in his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970, 1993), writes that the whole education system is one of the major instruments for the maintenance of a "culture of silence." Careful analysis of teacher-student relationships at any level, inside and outside of school, reveals instruction to be

fundamentally one-way in character. The content of instruction, whether value based or empirically based, become lifeless and petrified in the process. Education, Freire says, is suffering from "lecture sickness." Teachers talk about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable, as students diligently record, memorize and repeat. Education according to Freire (1970, 1993) and Foucault (1977), is an act of submission and control for the purpose of deposition of reality. Giddens (1990) would argue that it is as though our western institutions, particularly the institution of education, are stuck somewhere between recognition that survival demands the creative solutions offered in the postmodern discourse and a desire to preserve familiar western culture by continuing to live a myopic, inequitable modern story.

Because educators have difficulty accepting the postmodernist view of the world, social constructivist thought may play a helpful role. Instead of presupposing that knowledge has to be a representation of what exists, social constructivists propose the notion that knowledge is a mapping of what, in the light of human experience, turns out to be feasible (von Glaserfeld, 1988). What follows is a review of the literature on constructivism and the role social constructivism can play in transforming in the general practice of education.

Constructivism

Constructivism is a family of theories about the mind and the context in which it works. Reese (1980) has summarized the ontological development of constructivist thought. From the beginning of psychological curiosity there have been "constructivist" beliefs. It could be said that an Italian Philosopher, Giambattista Batista Vico, founded

the psychology of constructivism in 1725. In his writing he emphasizes the belief that "man understands only what he makes" (Reese, 1980). Immanuel Kant, a German Philosopher and prolific writer published <u>Critique of Pure Reason</u> in 1781. He proposed that the human mind imposes structure and meaning on what is sensed, turning sensations into ideas which is congruent with current teachings of constructivism.

Hans Vaihinger, also a philosophical constructivist, aided the development of Kantian thought through the publication of a journal in 1919 dedicated to the philosophy known as Fictionalism. Fictionalism is based on the view that many of our most important ideas are mental constructions. We hold them because of the aid they give us in dealing with a problematic reality (Reese, 1980). Vaihinger had a strong influence on George Kelly in his formulation of personal construct psychology. Kelly writes that human beings are better understood from the perspective " that each man contemplates in his own personal way the stream of events upon which he finds himself so swiftly borne" (Kelly, 1995, vol. 1, p.3). Although much of the early work in psychology is written in a sexist manner, it is understood that these perspectives are not just pertinent to men, but to women as well. Within these notions there is the possibility of discovering ways in which individuals can organize and reorganize their lives (Patterson & Watkins, 1996).

Some constructivists, such as the radical constructivists, claim that there is no reality other than the one the individual constructs out of his or her own experience. Although this position implies an increased tolerance for different perspectives, together with an increased sense of responsibility, Peavy (1992), argues that it is a solipsistic doctrine that strips the human mind from believing in anything. A radical constructivists

counter-argument would agree with the substance of Peavy's insights, as his criticism is based on the assumption that there are truths, but not with the implication that this is undesirable. For example, we have a way of anchoring knowledge albeit personally and socially constructed. Von Glaserfeld (1988) writes that one of Gambattista Vico's basic ideas was that the ways of knowing we attach to our social and technical world can be nothing but the cognitive structures we ourselves have put together. The human knower can only know what the knower has constructed through experience with tradition and language in society.

Social Constructivism in Education

The relevance of constructivism for psychology and education is that the individual is recognized as the co-creator of his or her own experience and life. Constructivism is neither individualistic in the way most humanistic approaches are, nor is it deterministic in the way most behavioristic approaches to human experience are (Peavy, 1992). Rather, constructivists believe that human beings together co-constitute the meaning of their world (Neimeyer, 1993; Speed, 1991) and are therefore able to participate in the deconstruction of present understanding to construct new meanings (Master, 1991). People's realities can be negotiated through the use of language, as in the form of the narrative; therefore the "self" makes meaning through cognitive and behavioral activities that are continually changing through the function of dialogue between the present self and the present environment (White, 1995). Constructivists have abandoned the idea that people can be defined by some predetermined objective condition. Labeling people as being dysfunctional, abnormal and/or pathological is not

the language of constructivism. People are not silenced; rather they are heard through the articulation of their own personal stories of unique cultural and experiential histories (White, 1995). Although constructivism does not necessarily imply equity and justice, it does suggest that inequity and injustice be negotiated with an awareness that all voices are heard and all stories told.

One limitation of constructivism is that it tends to be uncritical of the larger social and political context, because it attaches equal value to all stories (Waldegrave, 1990). For example, although one might believe that the story of the perpetrator in a crime against another should not have a story that is of equal value to that of the victim, constructivism does not provide a means by which to make this judgment. Korin (1994) suggests that Freire's ideas and methods are relevant to bridge the two realms because they validate both the importance of cultural meaning and the existence of the social and political reality. The term social constructivism is thus used to include an understanding that one's constructions are a reflection of individual, social, political and historical factors.

Social Constructivism and the Nature of Truth

Although social constructivists "agree on little more than the important assumptions that knowledge is a social product" (Prawat & Floden, 1994 p. 37), it is necessary to identify which foundation of thought will best serve the needs of students in an educational environment. Prawat and Floden (1994) have identified three main categories of social constructivism based on Pepper's (1942) writings. All take a

different stance on the nature of truth, but the third, contextualism, seems to be the one most preferred for the educational process.

The first stance gives primacy to abstract mental structures and rational thought processes at the expense of the historically and socially constituted subjectivity that each person brings to the reasoning process (O'Loughlin, 1992). The second structural model is the mechanistic model that implies that what exists outside of the individual is the predominant force in how we construct our way of knowing the world. This information-processing world view embraces a belief that the accuracy of truth can only be represented by what is outside of the mind. The third is borne from Dewey's work, and is of central interest to education. Dewey labeled as a contextualist (Prawat & Floden, 1994), believed that values as well as facts can be discovered and sanctioned by experience. Therefore not only is truth from this perspective individual, but also negotiated with other individuals through experience and language. The value of this approach in the classroom is that disagreement as well as compromise provide the impetus for learning and understanding diversity. In this approach, "opposing views become alternatives to be explored rather than competitors to be eliminated" (Roby, 1988 p.173). From this perspective an individual can defend his or her views and understandings without having to defend who he or she is as a person.

Social Constructivism in the Classroom

Although there is much disagreement about what the major components of a social constructivist learning environment are, some consistent themes have emerged. Social constructivist education includes student-centered instruction with individual

students being considered experts on their own knowledge. Along with this personal autonomy, students negotiate common understandings through discussion and authentic experiential learning. Students are also encouraged to critically reflect on activities and participate in discussions to develop and demonstrate their emerging social and technical understandings (Cennamo, Abell & Chung, 1995; Driscoll, 1995; Keiny, 1994; Lebrow, 1993). In summary, the key to the constructivist approach is that students construct their own knowledge through interactions with their social and physical environments. The assumption is that students are intrinsically motivated and self-directed, thus effective teaching capitalizes on the students' motivations to explore, experiment, create, and make sense of their experiences (Novick, 1996).

Therefore, the challenge of social constructivist education is to assist individuals to become aware of their personal and collective roles in their social environment. More precisely, the intent is to encourage students to acquire an understanding of the interplay of their political and social history and individual initiative in creating human experience (Peavy, 1992). If educators allow students to manifest an understanding that people are able to change over time and that there is no essential self or singular identity, only negotiated constructions of self and society (Habermas cited in Allen, 1990), then they are able to dispel the predetermined beliefs that have encapsulated their intellect. The difficulty is reflecting on value laden thoughts, but in doing so, students and teachers may collectively create a more inclusive, moral and humane educational environment.

In the classroom, a defining factor of social constructivist learning occurs when students are encouraged to reflect on their own thinking (Kieny, 1994; Lebrow, 1993).

Because classrooms are complex environments where many events occur simultaneously, written and oral reflective tasks help to anchor concepts and clarify arguments. Moreover, reflecting also seems to be a process that helps individuals to reach higher levels of knowledge (Steffe & Tzur, 1994). A limitation of "reflecting" on one's own thinking is that individual students seem insufficiently "expert" on a given subject to be in a position to be particularly helpful to themselves or others in creating a more encompassing understanding (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1994). However, I believe that learning is a process of making sense of the world, and making mistakes is essential to that learning process. Moreover, students develop impoverished concepts of knowledge and learning from the transmission spoon feeding approach because the "pieces" of knowledge are decontextualized and not grounded in experiences meaningful to the student. Thus they lack adequately developed strategies for managing their cognitive faculties (Lebrow, 1993).

Scruggs and Mastropieri (1994) point out another limitation of social constructivist instruction. Science, for example, is a vast and diverse content domain, and they note that not all scientifically relevant information can be acquired through manipulation and inquiry, as espoused by the social constructivist approach. Vocabulary and terminology, human conventions and procedures, and formalized classification schemes cannot be discovered or invented, but need to be learned and remembered (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1994). However, much of this can be learned and remembered through reading and research, discourse and writing, and demonstration and modelling. Therefore, for all relevant outcomes to be met in the curriculum, it may be necessary to

combine a variety of instructional procedures from a variety of perspectives: behavioral, cognitive and social constructivist. This is consistent with Duffy and Jonassen's (1991) recommendations, as they write that students often need the intellectual tools necessary to (de)construct knowledge. However, this is not to imply that expository instruction, memorization and exercise worksheets are best ways to acquire the basic intellectual tools.

Lebrow (1993) emphasizes that the underlying principle of social constructivist design and practice is to "do no harm." This edict does not necessarily require that teachers abandon performance objectives and other preferred methods; rather, it is to remind teachers that the goal of social constructivist education includes cognitive, behavioral and affective outcomes. Lebrow (1993) cautions us as teachers to use directive methods sparingly because "ultimately, teaching is a process of giving up control" (Lebrow, 1993, p. 8). There is a need in society for learners to be imaginative and creative thinkers, with the ability to question the status-quo for the benefit of all people.

Teachers and Social Constructivism

The strength of education grounded in the social constructivist approach is that it has the potential to challenge students to examine their underlying assumptions and definitions of truth (Kelly, 1993; Korn, 1991; Raywid, 1982). In turn, this allows students to increase their self-awareness, and question and examine their reliance on culturally-referenced criteria. Together the students and educator can co-construct a reality that is more responsible and tolerant of all people in society.

The first step teachers can take toward developing a postmodernist-social constructivist stance in education is to cultivate an awareness of our historical, political, social and psychological relationships with students and community. A limitation of our current transmission model of instruction is that it perpetuates the inequities in society. For example, all students come to school with diverse experiences because they may be poor or they may be First Nations or they may be homosexual, and they all leave school each day as that same person. In a conventional school they are told implicitly (through what has been referred to as the hidden curriculum) and explicitly (in the delivery of lessons and prescribed readings) that they are socially, politically, and morally inferior. Committed teachers can challenge the inequities that are perpetuated by the transmission approach by encouraging students to restructure their learning environments so that classroom discourse reflects a tolerance and understanding of variations of experience and knowledge.

The second step is more complicated because teachers have a responsibility to allow all students the voice to express themselves, for others to hear and understand. Paralleling social constructivists' principles, Delpit (1988) notes only giving students a voice in the classroom ensures that the power status quo remains the same. Rather than perpetuating the status-quo, social constructivist teachers prefer to see all students taught how to participate in the power culture while simultaneously learning how to reflect critically on power relations of which all, including the teacher, are a part. Teachers have to be willing to give students their expert knowledge, while assisting them to acknowledge their own expertness (Delpit, 1988). Moreover, while students learn the

culture of power they must also be made aware of the arbitrariness of accessing power, and how one's skin color or gender or racial background is like currency that purchases a voice in the dominant discourse. Only as teachers become self-reflexive about power can they hope to address the imbalances that are present. The challenge for teachers is to practice social constructivist principles that truly empower rather than merely give the illusion of power to disenfranchised groups while excluding them from power (Lebrow, 1993).

The third step for social constructivist teachers is to assist learners to become active participants in the learning process. The social constructivist approach to education recognizes that obeying externally imposed commandments and rules does not instill the self-confidence or skill to cope with an independent existence in adulthood (Haig-Brown, 1995). Ironically, the most direct way that students can become active participants in redesigning the practices in the institution of education is to have teachers who are willing to reflect on and challenge how they are participating in a dominant narrative. An educator dedicated to challenging marginalization in the public system accepts the ethical imperative that change begins with self, not other (Hardy & Laszloffy 1994). The act of exploring one's self requires the educators to explore their own racial identities and beliefs, and to challenge the way in which their roles as educators impact students. It means we must tolerate ambiguities and continue to question our position and values in relation to the position and values of the students we teach. Although there are scores of possible positions or realities to be negotiated,

this does not mean that "anything goes". We do not face an abyss, but a range of choices (Freeman and Combs, 1996). The issue of choosing and examining the effect of choices is central to social constructivist educational practices.

Scruggs and Mastropieri (1994) conducted research that lends partial support to constructivist views of science learning for students with mild disabilities. The purpose of the study was to investigate how students with mild disabilities construct scientific knowledge in classrooms in which inquiry-oriented science is being undertaken.

The research was conducted over two academic years and involved two classes of elementary-grade special education students, who met twice per week. Two teachers and two teacher-aids worked with 14 students with a grade range from one to five. Students were present for both years of the science curriculum. The science room was large and well equipped with instructional materials. The teachers employed the Full Option Science System (FOSS), a hands-on, inquiry-oriented science program developed at Berkeley, AIMS material developed in Fresno and a book describing adaptations of scientific activities for students with disabilities developed by Mastropieri and Scruggs (1994). During the course of the two years three FOSS units were undertaken.

Data sources included field notes from classroom observations. Frequently, two or more observers were present in the classroom. Audiotapes and videotapes were also employed. In addition, students, teachers and the principal were interviewed, and students recorded sheets and other student products were

examined. Data analysis in this investigation was inductive. The analysis of all available data resulted in multiple conclusions, regarding the ways in which students with mild disabilities construct scientific knowledge. Of interest was the finding that teachers felt careful behavior management was essential for science learning to take place. Moreover, teachers felt that highly structured coaching often seemed necessary and was associated with successful knowledge construction. The teachers felt that peers were helpful in skills applications and social encouragement, but were less helpful in promoting learning outcomes. Finally, teachers reported that teacher-directed questioning was essential for scientific knowledge construction of their students.

Scruggs and Mastropieri (1994) concluded that constructivist perspectives on science learning seem to hold validity in special education settings. Students with mild disabilities do actively reason through scientific content, and the active exploration of a variety of scientific materials seems to facilitate knowledge construction which builds on students' prior knowledge systems. Finally, effective teaching and good behavior management skills seem to be both compatible with and necessary for high-quality, inquiry-oriented science education (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1994).

One limitation of this study is that the students were not asked what they thought about the program. Another limitation of the study is that the material presented to the students was pre-packaged focusing on Environments and Solutions, and Structures of Life, and if students did not have a voice in the

selection of materials to be covered, it can not be determined if students' lack of

motivation to engage in self-regulated learning processes was due to their disability

or their lack of interest in the selected topics. From a social constructivist

perspective, strategic availability of learner-control options provides structural

support for the values of personal autonomy, personal relevance, active

engagement, and reflexivity (Lebrow, 1993). Although some constructivist

principles were employed in this study, it is apparent that the teachers were still

uncomfortable allowing students (particularly students with mild disabilities) to

take control of their own learning. Allowing students the choice to move at their

own pace, study a topic of interest in greater depth, receive more assistance in

difficult areas, and participate in more experiential learning not only stimulates

moral development, enhances self esteem, it also expands the interest of

adolescents in social problems and their inclination toward community

involvement (Raywid, 1987).

A study by Reid, Kurkjian and Carruthers (1994) offers some interesting

insights into this phenomena of teachers reluctance to allow students to take

ownership roles in the educational process. The purpose of their study was to

examine how master's level special education teachers operationalize

constructivist teaching. The authors analyzed 21 videotapes of teacher

demonstrations and information gleaned from the teacher's essays, journals and

university class discussions to describe the teachers' beliefs (traditional), the

instructional tasks they devised (hands-on and text based), and the dynamic

instructional goals they pursued: (a) structure and orderliness, (b) shared task understanding, (c) objectification of knowledge, (d) independent use of knowledge, and (e) positive motivation and affect. The teacher/participants' lessons varied considerably from what the university instructors had modeled in their class and from the literature descriptions of constructivist teaching.

All teacher participants were enrolled in a masters level special education program at a public western college. Postmodern and critical approaches to education were completely unfamiliar to the group. After collecting one tape from each of the 38 students enrolled in the constructivist learning class, the first and second authors randomly selected nine tapes. These tapes were studied following Mischler's (1992 as cited in Ried et. al., 1994) methods of repeated observation to identify and isolate behavioral episodes that they could relate to teachers' dynamically changing goals. Separately, the authors studied three different randomly selected tapes (for a total of six). Categories were developed from discussions with the 21 teachers whose tapes were selected for analysis. Evidence to further triangulate the data was derived from the essays, journals and comments of teacher/participants. Moreover the authors used multiple, corroboratory data sources and solicited feedback on drafts of the manuscripts from some of the participants. In addition, to ensure that the analysis was open to public inspection, they included procedural and temporal description of category development (Conant,1992 as cited in Reid et. al., 1994).

Of importance was the finding that teachers did not shift to a constructivist

epistemological stance. Instead they embedded aspects of constructivist principles

in their traditional teaching practices. The authors speculate that the way teachers

conduct instruction is dictated by their understanding of how a classroom should

operate in the culture of their school and the prototypic roles played by different

characters in the classroom drama. "Teachers' belief about the inability of students

with special needs to be active, self-regulative, and capable of making meaning,

combined with their view of themselves as managers, probably mediate their

difficulties in implementing constructivist principles" (Reid et. al., 1994, p.278).

Often students directed toward the public alternative schools are students that are

considered deficient in some important respect, however, research has revealed that

once students are given the freedom to excel, their achievement is superior to the

students in the conventional system (Gregory & Smith, 1983). Minimally this data

collected by Gregory and Smith (1982) indicated that "it is possible for a school to

both provide a highly supportive climate for and encourage high achievement

among its students" (p.6). It would be interesting to ask students and teachers their

perceptions of how a supportive class influences achievement in and attitude

toward school.

Reid et al. (1994) reveal the discrepancy between the knowledge of constructivist

theory and the willingness and skill to practice it in the classroom environment. This may

be due to the possible expectation of the teachers' role in the conventional school setting.

This may be a significant insight into the role and expectations of the public alternate

education teachers, who work in an environment which accepts and promotes curricular latitude according to the needs and interests of the students enrolled. Therefore, ironically, some public alternative educators may be exercising social constructivist principles, while being unaware of the theoretical underpinnings of their practice.

A three year research project by Bell and Gilbert (1994) reveals another dimension of teachers' commitment to adopt an approach with constructivist underpinnings rather than continuing to exercise their traditional method of transmitting a body of scientific knowledge. The purpose of the study was to provide extended professional development for teachers because short intensive exposure to new information and ideas were not supported in the conventional teaching environment. The study concludes that teaching according to social constructivist principles requires the teacher to evolve professionally, personally and socially.

The Learning in Science Project is an investigation of 48 teachers' development. The teachers were enrolled in four programs over a three year period. The programs consisted of weekly two hour meetings after regular school hours. The meetings were made up of sharing sessions, in which the teachers told anecdotes about teaching activities they tried, workshop activities, and various aspects of science and science education. The research was mainly qualitative, collaborative, reciprocal, guided by ethics of care and used multiple data collection techniques. The teacher development activities were largely separate from the research activities of data collection using interviews, surveys, and classroom observations, and discussions of the draft research reports. The focus was on reflection through multiple triangulation methods.

Results indicate that it was possible to describe three main types of development for teachers; professional (cognitive and action development), personal and social development. Second, the teachers' development occurred within the context of the effective components of the teacher development program. These effective components were support, feedback, and reflection, thus the focus is not on the program rather on the learning process of the teachers. Third, there is a loose and flexible sequence implied in the overview which describes the main aspect of learning of each teacher with respect to time. Individual teachers progressed (and regressed) at their own rate, taking risks and challenges within their comfort and confidence parameters.

Teacher development can be viewed as teachers learning rather than a process of forcing teachers to change. In learning, the teachers were developing their classroom practice, and attending to their feelings associated with change. Another aspect of the teacher development was that the teachers learned about change processes, and how they themselves learn. Metacognition was thus part of the teacher development process, as was the teacher reconceptualizating what teacher development was.

Personal development involved attending to feelings about the change process, being a teacher, and about science education. Professional development involved changing concepts and beliefs about science education and changing classroom activities. Social development involved working with and relating to other teachers and students in new ways. These three aspects were interactive and interdependent. Support, feedback and reflection were identified by the teachers as helping their development (Bell & Gilbert, 1994).

The most significant revelation about Bell and Gilbert's (1994) study was that personal development preceded professional and social development. It seems that the delivery of teacher development according to social constructivist principles required each teacher to reexamine who they were as individuals. Although this is extremely demanding, these researchers believe that the reasons for teachers continuing to practice in alliance with constructivist principles was because they were energized by their sense of personal empowerment, the improved learning outcomes they witnessed in their classrooms, and the support they had from colleagues.

A limitation of the study is that there is no information given to the reader that would indicate why these teachers willingly worked against the status-quo to address the immediate needs of the students in their classrooms. The study provides no information on their social, historical or political backgrounds. It could be that these teachers were already altruistic risk-takers, as indicated by their willingness to enroll in a time consuming professional development program, and were predisposed to enacting changes in their respective educational environments. However, I believe that once the constructivist idea of knowledge is accepted, namely that knowledge is a subjective construction of a person's reality, rather than an objective truth (Kieny, 1994), the transmission model of the teacher as the one responsible for transferring knowledge is drawn into question. Moreover, the question opens space in which a teacher is permitted to experiment with alternate approaches which may become cognitively, humanely, and personally meaningful. The public alternative system has opened space in the educational discourse which allows the potential for healthy relationships to develop between teachers

and students. Furthermore, this space may allow students and teacher to create a unified environment which nurtures meaningful reflection and an excitement about the learning process.

<u>Public Alternative Education</u>

There is disagreement about the origins of public alternative education. However, some writers trace the origins of alternative schools to John Dewey, and to the progressive movement in education of the 1920's. Others report that the genesis of the current alternative education movement can be found in the social revolution of the 1960s (Frizzel, 1985). Nevertheless the alternate school concept flourished when some middle-class liberals sought to employ the philosophical expression of Rousseau and Dewey. The focus of the alternate schools centered on the assumption that the best education is one that is largely under the control of the learner. They established free schools in which the student designed their own curriculum and progressed at their own pace. Some educators, concerned with meeting the individual needs of different students, began creating alternative programs which provided different learning environments and structures for students who did not fit in to the traditional programs (Korn, 1991).

Raywid (1994) included the public alternative schools with the family of focus schools. Focus schools, or "high schools with character" (Hill, Foster & Gentler, 1990), include Specialty schools, Magnet schools, Catholic schools and Alternative schools. Alternative schools, they explain, are distinct with regard to organizational issues. Whereas the emphasis of magnet schools typically lies in their cultural themes, alternative schools are likely to have a broader program focus. This broad program focus also differs

from conventional high school organization. The primary premise of these schools is to respond to the needs and interests of students who do not fit into the conventional system (Raywid, 1994). This reads as though students had some educational options and that the alternate system was established to provide choice for students who struggled in the conventional system.

Deidre Kelly (1993) casts a slightly different light on the evolution of the alternate school system. She believes that institutional efficiency and convenience best explains the origins and transformation of alternate education programs. In response to the hierarchically structured economy and an influx of immigrants, professional educators began experimenting with ways to deal with students, both male and female, who could not or would not conform to the dominant culture and class structure in North America. Although social reformers hailed alternate education as a humane, preventative response to individuals' neglected needs, the segregation of "rebels" and "others" from conventional high schools only serves to stigmatize them. Moreover, the segregation eases the disciplinary load of conventional schools and the threat of stigmatization is used to scare the majority of students into relative conformity (Kelly, 1993).

According to Kelly (1993) alternate education programs are used as dumping grounds for students who pose a problem in the conventional system. It cleans out the conventional schools so that they are less impacted by resistant students, students with social, emotional or behavioral problems, and students with unique learning styles. The alternate education students are defined as being "at-risk". At-risk students are those who are "not having success in the mainstream or [those] having already left the school system

due primarily to social, emotional, and/or behavioral difficulties. The reasons for not having success are varied and may include a combination of social and emotional disorders, academic difficulties, and adverse living circumstances" (School District # 57, 1997). These students have invariably breached the code of social norms, some for reasons that are beyond their control. "At-risk" students often find themselves being pushed out of the conventional school system (Kelly, 1993).

Despite alternate schools' reputation as a dumping ground for "unruly" students, alternate schools are more understanding and tolerant in providing a stimulating and rich learning environment for students when compared to the monotheistic middle-class model adopted by secondary schools. The failure of the conventional school systems to meet the needs of an increasing number of students calls into question their effectiveness and commitment to equity of opportunity. Alternate programs emphasizes personal attention in an atmosphere of respect and support, with a curriculum that encourages racial, ethnic and gender equity alongside of basic skills. This freer more intimate, more egalitarian school recognizes divergent learning styles and aptitudes and thus de-emphasize the hierarchy of competition so piously worshipped in our existing structure. Moreover, there is often a focus on building a sense of community within public alternative schools through involvement in trips, retreats and other cooperative activities. Community building activities bridge reciprocal relationships between the adults and the students in the schools. The holistic orientation espoused by public alternatives is a fairly standard feature (Sweeny, 1988 as cited in Raywid, 1994), therefore the schools pride themselves in their capacity to assist students to grow in directions of their choice.

It can be said that public alternative schools explicitly acknowledge the need to depart from the standard. The demands of the at-risk student population and their own marginalized status within the larger school system require public alternative schools to function continually as problem-solving organizations. Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) summarize the public alternative school:

> Teachers have assumed the additional roles of counsellors, confidante, and friend, and efforts are made to bond the student to the school, to the teaching staff, and to one another. Course content is more closely tied to the needs of the students in these programs, and efforts are made to make courses more engaging and relevant. Greater emphasis is placed on hands-on and experiential learning and students are given greater responsibility for their own successes. ...[Finally] more attention is paid to the individual needs and concerns of students, in and outside of class (Wehlage et. al., 1989 p. 172 as cited in Raywid, 1994).

As a result of the dramatic increase in school enrollment that occurred during the past two decades, a large number of public alternative programs have been created to deal with the chronically disruptive and disaffected "at-risk" students. Conventional public systems which silence students through a curriculum of submission and control are seemingly designed to push many students into a position where they are labeled as a member of the at-risk population. For example, if students rebel in the conventional system they are perceived to be flawed in some important respect and are thus disenfranchised. Moreover, often the teachers in the conventional system construe their

mission as helping to eliminate the flaw, which may entail intense academic remediation, counselling or the recommendation that the students leave the school. Therefore, students in these environments have a choice of contending with a transmission teaching model, which is exacerbated by modernist counselling practices, or leaving the institution, thus becoming a "drop-out." A learning environment such as the one described may be unproductive and sometimes detrimental for the struggling student.

The failure of public schools to meet the needs and interests of a variety of students has been documented from the inception of the public system and continues today. Arthur Powell concluded in The Shopping Mall High School (1985) that seventy-five percent of students were treated as unspecial. The unspecial received minimal assistance and attention. Their classes were larger and teachers held low expectations of them (Young, 1990). One typical reaction to student failure in schools is to raise academic standards and increase graduation requirements, and to make schools more competitive. Although the "get tough" approach is a successful motivator for some it is not for all. Kellmayer, in his book How to Establish an Alternative School (1995), suggests that get tough proponents and programs share two common characteristics; they present simplistic solutions to complex problems, and they usually don't work. He argues that holding young people responsible for acting out behavior that is encouraged and modeled in their society is not a solution. A society which defines success as competition is affected by the relative economic, social, racial, and gender advantages or disadvantages students bring with them to school, and should not be attributed to a fault in the individual student. However, with the rapidly increasing number of at-risk youth

society is producing through punitive approaches practiced in conventional institutions like public schools, there is an increasing need for public alternative schools (Kellmayer, 1995).

Public alternative schools are often "cutting edge" in their programming. Social issues that confront public education, like substance abuse, have been addressed in public alternative education schools long before the conventional system was willing to respond to such issues. While the potential for public alternative schools and programs to make a positive contribution to educational innovations and improvement appears great, we need to look at existing evidence to determine whether they are meeting this expectation. Furthermore, there is a need to look at how public alternative schools have been effective in improving student attitudes and achievement, so this approach can be replicated in other educational settings. In addition, we must look at the way they provide useful models for educational reform, and finally, we must look at the philosophical underpinnings of these models.

Although there was considerable research on public alternative schools in the 1970s, when the newness wore off, and the popularity subsided, so did the research. Since the 1980s the number of published studies on public alternative schools has been relatively small (Young, 1990). In addition, times have changed. Reliance on old studies presents some problems because early evaluations were characterized by weak research design and inadequate data collection (Young, 1990). As a result, conclusions about effectiveness of public alternative programs is, at best, tenuous.

Mary Anne Raywid (1982) did an extensive survey study of 2,500 secondary alternative schools and programs in the United States. Of the 2,500 schools located 1093 returned surveys. Over 90% of the respondents were from junior and senior high schools. Raywid's study was primarily a descriptive one and there was no information about program effectiveness and approach (philosophical, ideological foundations). However, the consistencies among respondents were that they identified human relationships and instructional activities as the central ingredients in their success as a school. Most schools reported that it was not the equipment, nor the facilities, nor the curriculum that determined their success. Moreover, the students liked the alternative schools; student attendance rose an average of 81% for all alternative schools surveyed. One limitation of this study is that it relied on a survey format for all of its results. Interpretation of survey information, such as the assumption that attendance increases show that students like school, might be inaccurate. In contrast, the advantage of focus group format is that probing questions could be asked of the respondence. Many of these schools require 100% attendance or the students face dismissal. Therefore more studies and studies utilizing different methodologies need to be conducted to explore the nature and effectiveness of these schools. Moreover, the philosophical underpinnings of these schools must be examined so that they can be used as a model for other schools.

Gold and Mann (1994), as described in their book Expelled to a Friendlier Place, researched academic achievement and attitude of delinquent students attending alternative and conventional schools. They compared 60 at risk students in three alternative schools with 60 students from conventional schools. Students were matched by age, sex, grade

point average and discipline history. Pre-post test results over a school year provided the

basis for comparison. The tests measured behavior, attitude, grades, and achievement. In

their interpretations, the authors focused on the importance of perceived flexibility of

school rules as well as academic prospects. Students who were positive about school and

confident in their role as students perceived their schools as flexible whether they were in

alternative or conventional schools. Perceived flexibility was defined on the basis of

students' reports that teachers took into consideration their feelings, needs, and abilities

when teaching. Generally, public alternative schools were felt to be more flexible. One

limitation of this study is that the students who attended these schools were not asked to

elaborate on their responses. With this restrictive format the researchers were unable to

access the rich descriptive information these students would have been able to share with

them.

A study by Gregory and Smith (1983) also explored the relationship between the

public alternative school and the conventional school. Their focus was on identifying the

nature of the respective school cultures. This study employed the authors' previously

developed Statements about Schools Inventory (SAS) to assess how well 14 alternative

and 11 conventional high schools were meeting the needs of their students. The SAS

involves both teachers and students ranking 40 statements on a five-point Likert scale

(from "almost always fits my school" to "almost never fits my school"). Respondents

first complete the scale to indicate how their school actually meets students' needs, then

repeat the scale to reflect their perceptions of an ideal school, one that each respondent

would most like to attend or to teach in.

Pairs of alternative and conventional schools studied were in 11 communities and 10 states. Results of both student and teacher responses indicated that alternative schools were superior in meeting the students needs in three of the four areas: social (teachers are enthusiastic and helping each other is encouraged), self-esteem (each student feels worthwhile and students are treated as mature persons), and self-actualization (the school believes students can become better people and students are encouraged to be creative). In the forth area of security (this school is well organized and teachers enforce the rules here) there were no statistically significant differences. Alternative school students held significantly higher expectations of their schools, but also described significantly higher levels of satisfaction than did the conventional school students. The authors conclude by indicating that while such factors as free choice and smaller school size probably contribute to the general superior climate of public alternative schools, the results of their study suggest that the concept itself deserves more serious attention than it has thus far received (Gregory & Smith, 1983).

Once again this study is limited to quantitative data of the teachers' and students' perception of the school. Interestingly when the authors calculated degree of satisfaction scores through regression analysis they found that although students in alternate school settings had higher levels of satisfaction with how schools were meeting their needs than did conventional school students, there was no significant difference in the satisfaction levels of teachers across the two types of schools. Perhaps interviews or group discussions would provide more scope to explore this phenomena.

Unlike most public alternative schools, conventional schools are often structured on a punitive model and do not provide the pedagogical scope for teachers to exercise immediacy and motivational discourse in the classroom (Crump, 1996). Moreover, teachers are often not even aware that their perceptions of the school climate differs markedly from students' because of the distance the teachers establish between themselves and their students. Furthermore, teachers tend to be more positive than students in their judgments about their school climates because "those that have more responsibility or control derive more enjoyment from their working situation" (Moos, 1979 p. 262 as cited in Nusser and Haller, 1995). It may be that the underlying philosophy of the school and the perceptions teachers have of their relationship with the students may be linked.

Nusser and Haller (1995) drew information from one thousand and thirty-five public and private schools to determine whether or not principals, students and teachers agreed in their assessments of their school's disciplinary climate. The data came from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), a study conducted for the National Center for Educational Statistics. NELS:88 followed a two-staged stratified random sampling design with schools as the first stage and students as the second. The study provides a nationally representative sample of American schools containing an eighth grade.

In each school the principal completed a questionnaire asking about various aspects of his or her organization. Among the questionnaire items were 11 that asked principals to report the extent to which various forms of student misbehavior constituted

problems in their school. Principals rated these items on a four-point Likert scale from, "serious problem" to, "not a problem." The sampling design also included 36 eighth grade students who were randomly selected within each school. In all 24,599 students completed a lengthy questionnaire covering various aspects of their in-school and out-of-school experiences. Among the items were the same 11 questions concerning student misbehavior that were asked of the principals (Nusser & Haller, 1995).

In addition to the data from the principals and students, two teachers of each of the NELS:88 students were selected for participation in the study. These teachers were drawn from the subject areas of Mathematics, English, Science and Social Studies. In all 5,193 teachers responded to the same 11 items as principals and students regarding disciplinary problems in their building. The researchers then created three measures of each school's disciplinary climate based on the observations of the principal, students or teachers in each school. To do this they constructed a Likert scale for each individual respondent's perceptions of his or her school's climate using the 11 items. They then aggregated students' and teachers' measures to the school level, using the mean within the school response as a measure of the school's climate. Next they carried out a principal component analysis, at the individual level of the 11 items, separately for each of the three groups. The researchers reasoned that if students, teachers and principals had similar understandings of the nature of a school's disciplinary climate, a principal components analysis should yield a similar factor structure for each group. The researchers also computer rank ordered correlations among the three groups as well as

divided the three groups into five equal groups and then crosstabulated each pair: students-teacher, student-principals and teacher-principals (Nusser & Haller, 1995).

The findings of the research that are relevant to this study is that people's conception of a school's disciplinary climate is not the same across the three groups. Principals rate their schools more positively than the teachers, and the teachers rate them more positively than the students. For example, students were over four times more likely than principals to see conflict among students to be a significant problem in schools (Nusser & Haller, 1995). If there is a substantial lack of agreement about such a matter of student discipline, and if it is the intention of a school to improve its climate, which information should the researcher rely on to make those changes? Knowing that the individuals with the greatest autonomy and control in their environments are the individuals that express the greatest satisfaction from their commitments, it would seem that the students could be a key factor in improving a school's learning climate.

A limitation of this study is that it does not survey public alternative schools to determine if there is greater agreement between teachers' and students' perceptions of their learning environment. Nusser and Haller (1995) conclude by emphasizing that research has shown that a cohesive school is one that shares common perceptions. However, they did not reach a conclusion about who should agree with whom, about what they should agree on and what level of agreement is required before student and teacher cohesiveness is obtained. They simply conclude that in the conventional school system, the perceptions of teachers, students and administrators differ markedly on the issue of school climate.

Kershaw and Blank (1993) completed a study with forty-one students, six teachers, three guidance counsellors and one administrator from an alternative school. The purposes of the study were to summarize the perceptions of students, teachers, guidance counsellors and administrators regarding their experiences in an alternative school setting, and to make comparisons with experiences in ten conventional schools in Tennessee. Of the forty-one alternative school students, twenty-six completed their requirement at the alternative school and returned to their base schools in September 1992. Of the twenty-six, only sixteen could be found on their base school attendance rolls in January 1993. Data was gathered by soliciting teachers, guidance counsellors and the administrator at the alternative high school to complete questionnaires. The students attending the alternative school were engaged in semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. In keeping with the desires of the school system personnel, the focus was on perceptions of a successful environment that encouraged students to continue attending school.

Interviews were also conducted with ten appropriate personnel at the ten base schools in which the alternative school students returned. The participants' responses were analyzed using inductive qualitative analysis procedures. Responses from students, alternative school faculty, and representative base school personnel were analyzed separately, and findings represented their unique perspective. Significant findings were that close, supportive relationships between the students and the faculty is essential for helping students make progress or needed changes. Nearly all the students in this study credited caring, trustworthy faculty members at the alternate school with some of their

personal growth. The alternative school environment provided opportunities for such relationships with several adults and with students who had similar or greater problems. This study supports the conclusion that relationships are the heart of student success in any school setting. Being respected, feeling connected, and being affirmed by others were dominant concerns for all students, but were especially critical for those who were less successful (Kershaw & Blank, 1993).

Kershaw and Blank (1993) found that there is a need for alternative schools and conventional schools to work more in concert rather than in isolation, opposition, or competition with each other. The varied perceptions about the value of the alternative school, the quality of education provided by the alternative school, and the impact of the alternative school on student success rate reflect deeply held beliefs about the purpose of schooling. While alternative schools emphasize affective aspects of students' growth, conventional schools typically focus on the cognitive. Alternative school personnel believe in establishing challenging but achievable expectations for each student rather than adhering to normative school standards which their students in their present circumstances could not achieve.

Clearly, according to Kershaw and Blank (1993), alternative schools exist apart from conventional school programs even if they are housed in the parent or base conventional school. Part of the problem is a lack of communication and clarity between alternative and conventional school personnel. Many conventional school personnel do not know why alternative school programs are structured as they are. However, studies such as this one suggests that practices in alternative schools could have a significant

impact on conventional school settings. "It is time to question the status quo and rethink the structure, expectations, and relationships that exist in all of our schools" (Kershaw & Blank, 1993 p. 16). Further it is noted that "What is good for at-risk students is usually good for other students as well" (Wehlage, 1989 p. 5 as cited in Kershaw & Blank, 1993 p.16).

A limitation of this study is that it focused on the perceptions of those affected by one alternate high school. Moreover, the study did not address school curriculum or instructional segments to determine the quality of instruction. Finally, there was no discussion about the ideological or philosophical approach that guides planning and decision making in the public alternative schools.

In conclusion, much of what is missing from research on public alternate education settings could be addressed by soliciting the opinions of the people who work in and attend these schools. The main themes that have emerged from the research on alternate education is that alternate education schools exist to accommodate students who do not or will not conform to dominant North American school culture (Kelly, 1993). There is a belief that because there is this marginalized population, programs have been designed to meet their needs and interests (Kelly, 1993). Kershaw and Blank (1993) agree that alternate programs emphasize affective aspects of the students' growth, as opposed to the conventional schools whose focus is on the cognitive.

Research published in the 1980s such as Raywid (1982), Gold and Mann (1984) and Gregory and Smith (1983) found alternate schools to be positive learning environments. Teachers took into consideration the feeling, needs and abilities of their

students. The shortcoming of these studies is that they were qualitative in nature and therefore lacked rich descriptive information. More recent studies by Crump (1996) and Nusser and Haller (1995) focused on the perceptions of students, teachers and administrators. They concluded that satisfaction in a learning environment is based on the amount of control an individual has in that environment. They also concluded that students could be a key factor in improving schools' learning environment. Kershaw and Blank (1993) studied alternate education with the purpose of summarizing perceptions of students and staff in conventional schools with that of students and staff in an alternate school. They found that relationships are at the heart of student success in any school setting. The limitation of their study is that the focus was on only one alternate school.

Obviously, research in the alternate setting is limited. There is a need to study alternate school curricula and instructional segments. Moreover, there is a need to study and link the philosophical approach to the practice that guides planning and decision making in alternate schools. With this information, a foundation on which to base additional research in the area can be established.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

This chapter includes an overview of the five social constructivist conditions presented by Driscoll (1994) and explains why focus group research is appropriate for the exploration of social constructivist conditions. The participants in the five different groups are described, as well as the role of the researcher. The procedure of the focus groups is described. Finally, I present a brief discussion of the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

A qualitative research design, with some quantitative exploration, was used to access the complexities of students' and teachers' perceptions of their experiences in the alternate school setting. I investigated the five social constructivist conditions outlined by Driscoll (1994) as they relate to teachers, students and instructional practices in the alternate environment. Driscoll's five conditions are: (1) To provide complex learning environments that incorporate authentic activity. An authentic activity may include an excursion to a local pond where students would gather an appreciation for the delicate balances within an ecosystem that is faced with industrialization. (2) To provide social negotiation as an integral part of learning. This condition can be met when students and/or teachers and/or community members are encouraged to share their understanding of stories that shape and define their lives. This would include debates and discussions that would actively engage students in (re)defining how they think and feel about the values they hold. (3) To provide juxtaposed instructional content. This requires that the teacher provides access to multiple modes of representation. An example would be to invite a First Nations person to speak about land claims to a Northern interior logging-

town-classroom. (4) Nurturing reflexivity is a process whereby students are encouraged to reflect on their own thinking processes. A student may be asked to think about the process that he/she followed to come to his/her conclusion(s) instead of being asked for the conclusion. (5) The final condition is student-centered instruction. A student centered assignment would include the student choosing a topic of exploration, choosing the form that he/she is going to present it and having a say in how the project was to be evaluated.

I suspected and wanted to demonstrate that alternate teachers' practices encourage not one objective reality, but many. The practice of multiple realities is used to address the needs, interest and backgrounds of all voices in the classroom. I believe this approach is particularly appropriate in alternate education classrooms, which are by necessity diverse, and which include students who for various reasons have not been successful in conventional normative classrooms. A qualitative research design is congruent not only with the exploration of participants' perceptions, but also with the social constructivist approach to instruction. This chapter continues with an overview and explanation for selecting a focus group research format for this study. It also includes a description of the participants and the procedure used in the study.

Focus Group Research

A focus group is a carefully planned multiple-person interview used to collect data about people's experiences and perceptions of a given situation of which they have detailed and particular knowledge (Krueger, 1994). Researchers and educators use focus groups to obtain qualitative information to help understand the "reality" of human

experience. The focus group interview includes open-ended discussion in which the participants can comment, explain, share experiences and attitudes about what is important to them. While collecting data related to understanding an individual's experiences, feelings, thoughts and actions, the technique relies on the interaction of the members of the focus group to prompt memories and enhance discussion and clarity of experience and perspectives (Krueger, 1994). I used focus groups to collect these data because I believe that it is essential to use a method which is congruent with the topic to be explored. A focus group format not only accepts, but fosters the social construction of knowledge. I argue below that a focus group format is particularly appropriate for exploring perceptions and examining educational issues held by adolescents and teachers from alternate schools. The limitations of this approach are also discussed.

One advantage to using focus groups as opposed to individual interviews is that group interaction fosters an in-depth discussion as responses to comments advance the group members' ideas about their experiences. Focus groups also allow the flexibility to explore spontaneous and unanticipated issues and experiences that emerge due to the interactive nature of the group's chemistry. An advantage of focus groups over surveys is that there is an opportunity for the facilitator to probe for fuller responses from group members. Another advantage is focus group research is oral based, surveys involve written questionnaires which may be seen as alienating by some alternate school students.

Focus groups have some limitations. There is need for a skilled facilitator. They afford the researcher less control than individual interviews. In addition, they produce data that are difficult to analyze. Nevertheless, the opportunities for self-disclosure,

validation of ideas and receiving support in a personalized atmosphere of a focus group are attractive advantages when designing a study which explores educational issues. The focus group is a particularly appropriate research design for examining social constructivism in the educational environment because both this method and this philosophy accept the notion that "reality" is socially negotiated.

Focus group research deals with people in a socially familiar setting, rather than in an experimental setting. This normal setting capitalizes on familiar group processes allowing for the exploration of unexpected group issues. Discussions, as they take place in focus groups, are a familiar resource often used by adolescents to reflect on their personal experiences (Krueger, 1994). Using the focus group method to help students identify teachers' social constructivist practices in the public alternative schools is not just issue specific, but also accommodates the communication style of the adolescent participants (Krueger, 1994). For teacher participants as well, the focus group is appropriate as it allows participants to influence and interact with one another, thus providing rich data for complex issues. Other advantages are low cost and relatively quick access to information (Krueger, 1994).

Researchers emphasize that the perspectives of teachers and adolescents need to be considered in the exploration of effective teaching practices in the public alternative high school (Conant, 1992; Crump, 1996; Kershaw & Blank; 1993; Raywid,1994). In this study, focus group interviews were used to explore the presence of social constructivist themes in teachers' practice in public alternative programs. It was not expected that teachers or students were familiar with the term social constructivism.

These focus group interviews examined teachers' and adolescents' perceptions of teaching practices. Focus group data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively to determine whether teachers and four different students groups report practices consistent with a social constructivist teaching approach. These data were used to draw conclusions about whether these public alternative schools have the philosophical underpinnings of a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning.

Underlying Research Questions

I sought to explore teacher-student relationships in public alternate high school settings in northern British Columbia, focusing on whether social constructivist principles and practices were employed unconsciously by the teachers, and were noted by the students. The following questions were designed to explore the perceptions of the students and the teachers in the public alternate environment. My underlying questions were:

1. In what ways are alternate school teachers practicing social constructivist principles in their classrooms?

2. What perceptions do alternate school teachers have about their role, and how do these perceptions influence the ways they interact with their students?

3. What perceptions do alternate students have about their teachers' role, and how do these perceptions influence the ways they interact with their teachers?

4. How do the students and the teachers perceive their experience in the alternate setting as compared to the conventional system?

5. What are the teachers' and students' beliefs and practices that differentiate the alternate system from the conventional school system?

A qualitative look at the perceptions of students and teachers in alternate schools may elucidate to what extent the philosophical underpinnings on which these schools are based with social constructivist ideology, and reveal how they stand in contrast to the larger conventional school system. It is not expected that the teachers in this study be aware of social constructivist practices. It is my experience that teacher may be exercising the social constructivist approach unconsciously.

Participants

This section includes information about the public alternative programs selected for the study. A summary of student demographic information follows. An overview of how the teachers and students came to participate in the study is presented and a description of the moderator and assistant moderator conclude this section.

The alternate schools selected represent a cross-section of the alternate programs in a northern British Columbia community. Two programs are on-site and two programs are off-site. Of the two on-site programs, one is housed in a portable on the grounds of an grade 8-12 "parent" school. The other on-site school is on the campus of the community college. The two off-site schools are located as such to provide a placement for students who did not experience success at on-site alternate schools. One off-site school is situated in a neighborhood setting and caters to the needs of young adolescents who have experienced problems in the regular systems and in other on-site alternate programs. The other off-site program is located at the Native Friendship Center. The program is similar

to the design of the alternate school model and enrolls First Nations and non-First Nations students. The school is located in the core of the city.

A total of twenty-three students participated in the focus groups, 16 males and 7 females. Each of the student focus groups met with their classmates for a period of 60 to 90 minutes in their respective classrooms. Fourteen of the twenty-three students who participated in the study described themselves as Caucasians. An additional six described themselves as First Nations students. Eight of the twenty-three students independently made the decision to return to school. Teachers and family members were also influential in encouraging the students to return to school. Most (16 of 23) students in the focus groups had been enrolled for ten months or more in an alternate school. Only one of the students was enrolled for less than two months. The age range of the students was 14-19 years of age, with the average age of the students being 17 years of age. Four teacher volunteers comprised the fifth group. Three of the schools were represented, two teachers represented one setting while one setting was not represented. Three teachers were males and one was female. They met in the portable of an on-site alternate program because of the centrality of its location. All teachers described themselves as Caucasians and had six or more years of teaching experience.

Role of the Researcher

Because I am a researcher exploring an instructional approach in my chosen field of alternate education, I have influenced this study in a number of ways. First and most obvious is that I have influenced the study through my philosophical orientation. My belief in social constructivism is reflected in the topic I selected for study. Moreover, the

questions that I asked in the study were designed by me for the purpose of exploring issues that I find important. I also took the role as the moderator in each of the focus group discussions. I was influential in this role because I asked the questions and the answers to the questions and the ensuing discussion may have been shaped by my verbal and non-verbal communication patterns.

I also transcribed the focus group discussions and coded the transcripts. My decisions about the content were made unilaterally. Therefore my interpretations of the data were made on the basis of my prior knowledge and professional experience. Finally, my motives as the investigator were benevolent, therefore I may have only channeled information that was positive and optimistic.

Procedure

The school board office was sent an ethics consent form from the university along with the request for permission to conduct the study. Furthermore, each alternate school principal was contacted to assure consent for the study. Students were solicited by their respective teachers to volunteer for the study. The researcher/moderator read aloud a brief overview of what was required of the student volunteers (see Appendix A for the script). Teachers were also given a brief information form about the researcher and the study (see Appendix A). It was made explicit that the group would be recorded and the information used as data for the study. It was also understood that there was a need to commit to ground rules for creating a safe environment for everyone to express their views, and that strict confidentiality be practiced. Students were then asked to decide if they wanted to participate in the study. Once participants volunteered, and returned a

written informed consent form signed by both the student and the legal parent or guardian (see Appendix A for a sample of the consent forms), students were selected on a first-signed, first-selected basis. Finally, times during scheduled school hours were arranged to meet with the student groups. The teacher group met one afternoon in the final week of school. This time period is scheduled for exams in the regular school system and for administrative tasks in the alternate programs.

The four student groups and the teacher group were asked to discuss specific open-ended questions in a focus group forum. I took the role of moderator, and, with an assistant moderator, met with each focus group. I have 11 years teaching experience, six of which have been in the alternate setting. Furthermore I have worked with adolescents in a variety of capacities including coach and counsellor. The researcher/moderator has also had previous focus group experience as an assistant moderator. The assistant moderator has had extensive research assistant experience at Simon Fraser University and has co-facilitated as a focus group researcher at the University of Northern British Columbia. She has also worked as a counsellor at the University College of the Cariboo.

Once the participants were settled in their respective classrooms and had a chance to enjoy some juice, soda, muffins and/or donuts, the moderators briefly introduced themselves and the guidelines for the discussion. This included respecting the opinions and comments of others. It was explained to participants that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and that all comments were valued. Moreover, the need for turn taking for the purposes of recording was discussed. Finally participants were ensured that their identity would be kept confidential.

I outlined the focus group discussion format. A few key questions were used to guide the discussion (see Appendix B), but the participants determined the direction and emphasis of the discussion. Students were asked to talk about what they did at the alternate school they attended, and how they would describe their program, the teachers and other students. The teachers were asked what circumstances led them to become teachers in the alternate system. Teachers were also asked about the ways in which instructional strategies and behavioral management approaches were used in the alternate schools. Teachers were encouraged to discuss the role they believed students in the alternate setting take for their own learning.

The moderators listened to the discussion, and encouraged positive as well as negative comments in a nonjudgmental fashion. The focus group discussions were audiotaped while the assistant moderator took field notes on key ideas and key quotes or additional questions that probed for clarification of the topic(s) in discussion. At the conclusion of the discussion, the key points were summarized by the moderator and the participants were encouraged to add, delete, and/or comment on the points in the oral summary. Finally, members of each focus group completed a demographic questionnaire that also asked for a summary of their thoughts about the alternate school system (see sample in Appendix C for the demographic questionnaires). After each focus group, I met with the assistant moderator to debrief the focus group interview. The audio-tapes were securely stored. Only the primary researcher and the thesis supervisor have access to the tapes and transcripts.

<u>Validity and Trustworthiness</u>

The volunteer sample in this study were a group that Miles and Huberman (1994) would call accessible and informed participants. The study's analysis procedures are described in Chapter Four including the sequence of how data were collected, processed, and displayed for specific conclusions. The study was designed to collect data across a variety of contexts reflective of Prince George's alternate school programs. Moreover, the researchers' role and status within the sites were explicitly described at the beginning of each focus group session and I was careful not to steer the conversations during the focus groups. I was also conscientious about giving and recieving information in a non-judgemental fashion.

The checks and balances provided by the assistant moderator to keep the discussion on track by assuring that all the questions were addressed in each of the focus groups and for taking notes on each of the focus groups added to the validity of the study. The debriefing with the assistant moderator after each group also ensured the completeness and comparability across the groups. The assistant moderator's notes that were taken could also be used to verify other records. Furthermore problematic items in coding were discussed with the assistant moderator and resolved through discussion.

The coding of the transcripts were completed through a multipass of readings and recordings to safeguard against the event of misinterpretation. Furthermore the study maintained the participants' verbatim comments in the results section. The limitations of this study are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data Analysis

In this section I describe how the transcripts were analyzed to identify the themes that emerged from the data. In the first stage of the analysis participants' statements were identified and tabulated as they compared to social constructivist conditions as outlined by Driscoll (1994). The second stage of analysis included the five factors identified by Krueger (1994). This stage of analysis involved examining the content of the transcripts for social constructivist conditions. Data from all five groups were considered separately and then together. In the final stage of analysis I created "wheel maps" of each of the focus groups to provide a visual of the social constructivist themes as they emerged in each group and between groups (see Appendix D).

Stage One

Focus group data and data from the moderator-assistant and moderator debriefing were collected via audio-tapes and field notes. The moderator and the assistant-moderator debriefed after each of the focus groups and the moderator took notes. I transcribed the audio-tapes verbatim. Each statement, defined as a participant's turn, was numbered in the transcript. A statement began when an individual spoke, and ended when another participant chose to speak. Brief agreements or disagreements by other participants ("back-channel" utterances) were included as part of the turn. A clarification or elaboration by another participant was considered a separate statement. Comments and questions from the moderator and the assistant moderator were not included as statements. To get a general sense of the transcripts and notes they were read thoroughly

twice. The transcripts were numbered for ease of reference and tabulation. Following

this, individual pieces of data, consisting of 1-2 sentences of participants comments, were

color coded with highlight pens if they were considered to be central to the conditions of

social constructivist learning as identified by Driscoll (1994). Each condition was

highlighted with a different color. Displayed as a summary in Table 1 below are

conditions social constructivists believe are essential for learning:

Table 1 Conditions of Learning Consistent with Social Constructivism

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Conditions of Learning

1. Complex, rich learning environments that incorporate **authentic activity**, which
   recognizes that classrooms are complex environments where many events occur
   simultaneously, so a natural progression of events must unfold to promote
   decision making and careful consideration of alternatives for action.

2. **Social negotiation** which allows insights to emerge through the group process
   that may not otherwise come about.

3. **Juxtaposition of instructional content** which includes access to multiple modes
   of representation to allow learners to examine materials from multiple
   perspectives.

4. **Nurturance of reflexivity** to promote an awareness of one's own thinking and
   learning processes.

5. **Student-centered instruction** where students are actively involved in
   determining their own learning needs and how those needs can be met.

Note. Conditions of Social Constructivism from, Driscoll 1994, p. 373.

After the statements were highlighted for inclusion in these five themes, I re-read

the social constructivist conditions of instruction and completed the exercise again. Each

of the statements were assigned to one of Driscoll's conditions. All statements were assigned to the same condition they had been previously assigned to. It was readily apparent that a pattern was developing within and between the focus groups. Moreover, during the coding process, one additional category was added as it emerged from the data. This category, labeled "relationships" included information about the respectful connection students had with their respective teacher(s).

Figure 1 below has been designed to reveal the frequency and distribution of social constructivist statements as outlined by Driscoll (1994).

Tabulation of Statements that Correspond to the Conditions of Social Constructivist Teaching
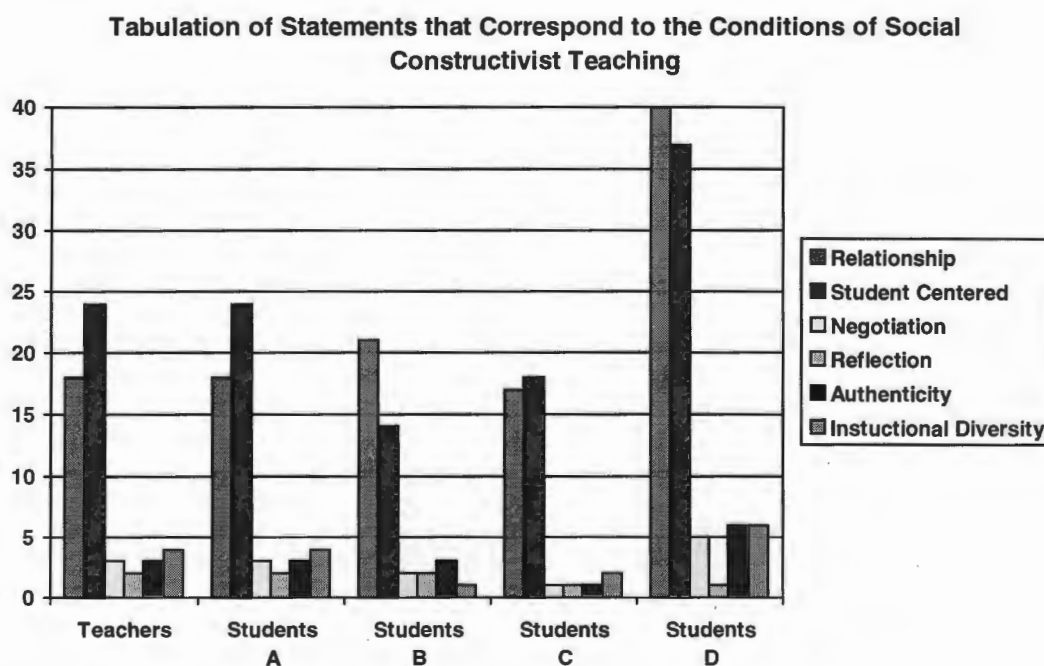
Figure. 1

Approximately 21 percent or 179 of 825 statements of all five groups combined contain content indicating a social constructivist approach to teaching is being practiced. The two categories in which comments were made extensively across all five groups were

relationships and student-centered instruction. Each group made from 17-40 statements on relationships, and from 14-37 statements on student-centered instruction, indicative of social constructivist teaching practices. The other four conditions are present in all groups but are mentioned infrequently in the data.

Stage Two

I considered a second stage of analysis necessary to identify the information in context and to add a qualitative assessment of context and intensity. The second stage of analysis included five factors, as they have been adapted from Krueger (1994). Table 2, below, provides a summary of Krueger's considerations in analysis.

Table 2	Considerations in Analysis
1)	The **words** used to describe participant's perceptions. Samples of student and teacher statements allowed the researcher to examine the language used by the five groups.
2)	The **context** (discussion) in which participants responses were triggered. Once again the circular statement format allowed the researcher to look at what questions or statements triggered what specific responses in the participants.
3)	The **internal consistency**. It was important to note whether individuals altered their perceptions or if they remain constant throughout the discussion.
4)	The **frequency, extensiveness and intensity of comments.** The frequency and extensiveness and intensity with which a specific issue discussed was important to note.
5)	The **specificity of responses**. The use of examples participants have experienced tends to provide both more specific and more accurate descriptions than when participants are asked to discuss an issue "in general."

Note. From Focus Groups (p. 149-151), by R.A. Krueger, 1994, Thousand Oaks, Cal: Sage Publications.

The five considerations include: (1) Consider the words. The words used by participants were analyzed from the transcripts, in terms of their apparent meanings. (2) Consider the context. All the data were kept intact in the original transcript form throughout the analysis, in order to maintain an understanding of the context in which comments were made. (3) Consider the consistency. The transcripts were reviewed to determine whether individuals alter their position on an issue after interaction with others, or whether they remain consistent in their comments. Where participants seemed to alter their opinions, clues suggesting the reason for their change were sought. In all cases, with the students and teachers, participants did not alter radically; rather they evolved after being influenced by the ideas of others. This is suggestive of the adolescents' need to conform. It also suggests of that teachers' need to clarify and advance their ideas about teaching in an alternate setting. These statements are also indicative of an indirect example of social negotiation, but I did not perceive this as I coded and therefore I did not make it as such. (4) Consider the frequency, extensiveness and intensity of comments. Both frequency with which the topics were discussed by participants, as well as the comments which were made more often than others, were noted. This was done within individual focus group data, and across all groups. Those topics which were addressed most frequently were considered to be of most pressing concern to the participants at the time the groups were conducted. Individual differences between the groups were acknowledged, and may be reflective of varied school cultures and/or differences in the individual teacher and students who volunteered at each site. (5) Consider the specificity of responses. Specific comments, based on personal experiences were given more weight

than general, vague comments. Although individual voices have been acknowledged, emphasis has been placed on the shared ideas that emerged from the data as a whole.

The adapted five analytic factors were incorporated into a series of steps in the process of data analysis. The transcripts were re-read to identify the commonalties between the participants and the groups. Individual pieces of the data were identified with a highlighter. The pieces of data consisted of participant quotations that related to the five social constructivist conditions. These included descriptions of social constructivist teaching and/or learning, as well as the feelings about them. An attempt was made to fit the identified information into the social constructivist conditions that had been previously observed in studies of the conventional school system (Reid, Kurkjian & Carruthers, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1994). This was unsuccessful, as the experiences of the participants were similar but not identical to those previously described in the literature. The alternate classroom is not organized or structured for the delivery of instructional content designed for full class participation. Much of the alternate school student's time is spent working alone or one-on-one with the teacher. I believe this is why four of the five conditions did not emerge as important themes.

However, the information in the transcripts seemed to me to be decontextualized by the Krueger's conditions for content analysis, therefore I condensed the information to re-examine the social constructivist conditions and determine the overall nature of the transcripts. I also investigated the transcripts to determine the appropriateness and the opportunity to exercise social constructivist practices in the alternate school setting.

<u>Stage Three</u>

Frustrated with my attempts to apply Krueger's analytic tools, I created five "wheel maps" with statements from each focus group transcript. Statements included sentences or parts of sentences that summarized the main idea(s) in the focus group discussion. Statements from each focus group were arranged in a circle format in chronological order so that a one page map of each group data could be examined. Again the themes were color coded to reveal the specific social constructivist conditions of the content in each session. A comparison of the themes that emerged from the five focus groups was then possible.

The results and discussion are presented in a narrative style. A summary description of each focus group written with illustrative quotes is used to identify the students' and teachers' perceptions and opinions about the teachers' duties and roles as public alternate education teachers. This is followed by a synthesis and interpretation of the students' descriptions and explanations of each session. A summary and interpretation of each group is linked back to the data and social constructivist approach to teaching. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for public alternative education teachers are discussed using a comparison of all the focus group data.

<u>Alternate School A</u>

In Alternate School A the students are on site of a grade 8-12 parent school. The classroom is a portable situated in the parking lot of the school behind the parent school's shops. Students are screened into the program to work on their academic subjects.

Electives are taken in the parent building. The students in the focus group were assigned to an afternoon block in the alternate program. The students met each day at the same time for a school semester. The junior program focuses on core academic subjects and social skills up to the grade 10 level. Students work on individualized self-paced modules, but are also encouraged to participate in electives, work studies and work experience programs in the main building. Upon completion of the program students may re-enter the regular stream in grade 11 or apply for the Senior Alternate Program which is in the same classroom. Students must be 15-17 years of age, have the requisite academic ability, and be at-risk of leaving school or have already left school. Applications and referrals are accepted by the alternate staff. There is one full time teacher in this program. Acceptance into the program is determined through a school-based committee who screen in potential applicants. The criteria for acceptance into the program is complex, however the common denominator for applicants is that they are at-risk. The applicants often have social-emotional issues which have in some way precipitated their disposition

The initial analysis revealed that this focus group concentrated on discussing the student-centered element (a total of 22 statements pertain to the student-centered nature of the program) and the student-teacher relationship (students talked throughout the discussion about the relationship they have with their teacher, a total of 29 statements). There were a total of 278 statements documented in this focus group with a total of 47 statements containing social constructivist content. One of the major themes that emerged from focus group A is that the teacher is a trusted individual who treats the

students with respect and understanding. It was also found that students believe that this relationship is the foundation for a healthy learning environment. Students found it easier to approach their teacher for assistance on their academic work. Students also consider their academic work to be easier because teachers allow the students work at their own pace. Moreover, students are expected to master the material before they proceed on to the next unit; therefore, students feel that they are always working on material that is appropriately challenging for them. Another theme that emerged was that the students believed that they were not being served equally in the conventional system, but were in the alternate system. Students believed that they had control of their education and reported that they had high expectations of themselves. Finally, they believed that they would not be in school if it wasn't for the alternate program.

The relationship that the teacher had with the students was often described by the students as being a friendship. The teacher, they explained, was described as such because of the qualities he possessed and the attitudes he expressed. Hal summarizes the relationship that students have with their teacher, "it is a lot easier in here because the relationship with the teacher is a lot different from the ones in the[conventional] school, like we talk to [the teacher] about whatever, but in [the conventional] school you don't really have a teacher-student relationship, here [in the alternate school] it's like a friendship." The students describe their teacher as someone who listens to them. He is person that allows them to have their own opinions, but challenges them to reflect on their thoughts. As Hal states, "Oh he has a real opinion but he doesn't choose sides." The teacher is also a person the students feel comfortable with and a person who respects

them. Hal say that the relationship with his teacher is "warmer" [than with any teacher in the conventional school]. Sam says that [the teacher] "is easier to approach." Students say they feel connected in their classrooms and they are validated for their efforts. They relay that this is possible because there are fewer students in the alternate classroom compared to the conventional classroom. They describe the learning environment as flexible and say they are treated as though they are adults.

When students described their program they say it is one that they would recommend to other students because they claimed that it is easier, student-centered, faster to complete, and more fun than the regular school. Jack says that "it is more relaxed and the work seems easier and you don't have the hassles to get your work done. There is no line-up to get help in here." Hal says that "it's the best program, the way the [teacher] teaches and discusses things it's a lot easier..." Stan adds that " the teacher makes sure that you get it [the concepts] before you move on."

Students mention that the alternate school instruction differs from the conventional school instruction. Sally explains that in the conventional school her math class was all lecture format. Sam agrees, "yeah Mr. X writes on the board and you take notes and I'm not very good at that." Students say they have difficulty in the conventional system, which may have precipitated a process resulting in them being pushed out of the conventional system. The students believe that the conventional system teachers don't have time for them. Hal explains that "he has trouble understanding stuff and if he can't get it the [teacher] starts getting aggravated [with him]." Other students like Sally feel like they are overlooked in the conventional system: "I had teachers in the

[conventional] school, and I go up there and ask [for help] and she says that she doesn't have time to help, another student goes up there who has like A's and B's and asks for help and she helps them, like right away." The students express a need for an understanding and supporting relationship between the students and the teachers as an essential component for assisting students to make progress and changes.

The students state that they are motivated and enjoy being in the alternate program. They describe themselves as having plans to graduate with their peers, but they will take all of their academic courses in the alternate program. Although they also see themselves with numerous hurdles to overcome, their attitude is positive and outlook optimistic. Sam explains that "the only way to learn is by making mistakes." But if you make mistakes in the regular system Sally says that "you are left out." Hal adds that his conventional school "teachers were more like wardens," but his alternate education teacher is "pretty level-headed, he doesn't yell or throw stuff." The students say that they are in an environment where making mistakes is accepted as an integral part of learning.

The students say that they are continually challenged to take responsibility for themselves and their work. They believe that the teacher enjoys them and really cares about them as individuals and about their academic successes. They feel as if their voices are heard and respected. Although they have little say in the instructional material, they are able to makes choices about ways to fulfill the requirements. Although activities and routines are seldom negotiated, the students believe that they are challenged to reflect on the purpose of their education and what it means to them. Students also relay that they have high expectations of themselves. Although there is a pre-employment program

(PEP) offered, they are choosing to work at academic courses that will allow them to continue their education at the college level. The students also explained that if they were not in the alternate program they would have "dropped out, or have been kicked out of school." Sam states that he would repeat the same pattern that he has repeated since he started school, "I would get so far behind [that I wouldn't be able to catch up]."

This group of individuals took turns volunteering information. One of the males, Hal, was outspoken and eager to talk about his experiences in his alternate school; therefore, he was instrumental in encouraging others to discuss situations and ideas that he introduced to the group. The group of five was an ideal number of participants to solicit a broad spectrum of responses as well as few enough for everyone to feel that he/she contributed. Students enjoyed the session and were surprised at how much information they shared and at the length of time they stayed focused. The students were in their own classroom and expressed comfort about being in their own learning environment. Students were also pleased that food and beverages were available and joked about staying longer if more refreshments were provided.

I was taken by the basic nature of the program. My prior belief that alternate programs were holistic, encompassing a broad spectrum of activities and learning opportunities was not reflected in this program. Students would show up for their scheduled alternate classes and work through the provided academic material. Students work independently on a packaged curriculum which is divided into a series of booklets. An entire course, for example grade ten science may be divided into six units, each unit may consist of five or six booklets. Students are required to take tests at the end of each

unit. Students must achieve an 80 percent grade or better on each test before they

proceed to the next unit. However, students and teachers may negotiate how the unit

material may be satisfied. Often the teacher is the only individual who gives feedback to

the students as they progress through the course booklets. Although there were outings

and activities they were often organized on an ad-hoc basis. For example, the teacher

would say to the students, "You have been so good for the first hour today that I think we

should go out and throw a football around for the last hour." What I found was that

students felt a connectedness to the teacher and the program. Moreover they expressed a

need to feel that they were in control of their learning. Students also mentioned that the

small number of students and the one-on-one attention that they received were important

components of their learning environment. The most significant finding appeared to be

that students spoke most frequently and animatedly about the respectful and trusting

relationship they had with their teacher.

Some of what the students were experiencing and the teacher was practicing

reflects a social constructivist influence. Student-centered instruction is arranged to meet

individual student needs. This is not a new idea to social constructivism, but what

distinguishes the social constructivist perspective on student-centered instruction is that

the student negotiates what, when and how learning occurs (Driscoll, 1994). According

to the conditions identified by Kieny (1994) students are active learners initiating the

learning process through self-motivating techniques and through teacher support and

guidance. The teacher does not transfer knowledge; rather the students are encouraged to

develop their own conceptual structures from the curriculum. As Sam states "In here

[alternate] you are taught one-on-one, because everyone is on a different subject. Jon adds that it's a lot easier because he [the teacher]uses examples that are more familiar to each person [because he know us so well]." Although the students write tests at the end of each units, the testing is flexible. Sam reports that the teacher "will challenge a student to write a paper on a topic of his/her interest, or [the teacher] will rewrite questions so that they are related to things we know." As a result students report that learning is easier. They might have reached this conclusion both because they are able to rely on their own resources and exercise their own decision making power in the learning process, and also because they receive continual support and encouragement.

This is congruent with Herman's (1995) work. He explains that "teachers must believe that all learners can learn, can find their own best way to learn, and will learn things that hold meaning for them" (p.2). Herman argues that Carl Roger's humanistic approach to counselling and the constructivist approach to teaching have a common philosophical foundation, in that "a healthy and creative relationship is of utmost importance" (p. 2). Students explained that their relationship with their teacher was like a friendship, and that the relationship is one of the main reasons why they were still attending school.

Looking at the wheel map of Alternate School A also reveals social constructivist instructional roots. Students state that the teacher "uses examples from our personal lives" when he teaches us. Jon says that a recent example that sticks in his head is "when we [the class] were talking about homosexuality. I asked [our teacher] what he thought. He shared his thoughts but he doesn't choose sides [he allows us to form our own

opinions about issues]." So it could be said that the alternate school teacher is using the conditions of reflection and social negotiation because he is allowing students to gain understanding by reflecting on their own life experience. If students are encouraged to reflect on their realities then the student's realities can be negotiated through the use of language (White, 1995). However, reflection and social negotiation were referred to infrequently in the discussion.

The focus group discussion reveals that "[the teacher] goes through everything and makes sure that you know the stuff." This reveals a comprehensiveness which is also characteristic of many non-social constructivist approaches. Peavy (1992) believes that the challenge of social constructivist education is to assist individuals to become aware of their personal and collective roles in their social environment. Although the teacher at Alternate School A knows the students on a personal level this does not necessarily ensure that new understanding are negotiated as part of the instructional process. The nature of the program and delivery of its content reflect many of the characteristics of the conventional transmission model. For example, students do not have the opportunity to experience complex learning situations as they work through the curriculum booklets. Social constructivists believe that simplifying tasks for learners will prevent them from learning how to solve the complex problems they will face in real life (Driscoll, 1994). The booklet based curriculum, without discussion and critical reflection, does not meet the social constructivist criteria for instruction.

Alternate School B

Alternate School B has two classrooms and two full-time teachers. Each class has an approximate enrollment of 12 students, for a total of 24 students. In addition to the 24 full-time students, there are also 10 part-time students. There are two youth care workers who assist in the delivery of the program. A third room in the school has been converted into a kitchen where the youth care workers prepare food for the meal program offered to the students. Youth care workers also connect students with outside agencies and provide social-emotional support for the students. The Alternate B building is off-site in a neighborhood setting. Although separate and distinct, the students have access to an elementary school's playing field. The students range from 15 to 17 years of age. These students have often had difficulty in the conventional system and in other alternate settings. The focus of this school is on work skills, life skills, social skills and academic upgrading. Upon successful completion of the program, students may apply to senior alternate programs, re-enter the regular stream or apply to the local college. Students must apply to this alternate school and be screened into the program by a screening committee, who make their placement recommendations on the basis of the student's requisite academic ability and on the student's social-emotional needs. Often the students are at-risk of dropping out or being pushed out of school.

The analysis of the focus group data found that of a possible 119 statements, 20 had social constructivist content. An additional 21 statements referred to the student-teacher relationship. Two themes emerged from this session. Students once again focused on the relationship they have with their teachers. and students attributed their

success in the program to the student-centered, self-paced nature of the program. Although not all the students were completely satisfied with their schooling or with their teachers, they believed that this alternate school was their only option.

When talking about the teachers in the Alternate B, Mike emphasizes that the teachers "make sure that you succeed; when I showed my report card to my friends they couldn't believe that I was doing so good." An Alternate B Teacher was affectionately described as a mother figure rather than as a teacher by the students When asked what the teachers would say about their students, Wendy said that the teachers "would say that they loved us [the students]... I think they really care about us and I think that she would say that we should have better for ourselves ... like a mom [would say]." Reasons for success in the alternate school that students listed included: the smaller classes, more personal attention and an understanding of what the students were experiencing. Rita states that the "teachers are more understanding than in the regular school, you can tell them things." Wendy describes it as follows: "our teachers have us all day long and they know all of our life stories and they know everything about us; they know what we do after school and on the weekends; they know pretty much about us so it's easier to get along with them, because like I trimmed my teacher's hair; like how often do you do that?"

In Alternate School B, like Alternate School A, school material had to be mastered, and students mentioned that teachers assisted them according to their individual needs. Students explained that they liked the student-centered and self-paced learning environment. Students take tests when they are prepared, and are often allowed the

option of taking them orally. Tony states that it is easier "because I had to think about four or five subjects [in the conventional school] and then when I came here I only need to think about one." He also explained that the work is "exactly the same as normal school [but] it's easier because you don't have to pay attention to too many courses."

Not all of the student got along with all of the teachers all the time, and they were quick to mention the times when they had had disagreements with their teachers. In this school it seems that the disagreements often became power struggles between the student and the teacher(s). "I challenge teacher D," states Cliff. "I challenge him when he challenges me which isn't good because he is in the power where I'm not, so I've almost got kicked out a couple of times. I yelled at him in Math and I don't know; I don't get along with teacher D." Students state that they were more likely to develop a relationship with a teacher if he or she treated them with respect and could identify with the "things" that they were going through.

Students also felt trapped in this alternate setting because they felt that it was their only option. Two students in this group attempted to secure employment, but explained that they were unable to because they had not completed a sufficient level of education. Some students commented that living on the streets lead to surviving on money and goods acquired illegally. Although some of these students were not certain about the value of their placement in the school, they also believed it was the only option for them at the time. The students described the school as the best of the worst, conventional school being the worst. Tony stated that he could tolerate this school "because the people [students] are easy to get along with ." Don adds, "Yeah, I mean like they [the students]

are like the same as me, they all got problems." As trapped as some of the students feel, they say that they want and need to go to school. Tony explains that, "I would stay in school; now that I know that I have to stay in school to get a job, I'd stay and I'd try not to fight."

Cliff explains that, if "I wasn't in this school I would probably be slinging drugs." Jessica states that she "would probably quit school altogether." Wendy says, "I think I'd probably be sitting out in the parking lot behind the cars smoking pot like I used to all day long." When the students were asked what was keeping them in Alternate School B Jack says "it's the reality of it all; if you screw up here you are fucked." Tony adds that the program is one that you can succeed in. "They [the teachers] make sure that you do [succeed]. I have already asked four friends to apply here next year. They [the teachers] do everything they can to help you stay but, they give you that choice. If you don't want to be here, you can leave." The students find the learning environment comfortable and their fellow students compatible. Another benefit of the program is that there was a catered food program for the enrolled students. You just have to mention the word "food" says Cliff "that gets me going." The combination of perceptions that there were no other school options and that education leads to a good job, coupled with teachers that students could not always get along with make this school the last and often difficult option for students.

One outspoken student in this session monopolized much of the group's time. He talked about his personal situation while others listened and the moderator and assistant moderator attempted to involve the group. For example, when a participant was sharing

Cliff cut in to remark that "I'm a genuine stoner. I don't care I'm proud of it; damn it, but it kinda meddles with the brain a bit (group laughter) so it kinda slow things down..." Although Cliff's remarks are valuable constructions of his experience, his perceptions were being voiced at the expense of others' opportunities to contribute. Another concern in this session was that one student came into the session more than a half hour after it had started and another student had to leave three quarters of an hour into the session. Despite the distractions and disruptions, other participants were patient and tolerant. Most participants thought about the questions being asked and listened to the comments made by their classmates.

I found this program to be more holistic than that of Alternate School A. There were regularly scheduled physical education periods, scheduled academic time and homework expectations. It is apparent that these conditions are also indicators of a more comprehensive program in the more traditional sense and thus, does not align it exclusively with the social constructivist philosophy. The alternate B students have made statements that identified the social constructivist condition of student-centered, self-paced programming as a major theme in their school. Students believe that the self-paced academic format allows them the latitude to deal with other issues in their lives. However, self-pacing in itself is not necessarily a social constructivist condition. Lebrow (1992) and Driscoll (1994) express their concerns about self-paced programming especially when learning environments have been detextualized. Although it appears that the students understand that school is needed to secure a job they did not talk about the value of learning to problem solve or reason in their daily living experiences. A

condition of social constructivism that was apparent from students' remarks was that they are encouraged to make choices based on what they believe is important to them, but students were not encouraged in the instructional setting to reflect on their personal and cultural roles in the social environment.

The students also focused on the relationship they had with their teachers being one of the major reasons why they were experiencing success in the program. Although students mentioned other reasons for experiencing success, such as the small class size and more personal attention, the reason most often mentioned was the relationship they had with their teacher. The students remarked that the teachers knew everything about them and could therefore attend to their needs on a more personal basis. This emphasis on the importance of teacher-students relationships was despite some students' descriptions of disagreements and power struggles with their teachers in Alternate School B.

Alternate School C

Alternate School C is situated in the heart of the city. The program focus is on life-skills, academic upgrading, social-skills and native cultural awareness. Students are 13-18 years of age. Students must apply to the program before they are eligible for screening. Students are screened into the program by a screening committee, who make their placement recommendations on the basis of the student's requisite academic ability and on the student's social-emotional needs.

This session had a total of 96 statements, twenty two of which were social constructivist in content. An additional 17 statements were directly related to the

relationship that students had with their teachers. The major themes that emerged from the focus group discussion were that students felt that they had more privileges and were given more attention than in the conventional school. They were involved in more activities, the classes were smaller, and help was immediate with one-on-one attention and assistance. Furthermore, the program was structured around their needs. Students said that they were also allowed to listen to music and eat in class as long as they respected the rights and interests of other students in the program. Another theme that emerged was that the students believed that they had a strong relationship with their teacher. They described their teacher as someone who was easy to talk to, had a sense of humor and was infectiously positive. Students made several comparisons of conventional school to the alternate school but the primary focus was on the difference in the relationship that they had with their teachers.

The first theme that emerged was that students believed that they had a lot of privileges and attention in the alternate school. Students would set academic goals at the beginning of each week to keep themselves on track. Work was modified to suit the needs of the students, so that if students understood the work they could challenge units by writing a cumulative test. If they passed the unit test, then they were not required to review the work they already knew, and were encouraged to continue working on the next unit. Although students were required to achieve an 80 % grade on the tests, Sally explains that "sometimes the teachers let you go [pass] if it's only a couple of percent off." Mark enjoys the way the school operates: "it's more relaxed, you don't have to run from class to class and there are less people to worry about bothering you."

Ken adds that "there is less peer pressure, and school is fun. We get to go all over on good field trips, do fun things like playing laser tag. I think that that's what keeps people motivated. If they [teachers] give us [students] something fun to do then they're going to come back and do that work." The program is flexible if we don't feel like working we can "go get something from the kitchen or go to sleep on the bench." "They leave the work up to you." Sally states, "They [teachers] only ask you once [for your work]; they are not raggin' on you all the time." "Yeah," Ken adds, "They ask you once and if you don't got it, well, it's your fault then it's not like they are on your back." Sometimes students are not always successful. It is my experience that students who are motivated will do fine in the alternate system but those who are not do not find success in the conventional system or the alternate system. Sally continues to say that, " in a regular school, they don't see you. They just see whether you have your homework done or not. Here they do and they see who you are [as a person] instead of like, 'oh where's your work'?"

The group talked extensively about differences between the conventional schools and the alternate schools. But the primary difference between the alternate school and conventional schools was attributed to the relationship that they have with their teachers. They mentioned that they felt lost in the larger system, unnoticed, unlistened to, unvalidated and misunderstood. In the alternate school students were treated with more respect. Ken remarks that "here [in the alternate] they treat us more grown-up." "Yeah," Mark adds, "you have more self-esteem. You feel better about yourself [in the alternate] because you are being treated like an adult." Sally adds that "we're like on the same

wave length you know. Like the teachers here understand us, nothing really surprises them... they have lots of life experiences." The students understand the benefits of being in a smaller group and receiving immediate attention. They also realize that they are not going to be controlled, therefore they accept the responsibility for their behavior and their academic progress. Stuents that choose not to accept academic and emotional responsibility are suppoted by the teachers and the youth-care workers. Many alternate students have issues that can not be addressed in the alternate school, but the alternate personnel connect students with community agencies for intensive support and guidance while students are still attending school. Students believe that having teachers that will allow them to be themselves and learn at their own pace and according to their unique learning styles is the key to their success in the alternate system. However this is not to infer that all students make it in the alternate program.

Focus group C started at 3:15 p.m. on a Friday afternoon in June and ran until 4:15 p.m. Although the group was an ideal number, the students had just completed a long week and a long day and the students as well as the teachers were anxious to get out in the afternoon sun. The group was slow to get going. Although the participants did became comfortable about talking about their program the staff was firm about the 4:15 p.m. time to conclude the session, and this seemed to abbreviate the session. There were three vocal participants in the group and they monopolized the majority of the discussion. Students knew each other well and were accustomed to having these three peers speak for them. The group was restless, although this was somewhat alleviated by the provision of

refreshments. The environment was comfortable for the group. The students were surrounded by their art work which was displayed on the classroom walls.

This student group's perceptions of their teachers' practice revealed that some social constructivist conditions are being met. Something unique about this group is that the students were involved in a circle ceremony each day. This was the only alternate that integrated a spiritual component as well as an academic, emotional and physical component. The circle ceremony is particular to the First Nations people and culture, but all students were encouraged to participate. The circle ceremony answers the social constructivist's call for learning environments in which learners can experience the complexity and authenticity of real world experiences. This group, like the others, was student-centered and self-paced, which Driscoll (1994) identifies as a condition where students are actively involved in negotiating their own learning needs and how those needs can be met. However, students are instructed using a one-on-one strategy, therefore there is little social interaction which stimulates ideas and serves as a basis for negotiating consensus. Furthermore, although students are involved in numerous activities inside and outside the classroom, many of these activities are similar to those that would be found in the traditional transmission curriculum. It seems that the social constructivist strength of this program is the circle ceremony, and although other social constructivist conditions are eluded to, this program reflects a traditional transmission model of instruction.

The relationship with the teachers seems to be an important element in a successful alternate program. A glance at the circle -maps reveals that each of the focus

groups have referred to their teachers as being an integral factor in their educational

success. Teachers that are able to connect with the students in a number of settings and

on a multiple of levels which seems to be a crucial component when a variety students are

asked about their perceptions of why they are "successful" in the alternate school. Again

this is congruent with Herman's (1995) work which found that counselling and the

constructivist approach to teaching have a common philosophical foundation, in that a

healthy and creative relationship is conducive to feelings of self-worth and achievement.

Alternate School D

Alternate school D is an off-site program designed for 48 students who attend on a

part-time basis. Each student must be present for a minimum of 10 hours per week. The

program includes a home study component where a maximum of six students (because of

manageability) are assisted with their social and educational goals with the intent of

reintegrating the students into an alternate or regular school program. These homestudy

students may be out of the formal system for reasons such as pregnancy or temporary

social/emotional discomfort. Students are generally 17-19 years old, but there have been

students attending who have been as young as 16 and as old as 20. Students must be in

need of an alternative to the regular system and have the requisite academic and

emotional skills to work independently in the program. The major focuses of the program

are life-skills, social-skills, work study, work experience and academic up-grading

leading to grade 12 graduation. Length of stay in the program is dependent on the needs

of the student, but averages between 18 and 24 months. Students must apply to the

program, staff and community agency members then meet to screen in students. The

criteria for acceptance is the requisite academic ability, the age of the student and the student's perceived needs.

There were a total of 185 statements in this session. Thirty-six of those statements pertained to social constructivist conditions of teaching. An additional 18 statements included a reference to the teacher-student relationship in the program. This older, more articulate group, live adult lives with regular jobs and, for some, the responsibilities of parenthood. The major themes that emerged from the focus group data are that students work at their own pace and are responsible for their academic progress. They are treated with respect, in a mature and accommodating manner. The students find the work easier than the regular program, and feel that they are learning more in a program that is centered around their needs and abilities. Although the instructional material is prepackaged, similar to material in other alternate schools, students are encouraged to draw on their own experience and unique learning styles to fulfill the curriculum requirements. A program offering that is distinct to this alternate program is mandatory tutorials which are designed for the senior students. The tutorials are comprised of lessons and assignments that are delivered according to conventional transmission model of instruction. The students feel that they are encouraged to be themselves because there is not the authority relationship between the teacher and student that exists in the regular school system. Students see their relationship with their teachers as a friendship.

The tone of the focus group was intense and energetic. Students were positive and respectful when they spoke of their experience in the Alternate School D. Students saw

this opportunity to continue in school as their last and only option. Several of these same students are now talking about continuing their education at the post-secondary level. The students that participated in the focus group were all nearing the end of their stay in Alternate School D and had all experienced many successes in the program. Finally students found it difficult to differentiate between the teachers and the youth care workers. Although the student could identify the teachers' and youth care workers' specific roles, when they spoke of the program they referred to it as a single harmonious entity where the skills of the teacher were complemented by the skills of the youth care worker and vice versa.

Students felt that the self-paced work allowed them to ease into the academic work and also allowed them the freedom to effectively manage their adult lives (work, parenting) without falling behind. They also explained that teachers accepted that if a student knew the concepts in a particular subject he/she would not have to go back and complete work he/she had previously mastered. In addition the students revealed that in the alternate school they were encouraged to do the work their way, which was markedly different from what they experienced in the regular system. Verla states, "In the regular system teachers say it is their way or no way. You have to do it their way, their formulas, their whatever, and even if your way is easier for you and it's right, it's still wrong because you didn't do it their way." Doug remarks that "the regular system doesn't let you express yourself the way you need to express yourself...here it's different, we are allowed to have our own opinion and our own mind, not just the teacher's opinion and teacher's mind." Students recognize this flexibility, and appreciate the teachers'

willingness to draw on students' strengths and resources. This is one way that students feel that teachers build a relationship with them as students. "They treat us like adults, they trust our judgment." Verla states, "The teachers here treat us like adults, not like we are in high school." Students explain that they joke and as well as talk seriously to their teachers and youth care workers.

Students explain that the relationship they have with their teachers resembles a friendship where mutual trust and cooperation enhance the working partnership. Students believe that they have earned control of their own learning by communicating their needs to the teachers. Through this process of taking control, close, respectful relationships develop. Students also believe that the positive, safe environment in the school is developed through the teachers' immediate, frequent and genuine praise. Students say that this encouragement motivates them to keep a healthy and productive attitude about their achievements and progress. Doug states that the teachers are "really positive people with really positive attitudes." This positive attitude allows the students to focus and get on track academically. Rick says that he likes to get things done fast, "like my Socials 11, I got it done in three weeks, which in the normal program it would have taken me a semester." Rick, believes he, like many students, work best independently, and this school provides that option. Moreover, students like Margaret, who says she needs a push once in a while, can also rely on the teachers to get her motivated. "If you need a push," Margaret says, "they will give it to you. If you're slacking off, it's not like they force you to sit down, [it's like a reminder]."

The students feel that they are academically successful because their emotional needs are also being met. "We are an older group of students, we can concentrate on our work because," as Rick states, "we don't have to worry about younger kids poking fun at everybody because we don't make fun of each other here." The bond between student and student, as well as student and teacher is so well established that students are comfortable discussing more personal issues. The flexibility and comfort students feel in the program allows them to be honest with themselves. This honesty in turn creates windows of opportunity to grow emotionally, and academically. A trusting and safe environment is established by the school staff and is conducive for learning in general and essential in the alternate setting. Students in all of the alternate programs have emphasized the student-teacher relationship as one of the key components for success in their respective programs.

The students in this program are at the end of their schooling, with six months or less to completing their grade 12. They were animated and excited about relaying their testimonials of how great the alternate program is for them. Although these students have different back grounds, interests and attitudes, they are all succeeding in the program. Verla points out that one of the reasons the program works is because the teachers are concerned about earning her respect. "The [teachers] have a lot of respect for us. They really worry about having our respect, whereas regular teacher in a regular school wouldn't care. They say "I don't care [about you] I'm the boss." Margaret remarks that in the alternate school, if "you screw-up on your work they don't sit there and put you down like most teachers do. They just point out your mistakes and help you fix them."

Margaret continues to say that the teachers are also like "personal counsellors. For example, if you come here [to the school] with a problem, they stop whatever they are doing and take the whole class and talk with you through your whole problem." Students are comfortable in this environment because as Margaret puts it "you can be yourself you don't have to act like somebody else." Students are accepted for who they are as individuals. Verla adds that with the constant attention and the continued support, the work becomes easier; "the easier it is the more you feel like you want to learn. Like, the easier it is, the easier it is to go on and say 'yeah, I can do this.'" Freire (1969, 1992) explains to be human is to engage in relationships with others and the world. However the western world's hierarchical, competitive patriarchy limits the equitable participation of all humans in quality relationships. Often students that attend alternate school have been marginalized because they could not or would not conform to the dominant culture and class structure (Kelly, 1993). The importance of a trusting and respectful relationship in the alternate system is essential. Research reveals that alternate schools are more understanding and tolerant in providing a stimulating and rich learning environment. Alternate programs emphasize personal attention in an atmosphere of respect and support (Kelly, 1993).

Not only do the students find the work easier they also find that they understand the material better. Andrew explains that "during the time that he has spent in Alternate D, I surprised my girlfriend. She thinks I'm in a dumb class and I end up doing her homework for her, and she's in a regular school; it sort of changes things around." Verla adds that she:

couldn't help her sister before with her math. Like, she's in grade 11, and I couldn't help her do her math or anything like that. But now I can because I actually took the time to sit down and learn it. Teacher A teaches me how to do it, and I can do it my own way, and I can tell [my sister]: 'do it this way; it is the easiest way and you'll understand it,' and she'll know it. If I have to do it their [regular school teachers'] way then forget it, I don't understand it.

It is apparent that Verla feels that she is in control of her education because her ideas are listened to and her learning style is accepted. She expresses a confidence in her ability to learn and to teach others. Rick adds that:

when I was in Math in normal school, you have a formula, you follow it and figure out the answer. Some things I can figure out on my own, but it's not acceptable to them [regular teachers]. You have to have the formula written out and you have to have it written down exactly the way that they want it. But Teacher A says,[to me after demonstrating a different way of tackling a problem] 'oh I guess there is more than one way to skin a cat' right! that's the way he thinks and you can get it done your way and it's right.

Students are praised for being innovative and taking a creative approach to their work. Rick is also quick to recall the times that he has been taken from class by the teachers and praised for providing the group with a positive role model. He could not think of a time in regular school when he was praised for expressing his creative and imaginative ideas in his work.

Although the students are encouraged to trust their own judgments, the teachers are relied on as sources of information to make decisions about various options available to them. Doug explains that "the teachers let you know your options and they show you some paths on how to get there. [Once you have made your decision] they are there to give us the momentum to keep us going up those paths you know?" The teachers take a personal interest in each individual and they take pride in the students' work. Verla states that " they [the teachers] take pride in the program and we take pride in what we are doing and in the program. When I tell other people that I'm in Alternate D, I tell them that my program rocks! I think the teachers think the same thing as us and that they're proud, just as proud as we are [about the program]."

The students are convinced that the program is the best program that they have experienced. They are able to recount many of their experiences over the past twelve or more years and are certain that a small class size, one-on-one instruction, and the latitude to work at their own-pace and use their own frame of reference to solve problems and make decisions is the best way to organize an educational environment. They are also convinced that a strong personal relationship with the teachers is essential if students are to be productive and happy in the learning setting. "It's easier to learn when you feel good about yourself." These students are self-aware and find the desire to learn when they know the competitive element of the schooling is not emphasized. They say that they understand that they are responsible for their education and they are busy taking care of that responsibility.

This group was energetic and positive. They were comfortable in their classroom and were appreciative of the refreshments that were provided. Participants were respectful of each other and encouraged each other to speak. Ideas and impressions of their experience were expressed in elaborate detail. This was a self-confident group who were all completing their grade 12 requirements. They were excited about what they had accomplished and eager to share what they had achieved. Although this session was about an hour and forty-five minutes, the students were as animated and excited about discussing their experience in the alternate program at the end of the session as they were at the beginning.

The research on alternate schools reveals that human relationships and instructional activities are the central ingredients of a successful school (Raywid, 1994). More specifically the research reveals that the adolescent reacts to events and experiences with a newly found power of thought. In formal thought, the adolescent can direct emotional responses to abstract ideas as well as to people. Introspective thinking leads to the analysis of self in situations (Zunker, 1994). With this extreme self analysis, and an intensified concern about the reaction of others to self, it seems necessary, from the students' perspective and in the research, to validate students autonomy in the instructional setting. The social constructivist approaches to teaching assumes this respectful approach to the learner who is described as being self-regulated and self-motivated.

<u>Teacher Focus Group</u>

This section is divided into four distinct parts. It begins with an introduction of the participants and three common threads that run through their experience. Next there is a summary of the themes that emerged throughout the session and the descriptive data that elaborates the themes and counter themes. A synthesis and interpretation follows the descriptive data and finally there is an interpretation of the data linking it back to the literature on social constructivism.

The teachers are representatives from each of the alternate classes visited. Although there was a total of four teachers who attended the session, one alternate school was not represented while another was represented by two teachers. There were three themes that emerged from the teacher's group that were common across the participants. The first was that all of the teachers found themselves in their present alternate assignments, after being exposed to a variety of teaching experiences. Secondly, all of the teachers came to the realization that building a relationship with the students was critical to the success of their students and therefore the success of their programs. Finally the teachers all had coaching experiences that they believed help them teach in an alternate setting.

It was interesting to discover that all of the teachers serendipitously came to teach in the alternate setting. The teachers did not have any special training in the alternate field, but were willing to take on the challenge, in some cases because other teaching positions (the ones they specialized in) were not available to them. Another common

thread was that all of the teachers had had a variety of teaching experiences. Teacher B explains that she:

> think[s] that one thing that's important to a lot of alternate education teachers is that they have had a lot of experience teaching all kinds of different subjects and different age groups and I know I've sort of come to the point where I was feeling like I'm not a rocket scientist at really anything but I'm pretty good at everything in terms of all subjects that they [the students] need. So a lot of us are really good generalists in that we are capable of doing everything. You know, we are not Mathphobic, we're not Sciencephobic even though our areas might be English and Socials, and I think that is really important to have the skills to help them [the students] with all of their different subject areas.

The teachers also talked about learning their skills in the work setting. A common lesson was the value of developing a relationship with the students. Teacher A talked about giving up the power of a traditional teacher to build a relationship with a group of struggling grade eight students in a conventional school.

> I understand how important it is to develop relationships with students, once they realize that somebody cared about their education and about them as people and as individuals there was mutual respect. Once that was established all the other barriers in terms of behavior [disappeared], I mean that's what it was, it was a power struggle until the power was given up and the relationship was developed [there was a battle of wills] and that [giving up the power] was the difference, that was the big lesson to learn. As a first year teacher I was thinking I've got to

control this classroom and that's teaching. That's called 'stress leave' somewhere down the line if you keep it up. That's not getting to know the kids, but by building on that [relationship] that's a part of [establishing] control in your classroom. So my first year was a big learning year that helped me when I started working with alternate kids in a different programs.

A third common thread in the teacher group was that they all had coaching experience, which they relied on in their teaching roles. Teacher D explains that the staff at the school were allowing the students to assume responsibility for the group and for how their decisions impact the majority. "School is an individual thing, so we decided to apply the coaching thing. We had meetings and we debriefed with kids to hear their feedback on how they are a part of the team." Teacher A adds that coaching:

gave him more interpersonal skills and motivating skills to deal with students. You know, I will challenge individual students, build their self-esteem and personal worth, but also being tough on them and making them accountable; I have high expectations for our students. I think a lot of people see an alternate student as the "lowest common denominator." They really don't give them the inspiration that they can actually do what they set their mind to. The part of coaching that comes into play is getting kids to believe in themselves. If they believe in themselves it's amazing what they can do. They surprise themselves everyday.

These teachers describe themselves as tolerant and accepting. They all believe that students would say that they have a sense of humor and are fair in their judgments of

them. They also said that they enjoy being in the alternate system. As teacher D puts it, "your worst day in alternate is better than your best day in the regular system."

When teachers were asked about their programs the teachers explained that they are still in the shadow of the regular system, but they are comfortable working on the fringe of the hierarchy because they are given greater latitude and autonomy. Although the programs have an academic focus, there is a major emphasis on building a relationship with the students. The teachers feel that the programs promote this sense of trust and belonging because students are not questioned about their past; they are accepted for who they are when they walk through the door. The programs were described by the teachers as being holistic, which included social, emotional, physical and academic components. The teachers explain their programs as being student-centered in that the students don't compete against each other. Rather they work on a self-paced curriculum that is divided into small incremental and achievable steps. Another theme that emerged was that the intent of the programs is to give the students new experiences which potentially offer opportunities for the students to learn about themselves. In addition all teachers stated that they sincerely praised and encouraged the students for each accomplishment made during the school day. All of these teachers believe that their programs are flexible and provide an academic alternative for students who could not or would not compete in the conventional system. Mistakes are expected and accepted in the alternate programs and students are not dismissed from the programs unless they become a safety concern for the specific alternate community involved. Teachers also believed that providing food is an essential component of a successful program. Teachers

also discussed the importance of not glorifying the alternate system. Finally teachers also discussed both positive and negative experiences in the alternate system.

Of a total of 147 statements, thirty-six were social constructivist in nature. An additional eighteen statements made reference to the student-teacher relationship. Teacher A states that students have an immediate sense of belonging. They get a clean start "and I explain to them that they will be treated as adults." Part of a respectful relationship is knowing each individual, and being aware of their skills, attitudes and goals. It is interesting to note that while we were talking, Teacher D invited a student in to write a test. Teacher D adds that "I really go out of my way to show the students that I care about them." Teacher A describes his " number one goal as getting students to believe in themselves. Once they conceive something they start to achieve it. I believe choices is a big part of that [learning to believe in your abilities and goals]. You can spend all day with a kid, but nothing is going to happen until they feel that there is something meaningful in what they are doing." Teacher A adds that one of the reasons for student success is the self-paced material. The material allows them to work at their own pace and build skills before moving on to the next level. The steps are kept small and manageable, so successes are frequent and so is the praise for those accomplishments.

A sense of trust and belonging is also fostered by teachers when students gets into trouble. Although teachers say that it might sound pessimistic, they expect their students to make mistakes. So when a mistake is made the teachers don't overreact. If the situation is a serious one that must come before the administration, the teacher sees the problem as "our problem." Teacher C explains that he approaches the student to see

what "we" can do to solve the problem. "I explain to the student that there are things that I can do, but I also ask the student to think of things that he can do to help himself. We can solve this. We can beat this problem, and we have to get your trust built-up so we go at it as a bit of a team." The teachers state that students feel more comfortable in the classroom and all experiences, both positive and negative, allow them to make informed choices in the future. Teachers say that they allow students to make choices, and to trust their own decision making. These are ways students are given the opportunity to build trust with their teachers. Teacher C states that:

> I believe whatever they say. I've been told some real whoppers but eventually
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> the truth comes out and when it does there is an opportunity to discuss their
>
> choices. I never get mad at them because the whole world is mad at them. There
>
> is no use in being another person that is mad at them. I believe in sincerity; you
>
> have to be sincere or they [the students] will see right through you.

Teacher A concurs with teachers C's statements. He explains that the students are not only respected, but given the opportunity to find meaning in their education. Each individual student is encouraged to find what is personally meaningful without the pressures of the traditional competitive learning environment. Teacher A states that:

> [Students] know that they are going to be given a certain degree of respect that
>
> they don't get anywhere else. But when they make their choices they are held
>
> accountable for them. I believe that the number one reason why students drop out
>
> of school is because it is not meaningful. At this school students are challenged to
>
> find meaning in their education. There is incentive to find meaning because all

students know when they walk through the door is that you can not fail. A student starts off at point A or point B and continues until the end of the year. Students' progress depends on their maturity level, their goals and their desire. But, you don't have to compete against anybody, you know it is up to you.

The teachers' perceptions mirror the perceptions recorded by the students. The alternate programs are designed so that students progress at their own pace. Teachers say that it seems to take some adjustment by the students, particularly if they have learning difficulties, to take the responsibility for their own learning, but most become more successful as the teacher works with the individual students' strengths. The teachers say that they are attempting to instill a sense of pride and respect in students. Teacher D adds that there are students who are really struggling:

We have younger students with documented and verified learning disabilities and emotional problems. I see my role as a kind of gold digger. I explore and try to uncover the gifts the students have and do projects with them to bring out their personal passions. It's a bit of a roller coaster ride but we get some really great moments. We work hard at building a community feeling, for example today we went over to our adopt-a -grandparent program. The grandparents had ice-cream for the students and they listened to some of the elderly talk. It was really magical to see, especially with all the stereotypes around the alternate students, seeing them show respect for these people.

Teachers say that showing respect for others and themselves is an important component of all of the alternate schools. Teachers explain that students are exposed to

activities that range from the community based adopt-a-grandparent program to school based activities on the school playing field to develop an understanding of their social environment. Teacher A explains that:

> there are benefits from all social interaction in the program, for example when we are out on the field doing an activity, learning occurs in situations when you get bumped the wrong way or accidentally nail somebody or somebody tries to light a fire under you. How are you going to react to it? Those situations tend to be more important and powerful for students than sitting down with the curriculum and plowing through it. Certain kids step-up after having a really good day out on the field, a different outlet is being tapped, and sometimes they are able to transfer that over into the classroom.

Teachers agree that a multiple of learning situations is ideal, and they are able to recount the benefits of the previous outings, however they also say that the outings are not frequent enough. Teachers say that they are juggling academic demands of teaching with the emotional demands that are characteristic of marginalized students. Nevertheless the teachers are understanding of the pressures, and are positive about their roles. Teacher C describes his program as a lifeboat. Students that find themselves in the water for a variety of reasons, this program allows them the opportunity to get onto a dry vessel again. Teacher A views his program as a complex puzzle that affords any individual the opportunity to work within it. A complete picture can be assembled by each individual student. Although individual pictures will vary markedly, they will be complete in the eyes of the builder. Teacher B sees what she does in the alternate classroom as ideal,

"what I would have liked to do in the regular classroom but simply didn't have the time to do." The time is a luxury that comes from having fewer students in the alternate classroom. The staff therefore have the opportunity to develop strong relationships with their students.

This is not to say that all students are successful in the programs or that all students connect with their respective teachers. However it is not for a lack of effort on the part of the teachers. Although there are strict attendance policies in place for all alternate students, they are given countless chances to continue in their respective programs. Teacher C states that, "Quite often when I think about 'kicking' a kid out I wonder where is he going to go? Whose house is he going to break into next? Sometimes I really break the rules to hold onto students." "Yeah," agrees Teacher D "the students have a lot of things that get in the way of getting here sometimes. Family alliances are pretty hectic; sometimes drug and alcohol problems are pretty terrible." Teacher A adds:

> we have a three strike policy, throughout the whole year if you have three
>
> unexcused absences, you can be asked to withdraw from the program.
>
> However, a student can make up the time he's missed and get back to square
>
> one. If they are going to be away its the students responsibility to call us. But
>
> you know it has flexibility depending on the situation, I mean our students come
>
> up with the most incredible stories for being away for a week or whatever it may
>
> be and you think you've heard it all and then boom you just get another one. The
>
> amazing thing, is that lots of the stories are true.

Teachers believe that it is beneficial to take the students at face value and often say that their belief in the students strengthens their relationship. Although students continue to attend because of their relationship with the teachers, sometimes they stay in school for reasons other than the personal connections they have developed. For example, the food programs in some of the alternate schools have become a community builder. The students know that it's a privilege to belong to the program when they are fed regularly. The staff at these schools also understand that the basic needs of these students have to be met before learning can begin. Teacher D states "that the food program has been an interesting community builder, it's a real link you know, building that table top thing... the social group begins to bond with each other." Teacher A states that:

> our kids are at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy, they need food and security
> and acceptance and belonging and love. And if one of those pieces are missing
> well... we are fortunate to have those things in place, like food, experienced youth
> care workers, strong programs designed around flexibility and self paced
> curriculum, all those things that give them strong foundations to actually feel
> good about themselves and succeed in their work.

When the teachers talk about what they think the students would say about them, Teacher C believes that "they would say that I am fair, and give them a lot of chances. "He doesn't take too many things personal and he lets you start off with a clean slate." This is consistent with what the students said about their teachers. Teacher A says that "I hope that they [the students] would say that I am happy go lucky, got a good sense of

humor, have a good relationship with them. They would say that they have good relationship with their teacher." Teacher B relays a more traditional perspective of a student's impression of their teacher. She states that "If students were to comment on Teacher B they might say that she marks too hard that she's too picky. She makes me redo things. There are no short cuts for the academic work. She is always focused on what you need to know for the exam and it's a real downer." These perceptions reveal that irregardless of the teachers approach to learning, the relationship that teachers develop with their students is important.

Teachers continue to express their belief in the importance of developing relationships in the program while talking about the role of the youth care workers. Teacher A states that the:

> youth care workers are essential in these programs. They develop a different
> relationship with their students. If a students is having a difficult day they are
> more likely to come in than to stay away from school because their know that they
> are going to get some support in their life issues. They also think that it is a cool
> place, they feel part of a community.

Teacher D adds that, "when there are three or four adults in a program, the students benefit from the consistency and the diversity of their instruction. The heart beat of the school is set by the individuals in the program." There are no administrators in the program so there aren't the power struggles that are found in the mainstream education systems. Teachers and students are working together to find solutions to their life situations. In the mainstream there is no time to deal with the social-emotional issues that

are often the root of the behavioral concerns. Teachers say that students know that they will be listened to, there will a plan of action to tackle the concern, and there will be confidentiality. Teachers say that students have a variety of issues that they have to deal with on a daily basis. These issues range from substance dependency concerns to family and legal issues. Often, say the teachers, we are their only advocates. Teacher C say that "We may possibly be their only life line and positive role model."

Although teachers agreed with one another about the importance of the relationship, they disagreed with each other on how that relationship was to be established and maintained. When the session was being summarized, Teacher A talked about building the students up and breaking them down. Teacher C disagreed. He did not believe in breaking the students down. He believed that the students are fragile and that to break them down would be a replay of what they had experienced in the regular system. They would be pushed out of the alternate system like they were pushed out of the regular system. After hearing Teachers C's opinion, Teacher A qualified his statement to apply only to those students who had been in the program for a year or two, and would not include new students. But later in the discussion Teacher A recounted an experience that a new teacher had in his school with students who were in the program for over a year. He identified that the source of the problem was a power struggle that developed between the students and the teacher because students were being treated as though they would be in a convention educational setting. Teacher A went on to talk about the transmission model of teaching being introduced in the alternate setting and explaining that "it's just a different relationship" that develops, implying that the student-

teacher relationship in the transmission model is one where the student does not have the power. Teacher A reflected on the stance of the new teacher and revealed that "the students didn't change, the new teacher changed" to accommodate the integrity of the learners. Teachers in the other alternate programs agreed that students need to be given the latitude with their educational choices so that they can experience the successes that they are capable of. Teacher D added that they also practice giving up power, "like in our setting I think we work through those [conflict] situations, instead of locking horns."

This dialogue was a surprise to me, because up to this point all participants were discussing the need to take care of the students, whereas in this discussion a difference of teaching philosophy was revealed. In previous discussion teachers explained their approach to behavioral and academic issues as being handled in a powerless way. For example, Teacher B stated earlier in the session that, "I ask the students what do you think, where do you think you are at, what do you think you need to improve? Instead of saying this is what you need." Yet, in this conversation Teacher B seemed to have the opinion that the "students will be required to do whatever I feel is in their best interest." It would seem that although the intent is good, what teachers perceive they are doing and what they are actually practicing is not necessarily congruent. Researchers have found that teachers' "belief about the inability of students to be active, self-regulative, and capable of making meaning, combined with their view of themselves as managers, probably mediate their difficulties in implementing social constructivist principles" (Reid, Kurkjian & Carruthers, 1994. p.278). However, Bell and Gilbert (1994) have found that teachers can adopt an approach with constructivist underpinnings if there is continued

exposure to and development of the new approach. Because this teacher has continued to teach in the alternate system, in time, her practice may become more congruent with what she espouses. It may be possible that the attitude of practicing according to the transmission approach was held with the future well-being of the students in mind. If the students were to reenter the conventional system, it could be argued that it would be negligent not to prepare them for the authority relationship they would experience in the regular classroom.

Another concern of the teachers was that the academic component is test-based. Teachers talked about the ways they circumvented that reality. They discussed allowing students to do the tests orally, or they asked the student to write a paragraph or draw a picture that might allow them to express their knowledge with a different venue. Teacher C summarizes their approach by saying " that's where we got to take that big word 'alternate' and say, 'well I guess I just did that an alternate way for this kid'." Teachers modify the curriculum so that students can construct knowledge from their existing knowledge. Driscoll (1994) explains that knowledge that learners can usefully deploy should be developed. Social constructivists agree that to foster reflective criticism of existing constructions can potentially develop life long problem solving and critical thinking skills.

Teachers were quick to praise the role and the work of the youth care workers. I found it odd that Alternate School A did not have a youth care worker, and the teacher became the person that students relied on for emotional support. In the programs with the youth care workers, a strong emotional bond typically developed between the students

and the youth care workers, and relaxed friendship developed between the students and the teachers. Teachers were not sought out for more personally charged issues when a youth care worker was present. Teacher B states that, unlike regular school, if a student has a problem they come to school to talk about it, whereas in the regular system the student is likely to stay at home and not deal with it.

Finally Teacher D asked the group to put their programs in perspective "because sometimes the alternate can be glamorized a bit, and that can be a dangerous thing too." The alternate program does not work for everyone. The students are screened into the programs, so the staff are working with students that have the academic requisites and the emotional stability to be in the programs. Although students are often experiencing some difficulties, they are still able to master the work with assistance. The option of asking a student to leave an alternate program is exercised. Moreover, the intent is not to transform the students into what society believes is the ideal citizen, but rather to praise the successes they experience and hope that they will continue to make positive choices for themselves. Teacher D continues to say "that for people to think that we're the big time turn around for these kids [is a misconception]. I like to go for the minor miracles with them rather than the major transformation that society wants us to make."

This group was very accommodating and were willing to meet in late June which is an extremely busy time of the year for teachers. As a testament to their flexibility, the focus group session continued as students dropped into the class. This group of teachers appear interested in students and seem to go out of their way to support decisions made by the students. Although the participants respectfully listened to each other's

experiences, a draw back to this particular session was that there was no representation from one of the alternate programs. A strength of the session was that the participants felt comfortable disagreeing with and learning from one another. One of the teachers decided to initiate a lunch program after listening to the benefits other programs experienced with its implementation. All the teachers in the session know each other and understand the complexity of their daily teaching experience.

Another strength of this session was when the moderator summarized the themes that had emerged, a rich discussion developed when their perceptions were reflected back to them. Teachers negotiated what the primary intent of their programs were and what were secondary. As Teacher D explained "we are not often asked 'how do you feel now that he's [the student] is not doing B&Es?' We are asked 'is he academically eligible for grade 12'." They agreed that the intent of the programs is not always the most publicized component. Although the session was long it was powerful and rich for the participants and the researcher.

At a first glance it would seem that the teachers are practicing a social constructivist approach to teaching. Social constructivist education as outlined by some researchers (Cennamo, Abell & Chung, 1995; Driscoll, 1995; Keiny, 1994; Lebrow, 1993) includes student-centered instruction with the individual student being considered the expert of their own knowledge. Twenty-four of the social constructivist statements in the teacher focus group related to the alternate programs fostering a student-centered, student-focused curriculum. Moreover, the students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning, through the self-paced format of the alternate curriculum. Teacher A states

that, "The program is structured around the students' needs and where they want to get to and that's based on student feedback, feedback from the staff and just that personal experience."

Students are also encouraged to critically reflect on exercises and activities and to develop and demonstrate their emerging understanding. Teacher A explains "that there are benefits from all social interaction in the program, for example, when we are out doing an activity" or as Teacher D says "when we are involved in the community with the adopt a grandparent program. Those situations tend to be more important and powerful for students than sitting down with the curriculum and plowing through it."

One assumption of a social constructivist approach to education is that students are intrinsically motivated and self-directed; thus effective teaching capitalizes on the students' motivations to explore and make sense of their experiences (Novick, 1996). Scruggs and Mastropieri (1994) concluded that constructivist perspectives on learning seem to hold validity in special education settings. Students with mild disabilities do actively reason through material and information that is presented to facilitate knowledge construction which builds on students' prior knowledge systems.

It is apparent that although the program is designed so a social constructivist approach could be exercised, this approach has not been adopted in its entirety in any of these alternate programs. Teacher A talked about building the students up and breaking them down. This contradicts the notion that students are intrinsically motivated and self-directed. This stance assumes that the student is in a deficit position with little to work with except what is provided by the teacher. This view is consistent with the

transmission model of education which assumes that these students will develop an impoverished concept of themselves and their situation if they are not given adequate strategies for managing their emotional and cognitive faculties (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1989 cited in Lebrow, 1993). Social constructivist teaching, on the other hand, is designed to encourage students to make their own decisions and evaluate their own progress. The teacher serves as a coach and resource, sharing the learning process, not controlling it (Driscoll, 1994).

A theme that did emerge from this focus group, as in the student focus groups, that is not included as one of the conditions of social constructivist learning, is the development of a healthy relationship between the teacher and the students. Although this respectful relationship is the result of employing the social constructivist approach, it is not written as a central tenant in the social constructivist literature. Although building a strong relationship with students is not exclusive to the social constructivist approach to teaching, it does provide a context for learning where the needs for both autonomy and belonging are supported (Lebow, 1993). A total of eighteen statements of 147 were directly related to the relationship the teacher develops with the students. Teachers in this group believed that that was what they were actively doing. Teacher D states that "We try to break down the barriers between the teachers and the students and start to build a support web." Students do well when the relationship between the student and the teacher is strong, often marginalized students do not respond to the aggressive, take charge approach. The nurturing of a healthy relationship may be a possible reason why these students do so well in the alternate schools. The ultimate challenge of social

constructivist teaching, according to Lebrow (1993), is the process of giving up control in the learning environment. The perceptions of both the students and the teachers in these focus groups is that their efforts at building a relationship with each other has been rewarding.

Teachers also felt that if a good relationship with the students existed, the academic component of the program would follow. It seems that the longer students are in the alternate system the more they practice taking control of their learning. The younger students explained that they needed a mother figure, that would set down guidelines and enforce rules. The older groups developed their own guidelines and looked to teachers for support, as one would find in a friend. This would support the social constructivist approach, as students would need to have time to adjust to taking control of their learning, particularly after being in the conventional system.

As students continued in the alternate system it becomes apparent that they are not considered passive recipients of instruction that has been designed for them. Instead they are actively involved in determining what their own learning needs are and how those needs can be satisfied. Although each of the alternate schools promote a different degree of academic autonomy, students are encouraged to take control of their own learning. Moreover, students are not likely to become autonomous thinkers and learners if they lack the opportunity to manage their own learning. The biggest drawback of these alternate schools is prepackaged curriculum. There are limitations to the degree of social constructivist instruction that is possible with an individualized program. The social constructivist conditions of social negotiation and nurturance of reflexivity are

minimized. The activities that the student is likely to be engaged in, such as listening or reading privately, is not sufficient to challenge the student's egocentric thinking (Driscoll, 1994), and therefore does not meet the conditions of social constructivist learning. Moreover, the condition of reflexivity is partly supported by the juxtaposition of instructional content and the resulting emphasis on multiple perspectives. Because the packaged curriculum does not encourage multiple perspectives it is difficult for this condition to be meet.

It is interesting to hear Teacher A talk about the work in the alternate school that is meaningful to the students. It is my belief that the work has become meaningful because a meaningful relationship has developed with each student. The teachers have found something in the pre-packed program that has meaning for the student because the teachers have made it a priority to know each student intimately. In the process of developing a relationship these teachers have strengthened the students' tendency to engage in intentional learning processes (Driscoll, 1994).

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study, focus group interviews were used to explore the presence of social constructivist themes in teachers' practicing in public alternative programs. These focus group interviews examined how teachers and adolescents perceive the teaching practices in the public alternative high school. Research has emphasized that the perspectives of teachers and adolescents need to be considered in the exploration of effective teaching practices particularly in the public alternative high school (Conant, 1992; Crump, 1996; Kershaw & Blank,1993; Raywid,1994).

This discussion begins with an overview of the theoretical framework of social constructivist teaching and learning. Subsequently this chapter includes a discussion of the major themes that have emerged from the study. Student-centered instruction was the only social constructivist condition considered that these teachers and students reported as a frequent practice in their alternate schools. The second theme that emerged, student-teacher relationship, was not defined a priori as a social constructivist condition, but was referred to often in the course of the focus group discussions. The discussion of the themes is followed by the implications social constructivist teaching may have on counselling and educational practices in the alternate school and in society. Finally, the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research are presented.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism has evolved as a family of theories about the mind and how it works. Dewey, a contextualist (Prawat & Floden, 1994), believed that values as well as facts can be discovered and sanctioned by experience. Therefore, not only is truth from

this perspective individual, but it is also negotiated with other individuals through experience, culture and language. The value of a social constructivist approach in the classroom is that disagreement as well as compromise provide the impetus for learning and understanding diversity. In this approach, "opposing views become alternatives to be explored rather than competitors to be eliminated" (Roby, 1988, p.173). From this perspective an individual can defend his or her views and understandings without having to defend who he or she is as a person. Lebrow (1993) emphasizes that an underlying principle of social constructivist design and practice is to "do no harm." This edict does not necessarily require that teachers abandon performance objectives and other preferred methods; rather, it is to remind teachers that the goal of social constructivist education includes cognitive, behavioral and affective outcomes.

The social constructivist approach to alternate education implies assisting students to construct their own knowledge through interactions with their social and physical environments. The assumption is that students are intrinsically motivated and self-directed, thus effective teaching capitalizes on the students' motivations to explore, experiment, create, and make sense of their experiences (Novick, 1996).

Students who are encouraged to make choices seem to find motivation in their academic autonomy. I found in this study that students said they enjoyed selecting one academic course and working on it until it was completed. Students said they were motivated to work on one subject because they could get to know the material well. Once they completed one course, they said that they had the confidence to attempt courses that they had more difficulty with. Students also said that they did not have distractions, such

as moving from class to class, subject to subject, and teacher to teacher, so they were better able to concentrate on their work. By allowing students to take increased control of their learning environments, alternate schools have been able to nurture abilities that might not have been manifest in the conventional system.

Five social constructivist themes have been identified by Driscoll (1994). The themes include a student-centered focus, an opportunity for social negotiation, an opportunity to reflect on one's thought processes, the authenticity of instructional learning, and juxtaposed instructional content. Although many of the five conditions outlined by Driscoll (1994) embody instructional principles that were originally derived from other theories, what sets these conditions apart is that they emphasize the process of learning, rather than the product of learning. A process approach, in which students are encouraged to reflect on how they came to know what they know to be true, was evident in this study. Teachers described how the students were encouraged to reflect on the ways they learned best. With this knowledge base students were then able to apply these preferred skills and strengths to other challenges they faced in and outside of the school setting. If students have an understanding of the processes of their learning they are able to contextualize the purpose of their education, which in turn fosters life-long learning.

Findings also revealed that, in many respects, the alternate schools studied continued to function as a conventional school. Teachers said that they were concerned about the test-based nature of their programs, but had not developed a substitute program. Although teachers talk about employing alternate measures that meet the needs of their students, teachers may find it difficult to promote programs that run contrary to the

established and accepted standards of the conventional system. It is evident from the

findings that some social constructivist conditions are being met while others are not.

Social Constructivist Practices in Public Alternate Schools

This section reviews what has been said by teachers and students about the

teaching and learning environment. An interpretation of what was said and how it was

said in the focus groups is then related to social constructivist approach. This section

concludes with a discussion of how the results from the focus groups are related to the

literature on social constructivist thought in education.

One main question I considered was; in what ways are alternate school teachers

practicing social constructivist principles in the classroom? The data the teachers

provided indicate that some social constructivist conditions are being exercised. The

social constructivist condition that was mentioned most often by the students and the

teachers in this study was the student-centered focus of the programs.

An example of student-centered focus was when teachers talked about sitting with

individual students and helping them discover their learning styles. They discussed

focusing instruction on students' interests and passions. Although they spoke about the

limitations of the test-based, pre-programmed curriculum, teachers encouraged students

to do things their own way. With respect to content, much social constructivist

instruction aims to debunk students' naive conceptions or misconceptions, particularly in

the areas of science and mathematics (Driscoll, 1994). The teachers said that they have

encouraged students to use the models that the students have constructed. For example a

student devised his own way of solving specific math problems, the teacher was amazed

with his initiative and encouraged him to use his approach. Statements from the students concur with the teachers' perceptions about student-centered instruction.

Students in this study implied that they are not passive recipients of instruction that has been designed for them. Instead, they perceived themselves as actively involved in determining what their own needs are and how they can be satisfied. It was interesting to hear older students' comments that indicated that they were more able than younger students to take the initiative to assume responsibility for their learning. This may be because the younger students have internalized the institutional hierarchy of our educational system and continue to find their motivation from extrinsic as opposed to the intrinsic means, whereas the older students find meaning and fulfillment in understanding themselves and others better. The older students' comments about the importance of having academic autonomy is consistent with Driscoll's (1994) findings that students are individuals who come to understand that the information and skills learned advance them toward achievement of some larger goal and they can determine that goal themselves.

References to the additional four conditions of social constructivist thought, which are social negotiation, nurturance of reflexivity, juxtaposed instructional content and authentic learning environment, only appeared sporadically throughout the transcripts. I believe that the condition of social negotiation is important to examine because its practice encourages students to come to understand perspectives other than their own. Although this theme was seldom mentioned, these alternate students did engage in social interactions informally. For example, in Alternate School A, the students said that a few students would start a discussion about something they read in the

paper or heard on TV that would grow until everyone, including the teacher, was part of it. However, there did not seem to be a formal portion of the program where social negotiation was fostered. This may be because the students were working on different subjects and were progressing through the subjects at different rates, therefore the teachers may not have felt that it was appropriate for the students to engage in group discussions. It may be that the teachers felt group discussions would take valuable time away from students trying to complete their academic programs. It is also possible that the students who find themselves in the alternate programs would have difficulty concentrating and attending to a group discussion without being distracted or disrupted by the other students. Students talked frequently about having one-on-one time with their teachers, so the responsibility of providing a different perspective on issues is left to the negotiation between the teacher or the child-care worker and the student. This puts a great deal of responsibility on the teacher. Therefore, it is imperative that the teacher reflect on their social, historical and political views and modify their instructional approaches to gain a better understanding of how they may be influencing their students. However such reflexivity did not emerge as a major component of the focus group. It may be that I did not code the data in a way that would reveal this condition.

Thus the condition of reflexivity was only partially apparent in this study. Students believed that they were learning to become more aware of their thinking and learning processes, but there was no indication in the transcripts that would suggest that they were encouraged to critically examine how and what structures create meaning. This may be because teachers have not become aware of the post modern discourse that

critically examines the institutions of the status-quo. Or, possibly the questions asked of teachers in this study may not have opened the topic of philosophical approaches that may have provided the opportunity for them to share their beliefs. Furthermore, at-risk students who compromise the alternate school population may be less likely to turn an analytic lens inward than mainstream students. This study may not have accessed this information because the students were volunteers and those who did not volunteer may have provided some insight into the phenomena of reflexivity.

The condition of authentic, complex activities being explored in the instructional material was also rarely mentioned. One practice that could be considered as an authentic learning activity is the daily circle ceremony offered in Alternate School C. This activity invites the participants to include every part of themselves and their understanding of their surroundings. The activity allows the participants to examine and practice their perceptions of their "reality" that has implications for life long learning. This is a foundation on which students may rely to solve complex problems that they will face in real life. It is important to mention that there were both First Nations and non-First Nations students who attended this school and all individuals were welcome to attend the ceremonies. However such "authentic" experience was not alluded to frequently by teachers or the other student focus group. This may have been because the question was not specifically raised in each focus group.

The fourth social constructivist condition important to my study is the juxtaposed instructional content. Students said that their instructional material did not engage them in experiments or explore material from a wide range of literary works, ideas or theories.

Therefore these students may be provided with only partial understandings of concepts and issues they may be confronted with in their daily experience. Although the teachers see the students in a multiple of learning situations, often these situations take place on outings designed for the purpose of engaging the students in some physical activity that is a reprieve from their academic work. Perhaps teachers could involve their groups in a community clean-up program or in a water shed regeneration program, thus exposing the students to a project that is hands-on, community based and environmentally relevant. If the programs included activities such as these suggested students may awaken to the significance of their influence on the health of their community. The programs could excite students to look at the interrelationships between the ecosystems as opposed to learning isolated facts and figures about water foul or swamp grass.

Although some social constructivist principles seem to be exercised in the alternate schools studied, not all conditions were met. The student-centered focus is the main adaptation these programs have made to the traditional transmission based education. Although implementation of Driscoll's four other themes might enhance the alternate school experience, this study did not find evidence of this. I may not have been able to measure Driscoll's conditions because of the way the the data were analyzed, or it could be that Driscoll's categories are incongruent with the alternate program studied. Yet my experience, from teaching in both the alternate and conventional systems, is that there seems to be more opportunities to employ the social constructivist approach in the alternate setting for several reasons. Teachers in the alternate programs seem to have greater latitude because many educators consider alternate students to be a irredeemable

so they are not concerned about what instruction they get. It is because the students are marginalized that freedom to deviate from the conventional instruction is permitted by administrators and society.

Another reason why teachers have more opportunity to practice social constructivism in the alternate school is because of the low teacher-student ratio. Due to the low ratio there is a chance for increased involvement with the students. Secondly, the alternate programs are not departmentalized as the conventional high schools are. Often teachers in the conventional system only see students on an average of five hours per week for one semester. An alternate teacher may see each student five hours a day, five days a week, for a year or longer. A third reason may be that because teachers see students in a variety of learning situations, they have an opportunity to observe how students react under a multiple of circumstances. So with this greater awareness and understanding of students, compounded with the additional time teachers can spend with students, teachers may be able to academically and socially challenge students more appropriately and effectively. Students may also come to enjoy their schooling, as it becomes a place where confidence and self-esteem are built, along with problem solving and critical thinking skills. See below for a visual summary of the student-centered condition as observed in this study.

In addition, alternate teachers see themselves as working on the fringe of the traditional model actively practicing approaches that are difficult to manage in the conventional system. Programs that are student-centered and self-paced seem to require the teacher to work more intimately with each of the students. Teachers employing this

Theme One

Student-Centered Instruction

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                    ┌──────────────────────────┐
                    │   Less Emphasis on       │
                    │   Academic Competition   │
                    └──────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐
│ Select own      │  │  Self-Paced  │  │ Learn from       │
│ Courses         │  │              │  │ Mistakes         │
└─────────────────┘  └──────────────┘  └──────────────────┘

                    ┌──────────────────────────┐
                    │   Self Regulation        │
                    │   through Skills and     │
                    │   Attitude               │
                    └──────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐
│ Assume More      │  │ Enjoy Attending  │  │ Autonomy and     │
│ Academic         │  │ School           │  │ Belonging        │
│ Responsibility   │  │                  │  │ Supported        │
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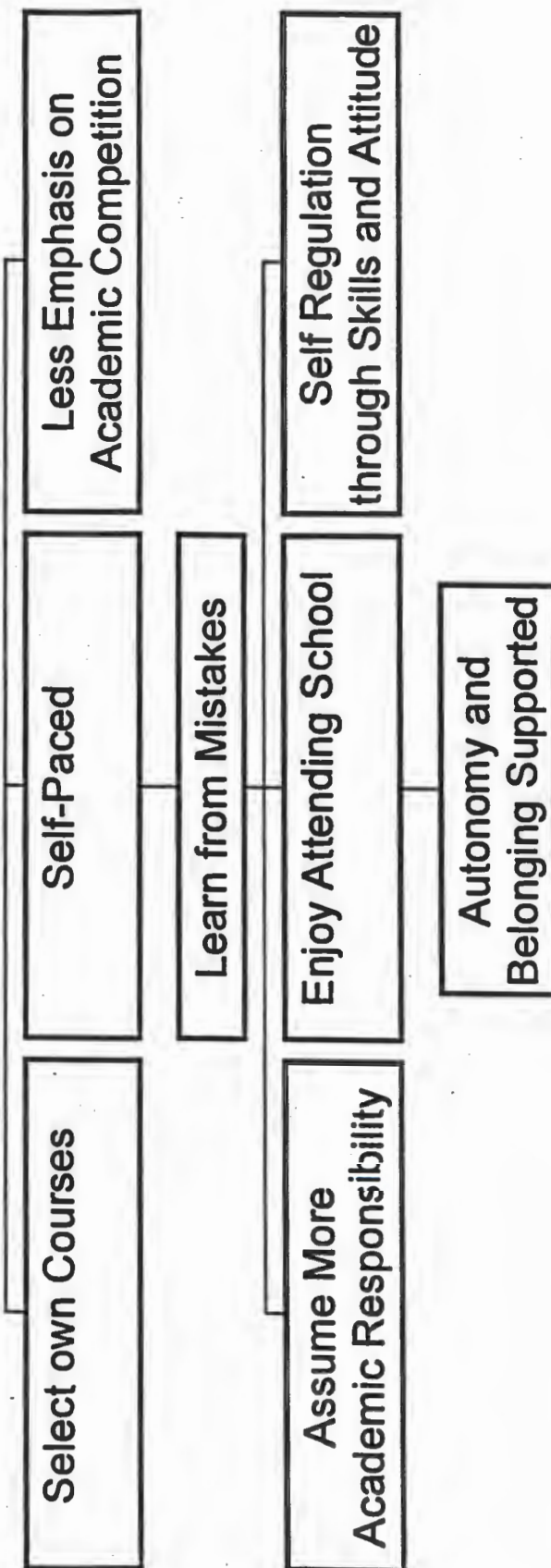
approach said they are doing so because they believe it respects the integrity of the learner. Teachers also mentioned that administrators allow alternate teachers to practice a wider variety of teaching strategies, as long as the students remain in school and are provided with a quality education. These circumstances seem to give the alternate school teacher greater latitude in instructional design and delivery so that through experience and initiative some social constructivist conditions may emerge in their practice. I believe that with continued support and a greater understanding of social constructivist thought, these alternate teachers may continue to broaden their practice of social constructivism as it has been described in the literature.

Raywid (1987, 1994) concurred with the notion that more latitude in the classroom may allow students to make more academic choices so that they will move at their own pace. Her research revealed that students would be encouraged to study topics of interest in greater depth, receive more assistance in difficult areas, and participate in more experiential learning. With these opportunities students may be stimulated to enhance their moral development and self-esteem. The greater autonomy may also allow students to expand their interest in social problems and their inclination toward community involvement. Researchers also reveal that public alternate schools explicitly acknowledge the need to depart from the standard. The demands of the at-risk student population and their own marginalized status within the larger school system require public alternate schools to function continually as problem-solving organizations (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). With this understanding, social constructivism may be particularly appropriate for alternate settings. Alternate teachers

could benefit from the awareness of the conditions so that they could continue to support students with an approach that is congruent with their existing practice. Alternate schools have traditionally been the testing ground for the larger schools (Raywid, 1987). If alternate schools adopt a social constructivist theme, the larger system may see the positive results and begin to apply similar practices.

Student-Teacher Relationships

The student-teacher relationship was a major theme that emerged from the study, but was not one of the pre-defined conditions characterizing the social constructivist approach. Remarks on this theme arose from other research questions that I asked which were: what perceptions do alternate school teachers and students have about the teachers' role, and how do these perceptions influence the ways they interact with each other? Students and teachers stated that their respective alternate schools provide a trusting and safe environment. Students also said having a good relationship with their teacher helps them to alleviate some of the problems they were experiencing in the conventional system. They discussed that their teacher(s) notice when they are have having a difficult day because they know them so well. These students said that when they are dealing with life issues, it was helpful to know that the teacher(s) would take the time to find out what they are going through. The students believed this understanding allows then to be in a better position to progress socially and academically. All students have issues, particularly adolescent students, but these students said that in the conventional school, teachers could not or would not attend to their needs. This is not to say that the alternate

system attends to all the students' issues, but students believe that their needs are addressed more frequently.

Students described how they can be themselves in their respective alternate settings. They mentioned that they do not have to pretend to be someone else, someone who is a composite of someone else's expectations. Students said the reasons for this are, less peer pressure, more confidentiality and a greater connectedness in their respective alternate schools. They also mentioned that they are more sure of themselves and more confident in their ability. Students mentioned that it was different in the conventional school because they were involved in things, such as smoking, swearing, fighting, and skipping classes, that were not viewed as acceptable to the conventional school staff. In the conventional school they were often ostracized and humiliated by their peers and their teachers. This may be because there is less time for each individual in the conventional school system for teachers to get to know the students. Any deviation from expected behavior, in the conventional school, produces a disciplinary procedure that is often intolerant and inflexible of differences.

A great deal of time is necessary to nurture a respectful and trusting relationship, one that is tolerant and flexible. Often the traditional, conventional school teachers do not have the time to develop strong relationships. From a personal perspective I have been able to develop much stronger and continued relationship with alternate students than I was a able to develop with conventional school students. Strong relationships are difficult to develop in the hierarchical and competitive structure of conventional schools, where the practice of submission and control is prevalent, and the class size is much

greater. Raywid's (1994) research reveals that a safe and secure environment is the hinge on which a successful alternate program swings. Students in these alternate schools say that they did not feel safe in their conventional schools. It is difficult to learn in an environment when there is insecurity and anxiety. Herman (1996) believes that students learn better from the people they like, this may be why students have expressed contentment with the alternate school. Social constructivist thought assumes that the learner is protected from the potentially damaging effects of instructional practices (Driscoll, 1994). The students in this study explained that the alternate schools made learning easy because the teachers developed a relationship that made it easy to ask for assistance without being judged or criticized. See below for a visual summary of the student-teacher realtionship as observed in this study.

One difference among the alternate schools in my study is that it seemed that the relationships were stronger between the teachers and the older students. This may be because the older students are more mature and have shared similar experiences with those of their teachers. Older students are also able to describe their relationships better, possibly because they have acquired the emotional vocabulary to express their experiences. It also seemed that as students continued to attend the alternate school, they became more adept and confident with their ability to interact with others. Also, some of the students are working outside the school and are therefore required to interact with many more people. It is also possible that for older students the relationships they have developed with their teachers has fostered the confidence to communicate more effectively with other students and adults in their lives.

Theme Two

Student-Teacher Relationships

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Greater Latitude
in Program Delivery
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Small Teacher-
Student Ratio
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More Time with Students
in the Program
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Greater Support and
Understanding
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Students Develop Greater
Self-worth and Self-confidence
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Students Enjoy the
School Experience
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Students More Prepared to
Accept Emotional Challenges
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Students are Able to Develop
Healthy Relationships
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Students Engage in Life-long Learning
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The direct effect of positive teacher-student relationships is that students are comfortable in their learning environments. Student who are happy seem to be motivated to learn. Students that are motivated to learn often find successes in their efforts. The successes have a direct connection to the students' self-confidence, self-worth and self-efficacy. As students become more confident in their abilities they often produce a greater effort in their studies. With a greater effort and interest in their studies comes the necessity to communicate their new understandings. Therefore a positive student teacher relationship cultivates communicative interaction and the negotiation of meaning. Foucault (1970) emphasizes the need for strong language skills so that each person can participate in the discourses that (de)construct the realities that guide our existence. Without the ability to participate in these discourses, alternate students' voices may be silenced in our society.

Implications for Counselling

Counselling is best understood in terms of the theory that is used to describe it (Hackney & Cormier, 1996). Although there are as many definitions as theories, there is one basic characteristic that pertains to all counselling approaches. That is the active practice of creating and maintaining a trusting relationship (Corey & Corey, 1992). In order for the counsellor to establish a trusting environment Freeman and Combs (1996) emphasize that one must have awareness of one's own ethnic and cultural heritage and how that heritage shapes one's world view. The social constructivist approach to counselling recognizes that the human fabric of "reality" arises through social interactions over time. People together, construct their realities as they live them. It is apparent from

this study that these alternate teachers have effectively established trusting relationships with their students. This is important to counselling, because the relationship between counsellors and students could be enhanced if counsellors used a social constructivist approach. Counsellors who accept a social constructivist view may build trust by providing a tolerant, non-judgmental, environment where the students' "reality" is actively listened to, and accepted. The practice of personal counselling and career planning could benefit from being less directive and more interactive. This in turn, will allow for more input from the students.

It is apparent from this study that students, and perhaps at-risk students in particular, may respond positively to a social constructivist approach to counselling. Counsellors who are able to show respect for students' judgments by providing the latitude for students to ask and answer his/her own questions, recount events and tell stories, particularly if the events and stories reflect preferred paths in their lives may be more effective with alternate students. Counsellors who are able to stay in a speculative questioning mode, balance the inherent properties of language that represent reality as though it were dependent on their construction of it (Freeman & Combs, 1996). "Maintaining this position also protects the counsellor from assuming a hierarchical posture and reconfigures the idea of the counsellor as an expert" (Freeman & Combs, 1996 p. 277). The school counsellor may only be able to provide social constructivist counselling by scheduling sessions for longer than the traditional 15 minutes.

The alternate system is also ideally organized for the adoption of group counselling. Group counselling could be defined according to the conditions of social

constructivist thought and be congruent with the instructional dialogue. Each individual could be accepted with the skills and experiences they bring to class. Students could be encouraged to develop social constructivist attitudes that may allow them to bring about a "return of knowledge" or as Foucault would say "an insurrection of subjugated knowledge's." (Freeman & Combs, 1996). Michael White argues that even in the most marginalized lives there is always "lived experience" that lies outside the domain of the dominant stories that have disempowered those lives. Exercising social constructivist thought, through instructional conditions or through counselling practices

> may bring forth the stories of individuals and groups, and provide an opportunity to perform meaning on those stories, so that people can inhabit and lay claim to the many possibilities for their lives that lay beyond the pale of the dominant narratives (Freeman & Combs, 1996 p. 40).

Implications for Teachers

It could benefit alternate school teachers to become aware that they are exercising some social constructivist learning and teaching practices. It is evident from my study that they are presently using some of these conditions. With a comrnon philosophical understanding, alternate staff may establish a cohesive and comprehensive purpose. The alternate student is typically marginalized by greater society. They are resistant students, students with social, emotional and/or behavioral problems, and students with unique learning styles (Kelly, 1993). These students epitomize the failure of the institution we call education. In the past, self identity and life roles were strongly influenced by traditions, cultural customs and stable norms. With an increased decay of all forms of

tradition, due to the rapidly changing conditions brought on by science and technology, comes an increased doubt in the structures of society (Giddens, 1990). For institutions to cling to the narrative of modernity, means that students will continue to have their voices silenced in the social , political and educational systems where they have the greatest potential to make changes. If teachers were educated to teach and support students in accordance with the social constructivist understanding, students would be the beneficiaries. Students would not be encouraged to embrace the dialogue that marginalizes and limits their participation in society, rather they would be encouraged to co-construct a reality that is more responsible and tolerant for all people in society.

Conceivably universities would offer courses that would introduce education students to social constructivist practices. University faculty could employ a social constructivist approach in their classrooms. The hierarchical power structure on which schools and society are founded would be exposed as reinforcing economic, racial and sexual inequalities. Students could be encouraged to be active participants in creating trusting, respectful and cooperative learning environments which would suit their psychological and emotional needs as well as the intellectual needs. As Postman (1995) argues, humanity, morality and equity are the ideal narratives that could be encouraged through social constructivist practices, and with these ideal narratives comes the possibility of creating a public, not serving it. There are positive recommendations coming from this research, however it is important to recognize its limitations.

Limitations

I am aware of a number of limitations in this study. This study employed a small sample size so it might not be representative of alternate education teachers and students in other communities. Another limitation concerns the coding of data. The data were only coded for evidence of social constructivist practices eliminating data that did not fit into social constructivist categories. Perhaps important information could have been assessed and new parameters of the categories could have been allowed to emerge from the data. This may have provided greater insight into the emergent themes of the study although the discourses that occupied the majority of the student and teacher focus groups was about the student-teacher relationships. In addition the coding was not verified by another individual. A second reader would have enhanced the reliability of the categories that were coded.

The students that did not volunteer to participate may have had a different perception of the alternate school environment. It would be to the researchers advantage to include the all students' voices. The statements of the researcher and the assistant moderator could have been included in the analysis of the data. Social constructivist theory indicates that the researcher influences the discussion. It would have been interesting to see how the researchers compare to the teachers and students in referencing Driscoll's five conditions.

Direction for Future Research

This research could be to replicated to determine the extent of the social constructivist practice in the public alternate system. Research could also be designed to

look at the factors or circumstances that motivate a traditional mainstream teacher to practice a social constructivist approach to education. It seems, because of the emergence of the relationship theme in this research, additional studies into the importance of the relationship between the students and teachers should also be examined. It appears that practice borrowed from the alternate schools has met with some success in the conventional system, therefore the practice of social constructivist teaching and learning could be used and studied in the educational mainstream (Korn, 1991; Young, 1990). An intervention study could also follow-up this study. In such a study the researcher could intervene to teach teachers more about social constructivist practices and trace the changes in their teaching practices and/or beliefs and /or students' beliefs and performance.

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APPENDIX A

Letter of Introduction

Teacher Information Form

Parental Information / Student Consent Form

Teacher Information / Consent Form

Information Form

Hello, I am Larry Johannesen, a graduate student at UNBC. I am working on my thesis. A thesis is a research project which is required for completion of a degree in education. I am a teacher, and have taught for six years in an alternate school in Williams Lake. I thank all of you for attending and choosing to be part of this research project. In this group I will be asking a number of questions to which there are no right or wrong answers.

The purpose of this meeting is to learn from your experiences, perceptions and stories at this alternative school. All points of view, positive and negative are appreciated. The only ground rule is that all opinions and remarks have to be respected, therefore no unwelcome comments, sarcasm or putdowns should be made in response to what others have to say. This does not mean that you have to agree with what someone has said, it simply means that you do not attack them personally for things in which they believe.

I will be tape recording the conversation so that I can listen to it later. The information will be used as data for my thesis. Although some of your conversation my be quoted in the report, you real name will not be used. I plan to record three groups of students, and because the questions will be the same for each group, it is possible that your answer to a question may be the same as another students, only each of you may use different words.

I hope that I will hear from everyone, but you are not going to be forced to talk. If you feel that you have some thing important to share, please share it with the group. I know that this is going to be difficult, because we will all have things that we want to share, but I must ask that we take turns when we talk. Later this tape has to be typed, word for word, and if two or three people are talking at the same time, it will be difficult to understand what has been said. I have provided you with a pencil and paper, so if you have something you want to share and someone else is talking, you can write it down so that your thought will not be lost

Because I do not know who you are I would like you to briefly introduce yourself and tell me one interesting thing that you wouldn't mind sharing with the group. Then a will ask you some questions. At the end of the session I will summarize the session and you will have time to think about what has been said and add anything that may have left out. We will then turn off the tape recorder and close the session with any additional comments.

There are refreshments that you may help yourself to at anytime. You must also understand that you can withdraw at anytime during the session. The session will take approximately 60- 120 minutes.

Teacher Information Form

Social Constructivism in the Public Alternative High School

Dear, _____,

The purpose of this letter is to introduce myself to you and to provide information regarding this study. I am a graduate student completing a master's thesis in Counselling Education at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George. I am on a self-funded leave from my position as a secondary alternate education teacher with School District 27 (Cariboo-Chilcotin). My selection of the topic for my thesis is no reflection of any policy or position of the school district. My interest in alternative education stems from experiences teaching in an alternative setting.

When researching alternative schooling I found a limited selection of literature focusing on my topic. Most research dealt with the various types of alternative schools and information on how to establish an alternative school. Moreover, much of the literature has not discussed the teachers' daily operation within the alternative school environment. The purpose of this study is to explore the operation of the alternative school, from the students' and teachers' perspective, to identify themes in their practice.

I am seeking your help to recruit up to eight student volunteers in your school. I am also seeking a teacher volunteer. Students who choose to participate in this study, will meet in a focus group and discuss questions about the school. This discussion with classmates will be used for data to complete the study. Teachers who choose to participate will meet with teachers from other schools and will discuss questions concerning the operation of their respective schools. Student and teacher groups will each meet once separately for approximately 60-120 minutes.

Strict confidentiality will be maintained in the handling of the data and reporting of results. That means that participants identity will not be revealed. Therefore, teachers will not know the identity of students quoted in the final report. Similarily the identity of the teachers will not be revealed. This study will be conducted according to the university's guidelines for ethical conduct of research. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact me at 964-1178 or contact my supervisor, Dr. Colleen Haney at UNBC, phone 960-5639.

Sincerely

Larry Johannesen

Letter to Parents

Social Constructivism in the Public Alternative High School

Parental Information and Consent Form

Dear Parents:

A study of public alternative education is being conducted by a masters student, in Counselling Education at the University of Northern British Columbia. Larry Johannesen will use this project for his M.Ed thesis in the Faculty of Health and a Human Sciences, Education Program. The student volunteers will be asked to discuss their perceptions of the school they are presently attending to identify practices and principles that may be present in its daily operation. The group will include 6-8 peers from your son or daughter's school. The group will meet once for approximately 60-120 minutes and their discussion will be audio-taped.

Your son or daughter's participation is purely voluntary and strict confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study. This means that your son or daughter does not have to participate but will do so only if you consent by signing the bottom of this form, and if you son or daughter provides consent also. Your son or daughter may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Your son or daughter will not be required to disclose their name on the audio tape, or in any other way identify him/her self in the study.

Should you have any questions about this research, you may call either Dr. Colleen Haney (960-5639) at U.N.B.C., or Larry Johannesen (964-1178).

_____

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

I _____ have read the above information and I understand the procedures to be used in this study. I also understand that my son or daughter's participation in this study is purely voluntary and can be terminated at any time upon my or my son or daughters' request without penalty. My signature below certifies that I consent to my son or daughter's participation in this study and I acknowledge receipt of a copy of this consent form

Name of student _____ Date _____

_____ Signature of Parent/Guardian

Teacher Information and Consent Form

Social Constructivism in the Public Alternative School

Dear Teacher:

A study of public alternative education is being conducted by a masters student, Counselling Education at the University of Northern British Columbia. Larry Johannesen will use this project for his M.Ed thesis in the Faculty of Health and a Human Sciences, Education Program. The teacher volunteers will be asked to discuss their perceptions of the school they are presently teaching in to identify practices and principles that may be present in its daily operation. The group will include 6-8 colleagues from alternative schools. The group will meet once for approximately 60-120 minutes and your discussion will be audio-taped.

Your participation is purely voluntary and strict confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study. This means that you do not have to participate but will do so only if you consent by signing the bottom of this form. You may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You will not be required to disclose your name on the audio-tape, or in any other way identify yourself in the study.

Should you have any questions about this research, you may call either Dr. Colleen Haney (960-5639) at U.N.B.C., or Larry Johannesen (964-1178).

CONSENT FORM

I _____ have read the above information and I understand the procedures to be used in this study. I also understand that my participation in this study is purely voluntary and can be terminated at any time upon my request without penalty. My signature below certifies that I consent to participation in this study and I acknowledge receipt of a copy of this consent form

Name of student _____ Date _____

_____ Signature

APPENDIX B

Student Focus Group Protocol
Teacher Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Questions: Student

Social Constructivism in the Public Alternative School

Areas to be explored: student-centered focus, the opportunity for social negotiation, the opportunity to reflect on one's thought processes, the authenticity of instructional learning, and the juxtaposed instructional content.

a) Can you tell me a little bit about the work (classwork/homework/activities) that you are required to do at this school.

Probe: How is it the same or different from other schools you have attended?

Probe: How does the structure of the alternative program differ from other schools you have attended? (ie., flexible timetable, days of attendance or the ability to work around a job or family commitments). Explain

Probe: How do teachers encourage you at this school? (ie., to take the initiative or responsibility for your learning) Explain.

Probe: What choices do you have about learning materials? (Can you give me an example?)

Probe: Can you tell me about your progress at this school?

Probe: What do you think are the reasons for your progress?

Probe: How are you evaluated at this school? (Is it different at this school than other schools you have attended?)

b) How would you describe the relationship between the teachers and the students at this school?

Probe: Can you explain how this is the same or different from other schools you have attended?

Probe: How would your teacher describe the students attending this school if they had to explain your class to someone who does not know you?

Probe: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your teacher at this school?

Concluding Questions

a) How would things (ie., routines / school work / relationships / achievement) be different if you were back at your old school?

b) If you were the teacher at this school, what would you suggest to make this an even better school?

c) If you were describing this school to a friend what would you say to him or her?

d) Is there anything you want to add or ask that you feel is important and has not been talked about.

Focus Group Questions: Teacher

Social Constructivism in the Public Alternative School

Areas to be explored: student-centered focus, the opportunity for social negotiation, the opportunity to reflect on one's thought processes, the authenticity of instructional learning, and the juxtaposed instructional content.

a) What circumstances led you to become a teacher in this school?

Probe : How would you characterize your relationship with the students at this school?

Probe: In what ways is this the same as other schools you have taught at?

Probe: In what ways is this the same as other schools you have taught at?

b) In what ways do instructional strategies and behavior management approaches differ from schools you have taught at?

Probe: Are there things teachers are able to do in this setting that teachers in other settings are unable to do? Explain.

Probe: What progress do you see in your students during their stay at this school? What do you attribute that progress to?

Probe: In what ways do alternative curriculums differ from conventional curriculums?

Probe: Describe the advantages and disadvantages in the delivery of alternative curriculums?

Probe: Describe the advantages and disadvantages in the content of the alternative curriculums.

c) In what ways do students take responsibility for their own learning?

Probe: What are the indicators that tell you they are being responsible for their own learning?

Probe: What are students able to do in this setting that other students in   other classrooms can not do?

Concluding Questions:

a) If you were a student at your alternative school what would you say about your teacher?

b) What kind of things get in the way of your doing what you perceive to be important?

c) If you were describing your school to someone who did not know about your program what would you say to him or her?

d) How does your personal life influence your professional life at the alternative school, and visa versa?

e) What have you learned through your experiences at this school that would be beneficial to other high school teachers?

f) Is there anything that has not been asked that is important to your work or student progress in your school setting? Please add any thoughts that you feel might be pertinent.

APPENDIX C

Student Focus Group Demographic

Teacher Group Demographic

Student Demographic Form

<u>Demographic Information: Student</u>

Please answer the following questions about yourself, by CHECKING the statement that best describes you (unless otherwise indicated). You may need to check more than one statement. Your responses will only be seen by the researcher and one research assistant. Please do not your put your name on this sheet.

1. What is your age _____

2. Which of the following people encouraged you to make the decision to come to the alternative school?

School counsellor	( )
Teacher(s)	( )
Friend(s)	( )
Family member	( )
Personal decision	( )
Other	( ) Specify _____

3. To which ethnic group do you belong?

Western European	( )
Eastern European	( )
First Nations	( )
Caucasian	( )
Hispanic	( )
East Indian	( )
Asian	( )
Middle Easterner	( )
African	( )
Other	( ) Specify _____

4. How long have you attended this alternate education school?

0-2 months	( )
more than 2 mon. but less than 5	( )
more than 5 mon. but less than 10	( )
10 or more months	( )

5. As a student at this alternative school describe what you believe is the most outstanding thing about your teachers.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Teacher Demographic Form

<u>Demographic Information: Teacher</u>

Please answer the following questions about yourself, by CHECKING the statement that best describes you (unless otherwise indicated). You may need to check more than one statement. Your responses will only be seen by the researcher and one research assistant. Please do not your put your name on this sheet.

1. What is your age _____

2. To which ethnic group do you belong?

Western European	( )
Eastern European	( )
First Nations	( )
Caucasian	( )
Hispanic	( )
East Indian	( )
Asian	( )
Middle Easterner	( )
African	( )
Other	( ) Specify _____

3. How long have been a teacher?

0-2 years	( )
more than 2 years but less than 5	( )
more than 5 years but less than 10	( )
10 or more years	( )

4. How long have you been an alternate education teacher?

0-2 years	( )
more than 2 years but less than 5	( )
more than 5 years but less than 10	( )
10 or more years	( )

5. As a teacher at this alternative school describe what you believe is the most outstanding thing about your assignment.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX D

Wheel-Map of Focus Group Four
Wheel-Map of Focus Group Five

Wheel-Map of Focus Group Four

Wheel-Map of Focus Group Four

Center of wheel:

PRAISE
POSITIVE
ENVIRON
SELF ESTEEM
HELP MOTIVATION.

SELF AWARENESS

ONLY NEED TO PUT IN A COUPLE OF HOURS A WEEK.

EXPELLING MOTHER.
SHOULD 26%.

UNIFYING THEME

Radiating spokes (clockwise from top):

- WORK AT OWN PACE
- THEY DON'T SHOVE SO MUCH CRAP IN YOUR BRAIN YOU ONLY NEED TO KNOW HALF OR THAT STUFF.
- WORK IS MODIFIED, IF YOU KNOW IT YOU MOVE ON
- TEACHERS IN REGULAR SYSTEM SAYS THEIR WAY OR NO WAY
- REGULAR SYSTEM DOESN'T LET YOU EXPRESS YOUR OWN OPINIONS
- HERE WE ARE ALLOWED TO HAVE OUR OWN OPINIONS
- LIFE SKILLS/AUTHENTIC ACTIVITIES FIRST AID FOOD SAFE WORK EXPERIENCE
- TREATED LIKE ADULTS 1ST NAME BASIS.
- THEY DON'T JUDGE US
- SELF PACED/GET FINISHED FAST THAT REG. SYSTEM.
- DON'T HAVE PEOPLE PUSHING/ONLY IF YOU NEED IT.
- FLEXIBLE/CAN'T GET BEHIND/YOU DON'T FEEL THE RACE LIKE YOU DO IN THE REG. SYSTEM. YOU COME WHEN YOU WANT, YOU JUST HAVE TO COME SUCH MUCH
- STUDENTS WORK AND ATTEND SCHOOL
- THEY RESPECT ME, I RESPECT THEM
- THEY MAKE YOU FEEL GOOD. NOT LIKE REG. TEACHERS.
- THEY ACCEPT YOU EVEN IF YOU ARE PREGNANT
- THEY SUPPORT YOU.
- WE ARE ADULTS LIVE ON OUR OWN WE CAN'T TO SCHOOL ALL DAY.
- TEACHERS PRAISE, POSITIVE ATTITUDE
- THEY ENCOURAGE US TO BE POSITIVE, GIVE US LITTLE REWARDS, GUM/POP, DO MAGIC TRICKS
- TEACHER HAVE RESPECT FOR US
- A NEW TEACHER "MELLOWED OUT" SHE WAS VERY BOSSY, SHE TRIED THE HIGH SCHOOL STYLE AND IT JUST WASN'T WORKING KINDA HAD TO SWITCH GEARS A BIT.
- CHILD CARES WORKS ARE LIKE COUNSELLORS TEACHERS ARE S TEACHERS, BUT THEY ARE PEOPLE YOU CAN TALK TO
- ATTENDANCE IS IMPORTANT. RESPONSIBILITY IS STUDENTS, TEACHERS PHONE TO MAKE EVERYTHING IS OK. NOT TO CHECK-UP BUT TO CHECK-UP
- CAN TALK ON CONSTANTS IN PROGRAM, ELECTIVES AT HIGH SCHOOL
- CAN PLAY SOFTBALL/COMPUTER/COLLEGE LIBRARY ACTIVITIES, CAN MAKE CHOICES, PLAY
- DON'T HAVE TO BE ACTIVITIES, NEED TO HAVE STEP
- ACTIVITIES SHOULD I HAVE MORE PROGRAMS LIKE THIS CONNECTED TO A SCHOOL
- TOO MUCH PEER PRESSURE (NEGATIVE) AT HIGH SCHOOL
- HOW DO YOU MANAGE AT OTHER SCHOOLS? PEOPLE MAKES MATURE IN ALT / BUT YOU WANT TO BE OLD SO YOU PUT UP WITH IT. (THE IMMATURITY)
- TEACHERS SHOW YOU, THEY SIT AND HELP YOU GOING THIS STEP YOU NEED TO TAKE (HELP FILL OUT APPLICATION FORMS)
- YOU WON'T FIND ANOTHER ACT. LIKE THIS ONE THIS IS THE BEST. (NO PROGRAMS AS PERSONAL)
- YOU FEEL CONFORTABLE, HE SHOWS YOU WHERE THE DOOR. (POSITIVE, CHEERFUL PROFS)
- THEY SIT DOWN AND WORK THINGS THROUGH WITH YOU.
- A MISTAKE THEY ACCEPT THAT MISTAKE AND
- ATTENTION THEY KNOW US HOW WE ARE NOT JUST WE HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS
- GIRLFRIEND'S I'M SUPPOSED TO
- YOU FEEL LIKE TO LEARN YOURSELF HERE
- A HIGH SPIRIT HELP
- TEAM TEACHER TEACHES THE SAME SAME WAY
- LEARN A DIFFERENT DIFFICULTY COMPREHENSION
- TS OF ENCOURAGEMENT ARE FUN
- OF THEIR WAY TO GOOD THINGS
- ENOUGH GRADES, THERE IT'S NOT A
- THIS WAY, I'M MOTIVATED WORK, I'M MOTIVATED
- SINCE I'VE COME HERE, I FEEL LIKE I ACHIEVE BEING +
- MATURE YOUNG ADULTS THEY TALK ABOUT TEACHERS
- AN INTEREST IN ME.
- THEY ARE HERE BECAUSE THEY WANT TO PLAY - THEY TALK
- LIKE A FAMILY HERE COMMUNITY TO BE MORE I'M PROUD WE HAVE SAID

Central hub:

PROGRAM NOT ALIKE

WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES LEAD YOU TO BECOME INVOLVED IN ALT ED.

(CONFLICT) — TEACH TELLS P.SS WHAT DISRUPTS — TEACHER DOES NOT GET UPSET WHO'S UPSET

BUILD-UP / BREAK-DOWN

TEACHERS DISTINGUISH BETWEEN TS & YCW ROLES.

ISSUE: CONFLICT — WORKING ON ACADEMICS

RIOT

PRAISE DEBATE