

University of Alberta

**Effective Teaching Practices for Working
With At-Risk Inner City Youth:
How Trauma Affects Learning**

by

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This final project is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and accept the document entitled

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my children, my daughter Laurel who left early but who continues to be a part of my daily life, and my two sons, Conor and Dustin, whose love, humour, support and conversations have stimulated my own personal learning and growth over these many years,

to my partner, Dave, who has given me invaluable insight into the world in which I work, and has challenged my Western ideas with compassion and good humour

and

to the many students who have crossed my path on their travels to what I hope is a better life.

Abstract

Inner city youth who are at high risk for any number of complications in their lives, have traditionally had struggles within the school systems that have been set up for a more mainstream population. This project set out to discover what does work for these students in terms of school programs, by interviewing students and teachers who work within an inner city Charter school that has been designed to meet the educational needs of these youth. This project also examines the results of trauma on learning and how this reality compromises the learning abilities of inner city youth who have experienced much of this in their lives.

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Statement of Intent

- To better understand what some of the learning issues may be for students who have enrolled in Boyle Street Education Centre and in particular to research how experiencing repeated trauma impacts their ability to be successful in school.
- To research literature to better understand teaching strategies that address the learning needs of students who have experienced extreme trauma (SWEET).
- To explore how the teachers and students understand and address these learning needs.

Purpose and Introduction of this Project

I work as the Assistant Principal in a school dedicated to the engagement of inner city street-involved youth back into the learning process. When I started this project, I thought I would be researching the specific learning needs of the students who attend our school. What I discovered changed the focus of my research. My work expanded to look at the impact that high levels of trauma have on a student's ability to learn and progress within the structured environment of a school and how trauma can compromise the brain's readiness to absorb information. I call these youth *students who have experienced extreme trauma* (SWEET). My focus remained the same, that of researching teaching strategies that support the learning of these youth; however, the research became based around how trauma in early life affects learning and behaviour for these youth throughout their school experience.

The youth who enter our doors come with a variety of needs. They may be homeless, involved in criminal activity, lacking sleep, food, clothing and shelter. They may be under the influence of some drug or alcohol. They may be surviving multiple losses, years in the child welfare system, and they most assuredly are survivors of trauma. As well, they may be talented "hip hop" artists, graffiti or First Nation artists, poets, singers, athletes, storytellers and/or writers. In short, they may be hiding talents that any group of youth may develop given the opportunity. Our work is to engage them long enough at school so that we may uncover their strengths and support them in looking at a new way of being; one which leads them away from crime, chaos and loss, to one which includes acknowledgement and the possibility of successful attainment of needed skills to go forward into a life that has more options than the one they came from.

Meeting the intense and diverse learning needs of our population of students is challenging. Many of our students are living with learning disabilities, chaotic life situations, violence and poverty. Many of our students have been affected by Fetal Alcohol Effects, attention deficit disorders, conduct disorders, trauma, and addictions. Most have not been supported by their parents in their learning and some have not been cared for in a meaningful way. This is primarily due to the complex situations that their parents have found themselves in and their inability to care for their children due to their own overwhelming needs. Many of our students even with all of their issues are the most functional adults in their own lives.

It is easy to find yourself overwhelmed by the intense personal situations that the students bring to school. The best teaching plans get thrown out the window when you are faced with the fact that one of your students has committed suicide, or that the young person sitting in front of you has no home to go to after school that day. The latest scientific theory or the play about the death of a middle aged salesman is hard to teach when you know that this child's mother is on the street and your student has to go looking for her. Nevertheless, teachers have to rise above the tragedies and carry on with their educational plans whenever the opportunity presents itself.

My project grew naturally out of a need to better understand the learning issues that our students, who have experienced extreme trauma, bring with them to school. I also wanted to research ideas and strategies for learning that teachers, working within this environment, could implement. I wanted to add to our existing programs a body of research to better ensure positive learning outcomes for our students. My research

combined current literature as well as the voices of former students and staff that attended or worked in our school.

As much as I wanted to concentrate only on the school day of our students and how to best meet their learning needs for this specific time, I learned once again that you cannot separate the student from their lived experiences. However, one does not have to focus solely on this lived experience to the exclusion of learning needs.

What I hoped to accomplish was to combine the information regarding how surviving trauma affects the learning of our youth along with the latest information regarding how to teach to incorporate these realities into our classrooms and teaching strategies. One of the reasons that this work remains exhausting is that it feels like you are fighting on all fronts; fighting to get our students to school, fighting to keep them in school, fighting to find programs or ideas that will help them learn and then fighting to fund the type of programs that may give these students a chance to lessen the gaps in their knowledge and to provide them with a safe and secure educational experience. My hope is that my research will be of some interest and perhaps some help in the on-going work to gather students off the streets and to keep them in school.

Our school has already developed many programs that address these realities, but I hope to add to this body of knowledge to better support positive learning experiences for students such as ours and for the students specifically within our own school.

I have purposefully not studied the generational and historical issues surrounding the experiences of First Nation's people. I am aware of the political policies and decisions that have led to the severely traumatic and horrific legacy that First Nations people have inherited at the hands of my predecessors, policies that led to a deeper pain

than what I have words for. As a person of Western European descent, I did not think that I needed to add my voice to the vast amounts of information regarding the impact that political decisions have had on First Nations people, or even the current policies that give lip service but do little to truly chart a more respectful path in our on-going journey. Those voices would more suitably be First Nation's voices.

As well, I did not study the root social causes of the many social issues facing our students such as poverty, inadequate housing, addiction, deep and profound loss of family. Indeed some writers (Riddell, 2005) would describe our students as learning disadvantaged rather than learning disabled as the conditions into which they are born, have a negative impact on their abilities to achieve success in school.

I also did not study the amazing strength, depth and beauty of the cultures of people who come to our school that I see reflected in their compassion and empathy for others or their deeply meaningful spiritual practices that I have been fortunate enough to have been included in. I did not include here their humour which can be heard ringing out even in some of the most desperate places.

The common experience that I researched was the impact of trauma on the learning of students who for many different reasons were excluded from the public schools. I sought to understand what could be going on with their learning that caused them to repeat behaviours that continued to cause them failure at school, and to shed some light on the real and lasting effects that trauma has on student success in school. In part, I wanted to understand why teaching at BSEC is so challenging and the rewards so hard fought for.

Background Information on Boyle Street Education Centre

Boyle Street Education Centre is a public charter school, which seeks to address the learning needs of inner-city street involved youth who have become disengaged with the existing school systems. When students are accepted into our school it is because they have been excluded from the regular school system. Boyle Street Education Centre was incorporated as a charter school in September 1995 and has been in operation since that time.

The Boyle Street Education Centre came into existence as an extension of programs initiated by the Boyle Street Co-op. The Boyle Street Co-op is a community agency primarily serving an adult inner city population in Edmonton and has been a centre for care and support of this population for over thirty years. The attempt to engage the youth who followed the adult population into the Boyle Street Co-op led eventually to the formation of the Boyle Street Education Centre as a charter school.

The Education Centre has had a long history beginning with the Boyle Street Co-op. The Boyle Street Co-op did not intend to have a school grow out of their agency but when youth kept showing up at their doors, they realized that something needed to be done to support this group of youth who had nowhere else to go. The youth were coming voluntarily to this agency and so the support workers began to engage them in different programs. Youth support workers were assigned to work specifically with this youth population and led to first Youth Unit of the Co-op.

The workers first attempted to work with existing schools to see if these students could be drawn back into the public school systems. This proved unsuccessful as schools were reluctant to accept these youth, and the youth were reluctant to return to a system

where they had failed in the past. They did, however, regularly attend the Boyle Street Youth Unit. The Co-op staff then secured a teacher to work with these students within the Boyle Street Youth unit setting and eventually there were enough students attending these lessons for the agency to set up a classroom for them. At this time there was one teacher plus volunteers and little to no resources to support the learning of this youth.

When the Charter school regulations were established in Alberta, the staff from the Co-op thought that applying for a Charter school to serve this specific student population could prove to be the most successful way to attend to the students' learning needs. The Boyle Street Education Centre Charter School came into existence in September, 1995 in a newly renovated basement of the current Boyle Street Co-op building.

It was in November of 1995 that I joined the staff of the Boyle Street Education Centre. We were housed in the basement of the inner city agency, which combined the work of overseeing the school as well as the work of meeting the needs of inner city adults. The needs of these adults were vast and encompassed mental health work, HIV and AIDS work, housing and social advocacy work, as well as awareness raising and community building work. The adults were upstairs and the youth were downstairs.

The school was designed on a relational and community approach to education, which followed the philosophy of the Co-op. The school was supported by many of the programs within the Co-op such as the housing registry, the nurses' program and the youth workers. The relational approach to teaching meant that as teachers, we had to understand that learning with this group of marginalized youth would only take place if first there was a relationship of trust established. Each of our students had to walk this

journey of trust with us. Much of our time was spent developing relationships with our students and trying to provide for them a secure and safe environment in which to establish their learning. The community aspect of the school grew out of the concept that even though there were many hard times for the people in both the Coop and the school, there were also strengths and times of celebration. Offering a school space within a community-based helping agency added a sense of hope and gave everyone a sense of place and of belonging.

The most memorable community event for me, in which both the Coop and the school co-operated, was a celebration of the volunteer programs. This was an event organized by one of the Coop staff where the whole community came together and participated in the celebration of its volunteers. The school Foods Program organized and prepared the food. The Fashion Studies class put on a fashion show. The Mental Health program of the Coop did some of the modeling of the clothes and crafts that were made. The volunteers of the Coop cleaned and decorated the main common area of the Coop for the event. Everyone joined in and there was an incredible sense of community and hope. This evening demonstrated the hard work that everyone was willing to put in to make the community idea of education a success. Community events offset the daily harsh realities of what life was like for people living with poverty and late stage addictions. These events took many hours of organizing and because of the demands of time and resources, they rarely occurred.

The other side of trying to operate a school within the walls of the inner city adult agency gave the school staff extremely complex issues to grapple with. Although everyone did their best to support the youth in our school program, it was extremely

difficult to provide the necessary level of safety and security for our students. The inner city adults were experiencing varying degrees of addiction, poverty and violence and this spilled over into our school. Students were bringing stories into the school of being afraid, of being subjected to adults in varying states of drug and alcohol addictions, of being propositioned to take part in criminal activity, of finding used needles and drug-related paraphernalia in the bathrooms, and other related incidents. Our students were not innocent, in that much of this was a familiar part of life to them, but they resented, and rightfully so, having to deal with this not only at home but also within their school.

During the first five years of our charter, we simply survived and pulled together whatever programs we could that would keep our students somewhat engaged, somewhat safe and somewhat positioned on a very tenuous educational journey. We developed the core academic classes and along with these we began to offer classes that would serve some of the other needs of our students. These classes were: a Fashion Study class where students could sew and fix their own clothes, a Cosmetology class where students could wash and style their hair and a Foods program where students made lunch for staff and students and also where students could develop cooking skills.

Students who qualified, were able to access funding programs that helped pay for their rent and sometimes allowed them to find a safer place to live. Still many days were full of the knowledge that our students had severe problems over which we had no control and advancing through courses was often the last thing on their minds. We were all aware of the short comings of our school and our programs, but we had neither the personnel nor the resources to address all of the issues.

During our second five- year charter, we started to raise our heads above the daily chaos of our students' lives. We worked tirelessly to develop programs that built on our students' talents and interests as a forum to acknowledge their strengths. We designed programs that combined the students' talents within the context of the Alberta curriculum so that we could offer not only time for them to do what they loved, but also the opportunity to gain credits from these activities. We further developed our option courses to include a "hip-hop" based music program which focused on the creation of student lyrics and allowed them a forum for their own expression. The Cree language and Culture class gave them the opportunity to explore and celebrate many aspects of their culture. The work experience program allowed them to remain connected to the school even if they had to obtain employment in order to live. We also developed Art and beginning Computer classes. We chose option classes based on our students' interests and tried to offer opportunities that would keep them inspired enough to continue with school. We continued to try different strategies for handling students' crises and to find resource people who could help them stabilize their out -of- school lives.

It was during the third year of our second five-year charter that a movement formed, spearheaded by the youth in our program, to look at an alternative venue within which we could offer the school program. Our students had become increasingly impatient and angry with their school environment which continued to be greatly impacted by the actions of the adults who also were members of the community. Their school was being looked down upon in the wider community and as well that they were still being subjected to an unsafe school experience.

There was also a political movement which affected our school. Alberta Education announced that Charter schools had to have their own School Board. This meant that the Co-op Board, which previously oversaw both the Co-op and the school, had to be split into one for the Co-op and one for the School. The Boyle Street School Board now had the mandate to concentrate more fully on school issues. There was a series of meetings to discuss the pros and cons of the school having a different site, and eventually the school moved into its own self-contained building in the fall of 2004. It was a leap of faith and not without hard feelings on the part of the people in the community centre who were left behind and who had worked so hard to establish a school within the inner city agency. Even so, the school board, staff and students felt strongly that the former environment was not conducive to positive change. Although we established a school in a separate building, we kept many of our ties with the Co-op.

Due to the overwhelming environmental issues of our original site and the unrelenting dysfunctional lives that our students led, it is no wonder that during our first years as a school, we had to focus our attention on the social issues affecting our students. Their educational needs were vastly overshadowed by the very real and very serious societal failings that put our students in daily crisis and at risk.

It was upon the move to the new school site that teachers were able to begin to shift their sight from the complex social issues of our students, to the complex learning issues of our students. We were able to begin this change due to the wrap around social and emotional services that we were able to provide for students in the new site which included youth and student counselors, an on-site psychologist as well as visiting health care, counseling and AADAC professionals.

With the move into the new school building, we had a series of reflective meetings with the Coop staff, the School staff and our School Board. We re-visited and re-committed ourselves to our Mission, Vision, and Purpose statements. These statements taken from our Charter are as follows:

Mission Statement

The Boyle Street Education Centre believes that socially, economically and otherwise disadvantaged students deserve the opportunity for full and equal participation in the life of Alberta. The Centre further believes that the provision of a holistic education program within the context of a multi-disciplinary community model and a supportive environment will maximize opportunities for students and that such education must be student centered and student driven.

Vision Statement

Our vision is to be an education centre that is holistic in nature and aspires to facilitate the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual growth of students who have previously been unsuccessful or have had interruptions in their school experience.

Students will:

- maximize their capacity to pursue post-secondary learning if they choose to do so;
- enter the workforce, and;
- understand the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Purpose Statement

Our purpose is to promote the success of students who are at-risk youth or who have been out of school in their goals of education, including the acquisition of social and employability skills so they may be responsible, caring and contributing members of

society; and to encourage the participation in and commitment to the education process by parents and caregivers, students and the community. It was during this visioning process that we had a chance to envision new priorities for our continued work with our student population.

On-going Evolution of BSEC

Boyle Street Education Centre is now into its third five- year charter. With the creation of new positions and support for our students, teachers are able to dedicate time and thought into making further academic change possible for our students. Attention is focused not only the social risk factors for our students, but on the academic risk factors for students. Students have not changed their demographic. They are still at risk emotionally and socially in nearly every aspect of their lives and they still bring these stories to school on a daily basis. Likely, 100% of our students, if one were able to spend the moments it would take to hear their stories, would describe a lived experience that few of us could imagine.

To support our students' learning within the classrooms we now have an on-site psychologist plus an additional psychologist and a counselor from the community who are here on a weekly basis. We have an AADAC worker who comes regularly and nurses who come every week. We have access to supply teachers and a teacher assistant. We have developed a literacy program two blocks each day for support for our most severe learning disabled students. We have two in- school counselors and an Assistant Principal who share student support work from housing to funding to student exit planning. We are currently developing a team approach to addressing individual student

learning needs which includes members from our counseling, teaching and administration staff.

It is as a direct result of being able to sustain staff positions which help in the emotional, psychological, financial, and life skill areas of our students' lives, that teachers can better focus on the learning issues that are presented within the classroom. The teachers are no longer the only people available to support students through crisis. This is a major paradigm shift for teachers at BSEC and a great opportunity to be able to concentrate on discovering and implementing programs to improve and advance learning opportunities for our students.

It was within this context that instructional leadership was added to the role of Assistant Principal. This project grew out of a desire to better understand the learning and behaviour difficulties that students have when they come to BSEC and to find ideas and strategies that may help us in being a better place of learning.

Literature Review

Students who come to school at BSEC have endured numerous traumatic experiences in their lives. Trauma, as defined here, is an emotional shock that has long lasting effects on the victim. The types of trauma most commonly experienced by our student population would be the witnessing or participation in violent episodes within the family or community, combined with a lack of predictable and dependable care. These experiences could be the result of alcohol or drug addiction, and could lead to loss of family members through death, through incarceration, through child welfare involvement, or through violence in the home or community. Based on the intake information that we gather when students enter our school program, 90% of the students at our school are survivors of these factors in their lives. Students who experience extreme trauma (SWEET) and who find their way to our school have been previously unsuccessful in the Public or Separate schools in Edmonton. Throughout history, there have been segments of our populations who have been failed by the institutions set in place by the larger society. Our students fall into this category. Still, these young people have an understanding that education is important in order for them to have a chance at better lives and successful careers. They can see the dream of a better life, but they are not living it and it is difficult for them to truly believe that they have the right to participate in that dream.

Recent and current research is exploding with possible reasons why SWEET have not previously met with success in school or societal systems and gives clues as to what

may be happening for them as they struggle to fit in and learn. This information provides insight into how the brain reacts to trauma and the resulting consequences for both students and teachers. There are an abundance of different ideas regarding the most productive teaching strategies and methods, which could address the individual learning needs that have arisen for these students and the learning deficits which have followed. Finally, on the political side, there is a call for awareness of the possible agendas that governments may have that underscores their unwillingness to address the root causes of trauma for the most high risk of our population, those living in poverty with inadequate housing and supports to meet their daily living needs, those living with mental health issues, addiction issues etc. This has had an impact on setting the tone of the current educational climate. This climate with its emphasis on testing and accountability has further discriminated against struggling students already falling through the cracks due to the life situations in which they were born.

I have had previous years of experience working with students who have had traumatic life events. From 1985 to 1995, I was the director of an adult education facility in Edmonton, AB. I worked with First Nations adults re-entering school to improve their education levels in order to improve their employment potential. During the years that I taught there, I came to see a pattern develop in the education process. It appeared to me at the time, that there was some connection between re-establishing learning and re-experiencing prior trauma within the students' lives. A student would begin the year with positive intentions, plans and goals only to lose their way further into the year. Overwhelming emotional experiences would prove to be insurmountable and as they were unable to overcome this negative impact on their learning, they would often leave

school once again. I believed, at the time, that the academic work of relearning somehow activated memories of students' previous life experiences. Because this pattern repeated and could be predicted, I would attempt to bring this awareness to our students and looked for ways to support their learning through this time of turmoil. Even though I had no idea of the connections between trauma and learning I witnessed the results every year and as a teacher I felt overwhelmed and ineffective, as I was no match for the power of the past in the current learning lives of those students.

Many years later, I now have the time and opportunity to study this phenomenon further. Literature that I have reviewed for this project points to the reality that experiences which create the memories of childhood follow us long into our lives and can have reverberations even into our adult experiences.

The 'organizing framework' for children's development is based on the creation of 'memories'...Memories are an indelible impression of the world; they are the way in which the brain stores information for easy retrieval...But if the early environment is abusive or neglectful, our brains will create memories of these experiences that may adversely color our view of the world throughout our life (Perry, 1999).

I now work with younger students who are also re-entering school after a briefer time away, and again are hopeful that they will be successful this time. Once again I find myself with students who have experienced a high degree of trauma in their lives and as a teacher and instructional leader, I believe that it is my responsibility to try to understand the connection between trauma and learning, not only for myself but also for the teachers in our school and others who find themselves working in this field.

To understand how trauma in childhood can alter the learning experiences of a student in high school it is imperative to have at least a rudimentary understanding of how the brain develops.

Brain development or learning is actually the process of creating, strengthening and discarding connections among neurons; these connections are called synapses... These are developed very rapidly and by the age of three, 1000 trillion synapses have been formed. If these “pathways” are not used, they are discarded and by the time the child reaches adolescence, they have about 500 trillion, the number they will have for most of their lives (Shore, 1997).

“These pathways present in the brain allow us to learn but they must be used to strengthen and activate. If they are not used, they will be discarded” (Greenough, Black & Wallace, 1987). “It is through this process of creating, strengthening and discarding synapses that our brains adapt each of us to our unique environments. Because the brain adapts to its environment, it will adapt to a negative environment just as readily as it will adapt to a positive environment” (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2001). “A growing body of evidence suggests that exposure to violence or trauma alters the development of the brain by altering normal neuron-developmental processes. Trauma influences the pattern, intensity and nature of sensory perceptual and affective experience of events during childhood” (Perry, 1999).

The effect of trauma or the lack of care in our environment and the impact this has on our learning begins from the moment of conception. Our brains have to adapt to the chronic stress that may be present on a daily basis and these adaptations have long reaching consequences for life.

Babies brains grow and develop as they interact with their environment and learn how to function within that environment. When babies' cries bring food or comfort, they are strengthening the neuronal pathways that help them learn how to get their needs met, both physically and emotionally. But babies who do not get responses to their cries and babies whose cries are met with abuse learn different lessons. The neuronal pathways that are strengthened under negative conditions prepare children to cope in that negative environment and their ability to respond to nurturing and kindness may be impaired (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Adolescents may be deeply impacted by the experiences they had as young children. Living in an unpredictable or violent home overworks certain aspects of the brain and leaves other neuronal pathways under utilized. These complex systems are affected by repeated exposure to trauma and can lead to brain development which impairs the learning ability. "Chronic stress sensitizes neural pathways and over-develops certain regions of the brain involved in anxiety and fear response, and often results in the underdevelopment of other neural pathways and other regions of the brain"(Shore, 1997). "Chronic activation of certain parts of the brain involved in the fear response can "wear out" other parts of the brain which is involved in cognition and memory" (Perry, 2001c). "Early experiences of trauma can also interfere with the development of the sub-cortical and limbic systems which can result in extreme anxiety, depression and difficulty forming attachments to other people" (Shore, 1997). "A key issue in understanding altered brain development in children who have been maltreated is that the way in which their brains develop is often a very adaptive response to their negative environment, but it

is maladaptive in other environments”(Hart, Gunnar & Cicchetti, 1996). Shore quotes Harry Chugant in his observation that “...We can have individuals who, based on early experiences, are in effect “hard-wired” for negative behaviors” (Shore, 1997).

Trauma has come in many forms to the students that we work with at BSEC. Many have experienced multiple losses in their lives. Some of these realities include:

- Violence in the home resulting in the loss of personal safety - emotional, physical or sexual abuse
- Loss of original caregivers and resulting stays in the child welfare system
- Losses due to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/ Fetal Alcohol Effects/ Alcohol Related Neurological Disorder
- The generational and profound loss of culture and language for First Nations people and the ensuing violence and substance abuse resulting from this experience. “It is reasonable to believe that historical trauma could predispose American Indian children to increased vulnerability to stress and trauma” (Wassermann, E., 2005).

Because of the severity of the losses that SWEET have had in their lives, their ability to learn and their patterns of learning continue to be seriously impacted and affected.

Trauma in the form of violence within the home, primarily as the result of alcoholism or drug abuse, is one of the pervasive factors which affect students’ learning and behaviour at BSEC. One study conducted in the United States, found that their sample of First Nations men and women reported a “91% lifetime incidence of interpersonal violence” (Robin, Chester and Rasmussen, 1998). From the information disclosed by students in our intake process, it is believed that this reality is very similar

for our non-Native students as well. As described earlier, “children who witness violence are profoundly affected developmentally and emotionally” (Margolin, 1998). Students who have witnessed or personally experienced violence may not be able to access areas of the brain best suited for the learning environment. “Children who experience the stress of physical or sexual abuse will focus their brains’ resources on survival and responding to threats in their environment” (Shore, 1997). Youth who have been exposed to trauma simply are not able to attend to learning in the same way as students who have not had to learn how to live within this reality. The research shows that their learning ability has been greatly compromised as the result of the situations that they have experienced.

One of the most important elements of understanding about children exposed to violence is that all humans process, store, retrieve and respond to the world in a state-dependent fashion. When a child is in a persisting state of low-level fear that results from exposure to violence, the primary areas of the brain that are processing information are different from those in a child from a safe environment. The calm child may sit in the same classroom next to the child in an alarm state, both hearing the same lecture by the teacher. Even if they have identical IQ’s the child that is calm can focus on the words of the teacher and using neo-cortex, engage in absorbing cognition. The child in the alarm state will be less efficient at processing and storing the verbal information the teacher is providing. The child’s cognition will be dominated by sub-cortical areas focusing on non-verbal information - the teacher’s facial expressions, hand gestures,

when she seems distracted. And, because the brain internalizes (i.e. learns) in a ‘use-dependent’ fashion, this child will have more selective development of non-verbal cognitive capabilities. The children raised in the vortex of violence have learned that non-verbal information is more important than verbal (Perry, 2001b).

Students who have experienced extreme trauma have emerged not only with maladaptive learning responses but also with maladaptive behavioural responses. Their learned coping mechanisms often result in challenging and disruptive behaviours in the classroom and this ‘learned’ behaviour presents one of the largest obstacles to their learning. Students tend to react quickly to a teacher request with what seems like little thought if they are in a situation that they don’t understand or in which they feel threatened in some way. “While there is adequate inhibitory control in most persons, when areas of the brain are deficient, damaged, or poorly developed, this may lead to impulsive acting-out behaviors” (Flick, G., 2000). “Children who have been victims of unpredictable physical or sexual abuse learn (consciously or unconsciously) that if abuse is going to happen, it is better to control when that happens. They may engage in aggressive, provocative behavior to elicit a predictable response” (Perry, 1997). In other words, if students can sense that someone is going to reprimand them in some way, they will further escalate the situation so that they are in control of the situation. Other common behaviour that we see in students is the inability to respond to requests. It appears as though they are ignoring what the teacher has said and they may simply leave the room or offer no response whatsoever. A student may go on the offensive and attack outward, or they may become defensive and simply close up. This will follow the pattern

of behaviour that a young child adopted in order to adapt to a trauma inducing event. “A child in a disassociative state, when presented with a threat may “freeze” both physically and cognitively”(Perry, Pollard, Blakely, Baker & Vigilante, 1995). “When an adult asks or tells them to do something, they don’t respond. If the adult becomes angry and more threatening, the child becomes even more anxious and moves further into full disassociation”(Perry et al, 1995).

The sad reality that we face daily in our school is that not only have our students experienced violence during their infancy, and their childhood, but they continue to experience trauma on a regular basis in their daily lives. “The highest-risk children are safe nowhere; their home is chaotic and episodically abusive, their community is fragmented and plagued by gang violence, and the schools are barely capable of providing structure and safety from intimidation and threat, let alone education”(Perry, 2001b).

Traumatic events experienced in the home may also be followed by removal of the child from their primary caregivers. The trauma experienced as the result of the loss of care from their original family is another common factor in the history of our students. “One of the most stressful events in an infant or child’s life is separation from their primary caregiver, usually their parent” (Wasserman, 2005). Sometimes within the First Nation’s communities, a relative and often the grandparent may take over the raising of the child, in which case, the effect of the loss of care by the parent is minimal and the child may often experience an even more positive childhood. This is often not the case with Non-native children where removal of the child from the family usually means a transfer to foster care. “All infants have the capacity, indeed the genetic predisposition,

to form strong attachments to their primary caregivers. But if a child's caregivers are unresponsive or threatening or the attachment process is disrupted, the child's ability to form any healthy relationships during his or her life may be impaired" (Perry, 2001a). This experience of trauma in early life can lead to "problems in maintaining interpersonal relationships, coping with stressful situations, and controlling emotion" (Schoore, 2001). It also has a direct impact on the learning experiences of children. "Children who lack early attachment opportunities have smaller brains and lower IQs" (Perry, 2001c). This kind of damage leads to a lack of essential social skills such as feeling empathy, and remorse" (Perry, 1997). This as well leads to "an inability to adjust to changing circumstances, take defensive action or act on one's own behalf, and a lack of ability to register feelings and pain"(Schoore, 2001). The transfer to the child welfare system for our students has meant the reality of living in many homes, many of which may or may not be supportive in any way. Often the students report feelings of being "less than" or feelings of abandonment and relate stories of not being included in the foster families' daily events with their other children. Most of our students, when reaching an age that they can leave the foster care system, choose to do so, even if there is no evidence of any other support in their lives.

Trauma in life can begin as early as the moment of conception. If the mother of the unborn child engages in the use of alcohol or drugs during pregnancy, the impact on that child can last for their entire lives and has huge implications for their ability to learn in schools or function in life. Many of our students who have been exposed to violence within the home and who are born to parents living with substance abuse addictions are also exposed to the effects of these addictions on their development prior to birth.

“Exposure to alcohol and other drugs in utero can disrupt and significantly impair the way a baby’s brain is formed” (Shore, 1997). “Exposure, especially in early pregnancy, can alter the development of the cortex, reduce the number of neurons that are created, and affect the way in which chemical messages are used” (Shore, 1997). These problems include difficulties with attention, memory, problem solving and abstract thinking. The term FAS (Fetal Alcohol Syndrome) was coined to describe the overall condition that a person exposed to alcohol may exhibit. This was later changed to FAE (Fetal Alcohol Effects). The current term to describe this disorder is ARND (Alcohol- Related Neurological Disorder). Children born with this disorder have a series of primary behaviours related to this disorder. They may be “socially or developmentally younger than their chronological age, be slower in processing data, thinking or hearing, be impulsive or easily distracted, and have memory problems and inconsistent performance” (Malbin, 1999, p.23). These issues greatly impact a student’s ability to learn and function within the school environment. Teachers expect students to be able to function at somewhat the same ability as their age indicates but for students living with ARND this is not the case. “There is no time in a person’s life when there is a greater gap between age and development than during adolescence”(Malbin, 1999 p. 28). Because students are functioning at a much lower ability than their age would suggest, there begins to develop a whole host of secondary behaviours which develop over time as the student attempts but fails to meet adult’s expectations. Malbin (1999) discusses some of these secondary behaviours as including fatigue, frustration, anxiety, fearfulness, rigidity, shutting down, feelings of failure and low self-esteem, acting out and aggression. Teaching these students can be a frustrating experience for teachers as well and

sometimes after many strategies have been attempted with nothing being successful, both the teacher and the student may shut down. "The long term effect of the gap between expectation and developmental need is burn-out. Children burn out and often act out since by adolescence, it is safer emotionally to look bad, than to look stupid, and adults living and working with them burn out"(Malbin, 1999, p.29).

Students living with ARND may have strengths but these are not the usual strengths which are rewarded in schools. Their strengths may include artistic or musical ability, movement or athletic ability, but may not include strengths required for academic progress. "Primary strengths may erode if they are not recognized and encouraged. If an athlete is prevented from playing sports because of low academic marks, his skill is devalued and the focus is instead, on his deficits. This deficit model effectively gives the message that the person's strengths aren't important"(Malbin, 1999, p.37).

We are beginning to suspect that a much higher number of our students may be living with this disability than we formerly thought. Students with ARND can have large discrepancies in their behaviour based on the time during the pregnancy that the mother used drugs or alcohol, as well as the amount and the length of time that the unborn child was exposed to these drugs. Whereas some students with ARND show physical signs of this disability, many students may not. Discovering that a student has been exposed to alcohol, in utero, has shed some light on previously misunderstood student behaviour. They may appear to function quite well within our school environment, but have behaviour which keeps interrupting their academic success. This behaviour may include making impulsive decisions, not following through on tasks, not being able to retain information and acting like they understand a concept, but not being able to attach

meaning to the concept. Once a teacher is able to apply information of a possible ARND disability to a student's behaviour, one is able to adjust and adapt expectations of students to match their ability. The questions, which can be applied to the educational setting then, revolve around accepting that these are neurological disorders and the resulting behaviours are not because a student won't comply but that a student is not able to comply. Malbin advises to "observe patterns of behaviour over time, without interpreting them either as willful or organically based. The goal of including the idea of brain function in understanding behaviours is neither to limit nor enable. The goal of the shift of perceptions is be proactive rather than reactive." She further asks that we "explore the idea of both primary and secondary defensive behaviours and think about unmet needs and characteristics in the environment to support the process of exploration" (Malbin, 1999, p.42).

Teaching SWEET requires experience and awareness. Often students attending BSEC, who have been exposed to alcohol during their mother's pregnancy, are also born into a home which includes poverty, violence and chaos. In the daily events of a school which are busy enough with demands and requirements, teachers must always keep in mind that the students with whom they are working have not left their crises at the door. A teacher must learn when to push, when to back off, when to use humour to diffuse a situation and when to take a break. Teachers may also begin to show symptoms of vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue, which is a fairly new concept describing the effects on teachers of witnessing the trauma experienced by one's students. Because the students themselves and even possibly the staff who work with them are not aware of the reasons why learning is not taking place, teachers will often blame the students or blame

themselves for the lack of progression of skills. Even if a teacher is quite aware of the chaotic experiences that a student may be living through, their primary responsibility to the student and to society is to fulfill the obligation to assist in the development of the student's abilities. The teacher cannot be swept away by the life going on around the student. On the other hand we do need to find ways to acknowledge the major learning deficits and obstacles which have resulted as the result of traumatic life experiences.

"While some children seem unaffected or minimally affected by their traumatic experiences, in reality, it is often the adults around them who are misreading their cues. These children are communicating non-verbally with us and we need to learn the language and educate others who work with children who have been maltreated about this language. Children do not "just get over it." As they attempt to cope, as their brains adapt to the negative environments, behavioural, cognitive, and social potential may be diminished" (Perry et al, 1995).

Because people in general are not educated to believe that trauma can and does affect the actual learning process, students and teachers can internalize the lack of success as something that is wrong with them. Because of this, much of the teacher's time and energy in Boyle Street Education Centre, is spent trying to convince a student that it is indeed possible and even predictable that they will learn if they come to school. By adolescence, however, the student has met with so much failure in schools that turning around this thought process takes a concerted and orchestrated effort by a whole school staff. "Because of learning's cyclical nature, previous successful learning and greater resources will have enhanced the self-confidence, motivation and strategic resources which make further learning success likely. Success is likely to be followed by further

success; comparative failure is likely to be followed by more of the same"(Riddell, 2005, p.46).

Accompanied with the reality that learning takes longer for these students, and behaviour is more challenging, there exists a societal pressure to discover something that will work with these students, and often, something that will work quickly. For anyone who has worked with SWEET, the reality is that change takes a very long time and the quick fix that governments are looking for is simply not the reality. If the research is to be believed, living through traumatic and chaotic experiences alters the development of the brain and has pervasive effects lasting well into adolescence and adulthood. This has major implications for teachers, students and schools. These learning issues and behaviours are complex and require time, money and effort as well as support for the staff working within these areas. "We need to help provide the resource-predictable, safe and resource rich environments our problem-solvers require. Our problem solvers must understand the indelible relationship between early life experiences and cognitive, social, emotional and physical health. Too often, the academic, public and non-for -profit systems asked to address these problems are resource-depleted yet have a mandate to "do something." Unfortunately, solutions that arise from this reactive approach to complex problems are very limited and typically, short sighted" (Perry, 2001b).

Students who have experienced extreme trauma are left with deficits, both academically and behaviourally. They may not have a defining physical or visual display of these challenges, but they are there nonetheless, and this reality leaves them disadvantaged in many ways. It takes many hours of work within the school to lessen

these barriers and to create conditions and environments in which these students may thrive in. Although SWEET may not achieve their Grade twelve diploma or necessarily go on to higher education, we do need to acknowledge how far they have come, and how far they are willing to go. To honestly acknowledge the distance that SWEET have traveled to be able to stay in school and attempt the work that is put before them, all people who work with these students should develop an awareness as to the great impact that trauma has had on their cognitive and behavioural abilities. This awareness should not keep any student from achieving the dreams that they hold for themselves, or enable negative behaviour. It should not lower our learning expectations for them, or allow us reasons to not hold them accountable for their actions. It should, however, require us to reach out to them with understanding and give us the strength and determination to keep designing programs that will celebrate their strengths and remediate their weaknesses. It should make us pause and consider where we would be, if we would have had a life like theirs.

Methodology

To collect and analyze the data that would assist me in studying the phenomenon of how to best teach inner city students who have experienced trauma, I have chosen qualitative research methods. Qualitative research as described by Creswell (2005) is “a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of the participants, asks broad general questions, collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants, describes and analyzes these words for themes and conducts the inquiry in a subjective biased manner” (p. 39). Creswell (2005) confirms these qualities in describing qualitative research as “naturalistic inquiry or constructivism which emphasized the importance of the participants’ views, stressed the setting or context in which the participants expressed the views and highlighted the meaning people personally held about educational interests” (p. 43). Merriam, a well known writer in the field of qualitative research design, describes common characteristics of qualitative research methods as including:

- A key concern – The researcher seeks to understand phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher. This is sometimes referred to as the *emic* or insider’s perspective.
- The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.
- Data collection involves fieldwork.
- Primarily employs an inductive research strategy.
- The finished product is richly descriptive. (Merriam, 1998, p.7)

Qualitative research demands of the researcher that I “discuss my own role or position in the research study which is called being reflexive. Reflexivity means that the researcher reflect their own biases, values and assumptions and actively write them into their research” (Creswell, 2005, p. 50). The study “may begin with a long personal narrative told in story form” (Creswell, 2005, p. 50).

Creswell describes the steps that a qualitative researcher must follow. “Five steps comprise the process of collecting qualitative data. You need to identify your participants and sites, gain access, determine the types of data to collect, develop data collection forms, and administer the process in an ethical manner” (Creswell, 2005, p 202). My project developed as I continued through these processes. I knew that I wanted to concentrate on the learning issues in my own school as it is here that my passion and my interest are fuelled, but the direction that I followed grew spontaneously as I entered and completed each step of the research.

As a teacher and researcher I am deeply interested in the learning issues as presented by our students. In my attempt to understand at a deeper level the types of barriers that they face in completing their high school, I wanted to hear directly from the students and their teachers. I am “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world, and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p.6).

I identified the school where I work as the site where I wanted to do my research because I am most interested in improving the learning experiences of this particular group of students and offering the teachers in our school, the information I discover as a resource to their teaching. “In qualitative inquiry, the intent is not to generalize to a

population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2005, p 203). The central phenomenon that I chose to study is how we as teachers are able to address the learning issues presented by students who have experienced extreme trauma. I wanted to study this issue in depth to gain a degree of satisfaction in my own expertise in this area.

I needed to begin my research by studying information from current literature for possible reasons for the learning issues that may have resulted from our students’ trauma related life experiences. Second, I wanted to hear about the types of learning experiences which seemed to have the best results as seen by both the students and the teachers of our school. This involved “homogeneous sampling” as I selected only those people who were connected to our school and so “have a membership in a group which has defining characteristics” (Creswell, 2005, p.206). From this selected group of people I wanted to learn about how we best mediate the complex learning situations which arise within this particular environment.

I approached our Principal and our School Board to gain approval for the study. My project design dictated that I seek ethical approval for research, which I was successful in securing. I developed interview questions as my data collection procedure. I was careful in the questions that I designed, to be mindful of the personal information I was requesting and to make sure that this information focused on either teachers’ or students’ stories of learning and not on the retelling of our students’ traumatic life events. Nevertheless the stories that I collected did contain some references to the trauma that had been experienced. I was not able to separate the lived experiences of the impact of trauma upon learning without listening to some of those actual experiences.

“Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data” (Merriam, 1998, p.1). Due to ethical considerations, I was not allowed to interview students or teachers who are currently working in our school so I selected students and teachers who were formerly at our school and obtained their permission to include their interview information in my study. All participants were over the age of eighteen.

My qualitative research was a case study as I was hoping to discover and understand in-depth particular information corresponding to one school. “A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in a process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a single variable, in discovery rather than confirmation”(Merriam, 1998, p.19).

The decision to focus on a qualitative case study stems from the fact that this design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing...By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity, (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998, p. 29).

Because I was concentrating on one specific phenomenon within a specific location this type of research is referred to as “a bounded system” (Smith, 1978 in Merriam, 1998, p. 27). “The bounded system or case might be selected because it is an instance of some concern, issue or hypothesis” (Merriam, 1998, p.28). The case in question here, which was of concern, would be the learning issues as displayed by a group of inner city students who have experienced extreme trauma and the way one

particular school seeks to mediate these learning issues which have resulted from these life experiences. This case has boundaries as the research is confined to this particular school and students.

Merriam (1998) discusses special features of a case study research design. These features include particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic qualities. She has used organizational information from Olson (in Hoaglin et al., 1982, pp.138-139) in describing these three aspects of case studies. I have found a direct application of this information to be true of my study. One of the descriptors of the particularistic category which fits well with my intent was that the researcher would “examine a specific instance but illuminate a general problem”. Although I was studying one particular instance, I was imagining that this information would apply to other students in other places who have had the same types of early experiences which may compromise their learning later in life. In the descriptive category, there is the opportunity to “illustrate the complexity of a situation”. I have discovered that the learning issues which our students presented were very complex. The more I researched the more complex the learning issues became. In the heuristic vein, Olson gives the opportunity for the researcher to “explain the reasons for the problem, the background of a situation, what happened and why”. (Olson in Merriam, 1998, p.31). I hoped that my research project would include some of the possible explanations and background to the current learning barriers that our students possess.

Further classification of my qualitative case study project, I believe, would place it in the psychological case study category. “Psychological case study employs concepts and theories from psychology in investigating educational problems” (Merriam, 1998,

p.42). Psychologists have had a major impact and direct relevance to education. My project has been greatly informed through the literature review by current psychological research regarding the development of the brain when faced with recurring traumatic events.

Qualitative case studies must be seen as valid research. The internal validity of a qualitative case study project is of concern as much of the information, which is derived from participants and written by the researcher, could be seen as subjective or oversimplified. To address these issues, there have been some protocols developed to ensure that the projects are indeed, valid. Merriam (1998) described methods to ensure the validity of a project and I have used many of these protocols in my research.

The first was “triangulation” which refers to the use of information from a variety of sources. Triangulation was further described as “the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals.” (Creswell, 2005, p.252) In this case, I gathered information from both students and teachers from our school and used information from surveys and interviews. I developed a survey for students (see App. B), a survey for teachers (see App. E) and interview questions for both students and staff (see App. C and F).

In order to reach former students and staff and because it was our tenth year of operation, I decided, with the co-operation of the school staff to organize a reunion celebration to celebrate this milestone of achievement. I thought that this also would offer both an opportunity for celebration and for research. The celebration was great, but the atmosphere was not conducive for gathering research information. However, there were a few former teachers and students who took the forms and returned them to me at a later date. I also asked, through a third party teacher, current students and staff to fill out

questionnaires/surveys and I was able to collect some information from these forms. Unfortunately, there were not enough forms returned to be able to conduct any quantitative research on the information. I was, however, able to use the information as an added piece to my qualitative research. I then asked four former students and four former staff who had completed the questionnaires for follow up interviews and it was in these interviews that I was able to gather the bulk of the information that I analyzed for my project.

Merriam also spoke of “member checks”. This means taking the information back to the people involved and getting them to review the findings and information. This can be done throughout the study. I found that I valued my colleagues’ opinions of my work and I especially consulted with the Principal of our school through each step of the research process.

“Long term observation” was another way to increase the validity of a project. As this is my eleventh year in the school in which I was conducting my research, I did have long term experience with this particular student population. I have accumulated many years of informal observatory experience and this informs much of my desire to explore these issues to a greater depth.

Of course there were limitations to the process of conducting a qualitative case study research project within my own school. I was biased in ways of which I was likely unaware. I was subjective in that my work and my many years of experience have formed opinions and beliefs that I must consciously bring to the forefront. Guba & Lincoln (1981) (in Merriam,1998 p. 378) describe the “unusual problem of ethics in that an unethical case writer could so select from among available data that virtually anything

he wished could be illustrated". I committed to being mindful of the information that I collected and to allow it to speak for itself and not confine it to any preconceived notions I may have had. Even with the drawbacks and limitations of the qualitative case study approach to research, I believed that it best fit the understandings and discoveries that I was intended to make.

Common Places

In my project I conducted eight interviews, four with former teachers and four with former students. Each of the people interviewed had previously completed a survey. I also reviewed eleven returned student surveys and four returned teacher surveys and added this information into my research. I have chosen to refer to the interviewed people with pseudonyms. The students will be referred to as Charity, Susan, Connie and Mark. The teachers will be referred to as James, George, Elsie and Marie. When the information has been gathered from student or teacher surveys, I will simply indicate the source.

Three of the four students had been out of school for three to six years. One student graduated in the year that this project was completed. All of the interviewed students spent considerable time at the school, anywhere from two to five years.

The teachers as well have been away from our school for quite some time, except for one who retired during the time of the interviewing.

The common places that I have found in my study of participants' voices in this project are:

- The shared student experience of trauma
- Student awareness of how trauma has impacted their ability to learn in school.
- Barriers to learning as a result of student experiences of trauma as seen by teachers
- Teaching strategies which are seen as positive by both teachers and students
 - Building respectful relationships
 - Patience
 - Tone of voice

- Interactive Learning
- Teacher ability to respond to unique student needs
- Strategy approach to teaching
- Teacher awareness and realities regarding working with SWEET

Shared student experience of trauma

Although my project focused primarily on the learning issues of students who have experienced trauma, it was impossible to completely separate the experiences of trauma from the learning issues which followed. I have included some of the student reflections on commonly lived trauma experiences as a basis for the shared student realities existing within our school.

Charity described the realities of our students' lives in this way.

The students are a lot of troubled youth, kids that haven't really had the opportunity to know a better life. They've been around crime. They've been around drugs. They've been around family violence for years. That's what they were raised with. That's what their parents were raised with. That's all they've ever known and I think for a high percentage of the students that when they do start coming here, that's the kind of mentality they hold, that angry aggressive violent demeanor. They're definitely troubled and a lot of them are misunderstood.

She spoke about the difficulty that she teachers could have when working with students who are actively using drugs while they go to school. *"When a person is using meth (methamphetamine) their thinking is really erratic. It's really erratic and it's very extreme in the aggressive sense."*

Mark added *“A lot of them are really trying to get something, to get ahead in life. You just don’t know where to start, you know. You’re on the streets.”*

Susan described what she named as the “hurt child”. *“Kids that follow the hip hop things or whatever because they’re hurting inside so they put on this face and say, ‘no I’m strong. I’m tough.’ And that’s why a lot of kids go out and look for fights and go and get drunk, because really deep down inside they’re hurting. But a lot of kids put on this front.”*

Student awareness of how trauma has impacted their ability to learn in school.

Throughout the student interviews and surveys there was an overwhelming consensus that traumatic experiences have had a significant impact on the student’s ability to learn. While the ideas differed as to how these experiences impact learning, there was no doubt in people’s mind that there was a correlation between these two phenomena. Often a combination of previous and re- occurring trauma appeared to trigger emotional and behavioural responses which simply left the student unavailable to take advantage of the learning opportunities within the school environment

Charity recalled the impact of trauma on her ability to learn. Beginning from Grade four, she was bullied at school. *“From the time I was in Grade four until I dropped out in Grade nine, I had been constantly teased every day. It wasn’t just like little teasing. It was like full blown like getting thrown into lockers. In two different schools I experienced it, five years solid.”* This, combined with trauma which she was experiencing at home, eventually caused her to drop out of the regular school system during her Grade nine year.

Having my mother being addicted to different drugs and not being there, not raising me and being abused by my auntie and my uncle when I was being raised...then watching my mother abuse herself, I think that definitely affected the way I learned or really, it disabled me to learn. My mind was quite often in other places...it wasn't that the coursework was harder, it was just the abuse around me and everything got worse. That's when my grades decreased. Everything dropped...I had nothing you know? Everybody I knew around me abused me or hated me...So when it came to trying to learn, it just wouldn't work. I couldn't keep everything in my head.

Charity left school for the streets not because she wanted to, but because that is the place where she found the acceptance that was denied to her in both her home and her school. "Students who have a sense of importance at home can maybe get by. But students who don't have a sense of importance either at school or at home, will seek that elsewhere" (Brandt, 1998, p.40).

Charity believed that these experiences affected her ability to focus in school many years after these events. *"So now here I am, five years later and I'm still having difficulty. I still have trouble staying focused for more than a period of time. It's just that something in my brain has been altered and it's having trouble comprehending it. It's definitely due to the stuff that I've experienced in my past."*

Susan, on reflecting on her school experiences, further explained what she saw as the impact of trauma on learning. She as well conferred with Charity's observation regarding the effect that trauma has on the brain's ability to focus on learning. She drew

a parallel from the suppression of traumatic memories to the later inability to access memory for learning in school.

“Abuse has a big impact and nobody will admit it. Nobody wants to admit it because they’re ashamed. When they go to learn, they don’t learn because their head is somewhere else. Their head is thinking, ‘Oh, what happened to me here...’ They don’t remember what happened to them, you know, they lose their concentration. So it has a big impact on their life and a lot of young kids don’t know that.”

Mark also had seen correlations between how the traumas he had experienced in the past had continued to affect his learning, long after the actual events had passed. This related to the concept of the fear of failure or the fear of success. The roots of this reality seem to be related to how experiences of trauma led him to the belief that nothing good can come in his life.

“Traumas that I went through were more just like re-living the past, past experiences, constantly being stuck in the past, like you just always metaphorically compare it and you notice you’re setting yourself up for failure. The same kind of situation would come and I would have that same approach to it, set myself up for failure and it was like you followed this pattern for a long time and you can’t break it”.

When asked about the impact of trauma on her learning, Connie simply stated that *“I have had trauma so that kind of stopped me from asking for help when I needed it. That was one of the things that impacted learning when I was in school.”*

Sometimes the impact of trauma can keep a student stuck in a learned behavioural response that impedes any success at school. “Many youth who appear to act impulsively and without thinking are actually drawing on defensive responses set in habitual memory.

Human brains can detect hostility or rejection in less than a quarter of a second; before a person is consciously aware of these cues, emotions and behaviours are triggered” (Azar, 1998, p. 13). Charity offered this insight about the inability for SWEET to move beyond emotional reactions that repeat a pattern of failure. “We had some amazing, smart kids in school and we have wickedly talented kids in the school. Some of the brightest kids I’ve talked to are in this school. We have so many brilliant students, but because all they’ve ever known is just to give up when something becomes too hard and to run from that, that’s what happens.”

Barriers to learning resulting from student experiences of trauma as seen by teachers

The barriers to learning following the experiences of trauma are varied and complex. Their learning disabilities may range from FASD related learning issues to learned helplessness, to fear of failure and success, to distrust of adults, to psychological distress and everything in between. Each student has had particular experiences of trauma and this has led to specific learning issues and needs.

Historically, learning issues were referred to as “brain-based disorders, hence the terms such as brain-injured child, or minimal brain dysfunctions and were described in medical terms such as dyslexia” (Reid & Lienemann, 2006, p.5). The research that connected experiences of emotional or psychological trauma with brain dysfunction came much later with the work of Perry et al. (1996). As shown by this research, traumatic experiences were shown to alter the functioning of the brain and resulted in behavioral and learning deficits for students.

Teachers have witnessed what they believed to be the impact of trauma upon the learning ability of the students who are in their classrooms daily. Their observations of student learning and behaviour corresponded with the findings of research, namely that students' ability to be successful in the classroom appeared greatly compromised by the traumatic experiences to which they had been exposed.

James commented on students' lack of focus or ability to concentrate on the content that they are studying. *"The trauma they feel means that they haven't developed the ability to concentrate or stay on task or have the ability to think beyond the next step."*

Another inhibiting factor is a student's inability to believe that a positive outcome is possible. Elsie, a former teacher from the school, recalled a story of working with a Boyle Street youth who had gone on to an adult education place of learning.

Students who have had traumatic experiences when they're little ... can mean everything from not wanting success to.... We had a former Boyle Street student, an extremely bright individual...I knew there was a good chance that she wasn't going to have success. It had nothing to do with academics. It had everything to do with waiting for failure to happen yet again and you know in the end she very successfully created situations which allowed her to fail...I think it (trauma) has an absolutely huge impact...just from an emotional perspective, that inability to be successful, to embrace success, the fear of failure, all of those."

This comment is supported by Riddell (2005) who stated that learning is cyclical as "success is likely to be followed by further success; comparative failure is likely to be followed by more of the same."

Another common student behaviour described by teachers was that of the passive learner. A teacher response to the written survey explained this reality by stating that *“at-risk learners are generally very passive about their learning. They lack confidence regarding book learning and frequently do not have positive educational reference points which contribute to this passivity.”* Students early in their trauma recovery will more likely sit quietly struggling at their desks rather than take the risk of asking for help. Help hasn't been there in the past and it takes time to believe that help could possibly be there in the present.

Other teacher responses from the surveys spoke about the all-encompassing deficits that a student is faced with, not only academic deficits but life deficits.

These kids-due to upbringing or organic brain issues out of their control- need to be able to develop a skill set of something more than survival. They need to become aware of basic life skills, interpersonal skills and basic budgeting that they have not been exposed to. Many of them have been forced to ‘play grown up’ in that way that they are living on their own, are parents (or parents to be), and/or are in the throes of addiction. They often carry the weight of their parent’s burden. Yet at the end of the day they are children who are in need of serious intervention on numerous levels in order for them to be long term contributing members of society.

This corresponding idea was found reflected in another survey where a teacher described the “life” deficits that our students present and described the student as *“someone who does not have supports and survival is the only viewpoint they look at life from. This*

creates a higher sense of desperation that causes them to make many more decisions that put themselves in dangerous situations – both short term and long term.”

Most teacher interviews pointed to the difficult realities of the students' lives as a being a major barrier to school success. A teacher survey response pointed to the barrier of sustained neglect. *“These are teenagers who have been neglected by their parents, families and/or the education system as they have grown up and are now exhibiting behaviours that put themselves in physical and emotional danger on a consistent basis.”*

James recalled their *“challenges in everyday life”* and how it felt like we were *“imposing education”*.

When you impose education, superimpose the idea that they don't have a safe place to live or they don't have a consistent place to get food or to get pocket money or get transportation or get clothes or to deal with sickness even, it seems like if there is a barrier, it would have been within myself not understanding that school isn't the most important thing. What they learn is secondary to what the school actually did give them.

Other common barriers included *“students not attending on a regular basis”*. Marie found that *“frustrating, upsetting, but also understandable. The absences, the lates, there were so many issues in terms of personal life that obviously had to come first like addictions, poverty...not having the continuity of seeing students day after day...sometimes I felt very defeated and yet happy to see them.”*

Elsie followed up on this observation on the reality of the barriers to learning as a result of substance abuse issues. *“You can argue all the things why do people have*

substance abuse issues and it's all those other things. It's what brings you to substance abuse, but when you have substance abuse issues, it's pretty hard to move forward."

Teaching strategies which are seen as positive by both teachers and students

In searching for teaching practices which inspired the most learning for SWEET, I was primarily looking for the strategies that teachers used within their classrooms. Perhaps, bound as I was by the ethical constraints placed on my research in that I could only interview teachers who were no longer teaching in our school, I was not able to access that particular teacher information. Teachers and students were reluctant to speak about particular strategies that proved successful with students and instead spoke more about teacher qualities such as the ability to build relationships and the importance of community. Hobbs (1994) referred to adults who are successful with this youth group as those who need to have "stable personalities and solid interpersonal skills. He suggested that "staff selection is more powerful than training." Nevertheless, the following emerged as common themes regarding what the teachers and students saw as the most positive strategies used by teachers in learning environments.

Building respectful relationships

"Children who have been ridiculed, rejected, terrorized or traumatized can be overwhelmed by the extreme negative emotions of anger, fear, shame and depression...rejection can be as damaging as physical brutality. Love is the most important need of children and love deprivation can create tremendous rage" (Seita & Bendtro, 2005, p.27). The common theme underlying all of the interviews regarding

teaching strategies that work with SWEET was the ability of teachers to build respectful relationships based on love and acceptance.

Although I was looking for teaching strategies and techniques, the most prominent and consistent factor which was paramount in everyone's sharing was the ability of a teacher to establish a bond, a link of trust with the student. "A positive relationship is essential in treating and educating challenging youth...Trust is more important than technique" (Seita & Bendtro, 2005, p.108). The building of respectful relationships with clear but flexible boundaries needed to be the first task of any adult working with SWEET.

Along with trust was the need to belong or be connected to. William Glasser (1998) wrote about the four basic psychological needs that must be satisfied in order for us to be emotionally healthy. The most fundamental of these needs is the need to belong or to be connected. He points to "building a spirit of connection and community which is essential to creating a need-satisfying school characterized by high achievement." Robert Sullo, an author and follower of Glasser's philosophies, spoke of the need to "build and maintain positive relationships. You can only effectively teach students with whom you have developed a positive relationship. This is especially true with students who violate school rules. Connected kids are less likely to act out aggressively and engage in acts of violence. The best violence prevention program is to build a sense of community" (Sullo, 2007, p.147).

These ideas were strongly represented by the teacher interviews and surveys.

Elsie commented,

“teaching is not so much about strategies as it is about consistency, a sense of community...it’s about relationships and it’s about those connections and it’s about that sense of belonging. To me that is the strategy...That’s really the underpinnings of what’s going to help someone move forward, is when they feel that they have someone who cares...What has made some students successful? Is that the strategies of learning how to read or all of that? I would argue it’s what you’re talking about, having that face to face, no matter how confrontational that may have been, it’s about someone who cares about my behaviours. It’s about someone who is intervening in a way that’s helping me make some positive choices. I think it’s about relationships.”

Marie added *“I don’t see how you can teach in that situation (BSEC) without having good relationships with the students...it’s really important to get to know the students. I think that’s sort of the first job of the classroom, a new year or new semester is not so much the first assignments. The work isn’t really that important. It’s just establishing a respectful but caring working environment.”* Information gleaned from the teacher surveys concurred with this idea. *“Building relationships with students is always a priority but at BSEC it seemed to be even more so. A relationship must be established, trust established in order to begin teaching.”*

An additional response from the teacher surveys described how this teacher established an atmosphere of trust.

I have connected with them (the students) at their level to begin the process of educating them. Their “level” is simply the sum of their experiences in life-educationally, culturally and emotionally. I connect with them on those experiences as a starting point to elevate them above and beyond those initial places. I share a lot of my own life to promote an environment that is safe and can have students ‘come as they are.’ There is also a far more flexible discipline plan in place as far as regular social conventions, language etc.”

The importance of building a trusting relationship was also mentioned in the student interviews. Susan spoke about the importance of taking time to respond to a student request to talk. *“Students like whoever they get drawn into. Then you can sit down and actually talk to them about certain things. Whereas they have never trusted anyone before. Remember those kids come from whatever kind of different lifestyles. They just don’t trust anybody to talk to.”* She continued, *“If a kid comes up to you, the kid comes up to you for a reason. Just sit there and listen. You don’t have to put the stress on you, but just listen to the kid because maybe that’s all he wants. You never know and you should just sit down and listen to them before you send them anywhere because you don’t know what they’re dealing with.”*

Mark also spoke about the journey to a trusting relationship within the school. *“I had a traumatic experience through living on the streets, knowing that I have nowhere to go home and study, and all you want to do is go home and have a good meal right? Have a nice warm bed and you can’t do that. But when I went to Boyle Street, they opened whole new different doors and a lot of that trauma turned positive and it turned into*

something to kind of look forward to.” Mark was able to make that leap from untrusting to trusting and to reach out and grab onto the lifeline that was offered.

- **Patience**

While the vast majority of teachers spoke about the importance of the ability to build relationships with students, the vast majority of the students’ voices spoke of the importance of patience as the most needed quality of a teacher working at BSEC.

Research in the area of FASD and ARND suggests that often behaviour which is the result of organic brain damage can be viewed by the teacher as willful and defiant behaviour. Malbin (1999) speaks of the need of re-teaching the teacher who is working with FASD students. She speaks of the need for giving instructions one at a time at a slower pace, of allowing time for processing, and of asking why a student may choose to do a task in a way that seems illogical to the teacher. She also sees strategies such as giving cues that will jar memory and of giving very specific and very concrete instructions. She offers this advice to teachers working with students who have had their ability to function impacted by damage to the brain. “Observing patterns of behaviour over time, without interpreting them either as willful or organically based will clarify their function. The goal of including the idea of brain function in understanding behaviour is neither to limit nor enable. The goal of this shift of perceptions is to be proactive rather than reactive”(Malbin, 1999, p.66).

Mark gave this advice to teachers.

Be patient...like the many different levels and you’re going to get frustrated with us a little bit because you’re going to have to explain over and over again...So be

patient. We'll catch on eventually. Even if you have to be repetitive with your explaining, there's certain things that we catch on to, that we hold on to and we understand it that way. Sometimes you've just got to keep, you have to be rewinding, play, rewinding, play, like this tape recorder. Eventually we catch on. You've just got to kind of like keep the faith in us.

The power of patience is sometimes disregarded by teachers as something that may not be essential. The lack of patience by a teacher was noted in Connie's comments.

"Have more patience. In one of the classes that one particular teacher just didn't have the patience to keep going. So that's why I gave up." Charity added *"You have to have patience to work in a school like this and it's a great amount of patience because these students, they're very difficult sometimes, but patience is the key."* Susan added her own spin to the idea of patience. *"Sometimes kids get frustrated with work. They get frustrated with themselves because maybe they can't read the word or maybe they're having problems at home or something they they'll blow up on the teacher and the teacher steps back and says, "Okay, I'll give you your space."*

- **Tone of voice**

Along with the need for patience, the students who were interviewed also strongly highlighted the impact of a teacher's tone of voice. I referred to this in my literature review in the discussion about how a SWEET may respond more to *how* something is said, rather than *what* is being said. A student, who is surviving trauma, is quick to think that they are being judged and responds aggressively to what they perceive as a disrespectful tone. Teachers are not always aware that their tone of voice carries with it

rejection or acceptance, but the student who is hypersensitive to body messages picks this up within moments of any interaction. Charity raised some interesting points regarding this aspect of the teacher/student relationship . *“When you’re teaching a student who has a meth problem, or had had meth problems or any aggressive hard chemical drug problems, I think the critical thing is your tone of voice, and even though you’re not meaning to sound confrontational, sometimes they take it that way because that’s the way they perceive it.”* She continued *“ If a teacher can take a humorous tone, but still have that, I guess, authority within the tone so that I know he’s not trying to be up in my face...keep me in a light mood but still be able to teach me.”*

- **Interactive learning**

BSEC is designed around the idea of individual learning with an emphasis on one to one teaching based on the students’ levels and abilities. In this way a teacher can respond to a student’s learning needs in an appropriate way regardless of the skill level of the student. Classrooms have not been designed based on grade levels, but rather on the overall class compilation. We tend to have many different levels in a classroom combining students who are highly motivated and capable of individual learning along side the more high needs students, so that the teacher has enough time to meet everyone’s needs in the class. As well, inconsistent attendance coupled with student crises has made it very difficult to have the same students in the same class for more than one day at a time and so group learning experiences are difficult to sustain. Teachers, however know of the benefit of a shared learning experience and struggle to find ways to incorporate this into the student’s learning.

George, a teacher, commented, *“I think students learn from each other and so I like a class where there’s a lot of participation...more active learning styles where students are comfortable learning from each other or working in small groups as opposed to individual learning..”* Marie liked having an opportunity for *“students to show one another.”*

Students also shared the meaningfulness of a shared learning experience. Mark liked the chance to learn from his fellow students. *“There was some people on the same level as the other person and they would work together. I found that really helpful because then there could be shared discussion on a topic and what not...Some of the students were good...you would just ask a student, ‘Hey, you know, I’m having trouble with a metaphor. Can you help me out? And they’ll help you out, you know?’”* Charity pointed to computer work as helpful *“because it’s more interactive in a way.”*

- **Teacher ability to respond to unique student needs**

Although the one on one, individually based teaching methods were seen as something that could be improved on, it perhaps was this opportunity to concentrate on one student at a time that allowed teachers to be able to respond directly to that student’s individual and unique learning needs. As with most things, it is likely not an either/or situation between different teaching styles, but more a combination of both teaching opportunities that would be most successful with students and indeed this is what most teachers attempt to do.

Students who were interviewed responded favorably to their experiences of noticing that teachers had learned what worked for them and this had a major impact on their self-

esteem regarding their abilities to move forward academically. This was another example of how the relationship that a teacher builds with a student spills over into their choices around instruction for that student.

Connie referred to this as a powerful learning experience. *“A lot of teachers there, they find a way for you to understand it, so they’ll work with you, and they’ll kind of study you and your patterns of how you learn. So they’ll kind of help you so that you understand instead of going by their texts.”* She continued, *“Having people help me one on one, pushing through it, helped a lot. A lot of teachers there accept you for who you are...and they help you through it. They learn who you are to help you so that was another positive thing.”* Mark also added, *“They would tell me my strengths were writing poetry and they said to work at it more, do a little bit more reading.”* Charity spoke of her respect for her teacher’s ability to respond to her emotional needs.

“She can kind of alter some of her teaching methods to kind of customize my needs, like when I get into little stages where I tell myself that I can’t do it and I just start to put myself down, and my self-esteem just basically hits the floor. The teacher knows that when I’m in that kind of state, it’s not like a permanent thing. It’s just, you know, discouragement and so she can provide the work that I need and she can sit me down and work with me on the work and we can go from there...if I didn’t have the teachers being calm and knowing how to handle my mood swings, my emotional behaviour, I don’t think I would have done as well.”

- **Strategy approach to teaching SWEET**

From my research, it appeared that the acquisition of learning strategies for students seemed to be one of the more important ways to improve the learning of students with learning disabilities. These ideas support short term memory recall. “Short term memory has a number of control processes that are used to process information in a way that makes it easier to remember. These include: chunking, clustering, mnemonics, relating information to know material and tagging information” (Swanson, 1996, p.21). This was reflected in one of the teacher surveys. *“At risk students need to develop strategies for problem solving and making connections in their world. The use of these strategies promotes student acquisition of problem solving skills as opposed to merely memorization of facts and information.”*

Although no one would dispute the importance of teaching learning strategies to students who have difficulty in schools, teaching learning strategies to SWEET remains a challenging task. Primarily the learning of these strategies requires a day to day attendance as well as the ability to concentrate on learning the strategies as each skill builds upon the one before in a very systematic way. SWEET, while still in the throes of trauma, are simply unable to put in the required time at school, or if they do put in the required time, they are not able to concentrate for the period of time that it takes, as explained by the previous students’ voices. They may not be attending to the information as their thoughts are often elsewhere. Teachers use strategies where they can and with those students who are able to maintain any semblance of regular attendance. For the vast majority of students in our school, the ability to learn and use learning strategies comes about as the result of the lessening of trauma in their lives.

- **Providing a sense of hope**

Hope has been defined as “an essential experience of the human condition. It functions as a way of feeling, a way of thinking, a way of behaving, and a way of relating to oneself and one’s world. Hope has the ability to be fluid in its expectations, and in the event that the desired object of outcome does not occur, hope can still be present”

(Farran, Herth & Popovich, 1995, pg.6). Hope is active in our school as evidenced by Elsie’s thoughts on being an effective teacher at BSEC.

You’ve got this short period of time. What do you do? For me, when you work with disadvantaged population, it’s never about backwards looking, about how can I fix this because you’ll never have enough psychologists. You’ll never have enough time...what is the thing you’re doing that’s connecting the student, that’s really is doing something in a positive way, which is providing consistency, is providing interest...We can look at deficits until it’s coming out our ying-yang...So you do your best that you can with looking at, where’s the student right now? What are the tools that they have? How can you work on what they’ve got...because I can’t fix the past...but what I can do is provide a light at the end of the tunnel. I can provide a sense of hope.

Teacher reflections of learning from their time of working with SWEET

Working with students who have experienced and continue to experience extreme trauma challenges a teacher to question their ideas about teaching. What do you pay attention to? We are a school so the answer should be obvious – we pay attention to meeting the learning needs of our students. But when those needs conflict with their

ability to sustain their life, what then? Where do you put their learning needs? The following comments, from teachers reflecting on their time working at BSEC, highlight some of their dilemmas and learning that came out of working in our school. Their words profoundly touched my heart as I could relate and feel compassion for each of their comments. They reflected my reality of working at BSEC back to me and I am honoured that they shared these thoughts with me. I included these reflections as I believe these are important aspects of working with SWEET that may not be often talked about, but are a part of teachers' daily experiences if they are working in this field of education. It may help someone in knowing that they are not alone with their thoughts at the end of the day.

James:

My first dilemma was trying not to think about what was going on in the kid's life, trying to keep it separate from the education process. I quickly realized it was impossible. I remember there was a kid who wound up in jail because he did a home invasion. He tried to chop off someone's hand with a machete...that was the point where it was really weird for me because he was the sweetest guy in the history of the world. He was very respectful...He came in and did his work and asked really intelligent questions and you just assumed he was going to be fine. Then that happened.

James discussed how this impacted his teaching while at the school.

"I assumed that because there's so much else going on in their life, that it was easier for me to say, 'Well, they don't want to learn it or they're not interested in it because they have to deal with all this other stuff. So it was bad enough that t

hey had to deal with that stuff and maybe being turned off by education, but I was already accepting that as an excuse...It's kind of weird how you kind of adopt things that you are fighting against. You don't realize it." By having a chance to teach at a more 'regular' school, James now realized that "materials can be taught in a way that actually applies to them (the students). You can teach Bio 20 and Bio 30 in a relationship to... 'this is why you need to come to school and eat. This is why you need to drink water. This is why you're sick all the time...making that relevant for kids.'" He concluded with this awareness. "I've learned a lot about dealing with trauma too because once you're away from here (Boyle Street) you get a chance to breathe. The reason I left was we had a student from the school killed, got beat up. So he was in my class and I went to go visit him in the hospital and he was in very rough shape and that was the end of it for me. Which is probably the worst thing I could have done. I shouldn't have left at that point because you leave with this huge black cloud over you and then you have to think about it by yourself. Perhaps if I would have stayed, it would probably be much easier to go through. I learned a lot about dealing with trauma."

James continued with a discussion about how his time of working at Boyle Street Education Centre continues to impact his teaching today.

The hierarchy in education crushes kids. I think teachers do it. They absolutely crush kids because they believe in this hierarchy where they're at the top and they're dispensing knowledge and the kids walk in and have to be respectful to the teacher. My students know that they have a right to speak up about their

education and I think that came out of Boyle Street. At Boyle Street there was that model of being kind of as an equal...education's based on equality...I'm trying to help you understand this and you're going to help me understand things too. You're going to make me a better teacher. You're going to help me think about things.

Having staff stability must be golden for those kids. I was speaking to a teacher who had left elementary school for high school and when I asked her why, she said, 'High school kids need love too, not just the junior high and elementary kids.' I thought about that and I really thought that that's what we had at Boyle Street and that is what we also need at other schools.

Elsie:

"Leaving the school, from an educational perspective, I had a much, much more profound understanding of what it meant to have literacy problems, but I think also the huge thing for me was the impact of having dysfunctional lives and what it means to be living in poverty, really understanding that poverty is not about lack of money, but is really about poverty of spirit, poverty of positive experiences...I think I really sort of reached an epiphany when I was at the school. For me, it was not about, now, how can I make this person more like me? It was really looking at progress and what does that mean...To a traditionally trained instructor, success means you get through your courses and you pass and you move on to the next level. At Boyle Street, success is maybe coming to school two days in a row...The thing, I've learned in a most fundamental place, it's about progress and that progress can be in small pieces, but if you don't look at

progress, you're really not looking at success in a way that's important for people who live in poverty because their version of success is always going to be different from mine.

Marie:

Young people come to school with issues and we want to help them with them. Often it seems overwhelming. How can we chip away at these problems? I felt the stress. I'd come home with stress and then when something really big happened, it would be overwhelming, like a student was arrested or had to go back to jail, or even bigger things than that, a child had died or a sibling had died.

One of my biggest learning experiences is that it's not like the public system where you've got all those layers of discipline. You basically have to get to know the students and you have to deal with the issues that arise. There's some back-up for you, but essentially you have to develop that relationship and deal with the situation as the teacher. It was really good for me...we can deal with things ourselves and quite effectively.

George:

"For me, it's important to get the student to be able to function in the world. What does life require from these students? Let's fashion something that, when this student after a year, walks out of our doors, is able to function much better than when he came in, very much better."

Concluding remarks

Our school set out to serve the educational needs of a group of young people who had lost their access to the public school systems, either by the schools' decisions as in expelling students, or because of students' choices in leaving and not returning. Students who have lost their access to schools, in our experience, seem to end up on the street and so become what people call "inner city street youth". The life on the street can be brutal, extremely dangerous and unforgiving. Why would young people choose to live such a hard life?

The youth who make these choices have many things in common with each other, but the one central experience that they all share is that they come from conditions of trauma and pain. There are many reasons for this, from cultural genocide to conditions of poverty, addiction, mental illness and violence. The history of a child from the womb to the street is easily understood if one were able to chart each step along the way. The depths of their losses in life are sobering. From the work that I have done over the twelve years that I have been in this school, I do not believe that we have seen one child who has not been severely traumatized in their childhood. Some hide it better than others, and so the first indication of the severity of their distress might be an attempted suicide. The more I have studied our students, the more I believe that each and everyone who crosses our threshold carries with them a history of trauma.

So, does trauma impact learning? Is there any relation between what a person experiences as a young child to their ability to learn as they later travel through their school years? Why would someone choose not to do well in school? Why would someone choose a life on the street as a way to experience life? These are not the

questions that I set out to answer for myself as I started this project. Like many others, I was looking for what kind of strategies might work to improve the learning of the students who have “fallen through the cracks” as the common expression goes. I was still looking for the magic combinations of teaching practices, even after all these years. Maybe if we all just worked a little bit harder, or discovered just the right technique, we could find the key to unlock the learning potential in each of our students. To me, now, that seems like an arrogant thought, but that is what I was looking for.

There is no magic solution, no formula, no particular “right” way to work with SWEET, but through my project I did gain an increased awareness regarding the possible reasons for student failure within schools, and a renewed belief in the support systems and the honest human relationships that make learning possible. The information that I was able to find regarding the impact of trauma on the brain gave a possible explanation for the complex learning and behavioural issues that our students present. Not everyone will subscribe to this medical model that the brain is altered due to trauma, as some people will believe that perhaps this model absolves us of our responsibility to keep working for social change. I certainly agree that the decisions of people in power and the complicity of other citizens over many generations, have made the social conditions that are the root causes for the trauma that our students have experienced. I am a strong believer in doing whatever we can to effect social change so that the situations that create trauma for young people are lessened, but I have also come to believe that the trauma that people live through, affects the way they learn, and in this case, affects the way the students at BSEC learn. I also believe that students can heal from trauma and within this healing lies a clue to unlock more of their potential to achieve what they dream of

achieving. The voices in this project have shown me that this is true. Life will never be easy for our youth, but it is possible that it can contain more laughter and less sorrow.

Experiencing success and respect in school remains an integral part of a successful life. No one willfully chooses not to do well in school unless they have come to see success in such a diminished way that failing spectacularly becomes a substitute. Young people want to be in school. They want to do well in school, all young people. That is why they are willing to try, yet again, in a school such as ours, even though they have never had a success before. It takes great courage to go back into a system where you have only experienced failure and even though our school knows this and tries every conceivable idea to ensure success; even our programs fail our students at times. This research has helped me to understand why the students that I work with struggle to learn how to do well in school and why the changes happen slowly and over a long period of time. Our students are possibly charting new paths in new territories, not only in their lives but also in their brains.

The reflections from former teachers and students from our school illuminated for me once again that substance is more important than technique when working with a healing population. Effective and systematic teaching is important, but building relationships and communities in schools based on care and respect is crucial. Teachers will continue to search to find ways to make school relevant to students' lives, of meeting students' needs and not institutional needs. Students will continue to search for a school where they can feel good about their learning and indeed, themselves, and people like me will continue to search to understand why all of this sometimes feels so hard. This project has inspired me to listen to the wisdom of the voices that have crossed, and

continue to cross my path at BSEC and has given me a possible explanation and so a deeper acceptance of the learning difficulties that our students seek to overcome.

Further Study

The amount of resources and information is staggering regarding the effective teaching of students who for more than one reason have fallen through the cracks in our education system. I found that the amount of attention that these students are now beginning to receive lends a hopeful note to a rather bleak situation.

The teachers' and students' voices that I gathered through interviews, and surveys, were inspiring and moving. I could see further study with a much larger group of people who would add to this information in a more comprehensive way. There would be more power in their words if they were reflected by more voices.

Further study is also needed with teachers who are currently involved in teaching SWEET. Perhaps speaking to teachers who are currently engaged in teaching youth exposed to trauma, would highlight some of their ideas and practices which seem to be effective in adding to the skill level of the students. Further study for me in this area would be regarding where do we go to now that we have established a good trusting relationship with these students? What could we do to sustain attendance on a more regular basis so that learning strategies might have a chance to be successful? Or alternatively, what types of teaching strategies might be more successful with a population of students with learning disabilities who are not able to sustain regular attendance, or indeed is this even possible?

Another area of interest to me for further study would be researching the results of giving SWEET the opportunity to work with counseling staff skilled in trauma-related recovery work. This is a service that we are now able to offer our students at our school, and I would like to study the impact on students of being able to work

through trauma related experiences within the school environment and see how this may correlate with increased success in school.

Perhaps a more thorough and in-depth description of the programs at BSEC and how they have developed could be another avenue of research. I have included some of that information in this project, but it was more to give context than the focus of my project.

There would be so many directions that one could follow for further study of this area to support positive change for SWEET. The roads are many and I would encourage others to pursue their ideas and interests in adding to the voices that I have found in this project.

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Appendix A

Student Information Letter

Dear Student:

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that I am carrying out as part of my Master's of Education program at the University of Alberta under the supervision of Dr. Ingrid Johnston. The study is entitled "Effective Teaching Practices for working with At Risk Inner City Youth", and it aims to explore the following research questions:

- What teaching styles work best for inner city students who have been out of school or who have not had good school experiences?
- How can we improve our teaching styles or classrooms so that students have more success in school?
- What does the current research and literature say about teaching inner city students so that they have success in school?
- What do students see as their responsibility towards their own education?

Your specific role in the project would be to answer a written survey. You may read over the survey before deciding whether or not to take part in the research. Due to issues of consent, only students over the age of eighteen will be able to take part.

You are under no obligation to take part in the study. Because I occupy an administrative position at the school, I have arranged for participation in the research to be anonymous, which means that I will not know who has agreed to participate and who has not. The survey will be administered in my absence by a neutral third party. This person will be someone who is not directly involved in the research and who does not occupy a position of authority in relation to you. For example, it will not be one of your current teachers. To further ensure anonymity, you are asked not to write your name anywhere on the survey.

You may opt out of the study without facing any penalty or repercussions. You may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. Should you decide not to participate at all, you may hand in your survey blank or not hand it in at all.

If you are willing to take part in the project, please respond to the survey to the best of your ability and return it in the envelope provided. To indicate your willingness to have your survey responses used in this study, please check the consent box at the top of the survey before handing it in. Although you are free to opt out of the research or to withdraw at any time, you should note that because your survey will not have your name written on it, it may be difficult or impossible to remove your responses from the research once they have been submitted. Please take this into account when deciding whether or not to give your consent to participate in the study.

The information collected for this research will be used solely for the following educational purposes: completing my Master's degree project, scholarly papers and presentations, and a report for Boyle Street Education Centre.

I hope that you will participate in this study. Your contribution will be valuable to other inner city students.

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me or my university supervisor, Dr. Ingrid Johnston.

Mavis Averill
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The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Mavis J. Averill

Appendix B Boyle Street Education Centre Student Survey

Consent Box

- By checking this box, I consent to have my survey responses used as data for the research project entitled “Effective Teaching Practices for Working with At-Risk Inner City Youth”.

I have read and understand the accompanying information letter, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and to seek clarifications if necessary.

In agreeing to take part in the study, I understand that:

- I am under no obligation to participate.
- I may skip questions that I do not wish to answer.
- The information that I provide will be used solely for the following educational purposes: the researcher’s Master’s degree project, academic papers and presentations, and a report for Boyle Street Education Centre.

1. During what time period were you a student at Boyle Street Education Centre?

- 1995 - 2000
 2000 - 2006

2. How many credits did you achieve at the school?

- Don’t know
 1- 10 credits
 10 – 50 credits
 Over 50 credits
 High school diploma

3. When did you leave the school?

- After less than one school term
 At the end of one school year
 When you turned 20
 When you finished high school
 When you were asked to leave

4. If you left the school before you turned 20 or before you finished high school:

a.] Why did you leave?

b.] At that time, could the school have done anything to keep you as a student? Please explain.

c.] At that time, could you have done anything to keep yourself in school? Please explain.

5. How do you think you learn best?

- One on one instruction at your own pace
- In a small group with other students
- Doing a project /hands on learning (*example: making a video or cutting someone's hair*)
- Other – please explain

6. Do you feel you have (had) any input in how you are (were) taught at the school?

- Yes
- No

7. If you could make one change in how you are (were) taught at school, what would it be?

8. If you could make (have made) one change in your own attitude towards school, what would it be?

9. These are some programs that have been started at the school. Please mark the ones that occurred while you were a student.

- Move from one teacher to two teachers per core room
- Talking circle support groups for girls
- Lunch program
- Option courses – fashion studies, art, cosmetology
- Cree Language program
- Option course – music program
- Breakfast added
- Bus tickets to and from school
- Out of school phys ed field trips (Outward Bound, voyageur canoe trips, rock climbing)
- Talking circle support groups for boys
- Addition of computers to classrooms
- Addiction support groups
- Move to new school
- Addition of core learning days
- Other (Please list)

10. Please mark the program(s) that had a positive effect on your learning.

- Move from one teacher to two teachers per core room
- Talking circle support groups for girls
- Lunch program
- Option courses – fashion studies, art, cosmetology
- Cree Language program
- Option course – music program
- Breakfast added
- Bus tickets to and from school
- Out of school phys ed field trips (Outward Bound, voyageur canoe trips, rock climbing)
- Talking circle support groups for boys
- Addition of computers to classrooms
- Addiction support groups
- Move to new school
- Addition of core learning days
- Other (Please list) _____

From the programs that you have marked, explain why you think *each* program helped.

11. What kind of teaching works best for you? Please rate these from 1 – 5 with number 1 being the least helpful and number 5 being the most helpful.

	Least help			Most help	
	1	2	3	4	5
Working with teacher at teacher's desk	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Working mostly by yourself	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Listening to music while you work	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Teacher stopping by your desk to discuss ideas or assignments	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Discussing ideas with a group of people	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Learning from computer programs	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Visual assignments – moving from doing hand-outs to making charts	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Teacher at front of the room in lecture style	<input type="checkbox"/>				

12. What qualities do you find the most helpful in a teacher? Please rate these from 1 – 5 with number 1 being the least helpful and number 5 being the most helpful.

	Least help			Most help	
	1	2	3	4	5
Keeping the classroom quiet and focused	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Being flexible with rules	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Being open and friendly	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Ability to use humour in the classroom	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Being dependable (count on them to be there)	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Quick feedback on your course assignments	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Being prepared for classes	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Other_(please explain)

13. When you were a student, were you able to ask the teacher for help when you needed it?

- Yes
 No

14. If you answered no to question 12, what do you see as the main thing that stopped you from asking a teacher for help when you needed it? Please explain.

15. Were you a funded student while at school either through Student Finance or through Advancing Futures?

- Yes
 No

16. How many years of funding did you need to complete your schooling?

17. Did having student funding impact your decision to stay in school? Could you explain how?

18. What are you currently doing?

- Being a student/student funding
- Working at a job / (what kind)
- Hanging out / social services funding
- Doing temp jobs
- In a program (what kind)

Other _____

19. Did Boyle Street Education Centre help you in any way to have a better future after you left the school? How? Please explain.

20. What could Boyle Street Education Centre do (have done) for you or with you when you were a student here that would have helped you more in your life today? Please explain.

21. What could you do (have done) differently while you are (were) a student here that would help you be more successful in school?

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. Thanks for offering your ideas. They will make a difference in our search to do better work for future students.

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Students

- 1.] How old were you when you first started school at BSEC? How long were you a student at BSEC?
- 2.] How many years has it been since you left the school? Describe the activities that you are currently involved in. What are your future plans?
- 3.] Would you please describe the student population that attends BSEC.
- 4.] Could you describe a positive learning memory that you had at the school?
- 5.] .] At BSEC, you experienced many teachers and many different styles of teaching. Can you describe the teaching styles that helped you the most in your learning?
- 6.] What kind of atmosphere in the classroom supported your learning the best?
- 7.] Do you think that early life experiences of trauma had any impact on how you were able to learn in school? Please explain.
- 8.] If you could tell teachers how to teach more effectively, so that students who come to BSEC would have a better learning experience, what would you say?
- 9.] If you could add something or change something about your experience of learning at BSEC, what would it be?

Appendix D

Teacher Information Letter

Dear Teacher:

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that I am carrying out as part of my Master's of Education program at the University of Alberta under the supervision of Dr. Ingrid Johnston. The study is entitled "Effective Teaching Practices for working with At Risk Inner City Youth", and it aims to explore the following research questions:

- What kinds of teacher practices and classroom strategies do teachers and students think are most effective for learning with this population?
- What do students see as their responsibility towards their own learning?
- What kinds of teacher practices and classroom strategies are recommended by current research and literature in working with at risk inner city youth?
- What kinds of on-going supports do teachers need to be effective with this student population?

Your specific role in the project would be to answer a written questionnaire AND/OR to take part in an interview. You may read over the questionnaire before deciding whether or not to take part in the research. The interview questions would be similar to the ones in the questionnaire, except that I would be seeking further elaboration and detail. The interview would not likely take more than one hour of your time. It would be audio-recorded and transcribed.

All information that you provide for this study will be treated confidentially. To ensure that you remain anonymous, your name or other information that could identify you specifically will not be made public or included in any research reports or presentations.

You are under no obligation to take part in the study, and you may opt out or withdraw at any time without facing any penalty or repercussions. You may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you decide to withdraw from the research, any information that you provided will not be used. It will be returned to you or destroyed.

The information collected for this research will be used solely for the following educational purposes: completing my Master's degree project, scholarly papers and presentations, and a report for Boyle Street Education Centre.

I hope that you will participate in this study. Your contribution will be valuable to inner city schools and to any teachers interested in this field of study.

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me or my university supervisor, Dr. Ingrid Johnston.

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The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Mavis J. Averill

Consent Box

- By checking this box, I consent to have my survey responses used as data for the research project entitled “Effective Teaching Practices for Working with At-Risk Inner City Youth”.

I have read and understand the accompanying information letter, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and to seek clarifications if necessary.

In agreeing to take part in the study, I understand that:

- I am under no obligation to participate.
 - I may skip questions that I do not wish to answer.
 - The information that I provide will be used solely for the following educational purposes: the researcher’s Master’s degree project, academic papers and presentations, and a report for Boyle Street Education Centre.
-

1.] Could you define what at –risk inner city youth means to you?

2.] a.] Have you adapted your teaching style in order to reach at risk inner city youth?

b.] Describe how you have adapted your teaching style to meet the learning needs of inner city youth.

3.] Do you believe that at risk inner city youth have learning needs specific to this situation in their lives? Please explain.

4.] Could you discuss the difference as you see it between at-risk youth and youth with high needs?

5.] What population of at risk students do you think your school should focus on? Why?

6.] What has to happen in your classrooms to make you feel that you are being effective in your job?

7.] What do you want your students to be able to do as a result of being in your school? In other words, what do you see as success for a student?

8.] What do you need from administration or professional development to assist you in becoming better or feeling more successful at what you do?

Appendix F

Interview Questions for Teachers

1.] How many years have you been teaching? How many years experience as a teacher did you have prior to working at BSEC?

2.] How many years did you work at BSEC? Could you describe the working environment as you experienced it at that time? Tell me about your classroom.

4.] Describe the student population who came to BSEC.

5.] Tell me about two or three positive teaching memories that you had at BSEC.

6.] If you could choose one thing that you believe was the most difficult barrier to learning that the students at BSEC had, what do you think it was? Have you thought of teaching strategies that might have had a positive impact on this?

7.] Can you describe what you saw as common or recurring learning needs of inner city students that you experienced as a teacher?

8.] Tell me about effective teaching strategies that you used to address some of these learning needs in your classrooms.

9.] Could you describe one or two of the most difficult teaching dilemmas that you experienced as a teacher at BSEC and the solutions that you either used at the time or ideas you had later for what might have worked in these situations?

10.] BSEC has developed a community model of education in that the teachers eat with the students, do not have a staff room or separate bathrooms etc. We share in celebrations together and this brings with it an informal atmosphere. Comment, please, on how this model affected your teaching strategies.

11.] Do you think that early trauma in life impacts students' ability to learn in school? Please explain.

12.] Given the context of the lives of students at BSEC, what do you think are the most important ways that teachers can improve the learning for these students, taking into consideration the individual needs of each student?

13.] How long has it been since you worked at BSEC? What new teaching strategies have you learned since you left, that you think could improve the learning of the students at BSEC?

Appendix G

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Project title: "Effective Teaching Practices for working with At Risk Inner City Youth".

I, _____, the *Research Assistant/Transcriber*, agree to:

1. keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher(s)*.
2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the *Researcher(s)* when I have completed the research tasks.
4. after consulting with the *Researcher(s)*, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher(s)* (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

Transcriber

(print name)

(signature)

(date)