

The Challenge to Create a Safer Learning Environment for Youth

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1 *Introduction*

Background to the research

This research continues my exploration of how violence affects learning and my search for effective approaches to support learning for those who have experienced violence. In my earlier research, I examined the impact of violence on women's learning and considered possible approaches for adult literacy programs to support learning for all (1997, 1999/2000, 2004). Following that study, I sought to find ways to implement changes to literacy programs (Horsman 2000, 2001a, 2001b, Morrish, Horsman & Hofer, 2002) and carried out further research to learn more about which discourses help and which hinder adopting such change in adult literacy programs (Heald & Horsman, 2000, Horsman, 2001c, Horsman, in press).

Through the current study, funded by the National Literacy Secretariat Department of Human Resources and Skills Development and sponsored by Parkdale Project Read, I sought to learn more about how violence affects learning by interviewing young people who are currently struggling with learning, either within or outside the school system. I wanted to explore how responses to trauma support or limit learning possibilities by interviewing young people and professionals engaged in the school system and in other education for youth. Parkdale Project Read hoped the study would give them guidance to support youth more effectively in their literacy program and to initiate new youth-focussed programming if they can obtain funding.

I began the study talking about my research and asking for input from students in various classes in a regular high school and an alternative high school. Although I handed out numerous invitations for students to talk to me further, only one approached me to talk briefly¹. When I began to talk to out-of-school youth in a job training program, I followed their advice about what would encourage them to talk one-on-one and returned during class time, with my research assistant—a woman closer to them in age—to interview those who

¹ It was only after this student had left that I realized that she might have spoken to me further if I had immediately set up a time and place to meet. Other students in the schools might have been prepared to meet with me one-on-one if I had had an office in the school and been offering honorariums for interviews. By the time I had discovered the importance of these two factors I had already interviewed sufficient youth through after-school and job-training programs so didn't pursue this option.

preferred to talk to her, and with a small honorarium for each interviewee. After these initial interviews, I worried that students who had little or no previous opportunity to speak about the violence in their lives and to reflect on how it had affected their learning might be unable to provide the detail and nuance I hoped for. Towards the end of the study, I came to see greater richness of insight in these accounts. They powerfully revealed the depth of silence and common difficulties in speaking about these issues. At the time, however, I decided not to continue in this vein.

I began to seek out settings where young people would be likely to have had more experience talking about and reflecting on issues of violence. Students in Leave Out ViolencE (LOVE), an after-school leadership program for perpetrators and/or victims of violence, and in Peace Power Crew, a project run by Beat the Street to address violence issues for out-of-school youth, proved eager to tell us² what they knew. They spoke about the violence in their lives, their experiences in school, in their program, and their ideas for what would support learning. Students in George Brown's Assaulted Women and Children's Counsellor/Advocate Program also offered rich insights into their own lives, struggles to learn in the school system, and clarity about what might help students experiencing violence³. As a consequence of these new sites of research, I interviewed students who had attended a broad range of types and sizes of schools in greater Toronto and elsewhere.

Interviews with teachers, a vice-principal, guidance counsellor, and school social worker from various schools and staff from youth programs provided a counterpoint to the comments of youth themselves, particularly to their common assertion that adults didn't care about what was happening to them. The professionals I interviewed clearly cared enormously, but struggled with what they were able to accomplish within the structures that limited their work.

Interviews were taped and extracts transcribed. Only repetitions, "mmms" and "aaahs" have been removed. Spoken language has not been edited to create a written format except where interviewees preferred to edit their words. All interviews are included in italics to draw attention to these words of wisdom.

² Interviews and focus groups were led by Jo Petite, Nadine Sookermany, Nicole Ysabet, as well as myself. All quotes in italics are excerpted from these interviews.

³ I was not aiming to study particular schools or organizations, but rather to understand possibilities for supporting learning through interviewing in a limited number of sites in Toronto. Most students said they were proud that they could help address this issue and wanted to be named. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate some of these students at the completion of the project. When I was unable to reach students to secure their approval for the quotes I wanted to include, and to review how I was using their words in the paper, I used pseudonyms instead of attributing the quote. I have also used pseudonyms when students requested anonymity.

Everydayness of violence

Students I interviewed, wherever they were located, were clear that violence was all-pervasive in society and in their own lives. As one student said:

Violence is everywhere, all the time. Everywhere—it's like, a part of life in a way. It's like a part of life. No matter what walk of life you're from, if you're from an affluent family, or from a family that doesn't have a lot, or—it doesn't matter. Wherever you are on the spectrum, violence will somehow work its way into your life. And in a school, it's just like—violence is almost a cool thing. When you're a grade nine, you get initiated. They never caught me, though, I ran all the way to grade ten. They never caught me. But getting beat up when you're a grade nine in high school is like the norm. It's not even looked upon like—well, if the principal catches wind of it, he's a disciplinarian or whatever... But at that age you're vulnerable because you don't know who you are. You don't have an identity. You're still searching for what kind of group you belong to—what kind of circle you fit in—and your self-esteem level is unstable.
(Kwame)

Students who had moved to Canada from different parts of the world were eloquent that there had been far too much violence in their lives, from war, from civil unrest and from other forms of violence witnessed in their communities. In regular classrooms, nobody spoke of violence they had experienced in the home, although I wondered in many groups how much of the silence and awkwardness was about what wasn't being said. In a grade nine classroom, the silences were especially tortuous. In a grade 12 classroom, one boy argued that there was little real violence in Canada—only the fear of violence created by stereotypes and media from the United States. A girl who had been pushed into a car in broad daylight was incensed by this argument, and other boys spoke of the presence of violence in their lives. Students repeatedly described the violence in school, or just outside school, that went on out of teachers' sight. Students generally spoke of the prevalence of violence, or the threat of violence, in all areas of their lives.

Violence is not an aberration that can be excluded from children's lives at home and at school. It is an everyday occurrence that needs to be acknowledged and addressed. In the face of this widespread experience of violence, the school and societal approaches of removing children from violence in the home and removing violent children from the school seems inadequate to maintain a safe learning environment or support learning for those who have experienced violence.

Control, connection and meaning

Judith Herman describes trauma as caused by events that “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning.” (Herman, 1992:33) Many writers have suggested that for trauma victims, therapy should be directed at helping the survivor regain a sense of control, connection and meaning in her life. Through my earlier research (1999/2000) I began to see some of the complexity around control, connection and meaning in relation to education.

Control – Control is a complicated terrain. While some learners don't like being controlled, they may also be mistrustful of being in control. When students stop and start programs, they may be trying out some form of control.

Connection – Connection is necessary for communication. We can't assume learners can connect. Building connections may take a lot of work and takes time.

Meaning – Trauma can result in a loss of “meaning.” This may make it hard to imagine goals and to find meaning in life or in words. (Morrish, Horsman, Hofer, 2002:25-26)

During this current study I came to see even greater importance in these three areas for youth, especially in the school system. These three themes weave throughout this paper. Students continually reported their difficulties with the lack of control they experienced in school, and described confrontations as they sought to obtain control through skipping school, arriving late, misbehaving, or failing to produce homework. The school and welfare systems try to take control through removing students from violent homes, or removing them from school when they commit violence, fail to attend, or fail to pay attention in the required manner. These attempts increase the confrontations and do not, I believe, support learning. Students and professionals spoke frequently of the difficulty of creating connections across the institutional divide, and the increasing challenge as cutbacks and school and welfare policies limit connection between students and professionals in the school. In painful contrast to these “protective” limits, students state in a myriad of ways that connection with adults who they can come to trust is perhaps **the** most important aspect of supporting their learning. Students, teachers and other professionals all spoke of their struggles to find meaning within their own work and particularly to conceptualize “success.” Because students who experience violence at home or at school lose confidence and a sense of their own worth and ability to act in the world, programming which supports the rebuilding of an empowered self-concept is crucial to support learning. Shaping new meanings for students and professionals may be a key step in finding creative ways to enable students to learn successfully.

Trying to remove violence does not create a safe environment

Removing students from the violent home

The Ontario Child and Family Services Act states that “If a person has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is or may be in need of protection, the person must promptly report the suspicion and the information upon which it is based to a children’s aid society.” This seems straightforward: children need to be protected from violent adults. Any adult who suspects a child is experiencing violence must report this. But students repeatedly told me that they were not asked what was wrong and that asking was essential. One student was particularly eager that I make sure that teachers understand the importance of such careful questioning, as she was adamant that this was the most important thing that could have been done to support her learning:

I think that people in the schools, if you see a kid in that kind of situation...like the way I was, missing school and that stuff—if the child doesn’t answer you, then you should at least ask them “Do you need food? Do you need any bus tickets?” Start off like that. That could make them tell you something, I’m telling you...When I was going through my grade school, I just had them buy me stuff... clothes and stuff, but no one specifically asked me “Natalie, what’s wrong at your house?” Which they should have... Of course I would have said something, because I would have believed that they wanted to help me. That’s what teachers need to do, I’m telling you. You have to sit down, and—even if they don’t say nothing. You could ask them specifically, straight up, “okay do you have a problem at home?” If they say no, you ask them why are they missing school. If they still say nothing, then ask them what they need... I think counsellors should ask these kids, because I’m telling you, it’s important. Believe me, they’ll learn more, they’ll do something, if somebody else will pay attention. If somebody else pays attention to them, they’ll learn better.

Like, if somebody had paid attention to me, in school... I don’t think that teachers should just think “Okay, their parents are supposed to do that for them.” You can’t be so ignorant, sometimes at home that’s what

they're getting, ignorance. So they're thinking at least if they go to school, if somebody's more open with them and more helpful towards them, trust me, it's a lot better for that person to do something with their life.

This is my first time, okay? Actually getting help with my learning. Not just in this program, but people now, I didn't have the help back then. That's wrong, as an adult now, I should have got it a long time [ago], because I didn't have that stable thing. They didn't ask me questions. That's why I didn't end up telling them anything. Sometimes kids don't even know how to approach them...

*You're supposed to focus on not just one student in the class who's doing something, who's getting their work done. You guys have to focus on the ones who are not doing what they're supposed to.
(Natalie Jones)*

Another student, who did receive a range of "help," was also clear that she needed to be asked directly what was wrong. The lack of this question led her to a firm belief that nobody really cared:

Everyone kept asking "Why don't you like school?" Nobody asked why I was having a hard time. I didn't not like school, I just didn't want to be there. It made me feel ill. No one understood it made me feel ill. I think it's that child saying "I have the flu, I can't go to school today," but I really felt very sick to be in the environment. The smells made me feel ill, made me feel dizzy. Public school, I think, above high school was more traumatic, because I just remember all the students always staring at me and not coming near me. And the teachers being okay with that. Like, no one ever said "You need to play with Jennifer, don't talk to Jennifer in that way." (Jennifer Hogan)

Some students did say that even if they had been asked what was wrong, they would likely not have told because they did not want to split up the home, betray their parents, create disruption for siblings, or because they did not believe that reporting would lead to a better situation:

They told me [they wouldn't tell anyone else], but it's the fear that when they say it's abuse, they have to call Children's Aid, whatever. And personally I didn't care whether I was taken out of the house, it was fear that they would take my brother too...He was being treated fine, I was the only one that was actually being physically abused...My little brother is really attached to them. (Andrew)

Other students said they would have told (or on occasion did actually tell) if the right person had asked, in the right way, at the right time. In particular, what

seemed to make a difference to students was that they had the opportunity to build a relationship with a teacher and see that she or he cared, believed in their potential, and was genuinely concerned about what was wrong.

Even students who did not want to tell what was happening at home wanted evidence that adults cared what was happening to them. Some wanted supports that might help them negotiate their difficult home life and continue schooling, such as money for lunch or transportation, or a place to do homework. Although many might argue that these young people's choices were not wise, and that they need to be "protected" in spite of themselves, their attempt to stay in control meant that they received no help at all. They were unable to access any support to help them think through their options. One student said that it was only after she left her family that she understood what she had been living through as abuse. Her sense that she mustn't reveal her mother's difficulties meant she hadn't spoken to anyone about her home life. Reporting policies designed to protect children from violence appear to run the risk of deepening silences and leaving students with less opportunity to question the meanings they make of their experiences. As a consequence, students may be more at risk of remaining in an unsafe environment.

Students, teachers and others also struggled with doubts about whether engaging Children's Aid does increase safety for young people. Some students who had been through the system mused about how bad they felt and the ill effects they perceived:

Violence is made through the feeling of abandonment. When I was in foster care, I was in it for all of my childhood basically, and I was a curious kid but I went into foster care—it messed me up. 'Cause it's being switched around from house to house so I turned violent. It was just the feeling that no one wanted me. I'm living with pure strangers one week and new strangers the next week. So I turned violent, I was going in and out of schools, hung with the wrong crowd [to] feel wanted. (Junie Henry)

Another student said that moving into foster care felt like punishment. Even though she was not the one who reported the abuse, she blamed herself. Students also spoke of the difficulty of keeping any continuity in their schooling and learning when they moved between foster homes, or group homes, or when they were living in youth shelters. Although some movement may be inevitable in such a process, moving increased the difficulty of staying in a school where they were known and supported. Shelter policies, for example, restrict the amount of time young people can remain, and yet subsidized accommodation is not available without long periods on waiting lists, so students are forced to make repeated moves. Supports to enable students to stay in their old school, or to adjust to and find supports in a new school, seem important to enable continued learning to take place when students have to move to a new home.

Teachers also worried about whether reporting their knowledge or suspicions of violence actually helped the student concerned. Two newly qualified art teachers chose to remain anonymous as they spoke about their experiences and the problems they perceived:

It was my second week teaching at a huge...school, and I had a kid disclose information to me... and I followed through with it to the best of my ability, which after reading the paperwork, is what one is supposed to do. To the best of your moral ability, follow through with the situation. And then when I was speaking with the Children's Aid I felt really negatively about the system, I was made to feel negative about the way that I dealt with it. And that's one individual who's on the phone there, but you're hanging on the phone with this ambiguous voice on the line that holds the future of somebody you're dealing with intimately. Because the classroom's an intimate situation – [but]... I feel like there's no warmth allowed to be in the class.

...I felt like it wasn't imminent danger. I felt as though it could wait...overnight. But I got reprimanded for that. And in the end I didn't even think that there was much of a reaction to the student's situation anyway. I didn't see anything come of it, which only made me feel more negative about the experience. (Art teachers)

With an overloaded care system, teachers spoke of a sense that reporting had led to little help, and perhaps increased the violence at home for a young person who had betrayed the family silences.

Concerns about whether children benefit when they are taken into care were also widely echoed. One educator said:

You spend enough time with kids who've been in foster homes, or who've been in care, and you know that that is not a good option.... Anyway if we had a care system that actually was functional, that didn't abuse kids more than they already get abused, that would be one thing - but we don't.

What is the primary concern? The primary concern is not the wellbeing of that person. The primary concern is the supposed apprehension of the offender because supposedly that's going to take care of everything. So it's extremely clear—and the kind of stuff kids have to deal with—“this happened to you and if he abuses your siblings it will be your fault”—kids are told that by police officers and guidance teachers. It's part of the leverage they use on them. (Marilyn McLean)

Teachers spoke of questioning whether they wanted to hear disclosures, worrying that they would be forced to betray students who trusted them with their stories and did not want them to report to Children's Aid. Others had the

experience of asking a student what was wrong, hearing a disclosure, and then having to deal with the student's anger when they reported. In all these cases, teachers worried that they had made the situation worse.

Like the students, the teachers are caught in silence. There are almost no places for them to take their concerns or discuss whether it is necessary to involve Children's Aid in a particular case, let alone to challenge the current framework of reporting and question whether this approach serves children well. I was told that the Rape Crisis Centre gets a call or two a week from teachers questioning whether they should report to Children's Aid, but as a forum where callers remain anonymous, this offers no potential for opening broad-based discussion about the complex issues of how best to support children experiencing violence. Students also look for places where they might be able to avoid revealing their age and find a listener who will not take control out of their hands. Some call the Rape Crisis Centre or the Kids' Help Line⁴, both anonymous and confidential lines where young people may speak of their experience without losing control if they are careful to avoid giving identifying information that will require counsellors to report their disclosures. It is likely that many more assume there is no one they can talk to while still maintaining control, and so never have the opportunity to talk through what they want to have happen with a sympathetic listener, or to access supports.

Many aspects of the legislation limit connections. Not only do young people and teachers avoid opening up talk about violence, but also a recent stipulation means that any adult who "has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is or may be in need of protection must make the report directly to a children's aid society." This means that each teacher must make the call her or himself. Previously, teachers would have gone to guidance counsellors to discuss the issues, and there would be more coordination about particular families. A guidance counsellor explained that now she did not learn who was reporting or who they were reporting, so one more possible connection is lost. The additional requirement to report any evidence of children witnessing violence has also increased tensions. This requirement, intended to recognize the damage done by witnessing violence, may instead have decreased the likelihood of women accessing supports to escape violence because they fear losing custody of their children. Teachers were often anxious knowing that they would be liable and could lose their jobs if they did not report to Children's Aid when obliged to. Educators suggested that with stricter reporting policies, public education around issues of violence is decreasing rather than increasing:

It even affects public education. When we go into high schools...there didn't used to be this whole level of paranoia about "what if students disclose to you?" Now there is. So the level of paranoia teachers have

⁴ It is curious that as a society we accept that children can keep control and avoid involving child protection services if they call a confidential phone line and speak about abuse, but not if they talk in person to a trusted adult, even if they are clear that they don't want protection services to be called. I have come to believe that children in violent situations might be better served by the possibility of speaking to adults in person without automatic intervention.

about even bringing in, say, the Rape Crisis Centre to students, is much higher. Because inevitably the fallout is going to be that someone is going to disclose to the teacher afterwards, or to us in the hallway or whatever, so they're terrified of that. And so the people they'll let in, the people who go to schools now, are people who are more invested in those institutional outcomes... It was better ten, fifteen years ago when we could just go in and talk to students. (Marilyn McLean)

Teachers and other professionals based in the school attempt to negotiate conflicting demands. In spite of students' judgement that most don't care, teachers and others talked about how hard it is to feel unable to do enough to help, and to feel that they are criticized from all sides:

It's really hard for teachers, because you're the kid's lifeline. You are. And even when you're talking about truancy, even that. Again, a communication breakdown. You call the parents, and a lot of parents have this attitude like "You spend more time with my kids than I do...you don't know them at all, you should know them more," or "Why is this happening, how could you have let this happen?" And on their behalf, they're stressed out. They're probably both working, they're probably getting home—lots of the kids are latchkey kids, you know, and they're not spending nearly enough time as a family unit. And so the teacher becomes this intimate lifeline for a lot of kids. And kids just naturally do that, are looking—you spend all this time with them so they're looking to bond with you. But we're not allowed. And at the same time we have all of these legal responsibilities. And at the same time, you're a human being who cares. And we define your future, and we're supposed to teach you kind of superficial knowledge, and we're human beings so we care and go home feeling like crap about it all the time. And we get paid like crap. And you get no gratitude, because—you listen to the radio, like today when I was driving the car, and the PC party is like "There's teachers who want to go on strike. Maybe we should remind them that the students are the most important people." ...And there's this huge issue, and all you want to do is do something, and you can't. You're one person. (Art teachers)

Several teachers commented that they appreciated these interviews, as they do not otherwise get opportunities to talk and reflect about these tensions.

If our framework is that violent families are aberrations, then we will assume that most families are good. This assumption means that schools are eager to engage families in their children's problems, and will call parents to report children's absences, poor work, or misbehaviour without warning students that they are doing so. Many students suggested that this assumption cannot reasonably be made. They argued that students should be warned before schools call their homes, and suggested schools should consider whether contacting families might make the situation worse. One student who spoke from experience explained:

They keep kicking kids out 'cause they're bullying people and that, right? I feel that's the wrong thing to do... 'cause most bullies are being bullied at home. You send 'em home, they're only getting bullied more. And the fact that they keep calling the parents and that, "Oh, your son's doing this, your son's doing that," you go home and you get hit more. So personally I don't think the school should have any contact with the parents unless it's, say I get hurt or something... You call my parents and I get hit more, and it's an ongoing thing. (Andrew)

Other students also spoke of parents who focussed on criticising and beating them for their failures rather than praising their achievements. They pointed out that schools and parents try to scare students into "doing better" but insisted that fear does not lead to improvement. Students said the sign of a respectful and sensitive teacher was that they checked in with the student before calling home to ask about a problem. Students spoke of the value of being given support to rebuild their confidence rather than being removed from a difficult situation:

Growing up with my grandmother, I felt okay, it wasn't in my mind that my parents weren't there. My mom was there, but I wasn't living with her at the time. Then I started living with my mom, and I think my confidence took a big hit there too, because of her boyfriend hitting her. And I didn't know what to do in that situation. And I couldn't do nothing in that situation, so I felt helpless. Just a lot of things happened that made me feel like I wasn't doing anything. It ruined my confidence from the start... I came and lived with my dad and I don't think that solved anything. I think living with my dad made it worse. He didn't give me that independence that I wanted. He wasn't showing confidence in me. If he had showed confidence in me, I would have had way more confidence...

I think I would have wanted more self-confidence. I don't think I would have wanted just to take my step mom [who was emotionally abusive] out of the picture. 'Cause I don't think in life, you know, when a problem arises I don't think you should just get rid of it like that. I think you should deal with it. (Marcus)

Those who felt it was their job to save students from violent households clearly experienced frustration and perhaps despair when they were unable to protect kids they believed were being abused. One student was critical of the counsellor who, as she put it, wanted to be her "saviour:"

No one ever involved me in my own process, nothing along those lines. School for me was just being shoved into one class and the next class, people pretending to care while you're in the classroom, but when you leave the classroom they don't really remember your name. I've had guidance counsellors—there's always that one who wants to be your saviour, but they're not really quite sure how to do it... She took me to dinner a couple times in the year, taught me how to play pool. I think

she thought I needed a friend. And she involved me in different drama groups and stuff, so there was good aspects to high school because of her, but in the end she never asked what was wrong...

Nobody really asked me, what's happening at home, do you need support, why since you were ten have you had a job? Nobody asked these things. Nobody wondered why I had consistent worries, anxiety, why I have panic attacks over money, why I could budget at a certain age, why I was the primary caregiver to my brother—and everyone knew that, through all my schooling, everyone knew because he would need to go home sick and they would call me out of class to take him home.

I wanted everyone else to leave me alone, but I did want someone at school to say why? Why can you sign yourself out and the attendance people don't care? Why are you the one called for your brother? Why do you come in with bruises everywhere? Why are you high all the time? Why do you drink? Why do you have a reputation that no girl in their right mind would ever want? Why about any of this? (Jennifer Hogan)

Although this student was frustrated by her guidance counsellor, she was also clear that it would have been helpful for her if people had acknowledged the realities of her life, which she was certain they knew about, yet avoided naming. I wonder what difference it would have made to her if the professionals in her life had asked her what was wrong, acknowledged that it seemed that much was not OK in her childhood and asked her what she thought would make a difference.

Dale R. Callender, a counsellor from Delisle Youth Services, was clear that his concept of success was not saving students, but rather being available as a resource:

I think for me in terms of success, I really have to take a step back. Some days I will leave here and say geez, how successful was I here? And I don't know. I really don't know. You have the cases where the kids have left and then come back and say "Thanks a lot." Is that success? I look at success in terms of saying I'm here for a reason...and I give information out. I may never know if that information has been helpful or not helpful. But I believe the one area of success [is] as long as I still have kids coming here, it's success. 'Cause when you look at counselling and accessibility, counselling and kids looking for support, I think that's key. (Dale R. Callender)

Clearly many students agreed that an accessible source of information was key. An entire group of students who had spent time in the school where he was located launched eagerly into talking about him:

He wasn't a guidance counsellor, he was just a guy in the office. He was trained to be a psychologist, I believe, and he was involved in every aspect of

the school. Every group, he helped out with. And everybody felt comfortable talking to him. I know fifty people I could name that went to go talk with him about a problem they had...and he was always there, his door was always open...he was always willing to help out. (Alternative school social studies class)

They all knew him, whether they had sought help from him or not, and were clear that counsellors like Dale Callender could support learning for students who had experienced violence.

Recently published research from the medical field (Trocmé et al. 2003) questions the extent of physical injury from child abuse and neglect and suggests that long-term emotional harm is far more devastating. They draw the inference that mandatory reporting and abuse investigations may need to be reconsidered. However, a commentary published in the same journal (Ward & Bennett, 2003) is cautious about the statistics of physical harm, suggesting that it may be hard to diagnose, and concludes that not enough is known about child mistreatment to decide on shifting approaches to reporting. I was interested in questions about the value of mandatory reporting and think further research questioning this approach and assessing approaches which invite more collaboration from older children would be of value. The suggestion that emotional harm might be the most severe consequence of abuse was interesting, but limited by the absence of discussion about how to heal emotional damage. Studies are needed to further explore the emotional damage of child mistreatment, the most effective healing approaches, and whether and when Children's Aid interventions are increasing or hindering healing. The intersection between emotional damage and school failure, how each may reinforce the other, and how either may be mitigated, are also important areas of study.

When few professionals ask why, and few students talk about what is happening to them, reporting policies intended to create safety may instead exacerbate silences. When young people fear they will lose control if they disclose their experience many will "choose" not to tell. But with this choice they lose connection and have little opportunity to think through the meaning of their experience, see how it is affecting their learning, and assess their options. When teachers and other professionals "choose" not to open up talk about violence, not to ask students why they are arriving late, skipping school, or misbehaving—fearing disclosures and the consequences of asking—they, too, preserve the silences. Students, teachers, and others all need opportunities to explore meanings further.

While the current reporting system remains in place, one possible way to break the silence may be for schools to seek to create more "spaces" which support students' critical reflection about their lives and the opportunity to consider the level of violence they experience and provide information about the variety of resources they might be able to access. Schools could explore creating more assemblies where issues of violence are introduced and different resource

people such as Children's Aid workers, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists speak about how they address issues of violence, its legacy for the self and its impact on learning. Posters advertising resources such as the Kids' Help Line would help students to know how to contact places where they can speak confidentially about their experience. Where counselling and information on resources is widely and easily available there are more possibilities for students to access needed resources even if they feel unable to break silence about their own experience. Teachers who are concerned about students will be more able to ask them directly whether anything is wrong if they know students who disclose understand that teachers must make a report to Children's Aid. Teachers are then able to give a clear message that they care and are concerned about students' wellbeing, rather than seem to be simply judging their misdemeanours.

“Protecting” students from bad teachers (or is it: protecting teachers from bad students...)

Policies that appear to be designed to protect students—removing them from violence in the home, and avoiding the possibility that “bad” teachers can exploit vulnerable students—can become means whereby talk about the violence in students' lives is silenced and isolation is increased. As one student said:

*A lot of students would need to feel a little bit closer to a teacher, but didn't they just pass something that said “students can't email teachers, students can't do anything with teachers out of school” so I don't know how anybody's ever going to get close. You're not going to tell a stranger. You know, if you see them once a day or whatever, you're not going to tell a stranger about all your problems that you've been through. Now that they're making it even harder, I don't know what you would do...The whole point is, you're not allowed to cross that line anymore... And I know a lot of people—even last year, I was moving out on my own, and one of my teachers, they were selling their cottage. They brought a whole bunch of things from their cottage, and they told another teacher, and they got me some things. And I was so happy, and she gave me her email address, she said “Just let me know how you're doing,” 'cause she retired. And then it was really weird, I actually found it and I was about to email her just to let her know I was okay, and how I was doing, and then I heard that thing on the radio, and then I was like “That's really ridiculous.” Because that teacher helped me, she never—it was never anything but helping a student. And she sat there and talked to me about what was going on, and she was a lot of help. And to say that—I would never have told any other teacher, but she knew something, and she'd been my teacher for a while. I think it's ridiculous to say that they're going to be that strict...A lot of teachers, if you can get closer with them they're just human beings like everybody else.
(Alternative school English class)*

Many students spoke of the importance of being able to get to know a teacher well enough to get a sense of who they were, to see if they were trustworthy, to see them as human. Teachers were clear that they were discouraged from having conversations alone with students in order to protect themselves from charges of harassment:

Shut 'em down if they do [begin to disclose to you]. I had a personal experience with something like that...

This teacher talks about her experience with the disclosure quoted earlier and then when the student came to talk to her again, after the criticism she received earlier for being too informal she felt she had to behave differently:

At which point I felt that I needed to be extra-aware of my behaviour, and was very formal with the kid, and it made me feel terrible. I just felt like I needed things like witnesses, if this kid was going to talk to me further...teachers aren't allowed to be intimate, human or warm with students any more on an individual level. You safeguard yourself. You never find yourself alone in a classroom with a student any more because it can be used against you.

Second teacher: If you're in an office—say [a female teacher] and a male student are in an office—they have to keep the door open and there should be somebody else in the office, or the classroom, or if there's not then you move out into the hall. (Art teachers)

Teachers commented that many of the regulations deny simple human interaction that might make it easier for teachers and students to connect:

We're not allowed to use their washrooms. It's not bad enough that they can't use ours, but I can't walk into the girls' bathroom, because I might abuse a student. There's just something really human about standing at the sink washing your hands together. (Julianne Hodgins)

Students talked often of hiding and crying in the bathroom, making it clear that it might be a place where a teacher would see that a student is having trouble.

The opportunity for students to take control of who they will connect with and how they will connect with someone who might listen to the problems in their lives is increasingly limited. Students' possibilities of making connections are cut off, narrowing their chance of seeing connections between their problems at home and their difficulties learning in school, and excluding human connections which might enable them to access a range of supports.

Removing the violent students from school

Veronica, thirty-one, explains, “I did a lot of acting out when I was younger. There were social workers, psychiatrists. But no one ever asked what was going on with me. Basically they were putting labels on me, telling me what a terrible person I was. My acting out as a kid was related to the sexual abuse. I started a fire in the woods. I was in the fifth grade and I started skipping school. It seems as if social workers and such were always in my life, but I don’t know what they were doing other than moving me around and stuff.” Although running away and delinquency often cause additional problems for the child-victim they are ways of expressing her turmoil and attempts at exercising some type of control. (Dinsmore, 1991:27)

Many of the students who are the perpetrators of violence in school will be those who are experiencing violence at home. Students who have been violent are only too aware of the way violence can quickly become part of their identity, and explained how hard it is to be seen or even to see themselves in a different light:

Don’t think about the person who committed the violence as a perpetrator, think of them as a person. Because what I’ve seen in schools is that when you did something really bad, you get punished for it, and that cloud hangs over your head. It’s like a shroud of shame that you have to walk with. So a lot of the kids end up going with a life of walking on that road for the rest of their lives... They don’t take time to look at them as a person and wonder - why did you do this? (Zane Holder)

The students the child welfare reporting policies are theoretically designed to protect said repeatedly that nobody asked **why** they were misbehaving. When the school clamps down firmly on their behaviour—behaviour that is perhaps one way to break silence about violence being done to them when other routes to talk directly and maintain control are so limited—they may have an added sense of injustice: others who hurt them get away with violence, but when they are violent, they immediately get into trouble.

Staff in an after-school leadership program which works with both perpetrators and victims of violence described the value of asking why a student is misbehaving, rather than only instituting punishments:

One of the kids was acting out in one of the programs, you know, sort of swearing, being a bit aggressive, and I pulled that kid out and just said “I’ve noticed that you’re acting this way today, is there something that’s going on with you?” You know, without judgment, just ... I’ve noticed you’ve been a bit more direct today, a little more

outspoken, something like that with, again, no judgment, and trying to get behind that. ...my initial feeling around it was like, excuse my French, but "Why is he acting like such a — —?" You know, like it's really hard for the lesson to go on, and he's really disruptive. I was feeling kind of angry, because as a staff member you feel responsible for the kids really taking in the lesson basically. So instead I pulled him aside at break, and I was just like "You know, what's up with you today?" and as it turned out, there was stuff going on. So it's a much more empathic way to communicate. (LOVE staff)

Similarly Ken Klonsky, a recently retired teacher with many years' experience working with students with behaviour problems, was clear that this approach works best:

They're not working, they're throwing something around the room, you take them outside and say "Look, what's this problem today?" You only have six or seven other kids working individually in there, and then you can go through that with them...Because I was trained in that way, I actually did that even when I was teaching larger classes because I know that the best way of dealing with these kids is just talk to them. Not to confront them in front of other people. And I would get much better results doing that, because the kids could see that you cared. Often that's all they needed. If you said "Look, I don't have the time to deal with this now, but see me after class or after-school or lunchtime and I'll be happy to talk to you." That makes a big difference.... (Ken Klonsky)

Ken Klonsky also gave a vivid description of how to move from confrontation to collaboration:

One of the most important things was not to be oppositional. So even when you told them something or you made a request, you don't do it in front of them, you do it alongside them. Because the problem is not the kid or you, the problem should be the work or the situation. So if you go alongside them, you kind of point and say "Well, look. Here's the problem we're having. You're not learning this and neither is anybody else, so how can we—how can we together solve this problem?" (Ken Klonsky)

But there are fewer and fewer "bodies" in the school to provide this sort of support, to engage with students and try to understand why violence is occurring. Instead of questioning why students are misbehaving, schools institute consequences:

...[W]hen people say "this person has an anger management problem," we all deal with anger. So... do you deal with the end result in terms of focusing on consequence, or do you deal with what got them in the first place into that difficulty: the triggers... I think that's what you focus on... (Dale R. Callender)

Several students explained that violence can be a way of seeking control in some area of their lives. At home, Andrew was regularly shut in his room, and often beaten:

You sit there doing nothing. There was no books, no TV, no computer. I didn't have anything in my room - just my bed and four walls. (Andrew)

He described how the lack of control he experienced led to him hitting other students:

We don't get control over anything in school except...whether or not we go. So technically, we don't get any control in school. When you've got no control at school, you've got no control at home, you're basically—you know what I mean?[You] feel like, what the hell, why not get some control. [Hitting other students] was a way that people listened to me. In a way, that would be control. But in return, I ended up growing up with no friends. (Andrew)

He went on to explain that even though he got only negative attention from the bullying he engaged in, it still fed his need for attention:

Interviewer: Even though when you bullied you got sent home to be with [your parents], that wasn't enough to stop you bullying?

Andrew: No, because I needed attention. There wasn't anyone at home paying attention. Either way you look at it, I was looking for attention and I got what I wanted... It might not have been the attention that I wanted to get, but it's still attention. I wasn't really looking for a certain type of attention, I was looking for someone to pay attention to me. And when you're in the principal's office...you get more attention. (Andrew)

Andrew's words raise the question of whether he, and other students like him, might have displayed a more positive sort of behaviour if positive behaviour could have generated the same level of attention.

Ken Klonsky explained that when teachers give work that is too hard for students, feelings of frustration or humiliation are often expressed through negative behaviour. He believed that schools contribute in this way to students' violence.

My experience has told me that learning affects violence...and that if the school system had been, or when it has been responsive, when it has been a place where the kids feel both safe and that they're learning something, they're fine. But when they're frustrated, either through the curriculum being wrong for them, or the fact that they have a learning disability of one sort or another, then they get violent...

The first day I came into [the school], I had all this stuff prepared, questionnaires that I wanted the kids to fill in. They were about thirteen years old. And we handed them out to the kids, there were only about six or seven of them, and all of a sudden, the desks started going over and the swearing started, and I'm going "What's going on here?" I was totally inexperienced, I was a regular classroom teacher, I really didn't understand what was happening. And it was only much later that we realized that they couldn't read - the ones who were throwing the desks over... They already have damaged egos. If you present them with a situation that they can't learn, or they can't function, they feel so humiliated that they'll do anything to cover that up. (Ken Klonsky)

In his final years teaching, Ken was no longer able to work with small groups of students. Instead he was back in the general classroom, clear that the government had made a choice not to expend the resources necessary to support the students he used to work with. Without the resources to explore what is going on, build strong connections with students who will not easily trust, and ask what is leading to student violence, students are suspended or expelled:

There was a time where I thought schools were making some headway with these kids, and then all the supports were taken away. So now, at this stage, they simply have decided to go back to getting rid of the kids. They're not in the building any more.

It was hard, but [in the program we ran] I thought that we really got the hang of it after a while. We decided that we were going to leave the control in the hands of kids, we weren't going to use the holding method—we just looked at each other one day and said "No more of this." And when the kids understood that, they knew they had to control themselves. I think that was a real turning point in our dealings with them, because they were relying on us for physical control, and that's not a healthy situation, for you or them. Because we were getting hurt, on occasion...we just decided if they want to wreck the room, go ahead, as long as they don't hurt somebody. There are very few people who can't apply the control to themselves in that situation...But then you're talking about a system with the luxury of having those types of classes - where you had two people, and very small numbers, and it was very expensive. So I believe that when they looked at the expense of it, and they looked at the cutbacks, they just decided "who are the first kids we're going to sacrifice?"

If there's a student that's being violent to other students, I totally agree, you have to remove that person from the school until such time that they understand they can't do that type of thing. I don't believe in total expulsion. I think that's a horrible rejection, and that's going to come back and hurt society sometime later. You can't just do that to a young person.

At the same time, they're suspending students for swearing and things of that nature, and that's completely unnecessary. That's not to say you shouldn't deal with it, it's just that it's not a reason to say to a kid "You can't come back to school anymore." I don't know, Safe Schools, what they really mean is "Making schools safe for kids who don't have problems." Any excuse—first of all, they know they don't have the money to deal with behavioural problems that exist because it's an expensive proposition to do it properly...and so the policy, all it does it say "we know you can't deal with these kids, so we're going to give you an out." (Ken Klonsky)

One student said that suspending and expelling students for misbehaviour felt like telling them they were bad - abandoning them. I wondered also whether moving these students out does make the school safer even for those who don't have problems.

Several students and educators were clear that not funding the needs of all youth has a major impact on those who have experienced violence. Johanna Petite, a literacy educator and graduate of the George Brown Assaulted Women and Children's Counsellor/Advocate Program (AWCCA), explained:

You come from a violent home into a school system You come in with low self-esteem, feeling stupid or worthless, and then actually the school system treats you like you're worthless, because they don't have the resources to teach you, let alone the personnel to take care of whatever other needs you have. I think there's a real message being given to kids, and parents. (Johanna Petite)

Students argued that cutbacks will generate problems for the future. Clara Locey, a student who had had the benefit of participating in the LOVE after-school leadership program to help her believe that she could make a difference, was motivated to try to find a way to address the problems:

Cutbacks are so stupid. What are they putting their money into, if they're not putting their money into the youth? They're raising an army of haters. We're the generation that's going to run the world next. Don't they care? I mean, it just makes me so angry that I can't do anything about it because I'm a student and I don't have any power!

You'll see, I'll do wonders for this world. I have to; I can't just sit by and do nothing. (Clara Locey)

But not everyone I spoke to disliked the Safe Schools policy and the current approach of zero tolerance to violence. Some felt that it was valuable to help students to stop before it was too late, and provide access to the supports they needed:

With more experience in this position, and having seen over the years who has had success with each type of system, I believe in extreme strict zero tolerance. What's difficult is implementing it as a human being...it is very painful to sometimes suspend. ...Sometimes doing it now will save them from death, from a life in prison, from a life with drugs, from a life of subjugation. It's still difficult to do it...the students come back and say "You saved me, and you should have kicked me out, and if you hadn't done that, if you hadn't got me in jail I'd be dead now." Because often, too—and VPs, we talk about this—sometimes the only way we can get treatment for a child is to get them arrested. We have and I have, in fact, suspended someone for the maximum which is twenty days, in order that we have to go to expulsion, therefore they will have to get treatment through the court system. Then maybe they'll get a psychologist...or welfare, or a social worker. Because we don't have that from the school structure. But they will get it if they're incarcerated, or if they're waiting for trial. (Secondary school vice-principal)

When this vice-principal described the way she engaged students in the process of identifying the required days of suspension for their “crimes” she was clear that it was important to provide students with an opportunity to see the clarity of the boundaries of accepted behaviour and decrease the confrontation in the process. Although this vice-principal was praising the system as a way to access supports for students, I was reminded of the teacher quoted earlier who said that as a society we have made a choice not to spend what is needed to support those students who need more help.

As I was writing this paper and rereading quotes from students who spoke of the violence they experienced and their own violent response, I was also listening to the radio news as a little girl who has been abducted fills the media. Everyone is desperate for her safe return, and enormous effort has been mobilized. Yet daily, we give up on children—perhaps they are seen as less innocent than this little girl—with the argument that we cannot afford the resources to offer them the support they would need.

What I get, unfortunately in my experience—you know, on the news, when you hear “known to the police”—now I understand what that means. I can tell you by the way something was committed probably who did it. And I would have been horrified, as a—to think “How can they know? Why wouldn't they—” Well, they can know, because they're out at this moment in time, and that is normally what they do, and people tend to do the same things in the same pattern. And it is the same people involved.

The second thing I learned in this job is there are no victims. It's extremely rare to have a true victim. They take turns being victims. And that's something significant, and that's what makes you really cynical,

and makes you question the veracity of everything. Because it's just 50/50 whether today's incident, they started it or didn't start it. Because they're in the circle of violence. The same kids...Parents that just have a kid that just goes to school and joins the volleyball team is not going to even know there's trouble, is not going to be involved in trouble, is not going to be touched by it. It's another world, it's another subculture.
(Secondary school vice-principal)

I question whether "good" and "bad" students can be divided up in this way, and worry that the implication may be that when something happens to "bad" kids it doesn't matter. One student described his experience:

I was a bad kid, a bad person in school, if you want to call it bad - like, misbehaviour and all that stuff. After a while, if you were always getting in trouble but then someone else did something to you, and you told, teachers wouldn't believe you. Principals wouldn't believe you. They'd call everyone and people would deny it, and the principal'd say "You lied to me."...They have to listen to you; they have to listen to the bad kid...(John)

As one student said, there is no simple divide between good and bad kids:

We all have been victims of violence, and we've all, whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally caused some sort of emotional harm to somebody. We're not innocent. (Kwame)

Student accounts of the prevalence of violence raise a question about whether the policy of exclusion creates the violence-free schools that are hoped for. As students explained, much violence goes on out of sight of teachers. One student commented that attempts to stop the bullies were hopeless because they could always get her when there was no one to see. Instead she said that what made a difference were those in school and in her after-school program who helped her see herself differently:

I had teachers who saw that I was bullied and did mediocre things to try to stop it—misguided: "So-and-so, stop calling so-and-so names." and that really doesn't do anything. I recognized by the time I hit middle school that even though the teacher will give the bully problems, the teacher isn't around all the time. So you're going to get it anyways.

But I never wanted somebody to fix my problem. I accepted that I was being bullied. I just wanted someone to tell me that it wasn't okay. That they didn't agree. I got in this whole mindset, that nobody came to my defence. That nobody even came to me afterwards to say "You know, I don't agree with what that person was saying." I was a loner at school...

LOVE did come when I was very much depressed and had dug myself into a hole of self-pity. And they helped me realize that I do have potential—that my opinions are worth something. I will make a difference, as much as people are going to be out to show me that I won't. (Susan)

Many students spoke of becoming a target of harassment by other students because of being different in some way. Whether the difference was how they dressed, where they had come from, where and how they lived, or some other feature that made them stand out, students who became the object of ridicule or physical harassment were clear about the impact this had on their school experience.

That was more violent—being poor—than it was being hurt sexually in any way...I think that just disturbed me mentally, where the poverty is what disturbed [my schooling]. (Jennifer Hogan)

The tiniest difference seems often to expose students, as one student described:

I was new to the public school system. My first day, I rolled up in these green shorts, and a green shirt, and sandals with socks. They were laughing, you know what I'm saying? I didn't know. (Kareem Khan)

He said these students made his grade nine year a nightmare and he began to get into fights, determined not to “take shit” from anyone. Other students spoke of being isolated or beginning to hang out with the “wrong crowd” in the face of bullying. Students who are living in families where there is violence, poverty, drug abuse or alcoholism, and those who are living with a foster family or a group home, are particularly likely to experience changing schools, sometimes frequently (and expulsion may be added to these experiences), thus exposing them repeatedly to the taunting and other violence reserved for the newcomer, the one who is different or vulnerable. For students who are attempting to survive in the face of violence or neglect in the home this harassment at school further undermines their sense of self.

When students also experience being judged or harassed by teachers, the damage is further compounded. Several students spoke of being stereotyped based on race, gender, poverty, or behaviour and said these judgements stick:

I know he stereotyped me because of how I dress and how I look, because you see me dressed like this [baggy pants and big sweat shirt], whatever trend it is, they assume you fit into a certain crowd, you act a certain way. But he never took the time to get to know me and see who I am, he just assumed—his judgement, everything he went off of “That's what I think, and that's what it is.” (Hansen Antoine)

If you have teachers that say “Oh, you're this, so you can't learn,” or if you have teachers and people telling you that you're stupid because

you're a girl, then—I've had a teacher fail me and say that he didn't think that I was good enough to do advanced classes, or advanced English, which meant that I would never, ever be able to go to university...it could be that I was a girl. He was a typical, big, disgusting boy that was a huge power monger, that was just like "You're a stupid Black girl, you can't possibly go to university, you can't, you have to take general classes."

[You have] teachers that just want to fail you, that don't care, because they think you're something, they're completely prejudiced about you, or...they want to fail you, they want to kick you out. And all these teachers and—that's bad, because if teachers think that...they look at these teachers like "Whoa," because they spend, what, eight hours a day with them? Probably more time with them than with their own parents. And they start believing that they're bad. "Yeah, I am bad." So then they don't want to learn, because they're like "Why should I learn, I'm stupid. They told me I'm stupid, so therefore I'm stupid." (Marcia)

In contrast, for those whose experience of school was filled with friends and supportive teachers, school felt safe and remained a place where they could learn in spite of violence at home:

It didn't really affect me because when I was at school, I felt free. I felt like, un-scared. I felt like there was no one who could hurt me here. Everyone was my friend. But at home, I felt scared...that's why my learning didn't go down, because I wasn't scared at school... Because I had so [many] friends there, and my teachers were helpful. (Tina)

Students questioned the value of a policy that moves students who commit violence out of one school and into another, or into special programs. Students who had experienced it were clear this just added to their problems and their inability to connect:

I went to school every day. Basically, I went to school to get away. I wasn't wandering off from school...I've been to about seven different schools. I'd flip out at school, and they'd be like all right, get out of here. [I'd] go to another school. It would only make it worse that I'd be at home for a while till they'd find me another school...One school, I was there for three days and then they kicked me out.

Kicking me out of school wasn't the best thing for me, because of the fact that I had finally for the first time in my life...made friends, and found out what friendship was. Then they kicked me out and now I don't talk to any of them. (Andrew)

A counsellor also pointed out that the problem moves on with the student:

When you kick a kid out of school here, what are the options? Let's be realistic. "This is not the place for you." In some cases I agree and I

advocate, this is not the place for you. But then, where do you go? You hit that magical age sixteen, and they can willingly kick a kid out of school. The school system can. And they say "Well, you know, a semestered school would be better for you." Might be, but potentially if you haven't looked at the problems that got them, in the first place, into that situation, you've just now created a problem over at that semestered school for the kid. And that happens a lot in our system. (Dale R. Callender)

As one teacher described:

I've seen young people who I worked with, with their mothers, wandering from building to building looking for some school to take them in. And they won't. (Ken Klonsky)

When I asked what happens to those kids, Ken said he didn't know.

One guidance counsellor described a student in her school who seemed to be making headway, but then he was expelled and she lost her connection with him.

Especially this one student, who really, all of us thought, "Oh this kid is so neat," and he was so kind and considerate of all the other kids in the group, and very co-operative, and very motivated and positive. And just last week he was expelled from the school. So that really surprised me...it was just after I had seen him. [I said to him] "Oh, you are doing so well! You're passing almost everything, you're really being focussed, you're applying yourself." And the next thing I hear he's expelled—I couldn't believe it...The thing is that it bypasses us. I don't get involved in it so I'm not sure exactly what's happened until after it's over. And because we're not involved, it's really hard to get a gauge if that was the appropriate thing. It's hard and fast, and there isn't any consultation, any kind of "Let's try to save this kid." It's like, "That's it, goodbye." (K. Silke)

He would start again in a new school without teachers who had seen his improvement, who were rooting for him and full of encouragement. Teachers and guidance counsellors would likely question whether their attempts to support him had been of any value, and might put less effort into the next student in a similar situation. I wondered about the impact of that loss of connection for both student and professionals.

Students talked about the unfairness of a system that doesn't ask why. Did you hit because you were provoked, because you were trying to prevent violence, because you needed to be noticed, or because you wanted to exert control?

I think the biggest thing is listen to somebody...if you sit down with somebody for two minutes, you don't even have to reply, you just have to show them that you're into them, you're into what they're saying. I think

that would really make somebody feel like, somebody's actually out there for me, somebody wants to hear what I have to say. It just takes a little bit to start...You might not know what a big change you might be making in somebody just by listening for two minutes.

I think teachers need to pay more attention... I think they—not all teachers, some teachers make you feel like they're obligated to do this. That they're not making it fun for—if you make it fun for yourself you'll make it fun for us. And they're not showing that they really want to do it...There's teachers, don't get me wrong, that will show you that they want to do this, they want to make sure that you learn, they want to make sure you're better. Some teachers...the easy way to get themselves out of a situation is send you to the office. Why do you not sit down and talk to the person and tell them what you think they're doing wrong, or listen why they're doing something wrong? (Marcus)

Students also reported what they felt was a double standard—they believed less attention was paid to their reports of violence than to those presented by teachers. They particularly felt that their reports of teachers who bullied students, put them down and treated them disrespectfully were discounted and ignored.

...the common theme in all of them was that when a teacher has a problem with a student, they will suspend you or take action immediately, but when a student has a problem with another student, they don't care... When students have complaints about a teacher too much, they should take that teacher out of the school, because there's obviously a problem with that teacher. They should put in teachers that can more relate—obviously a teacher can't relate to every single student, but a teacher who was down to earth, basically...(Sharon)

I was always surprised, listening to students, to hear how fair and “reasonable” they were when they criticized teachers and systems, acknowledging the limitations and realities of teachers’ lives that might make it hard for them to respond as the students wished. Students didn’t believe they ought to have everything handed to them. They often said “Well, really, people did the best they could,” or “it’s not their job to cater to me.” Perhaps this is an attitude schools could draw on. Students don’t expect teachers to be superheroes but do demand fairness. Could schools explore how to value this prevalent sense of justice, incorporating greater accountability to students and revealing more clearly the processes by which a broad range of school-based problems are addressed? This could lead to engaging students in processes for solving school-based problems.

As we listened to students we also wondered whether being reasonable is a way they protect themselves⁵. If you believe the system is rotten, that people—teachers and students—have little power within it then you don’t expect much

⁵ These insights were developed by Nicole Ysabet and drafted by her as she thought through the complexity of students’ “reasonable” reactions.

out of it. It is less painful to believe no one could have helped you than to believe that any number of people could have helped, but chose not to. When a student says, "I'm bored, I'm not focused, but it's my responsibility," he is not going to get any argument from teachers or administrators. He has effectively relieved them of any responsibility for engaging him⁶. The system says if he can't learn within it, that's his fault, and his expression of "responsibility" fits seamlessly within that. Such a student may also express himself in other ways, some of which appear to contradict each other—disrupting class, talking off topic, challenging teachers who he deems unfair. One lens through which to view this range of behaviours is as expressions of pain and numbness. Sometimes the student can believe that it is his fault and submit, and other times, he is looking for someone to address his pain. Perhaps students are unlikely to share with teachers their sense of personal responsibility; instead teachers are more likely to observe periods of quiet followed by periods of disruption. When teachers respond only to bad behaviour, it may seem unjust and make it harder for students to draw on other identities.

In a context where there's room to express feelings about injustice and perceptions about inequalities, a "reasonable" approach might be a pragmatic basis for social and personal change. The LOVE leadership program, for example, stresses individual responsibility in working towards a social goal and personal empowerment. Youth services counsellor Dale R. Callender also stresses "starting where you are," not saying you should accept that things are just awful, but saying you need to see the parameters of your situation so that you can figure out how to work with it to your best advantage. This is the kind of "reasonable" attitude that schools could encourage and foster in students.

Students frequently spoke about sports and creative activities as giving them an opportunity to express themselves, to let out their anger in an acceptable way, and to be heard and seen in a positive light. One teacher observed the same phenomenon:

The only saving grace is if they get involved in some kind of activity around the school that so absorbs them, they suddenly see a greater value than—they don't want to misbehave because they don't want to lose something that they have found really great. Like they get involved in a dramatic production, or they take part in a sport...there have been some kids who've really been saved by creative stuff around the school...all of a sudden, they have a stake in that place. They want the school to run properly, they want things to work, they don't want to be suspended, because they're now going to do something that's going to put

⁶In contrast Kate Nonesuch, an inspired adult basic education instructor I interviewed in an earlier study, spoke of a rule in her classroom that no one is allowed to be bored, as she said: "When people say 'I'm bored. This is boring' often what it really means is 'This is too easy,' or 'This is too hard.'" Then it's time for me to figure out what kind of work I should give them that would be better for them and it's a time for them to figure out the same thing. We have a problem to solve together. I think that the more opportunities we can give them to understand their own way of learning, the better their learning is." (Horsman, 1999/2000:138/141) It is tantalizing to imagine what a difference such an approach might make to young people's attempts to learn both in and out of the school system.

them in the forefront and give them some distinction. And it's not going to be the distinction of getting in trouble. All they're looking for is some kind of...power or attention or something like that. And once they get that legitimately, they don't need it from misbehaving in the classroom. (Ken Klonsky)

Similarly, at the end of her interview, one student went back to my question about what would make the school system better:

[Not] punishing kids for acting out in ways they can't help. So you're getting bad grades, that means now you can't participate in football, or cheerleading, or the drama club. Because you're not smart enough to do that. Then the child has nothing left to come to school for. You're keeping them there by a thread and now you're taking it away because they're not smart enough...There's punishments for being a slower learner, and that would be something I would suggest [changing], because that's what my brother always got caught on. He's a very slow learner. He's very smart. He used to help me with my homework, because he was very smart and that. But in classrooms, he gets very nervous around people and he becomes a very slow learner. So he got bad grades, and he acted out, so they would take everything away from him and then he'd act out more. So then they'd call him a bad child because he was acting out. The thing is, you took away all his good points of high school. You said "You can't be a part of any of this until you get better grades." Well, what's encouraging you to get better grades if you can't have any fun? High school can't be all horrible. You need to have something good. (Jennifer Hogan)

In the light of cutbacks to the "luxuries" such as art, music and extra-curricular activities and the increasing focus on strict punishment for violence, it is disturbing to hear how much difference these "frills" might make. Perhaps they need to be seen as essentials as they hold a critical possibility of drawing out a positive aspect of the student, helping him or her move away from a singular identity as a "bad" student.

Bronwyn Davies (2000) examines the process of being a "good student" or "bad student" and notices the way the discourse around "consequences" is used to try to "persuade" students to take up the identity of good student. An extract from a principal's journal as she experiments with stepping out of this discourse offers an enticing possibility of what might happen when confrontations over who is in control are sidestepped and an identity other than "bad student" is recognized:

Robert (an eleven-year old) was on the roof today - calling out that he hates all of us - that he's going to burn the school down - that we're all stuffed. He's screaming about some injustice that happened to Paul (a younger boy with whom he travels to school) He has not been to regular school for two years and I know that the

police won't go around to his home without taking two cars. I wonder what I will do, as I know that if he really goes off he could do some damage.

Cath: Be careful up there, it can get slippery.

Robert: Get fucked You're all bastards.

I have some choices about what to say next—to ask what happened, to enter negotiations, to talk about consequences and making good or bad choices about behaviour. Instead I tried to reflect on the discourse in which he is operating. To look at this rebel, wronged, positioned against the always right, in control teacher.

Cath: I didn't know this about you.

Robert: Fucking what?

Cath: I didn't know that you had such a strong sense of justice and will do just about anything if you thought a friend had been wronged.

Silence. He comes down from the roof, picks up his bag, and goes to class. Later I went over to see what's happening and he was sitting down, just doing his work. (Cath's journal) (Davies, 200:161-162)

Reading this extract prompted me to imagine the value of more teachers learning to notice the discourses in which they, and students, are engaged, making more conscious choices to select alternative responses that move out of positioning students as "bad" or "behaviour problems" and, instead, inviting them to develop alternate identities.

Students spoke of programs which allow them see themselves anew, to claim a new identity, to form part of a different group, as especially powerful tools that support them to move away from violence. Students in the after-school leadership program LOVE (Leave Out ViolencE)⁷ were clear that it didn't just provide a constructive or fun way to fill the time, although it did both. More importantly the program offered them a new way of seeing themselves and of being seen. It helped them to move away from negative behaviour and to see more options for who they might become:

What LOVE also can help you do, LOVE gives you responsibilities to— instead of getting people to look up to you ...in a bad way, LOVE gives you [a chance to] have people look up to you in a good way. And so you become your own gang leader, but in a different mentality.

LOVE shows that you are valuable to society. Not like "We could use your help," like "We do need you. You've been down this street, you've seen the gang violence, you know how to talk to someone in a gang. You know their situation. You've had the experience. So it's up to you now to

⁷ There are many models of programs designed to support "at risk" students. Although I did not compare them I suspect that most are valuable. Above all, students need to be listened to, cared for, and respected. One particular asset of the LOVE approach is the focus on the larger issue of addressing youth violence. As well as helping students to try out a new identity, this may also help program staff to develop a concept of success based less on each individual student's immediate achievement (or lack of it) and more on continuing to address the broader issue of youth violence.

teach." It turns it around. I can say "I'm in a gang, my gang is called LOVE. They give me respect. We give each other respect." There's no putting each other down. The initiation is going to schools and sharing our stories, and making kids feel good about themselves, and in return, enriching ourselves. When that kid comes up to you and says they really understand what you're saying, they need some advice or something, that's your initiation...They show you a higher level of self-being, a bunch of other ways to do things.

This student felt programs that simply passed the time were far less effective at changing a student's approach to life:

[The government has] these programs, like rec centres—yeah, they're great to take up the time, but if you're in a gang or selling drugs or whatever, you can work out a schedule. You go to the rec centre and play some basketball, talk to the guy who works there, whatever, you go sell your stuff and you go back. It's simple. It just gives you something to do in your spare time. (Zane Holder)

Another student added his voice to this powerful account:

Being a part of those negative things in the past, I've always known the difference from right and wrong. But I was sort of naïve about it. You want to be your own person and you want to do good things, but at the same time there's a crowd that everyone knows who you are, and you're well-known and all that. You gotta pick. Are you going to pick to be in that crowd, or are you going to pick to be your own self?...Being in LOVE developed those skills that I knew I had, but I just needed something to push me. I got that at the right time...in the past I've done things I'm not too proud of now, but I was caught up into that. And I always wanted to be a part of something positive, but I just didn't have the chance. I didn't know where to start.

[LOVE] helps a lot. You feel really good about yourself. And you express yourself ... in a positive way. You feel pressured into doing that also. Because it helps you. That's the important thing. By helping yourself, you can go out into a community and help others, people that go through rough times and things you've been through. You can go back and help people...going through the same thing. (Hansen Antoine)

Every student I interviewed in this program spoke of the importance of being seen as a resource to address the larger problem of youth violence, and being treated respectfully as one who had much to offer and teach, not just occupied and off the street. This approach clearly helped them find their own strength and sense of self-worth.

I have many questions about the zero tolerance policies, under which students experience suspensions and expulsions, move from school to school and

perhaps eventually into special programs with anger management and tighter controls, but rarely into programming that helps them explore the roots of their anger, see themselves in a new light, or support their self-care and clarity. For students who have already been through violence in the home this may send a strong negative message. The lack of focus on why, on what leads to this, may contribute to many students' sense that no one cares. Expulsions break connections, and make it harder for these students to find teachers or counsellors they can trust and work collaboratively with: the sense of confrontation is exacerbated, the student's lack of control is highlighted. When these students are framed as bad, as the problem, they can easily feel the system has given up on them. Questions need to be asked about the different impacts of zero tolerance for students of different ethnic backgrounds. Research (e.g. Skiba and Peterson, 1999) suggests that such policies have little effect in reducing violence and may increase anger and inequalities through treating racialized students more harshly than white students.

Rather than increasing a feeling of safety as schools institute tighter codes, it seems that students feel less safe and less able to build relationships with staff in the school. Staff at LOVE leadership program drew a vivid picture:

A lot of the kids that I talk to will say that somebody from the school—it's like a police model. Their job is to...catch you doing something bad and to punish you. So you can't have a relationship with somebody like that...The schools are really becoming jail-like. You've got cameras, police, now they've got the dress code thing happening, the zero tolerance—a lot of violence is happening in the schools. So it's a pretty scary place for kids to have to learn. (LOVE staff)

I am left with a difficult question: a safer learning environment does seem an important factor to support learning, yet I am doubtful that policies that seek to remove the violent students are achieving this end. Students still found schools to be violent places—even if the violence is often moved out of sight of those in authority. Students spoke about the importance of more “space” and more connection to create a safer learning environment:

If something happens to you and you're angry, you don't want to talk. You want to get some space, right? But some teachers in schools are just right on you. They send you to the principal's office, that gets you more angry. If you want space, you need to say it—take a walk or sit in the office, do something... I know schools are not going to let people go outside or walk around the halls. But if they had—either the cafeteria, or in my other school we had a place called the fish-bowl. It was in the office... and you could read, play cards, or even just sit there. Just think it out.

I know a lot of kids get stressed, and then the teachers say they can't leave. They get angrier and angrier and then some teachers—like,

they get suspended. And my thing is, if you see a kid's getting stressed and angry, and can't cope in class, and is misbehaving more because of that issue, they need space obviously. A lot of teachers don't give them space, and then they blow, and they get suspended or something. (John)

Further exploration to identify the range of ways students could be given more physical and emotional "space" might enhance possibilities for learning. Students suggested that they would feel safer if there were more time between classes so that they didn't have to push their way through packed corridors; more spaces to retreat to when they need quiet, spaces to be alone, to feel safe; smaller schools where they feel known and valued; more people able to spend time with them, show they value them, notice if something is wrong, and care about what is happening in their lives.

Trying to ensure teaching is happening does not create a learning environment

Demanding attendance

A kid moves through the system...

majors in cafeteria
or washroom
or at-the-fountain-as-often-as-possible
and, out of class lots
or in class, but there-and-not-there.
(Tynes, 1990:41)

Students who have experienced violence are often those who are in class but not really there or are in the washroom a lot, or simply not in school. Students expressed frustration with the stress on attendance. It was a rare teacher who supported students' learning even when they were not attending regularly, and students spoke with huge praise of the message of support and caring they took from those instances. It is tempting for teachers to believe students don't care—why else are they not paying attention, not doing the work, or not bothering to attend? But students talked about not attending because they wanted to avoid lashing out at a bully, to avoid being beaten up, because they had no lunch money, no bus money, or nowhere to go to change clothes:

*It was really hard for me, because I was staying in a shelter at the time, and there's a three month limit at each shelter. So I used up my three months at the one close to my school, so I had to go all the way up to North York and then I couldn't travel because they wouldn't give me the bus fare. So I missed like, a month, but then I finally got my place and when I came back it was, like, November, and I tried to say I was here all September, but most of October I couldn't come. If I could just finish November to January and do my exam—if I do good on my exam—but they wouldn't even give me the chance to do that because they said—
Interviewer: You already missed too much?
Yeah. So I lost four credits there. It's always been like that.*

I was involved with CAS for a while, so I used to move around to different foster parents. When I'd go to a new school, I'd have two months left before the year was done and it was just like I couldn't catch up on all the work, because not every school is at the same position...[Later, in high school, there was violence at home.] It was hard because I'd want to do the work and stuff, I'd want to reach school on time or make certain classes, but because of my living situation I wouldn't get enough sleep. I'd be out on the street till all hours of the morning, I'd finally find somewhere I could go to sleep and then I wouldn't be able to wake up to go to school in the morning. For school you have to have new clothes every day, you can't wear the same clothes you wore the night before, so if I had nowhere to go to change my clothes or get clothes, I couldn't go to school... if I went to school I wouldn't have anything to eat at school... Sometimes I would get the work in advance, or if I missed a lot, I would get the work from the teacher and I'd do it when I was away, but I wouldn't be able to hand it in because I missed too many days. They say you have to have certain hours actually in school. I still had the work with me. I still walked around with my school bag. It was like my one possession. So it was kinda hard. [School's] not really accessible to people that don't really have that stability in their life. (Sarah)

Some students were not in school because they felt worthless or got mad at themselves:

I'm trying—it's too hard. When you get frustrated, you're like—I beat myself up inside so much...I don't let no one know I'm doing it but I am doing it, and I notice I'm doing it, and I get really angry, and then I get fed up, and I'm like "You know what? Forget you all. I'm leaving. I'm not going to talk to you. I'm just gonna go walk." And it hurts, and I know I shouldn't do that, but I do it. (Karen)

Even when students are in the classroom, it is frequently hard for those who have been through violence to stay "present" enough to learn. Many feel judged by the teacher and feel there's no point in being there. The slide to skipping class is a quick and easy one if no one engages with them to support their learning. Three students who had been through different forms of violence gave hints of their experience and how hard it was for them to stay in school. All three had dropped out of school when they talked to me:

I could sit in class and write the notes and pay attention and participate in class, and all of a sudden, I'm not even here. I don't even want to be here. I don't want people to look at me. I don't want to have to look at the teacher—I don't want to have to listen to the teacher. I don't want to have anything to do with the teacher. The teacher doesn't like me...it feels really awful, because before [the violence], you know, you were so good at school and all of a sudden you're failing class after class. It hurts so badly. You go home with

your report card, and your parents—they're confused, they're like: "I thought you were smart, what are you doing failing?" (Anna)

I'm not safe if I see him [violent ex-boyfriend and father of her child]. I'm not safe, and that's what scares me the most. That's why I can't—like now, if I see him I couldn't even stay in this program. 'Cause I can't be focussed. I'm telling you, when something's on my mind and I'm bothered, I can't be focused... I couldn't, I wouldn't be able to focus on my work. I'd be crying too much—into myself. I'm a person, I can't keep my crying in. Like, I'd be feeling my heart over-beating all the time. You'll be talking, I'll be talking to you and all of a sudden something will—I'll think of something with him and then I won't be able to even remember what you told me...I'd be so distracted. I would be really shaken up. I would want to be by myself. I have to be around somebody who could talk to me to make me feel better and it wouldn't just take a couple minutes. I would actually need them for a couple hours, believe me. (Natalie Jones)

...I was in school, and this is when I was very young, and it [violence at home] made me feel like I was not worth the time to be there, not worth the time to go to school. Because then if I did something wrong, I would come home with a bad mark on a school paper, my mom would just start beating me. It was not good at all. If I didn't get an 'A' or anything like that, she wasn't proud of me. That affected me the most...No one ever asked me about nothing. (Karen)

When students are in school but struggling, they are often to be found in the bathrooms.

Francine: I hated it so much I would basically hide in the bathroom most of the time because...I have a thing for bathrooms, I like hiding in bathrooms, because somehow as a child I determined that two places Jesus couldn't see you were the bathroom and the closet...although the bathrooms had bars on them. That was so funny. You'd look out into the courtyard, you had bars on the window...

Jennifer: [Bathrooms were] the only place that you could go that you knew no one was supposed to come talk to you, so if you're in there and no one's talking to you it just makes sense. My thing was always to seem normal, so I didn't want to seem like no one's talking to me and I'm in the hall where everyone is. But if you're in the bathroom, it's safe in there, and the teachers don't go and look for you in the bathroom. So when you're skipping, you can skip in the bathroom.

Francine: Our bathroom was great. Other than, we had the bars, which kind of made you feel like you were in jail, but we kind of felt like that anyway. But we had a heater in the bathroom, and we could sit on the heater in the winter and especially for recess you could escape and sit on the heater. You'd know how many people used it by the amount of spit balls on the ceiling. People would sit there and throw shit up there.

Jennifer: And when you're hiding you can go into the stalls and put your feet up on the toilet so nobody can see you and just hide in there. You learn how to cry really quietly.

Francine: I had to pee every single class. I don't know if my teachers realized that, but every single class. I would ration it, like, okay, it's been an hour. I can need to go pee again. I know I can. And I would raise my hand and go. Just to escape the classroom.

Escaping to the bathroom gives students some, albeit limited, measure of control. There is little other space they can make their own, but in the bathroom they can avoid other students and teachers and create a space for themselves.

Listening to students I was reminded of the process where a person acts out to be hit because it is better than the tension of waiting for the inevitable blow to fall. Similarly, students decide they are going to be suspended or asked to leave at some point, so they may as well leave anyway:

I've done that [given up] enough times. When schools were saying "If you don't shape it up," you know "we're going to have to let you go." I'd be like "You know what? Let me go." and I'd walk out of the office. Just 'cause I knew eventually it was coming, they were just softening me up for it kinda? I've been through it so many times, it's just the same speech. You know what I mean? It doesn't matter about the work I've done, it doesn't matter that I don't have a place to live, it just matters that I'm not here. But you know, I'm gone. Fine, don't look at my report card last semester, middle of this semester, and see what I got. Kick me out now. Whatever. So a lot of times, it's my ignorance that I've lost a lot of credits, but it was just 'cause I knew it was coming. I didn't wait for the blow. I just walked out. (Sarah)

Although this student blamed her own ignorance for actually quitting, it seemed also to have been a way she was able to protect herself from the disappointment of being rejected yet again. She still questioned why she was excluded:

I understand that certain kids, they should be in school every day because they're living with their parents and they have to get certain hours of teaching time. But if I can do the work without the teaching time, then let me at least try. Why are you going to stop me from trying?

Students often spoke about the absurdity of suspension as a punishment for skipping school. They were clear that it just increased the disengagement that was already happening, rather than pulling them back into connection with learning and the school.

Dale R. Callender also spoke of the problems of a system where students who arrive late or skip school are given detentions and suspensions:

...our school system focuses [on] consequences... so you have a kid that's skipping for instance, they end up getting a detention. What do they learn in detention? To a certain point the belief is that it forces them to be on time. When you have someone that's late forty times, and had forty detentions, it's not working. But they don't do anything else...a kid that skips, or is late, three times, they suspend them. Well a kid that's late or already skipping, you would think in terms of—their academic performance has gone down, their self-concept has gone down, because they go into a room and they have no idea what the hell's happening, and then they suspend them for three days. It just compounds the problem. Then they come back and it's like, I've been suspended for three days, now I'm out four days of work! Again, the system doesn't support [them].

This description reveals the need for a new approach that increases students' engagement with school, helping them connect with school and catch up on the classes they missed.

Although punishment for skipping may be problematic, ignoring lateness or skipped classes is not an answer either. Students often talked of how important it is for caring teachers or guidance counsellors to follow up when students first begin to disconnect from school. Skipping classes, or arriving late, may be a call to be noticed. Students suggested that if they had been noticed and someone had seemed to care it might have helped them re-engage:

They didn't notice [my absence] until my mother was sick from work. Once she noticed, then they started getting out the papers: absent this day, absent that day, here half a day, gone half a day. And in public school you're in the same class every day, so they should notice. But no. No noticing. They had however many students per class, you just were one that wasn't there. It had been a few months before anyone noticed I was actually missing. I'd miss two or three days a week.

I think in the beginning I wanted someone to notice, but then I knew no one was coming so it was nice to have the quietness. Because if no one's around, then you don't expect anyone to notice you. Where, when you're in school, and everyone's around, and you're still not being noticed, that's a bigger difference. (Jennifer Hogan)

One teacher I spoke with, Julianne Hodgins, said she had initially felt odd calling students when they missed school. When one student told her that it made him feel she cared about him, it confirmed for her that the call was a valuable interaction, simply giving a message that they were missed and that somebody cared. She focused on making it clear that it was a caring and supportive call, not punitive or critical as she had originally feared the students saw it. In another school, where teachers were now being assigned a number of students to follow up on attendance, guidance counsellors were worried that teachers might not see the value in this task and would let it slide.

Julianne Hodgins contrasts what she was able to do in a small alternative school with her experience in a larger traditional institution. In the small school, where students are engaged in independent studies, there is more flexibility:

...here, I do say "You're late but you're here, yay!" and I don't ever have to give anyone a hard time, because we have this great policy that says you only have to attend ten one-hour classes. That's your attendance requirement. So you can miss some days, I don't have to be on your case about any particular occasion. And it's such a minimal requirement that it's really easy to stand behind it. If, in an entire semester you can't make it to ten one-hour classes, then clearly you're not in a space to be going to school right now. (Julianne Hodgins)

Students say they want to be taken notice of, but if the notice is only criticism then it makes it harder to go to class the next time:

A lot of teachers do that [take students' skipping class personally rather than thinking about what might be going on for the student]. When you skip their class the day before, and you come in the following day and they're berating you for being absent, it makes you that much less motivated to come the next day. So then it becomes a pattern of skipping. If I didn't have a note, or a reason for why I wasn't there, I was afraid to go. (Clara Locey)

Students reflected on the complexity of needing attention when they are beginning to slide away from school, otherwise the pull of alternative connections easily takes over. Several students commented that grade nine is a crucial time, when more freedom can mean that students are lost:

Sometimes the teachers don't—I'm not saying all teachers, but some of them don't listen to what you have to say. And they're very short-tempered, so like, it's either—it started like they would get kicked out of class. Then they would be like, "okay, I'm not going to this class, 'cause me and this teacher don't see eye to eye." Then they would do something for that period, and then they just get—the web just pulls them in, pulls them in. And then they disappear from school, and that's it.

They'd come to school once a month. And it's like "What are you doing?" Parents are busy with work, they don't really have the time to focus, you know, you could say "Come on, go to school," okay, "I'm gonna bring you back to school, we're going to sign a contract and this is what you're going to do." A week later, it's just like "I'm back to doing what I want to do. No one's really there to watch me and hold me down" and if you were—school, it's not like—no one's there to hold you down.

Once you get to high school, everything's—in middle school, there's close contact with your parents. High school? There's too much kids, it's every man for himself in high school. You either come, the teachers

don't have time to run you down. The grade nines, even the grade nines, they sort of give them their space. And then they take just that little bit of freedom, the difference between middle school and high school, you give that little bit of freedom and then they're gone, and that's how bad things happen. That's how they get involved into gangs, and they start doing other things. Everything just has that sucking effect, like you get sucked into it.

I remember the first time I skipped school, I was so scared. But then, it's like a rush, it's like "Oh, I didn't get in trouble! I'm gonna do it again." And you do it again...I would sleep. I'm like "Okay, no one's here to get on my case." (Tammy)

Students commented that the slide into gangs was often tied to feeling that they couldn't get respect in school, and so look for respect and possibilities on the street instead. Tammy described her cousins' experience:

I watch my cousins. Three of my cousins were in gangs. So the gang life, the activities would have them out late at night, so they would have no time for school. It made no sense for them to get up and go to school, and even if they did come to school, they were like—can I say shit-disturbers? It was just, they did what they wanted to do and—they were more afraid of having that bad-boy rep being taken away from them if they were to sit down there and say okay, I'm ready to learn. Cause they're really smart. I have one that's—he's the brightest in math, but due to the fact that he wants to be in a gang and have that respect from the street, he doesn't sit down to get the respect from teachers or from his classmates. He doesn't believe that he has to, 'cause why when he has the respect of people on the streets?...It's either or—it's like, I have my bad boy rep, I don't listen to nobody, I do what I want to do. It's me and my boys, I'm for that. Or, I'm in class, doing my work, trying to better my future. Usually when they're in gangs, they usually don't believe that the future for them is bright. Like, they always believe that they will be held down, and it makes no sense, even if they were to attempt to learn and make an attempt to better themselves, they still feel that someone would come along and hold them down. Mostly they would say the police, but they're so used to—they do the bad activities, so the police will be on them. They feel like there's no hope. (Tammy)

Some students read the lack of response from teachers and others in authority as a message that the school has simply given up on them:

Teachers responded the same way. They knew you didn't want to be there, so they treated you like you were stupid or shouldn't be there. I've had teachers comment. The attendance lady would laugh at me when I would be like "I'm sick, I'm going home," she'd be like "Oh, yeah." And she wouldn't call my mom or say anything, she'd just let me go home. And it just became an ongoing thing. (Jennifer Hogan)

When students are struggling around issues of control—skipping school because they don't have supports at home that make it possible, because they don't believe in themselves enough to think they can learn, because their clashes with teachers or their absence of connection leaves them disengaged—the rigidity of the expectation of attendance can decrease the likelihood of attendance and the possibility of being fully present and learning. As one teacher observed:

There's something wrong about the attendance thing. If we could somehow come clean about the fact that part of our job as a teacher is to be a babysitter, then maybe we could say "You must be here. But you can come here and pretend it's jail, or you can come here and go to school." I don't know...I have kids who come to my class who don't want to be there and will not engage... Mandatory daily attendance in school means that most of them don't want to be there. I haven't seen anybody, never mind students with bad stuff, I haven't seen a group of adults get a damn thing out of a presentation that they really resent being at. They talk, they do all of those things that we object to in students. They don't hand in the assignment—the evaluation of the facilitator at the end of the lesson—they talk amongst themselves, they make rude comments about the facilitator. These are all teachers! I've seen them, they do it at OISE! They're badly behaved. There has to be some way in which school becomes a voluntary experience. (Julianne Hodgins)

Students' requests may seem contradictory: on the one hand many suggest it's crucial to pay attention when students are skipping classes or arriving late, on the other they are clear that critical attention will only increase their disengagement and disconnection from school. They want to be asked what is wrong and supported to learn, even when they are not fitting in with the required attendance policies. When, instead, they are suspended or punished in other ways for failing to attend regularly and on time, it becomes another way of moving students who have experienced violence out of the school system.

Labelling the problem

I want to draw attention to students who felt that labels were another way that they were silenced and made to feel different, without diminishing in any way the importance of recognizing learning disabilities and mental health conditions that can get in the way of learning. It is possible that labelling a learning disability or a disorder can become a way of deepening the silence about the impact of violence on learning by diverting attention from the origin of the behaviour and steering attention instead to diagnosis and treatment. One student described his experience:

[When violence started at home is] about when I was first diagnosed with ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder]. I was hyper a lot,

bullying others and not paying attention in class... you know. I don't believe I have ADHD. I don't believe I ever did...

Interviewer: Did you feel it was a reaction to what was happening at home?

Yes.

If I get bored enough, I just get really fidgety and agitated. 'Cause I'm so bored... [I was stuck in my room at home] You sit there doing nothing... I didn't have anything in my room - just my bed and four walls. I slept. It's like being in jail with no TV. To be honest with you, maximum security prison would probably be nothing for me. I'd get a TV!

My teacher would give us work, and I wouldn't want to do it. I would basically sit there fiddling around, and basically that's when my teacher would tell me to go on the computer. And then when I started beating people up, that's when I actually got diagnosed. It wasn't actually when I started fidgeting, it was more when I started fighting. (Andrew)

In spite of his diagnosis, fighting still led to him being moved from school to school as each new school expelled him for violent, disruptive behaviour—one after only three days. Would a different response—rather than drugs and expulsion—have had more effect on changing his behaviour? Perhaps if he had felt less silenced about his home experience, been offered more constructive ways to get attention and to escape from boredom, been helped to build the sense of self-worth so badly eroded in the home, he might have been able to attend and learn.

Andrew was cautious about revealing the horrors of his home life as he was fearful of Children's Aid breaking up his family. His early attempts to talk had led only to a sense of betrayal when his mother learnt of his disclosures and insisted he was lying. I wonder what effect it might have had if he had been enabled to explore the connections between his school behaviour and his home mistreatment and whether his behaviour would have improved if he had been offered a different learning environment. The opportunity to talk about his experience and to develop an understanding of the origin of his behaviour might have allowed him to assign a different meaning to his behaviour and supported him in beginning to develop ways of coping. He had begun to learn on his own that when he had the opportunity to keep himself occupied with something to fiddle with, he was more able to focus and less likely to hit out in frustration. He thought that he might have been more able to study in a room alone—one with a window out onto a garden so that he didn't feel trapped as he did in his room at home—but there was no opportunity to explore the possibilities of these options as he was labelled, medicated, and moved from school to school.

Another student I interviewed spoke of being diagnosed as having a learning disability. I hoped that the diagnosis had helped her feel less judged, less stupid. However, she was clear that it made little difference. It felt like another way of

saying she was stupid and not normal. She said it would have been different if all forms of learning styles were widely acknowledged, if curriculum was designed to be effective for those with different learning difficulties, but instead she felt the judgement of a learning disability just made her vulnerable—it was another reason to be belittled and seen as not normal.

If you're having such a problem... with other people in my school if they acted out, they just honestly didn't try to put any effort into it.

You get thrown into things like co-ops or special ed. classes, and that was your help. You get to be teased by the rest of the school because now you're stupid, because you're in a special ed. class, or you're bad, because you're in co-op. There was no "This is normal, this happens to a lot of kids, so we're going to change our curriculum to include you all."

By the time she reached a college program she experienced ways her learning disability diagnosis helped her to move away from the label of stupid, and begin to identify learning strategies to support her study process:

And [she] was also the person who realized I had a learning disability, and got me to the people I needed to get to to get the support. It didn't help till this year...because then I felt stupid. I felt okay up till that point, I felt like everyone thought the same way I did. I thought everyone studied for six to eight hours every night to get through a college course. But I was wrong. I thought that everyone struggled to organize their time the same way I do, but I was wrong. Then I didn't want to learn that I was different, so it took a long time...a year and a half after knowing, I think now it's more helpful, because when I used to get told I was stupid for something, now I know I'm not stupid. The reason I can't recall that information, the reason why I have trouble doing this and this, there's a logical reason, there's a logical way to work through it...I think having the word disability is kind of degrading, and it really felt degrading in the beginning. But at this point in the game, it's the only thing that will get you in the door. And I'm glad to have something that will get me in the door. (Jennifer Hogan)

Other students who had been diagnosed with learning disabilities or ADHD said this resulted in more teasing and put downs, and sometimes contributed to their violent outbursts.

I got diagnosed with ADHD. And I got made fun of so much because I've got a learning disability. And I've got to take things slowly. And people would say things so fast I didn't follow, I'm like "What?" and they'd be like "You've got to do this, this, and this." And I didn't understand it. So they would make fun of me, saying "Oh, you're stupid, you're retarded," and stuff like that.

[Students would make fun of me] while the teacher was there, and the teacher would sometimes participate in it. I had one teacher who was actually caring enough not to say anything, and would suspend them. He would tell them to be quiet, not to tease me, and leave me alone. And if they didn't, he would either give them detention or suspend them.

Which, I would be like, thank you very much. And the principal understood where I was coming from, but other teachers would just let it go on, or sometimes would participate. And I don't think it's right for a teacher to participate when they're supposed to be caring. (Stuart)

As there is a growing literature focussing on the development of the brain that some learning disabilities may result from childhood trauma (e.g. van der Kolk et al., 1996) it is particularly important that schools and youth programs are equipped to recognize this and to offer appropriate resources to address issues of violence and their intersection with learning disabilities. Neither aspect can be ignored if students are to be supported to learn. A combination of access to counselling and computer resources to reduce students' frustration with learning difficulties and accommodate their inability to read or write with ease might make an enormous difference to many students⁸.

I wondered whether diagnoses of ADHD or other mental "disorders," which often lead to medication, are part of a desire to "fix" the student, just as people who have experienced violence often resort to street or prescription drugs as a way to "fix" their own discomfort. One student spoke about her anger that, having lived most of her childhood with abuse that nobody appeared to want to know about, finally, when the violence was acknowledged, she was expected to be "fixed" and "get over it" as soon as possible:

My parents told the school that I had all these issues with my mother and stuff, and my parents were like, my dad was very much like "Okay, you need to recover. Obviously there's been trauma you haven't told us about, and you need to recover. So this is the game plan. You're going into counselling. We're going to tell the school." The school was oing to put me in special counselling, and this was all very—I had been there two weeks. And all of a sudden there was an agenda of things that had to be done, and they're very planning people. So I don't want to be in counselling, because I'm just starting to realize

⁸ The Toronto District School Board offers an innovative language laboratory program with computers equipped with a wide range of interconnected software along with specially equipped laptop computers for students to take to class which allows those with learning disabilities to complete excellent work at their grade level unhampered by difficulties with reading and writing. This approach requires a combination of computer hardware and software along with specially trained resource people and teachers. If these resources were available to all students with language based learning disabilities or difficulties in their own school or literacy program it might substantially improve their success at learning and decrease their frustration, and the violence and low self-esteem that easily results from failing.

that there's been something wrong. 'Cause my group of friends, their families were worse than mine. I had the best family out of all my friends. So I thought I was blessed, like, there's no problem. So I come into this environment, and I'm like, okay, something went wrong in my childhood if this is what I was supposed to be living. So I was very confused. ...I was not ready to be in counselling at all..."We're gonna be here at eight a.m., we're going to be here at 8:30," these are my parents, right? So I was not getting better on schedule.
(Francine)

This expectation that the problem should disappear as soon as possible can become another demand that violence should not be visible, and another way a person who has experienced violence loses control.

Diagnoses of learning disabilities, ADHD, mental illness or post traumatic stress disorder may be of value to help students recognize the difficulties they are having and believe that with supports they will be able to learn. Diagnoses of this sort may enable students to access accommodations which support their learning. But they can also become blocks to exploring the source of students' problems, leading them to a label of illness, and diverting them from assigning meanings to their difficulties which are associated with the violence they have experienced. Diagnoses can lead to pressure from others that they take treatment and get over their problem as fast as possible.

Being accountable for "teaching"

In Ontario over the last few years, we have repeatedly heard the argument that cutbacks are not affecting the classroom. During this research I began to fully understand that this assertion can be made only if teaching is narrowly understood as imparting information. When teaching is not understood to include attention to the whole student, to why they are skipping school, or acting out, or sitting silently in the back of the room, then students' problems are seen as irrelevant to teaching. Several teachers said they were told that they should ignore issues of violence in students' lives:

They basically say "Your job is to teach. [Violence] is not your responsibility. Don't try and be the social worker—you have no background in that. You can make the situation worse. Be open, and let the person come to you, but take them to the guidance counsellor."
(Art teachers)

Hearing disclosures of violence is not the most important goal for teachers, however, recognizing the impact of violence is an important aid to effective learning. This is possible when teachers can work in concert with supportive people in a broad range of different roles who can establish strong connections with each student. When those other people are not present in the school, teaching is effectively curtailed.

Students spoke about the impact of teachers' responses to their problems and the inadequacy of these approaches to support their learning:

Some teachers would tell you they didn't care. "Those are your problems, and you're in school, and you really need to deal with being in school right now." And others would just be like "There, there, everything will be okay, why don't you try this, why don't you do that," and it would just be like one of those— "This is my job, I'm getting paid thirty thousand a year, you're really kind of interrupting it by not learning at the same pace." The math teacher was my one, in high school. I dropped out so much I had to go back and do grade ten math in grade eleven, and she used me as an example for the other students not to drop out. "You're too old to be in the class." (Jennifer Hogan)

If teaching is simply imparting information, students who don't progress at the same pace, for whatever reason, are seen as a problem.

Within this narrow conception of teaching, teachers feel they are not doing their job correctly if they pay attention to anything except teaching their subjects. As one teacher said:

I imagine somebody, maybe a department head, saying "You're not the social worker, you're not the counsellor, we have a guidance counsellor for that. That's not your job." (Julianne Hodgins)

This approach might work if there were a broad array of other people to build connections with students, but cutbacks mean that support roles are less and less available. I heard about cutbacks of social workers, guidance counsellors and school psychologists, and about students having to wait a long time to access these resources. One counsellor, who is full time in a school, commented on the incredible value of being there the entire time—a rarity:

The reality is when you're here full-time you can build that relationship with the school, with the clients, and you're going to be certainly well-known and certainly well-received I think. [Otherwise] it's like saying to a kid "It's okay to have a crisis, but make sure you only have it next Tuesday afternoon when I'm in the office." Well, reality is that doesn't work. (Dale R. Callender)

This counsellor explained that people think schools are in control of what happens to students, but in his experience schools aren't able to follow up with everyone:

[The school system has the appearance] of a controlled sort of environment, or contained environment. [But] the follow-up doesn't occur with that... the safe schools act says "This is how we're going to deal with that—hard line." It doesn't happen. Except when it's right in your face, and then they deal with that. (Dale R. Callender)

Talking to people in many different roles in the school system revealed most seemed to be struggling with inadequate resources. The students frequently said that inadequate resources gave the real message of how little they are valued:

Sharon: The government says they're worried about students being bad, but look what they're doing to the school system. They're cutting down on everything.

Kareem: The thing about governments is they seek the approval of people. And the people they're not seeking the approval of [are] youth. They don't care—they really in all truth don't care about what happens to youth.

Without adequate resource people who are easily available in the school, teachers cannot focus solely on teaching and many students will be unable to learn. Even when supports are in place for students, teaching has to include recognition and respect for the experiences and struggles of the student, and clarity about how to support learning when students are experiencing violence, if it is to be successful.

Accountability seems in theory like a good way to ensure that teaching is happening. But if accountability is tied to a narrow definition of teaching, then stress on accountability may in itself limit the possibilities of supportive and caring connections with students. One teacher's musing about what her job really should be illustrates the tensions:

If I'm not grounded in that [the academic task], then I feel like I'm off in someplace I shouldn't be, talking to them about their personal life.

Interviewer: What tells you that?

...My own critical voice saying "You're spending all this time talking about x, y, and z problem at home because you don't have anything to say about your assignment, or you're not really interested in it..." The places I've really connected well with students are when I love what I'm teaching, I know what I'm doing.

...and then, what am I going to be evaluated on? I'm watching a colleague of mine very busily reorganize the paperwork and the way she keeps track of students' attendance and her responses to that. And that's because that's what we are most accountable for.

Nobody will ever observe me talking to a student, and nobody will ever give me credit for, or criticism for, my engagement with or non-engagement with a student. But they will look at my book, and they will see how many absences the student had, what I did about it, who I called and where it was documented. How many assignments I

gave them and when they were handed in and how late they were. That's the sort of thing that can be tracked. So that's [what I'm thinking about] when I'm anxious about "how am I being appraised?" Nobody knows, and nobody will ever know, that I spend two hours every Friday with a student who's not even my student, helping him with his English. Nobody will ever know that I spend time with friends' students teaching them how to brainstorm or map something they're really interested in. No one knows. I spent hours on the phone with [a student] trying to get her into the Gerstein Centre 'cause she's in the middle of a crisis. Well, actually, that gets documented, 'cause that's a crisis. (Julianne Hodgins)

It is important that much of the strength in good teaching will be in confidence in and interest in exciting and thought-provoking curriculum, but alongside that, teachers need to find ways to connect with students and help them access the range of supports they need to focus on their learning.

I heard from many professionals that increased bureaucracy and complex record-keeping systems were limiting the possibilities for connection with students. And I heard from students that lack of access to concerned and caring professionals told them that they were not valued. Just as I was hearing from students that it was essential that someone follows up and tries to draw students back in at the point when they begin to skip school, I also learned that attendance counsellors were being cut. When I asked a guidance counsellor what is the process for following up on students who are skipping, she sounded frustrated:

Well, with things like the attendance—we used to have an attendance counsellor but now we don't. And I'm not sure exactly what's going to happen, because of downsizing—as a matter of fact, I have one student, I got a note from a teacher that he has not been attending, and I think the principal actually called home to talk with the family, but the student is still not coming to school. And usually then we would have had the attendance counsellor try to negotiate something with the family and at least get the student connected back to the school and look at alternatives. Now we don't have that, and we have to now make referrals to the head of the social work department. That person then has to decide whether or not it is worthy of having our social worker take this case on. But I think that he would have to in this case because this student is under the age of sixteen. But it's now becoming very, very bureaucratic before we can access any help. (K. Silke)

The shift away from attendance counsellors is more acute because it is happening when other supports have already been cut back: there are already fewer social workers, guidance counsellors and vice-principals in most schools.

As another teacher explained, when a complicated process intervenes between her and the student it is harder for her to engage well with the student:

At [the larger school where I worked], if my students didn't attend class for three classes in a row, then there was a whole bureaucratic process that I had to engage in which involved forms, and principals and vice-principals, and telephone calls home. So at that point, my relationship to that kid is antagonistic. "You've just put me through this huge bureaucratic process. It's really hard for me to be feeling sympathetic about where you are." I think the bureaucracy is a big pressure. (Julianne Hodgins)

Similarly guidance counsellors spoke about being so tied up with record-keeping that they were less able to run programs for "at-risk" students or even be out in the halls engaging with students:

...And then we ran smaller groups for students that were creating a problem in a class. And you know, all of those things I think were helpful in the sense that the student felt that—I don't want to say they were special, but they were being addressed in a positive way, and we were trying to work with them to help them so that they can function better in school.

At one time, I could be focussed and say this is my priority. But then all of a sudden, we're swept with all this other—the data, the paperwork, the computer. And if you don't stay on top of that it's—you're then also accountable to people for having this other stuff done... This year has not been fun. (K.Silke)

This counsellor ended the interview by commenting that she feels bad that she is busy:

I always feel so bad when I'm too busy, it's like the classic—parents are too busy, we're too busy, 'doesn't anybody have any time for me?' It's not that people don't care, it's that there isn't time.

With cutbacks prevalent in so many areas, it is more than likely that students will experience everyone as too busy to make the connections necessary to build trust, support reflection and strengthen understanding so that students have opportunities to rebuild self-esteem and self-worth damaged by violence and achieve success in learning. Although most professionals clearly want to help, the processes of accountability tie them up with paperwork. When they are unable to respond to students' needs, students conclude that nobody cares.

Recognizing the presence and impact of violence supports learning

Attempts to remove violence and focus on teaching don't create safety or an environment that supports learning. The challenge is to identify what might make a difference. I asked every group of students and each individual student I spoke to what they thought might support learning.

Talk about violence

As raised earlier, one essential challenge seems to be to find ways to break the silence about violence and its impact on learning without asking students to speak about their own experiences. They may not want to disclose and to focus directly on memories of violence may increase their pain. Many students suggested that assemblies, classes and courses on issues of violence would be extremely valuable, but some cautioned that if information was given on the impacts of violence on learning then some students would have "ammunition" to taunt others. For instance, if a student is having trouble listening, others could accuse him or her of having experienced violence. Although I would hope that as silences are broken the power of such taunts might be decreased, it is important to recognize this danger. Student advisory groups would be invaluable in helping schools to explore the fine line of programming that would support and not endanger students experiencing violence.

Some students talked about the value of assemblies held in their school on topics (in their words) such as: "Racism Day, Women's Violence Recognition Week, Remembrance Day." Others mentioned the importance of school assemblies about issues of violence where attendance would be mandatory. Some students focussed particularly on the problem of how to catch students at grade nine so that instead of becoming perpetrators or victims of violence, or drifting away from school, they could become advocates for a violence-free school.⁹

⁹ There are a variety of curricula and resources for addressing issues of youth violence (e.g. Kivel & Creighton 1997, Leave Out Violence Youth 2001, Totten and Quigley, 2001) and a range of publications by Education Wife Assault and the Equity Department of the Toronto District School Board. Although some are already in use in schools, students interviewed spoke overwhelmingly about the need for more awareness building and anti-violence activities. There are also many excellent anti-violence education programs, such as LOVE, Education Wife Assault and METRAC projects, and inclusive community building programs, such as Community Builders, but these programs generally require schools to have some available resources to work with the community organizations. I was told that schools are increasingly unable to summon the resources needed.

I personally think it should be mandatory to have a class on this: leaving out violence, ways to stop it, what causes it. You can get both sides. This program just... I love the fact that we have bullies in here and we have victims [at LOVE]... You're gonna pull a bully, and he's gonna say or she's gonna say "This is why I did it," and the victim will be able to see "Oh, so they sort of went through the same thing I went through," and they can relate, and it makes it all so much better, just tying everything together. But it should be a program that at least grade nine students, every time you reach grade nine, you go through it. It should be like a class... Don't ignore it.

Even if it's not a class, an interactive session where we can hear more feedback from the kids. It should be maybe like a course, a week long, and every day for the last period they go through this. I think that it would help so much. They want kids to do community service hours now, it should be like that for these kind of programs. You do thirty hours of violence prevention. It would make such a difference. (Tammy)

Students spoke about the enormous value of knowing that violence is not happening only to you, and the potential value of support from others going through similar experiences. At the same time, many spoke of the dangers of encouraging students to speak out about their own experiences. In spite of this worry, several students felt that support groups could be enormously helpful. Although I wonder whether students would feel exposed by the idea of joining such a group, I can imagine enormous value for those who felt able to attend.

When you have people about your own age that tell you that [they've] been through this, this, and this, you start to—you tell them, you know what? I've been through the same thing. (Andrew)

Alongside the work of naming violence as "ordinary but not okay," community-building work is essential if the school is to become a place where there is less victimization of others and more possibilities for supportive interactions. Many schools and youth literacy programs stress the importance of community, though in times of shortages it is hard to keep this focus in view. Others give this a lower priority and stress the narrow concept of teaching the curriculum.

Students had many ideas about how to assist students to find support without having to ask or tell personal stories. As Andrew suggested:

I read a book and it actually helped me feel more at ease. It was basically a book on youth violence...it was basically all about what happens...stories about youths' past and all that. Then it made me feel like I'm not the only one going through this. 'Cause when you are going through it, it's like oh my god, nobody's going to believe me because this never happened before. You feel like you're the

*different one, you know? Nobody tells you. Nobody shows you proof...
Don't even ask them what they're going through for them to tell you.
Let them read a book. Let them see that there's other people going
through the same thing. (Andrew)*

Several students suggested schools should have boxes where students could anonymously post descriptions of problems they are experiencing and these could then be addressed in assemblies. Given that students who have experienced violence might “space out” when their problem, or something like it, was being discussed and miss vital information, it would be crucial that issues of violence be addressed in a variety of ways. Students recommended that posters should be placed throughout the school, in the guidance office, and information should be presented in a range of settings.

Some students were clear that they didn't want to talk about issues of violence in their lives in a school setting. Some said it was too painful, others initially said they were bored, and wouldn't say any more, but eventually, speaking one-on-one with the teacher said it didn't feel safe to talk about such issues in school. That teacher reflected with clear insight on why it might be hard to link issues of violence and learning:

...if I'm looking at "How does the messy stuff mess up my learning environment?" well, I don't want it to. And if it does, it shouldn't. I just need to keep those things separate then. 'Cause the whole point to being in school was to be clear and tidy and all nice, and get a grip on things. And get out of this mess. And now you're telling me that that mess is affecting my school, and I don't want to know that. And I don't want to lower my guard and get in touch with anything painful or messy if you're not going to help me do that in a way that leaves me stronger in the end. So if your lesson plans, like some of the ones in the book that I objected to, are all wishy-washy and unclear about where we're going, and open a can of worms without any resolution, I'm really mad at you. That's worse than telling me to memorize the names of the states of the U.S. I can say that's useless, but I don't want you to open up a can of worms and then just leave me a bigger mess. And I really mistrust my emotional self. So I'm not sure I want to bring it here, and I don't believe that you really are going to accept my messy self. You encourage me to get all messy and then you slap me if my spelling's wrong. There's two different sets of rules going on, and I can't keep them both going at the same time. On the one hand, you say "Tell me why you haven't got your assignment in and I'll care," and on the other you say "Yes, but there are deadlines and you have to meet them." or "Well, no, it's fine, you don't have to meet them," but I feel like you don't respect me any more. The two worlds don't really easily mesh. (Julianne Hodgins)

Another educator reminded me:

Classrooms generally aren't safe places to think about violence. So whether it's a haven or it's not a haven, I mean for most of us our history of being in a classroom is so much one of giving over of control and power.

She continued her musing with the question:

*I've thought a lot about—one question that seems important to me to ask is, what would happen if the silence was lifted? So what would happen if there were lots of language around this? The consequences are quite mind-boggling, particularly for the educational system. And I think I have known this for a long time: if we had really effective anti-violence programs in schools, and kids were able to talk about violence and learning, all the things that would come up would really threaten both family and educational institutions.
(Marilyn McLean)*

If we opened up talk in this area we could expect a complicated picture of institutionalized and individual violence to become more visible. Many would be critical of the violence perpetrated by institutions such as schools and the demand for change might become harder to ignore.

These reflections are important reminders that schools need careful exploration to find ways to break institutional and individual silences and address issues of violence. School personnel must find a way to present issues of violence so that students know they are not alone, are able to reflect and recognize the impact of violence on their learning and explore possibilities for supports. They must do this in a way that doesn't in itself expose students to judgement from teachers or students, or appear threatening and increase their sense of vulnerability.

Make it “normal” to need help

One student said that schools should announce every week that there are counsellors available to discuss personal issues such as violence. But as I write this I wonder how many schools do have counsellors available. Students also suggested that counsellors employed by the school board may not be the best to address students' personal concerns. As mentioned earlier, during my first focus group session at an alternative school I asked what might support learning for students who have been through violence. All the students who had spent time in one school that has a full-time counsellor employed by a youth services organization said we had to talk to that counsellor because he was what every school needs¹⁰.

¹⁰ In this study I didn't compare different models of how to make a counsellor easily available. I have heard of various other approaches which offer pro-active intervention to students judged “at-risk” (such as the risk and prevention program in Boston or “Changing the Future” in Toronto). I suspect any model which gives students easier access to counselling support will be of benefit.

When we interviewed this counsellor we learned a lot about why this model was judged so valuable by students:

You'll find that they like the program that we offer here because it's full-time. It's very high-profile, very high-accessible, and the relationship the other programs or services have with the other schools seem much more fragmented...

*I don't want to get into any bias, but I'll be candid: I've heard before, in terms of kids sharing information to me, why they end up here and not, let's say, in the guidance is because they're not helpful to them. They feel like they're unapproachable. They don't head to their vice-principal to get help because, you know what, every time they go there, all they're being called down there is for trouble. So they say, okay what are the options available out there, and there's not a heck of a lot, quite honestly. And the cutbacks are even making it worse.
(Dale R. Callender)*

A full-time counsellor in each school would make an enormous difference to students. The counsellor spoke about some of the specifics of how he works:

...[in] the traditional model of service you wait for the kids to come to you, and you get out your paper and pad and "what's the problem, how can I best help you?" And I don't think it's [necessarily the best place to start] because before they actually get here, you have to create an environment ... the feeling that it's okay to go there. And I think that was the main push of myself is taking that stigmatization away from a counsellor or the role of seeking support. So part of the things that I do is I involve myself in the school culture. I think that's critical. Because I think when you're a counsellor but also play the other roles that you're involved in, in terms of school, it also [puts] you in your natural environment, where kids see you being non-judgemental, and being—not yelling at them, you're not part of the school system. And so as I'm involving myself in other activities they can also see that because I'm the same person I am as a counsellor here as I am in one of those things as the football coach. So they can see that and say ... I feel like this is going to be a safe place. (Dale R. Callender)

Students had a chance to get to know Dale Callender before they needed to go to him as a counsellor. That he was already known and trusted seemed very important to the students who spoke to me.

The environment this counsellor created by painting his own room and giving it a different feel from the rest of the school also seemed to give a message to students.

I also think in terms of the environment. If you notice here, if you went through the school rooms you would never find—you won't find a

room in the school that looks anything like this room. Nothing. And I think that's the key in terms of going into a counselling office. I'm in their turf. So how do I make the area accessible for them to want to come to a place that's just a counsellor? And that can be from how I paint the room, what's up on the walls, making the pictures as part of their environment. The majority of these kids—some of these kids I see as counselling, other kids, it's just, they come in. They drop in, water's accessible, coffee's accessible, computer access, it's youth friendliness. And I think when you look at youth-friendliness, I think that has a ripple effect. (Dale R. Callender)

Such a counsellor is able to supply some of the human interaction that teachers felt was being lost in large schools. When students spoke of the counsellor, they said he was different. It was important to them that he was not part of the regular school system. Some had spoken with him when they were students in the school, and described the value of that interaction, but all knew of him, the services he offered, and that he had a reputation as somebody to be trusted.

Over and over again, students talked of the value of knowing that counsellors were easily available and that other students would not need to know that they were talking to a counsellor.

Kids don't want to go, because they want it to be secret. They don't want to go, because the other kids [will] think they have problems. At my last school they made an announcement about a counselling program. Didn't say for what. So I went there and signed in privately...I was afraid to go to counselling...because I didn't want to get teased...What happened was when I signed in privately, every week I did drug counselling and anger management and stuff like that, and what they would do is they would call on the phone and say "Hey, your mom's here," and I would go down and say "What's going on?" and they would take me to the office and say "Your counsellor's here." And then I went to my counsellor. Or they would say something like, "There's an activity going on," instead of the teacher saying "Your counsellor's here," or "Someone's in student services to see you." (John)

The possibility of confidentiality seemed particularly important in the school environment where students often spoke of the way other students used vulnerabilities against them.

Dale R. Callender also stressed that such counselling services and the opportunity to build connections with trusted adults are needed at all stages in the school journey:

Some of the kids that I see here are already gone. And I don't mean this in terms of saying there's no hope in it, but [it] really is tough. And the reality of the service that I provide is that you can't reach everyone. For whatever reason they're not ready. So what would have

*happened if you'd reached those kids in senior public school? Junior public school? So the key [is] early intervention, but there's also the transition program. 'Cause I think this program's just as valuable as something like an early intervention program. For instance one of the things I found, we did some work at our senior public school down the street, and it's interesting, five of those kids are now here...and I'm seeing them on my caseload. So it was a very nice transition, I already knew them. I predicted that these kids were going to be at risk in senior public, and continue to work with them right now. But what I see...is the transition from grade eight to grade nine is horrendous for kids. The system does not support [them] in the magnitude of that jump. So I'm not surprised that...there's a lot more difficulties in grade nine than there would be in grade ten or eleven...I think you lose kids.
(Dale R. Callender)*

The possibility of some continuity and of on-going supports as students moved from one school to the next was enticing, offering the possibility that more students might be able to make the transition without slipping away from school.

Students complained of situations where they were pulled out of class and expected to take on counselling because someone else thought they needed it.

I'm thinking, "You didn't think the other students would know that I was being taken out of a class for an hour every week, and they wouldn't all wonder what was wrong with me?" 'Cause obviously it's not because I'm especially good at anything, 'cause I'm not doing well in school at this point.

...I'm in anger management class, where we're all supposed to take a vow of confidentiality. Fourteen-year-olds aren't confidential about anything. It doesn't really matter. And I'm thinking, everyone's gonna know all this in an hour, I don't know why we're pretending that we're all gonna remain confidential. That's not going to happen. This will all be used against me. And so I didn't really want to participate. And then that made me look like I was just being, you know, stubborn and resistant, and "Obviously she doesn't want to get better." (Francine)

Where students express mistrust of counselling, they are open to criticism that they are not serious about their healing. This parallels the critique of students who are not attending, or misbehaving, as not being serious about their learning. Yet in each case, students may really be looking for ways to create control and safety.

Just as students need supports, teachers also need counselling and other supports. We must recognize that violence doesn't only happen to students and may still be a present reality for teachers. The experience of violence may shape how teachers respond. One teacher commented that if you feel good about yourself and about students, when a student treats you badly you are likely to

ask (or at least wonder) what is wrong, but you are not likely to believe it suggests you or the student are bad. However, if a teacher has been mistreated him or herself in the past and not addressed past anger and hurt, a student's misbehaviour might lead them straight to anger and to a furious determination that no one will treat them like that. Or, if they have no experience of violence, they may have little understanding of why a child might behave so badly. They may slide quickly into a critical judgment and even to a belief that the student is worthless. Teachers' experiences of past violence, or of a comfortable childhood, may lead teachers to empathise with the struggles of their students, or to respect them for their tenacity in the face of challenges. Several students spoke of choosing to talk about their problems to teachers who had similar experiences themselves as children, who they felt would be less likely to judge.

Students were surprised to learn that teachers may not be able to see when students' experiences of violence are affecting their behaviour:

Student: You can probably tell, too, I mean teachers—I'm sure that you can tell when somebody's feeling uncomfortable. I mean, if you've had a lot of experience, I'd assume that you'd be able to see if a student's having—not all, but in certain cases, you can tell me if you've just been able to tell that somebody's having a bad...background, or something's affecting them, to do with violence.

Julianne: I can't—not always.

Student: Not really tell, but you have a feeling or something.

*Julianne: You know, my own stuff gets in the way all the time. I look at that kid in class, and I do not necessarily think "they're having a bad day," I do not automatically think they just went through something difficult at home, I may well think "Oh my god, they think I'm such a boring teacher. Oh my god, it's true, I am such a boring teacher." My self-esteem is going down the toilet, and I have to really do my teacher's college training thing and say to myself "Do not assume that it's all about you." But I have to actively work at remembering that it's not about me, because my first impulse is to feel "What? You don't like me?" I take it personally, and then I have to work at not taking it personally. So no, I don't necessarily always get it. But I think I have an obligation as a teacher to try and get it.
(Julianne Hodgins)*

I suspected that Julianne's refreshing honesty was a new insight for the students listening to her. They had tended to think the teacher's behaviour was all about them and did not recognize how the teacher's own doubts and concerns might affect her response to their misbehaviour or poor work.

All teachers and other professionals working with youth need supports to explore the anger that students' behaviour can lead to and the despair that can result when they feel unable to teach adequately or to make enough of a difference in students' lives. As one literacy educator suggested:

[As a teacher] you probably didn't know you were getting yourself into this when you started this work. And you don't have to be necessarily really talented at counselling...but you need to be aware of certain things. You need to know your limitations and boundaries, and you need to sort of have a handle on your own stuff so that you can actually be as helpful as you can. (Johanna Petite)

Teachers also need time and supports available to help them feel confident about what they are teaching. Otherwise it is harder for them to make connections with students:

The more clear I am about what I'm doing and how I'm doing it and why I'm doing it, and that my marking scheme is reasonable and fair, the easier it is to separate out "I'm having a hard time, I can't do your assignment, miss." from my own anxieties around, "Well, you're just saying that because you want to get out of this assignment, and I feel anxious about you wanting to get out of this assignment, because I don't feel good about the way I prepared you in the first place." And my anxiety level around the whole thing is just going through the roof. I know that's having an effect on how I connect with them. I know that I connect better when I like what I'm doing. I guess I have to feel confident enough about what I'm doing to leave it behind entirely and connect with them however it is that they're choosing to connect with me, knowing that I can return to—ultimately, the thing that I think I do have to offer them is a task that they can accomplish and feel good about. Hopefully it's a meaningful one. And so that's where I'm connecting the "I want you to care," like, I care, and I'm not your counsellor. I'm not your social worker. I'm the person who's going to get you to accomplish certain academic tasks. If I'm not grounded in that, then I feel like I'm off in someplace I shouldn't be, talking to them about their personal life...

For me, it keeps coming back to all of the places I am insecure, all of the places I visit that alienation on my kids. When I completely trust myself to be learning by exploring, I let them learn by exploring. And when I feel anxious or guilty or lazy, then I start to clamp down on them. (Julianne Hodgins)

It is also important for teachers to have the opportunity to learn more about the strategies students use and the ways students have learned to act through surviving violence. For example, one student talked about how she had learned to lie instantly when she feels she is in trouble:

I learned to lie at a very young age. I think it's one of the things I've never been able to lose. We talk about this a lot. I lie for any reason. I lie all the time. I know now not to lie, but if I still feel like I'm in trouble, I'll lie...As a kid, it was such a coping mechanism. "I have a bladder problem, I hurt my foot, my dog died, my grandmother died,

my father blew up," I don't even have a father but I used him a lot. Because you learn to really use that as—okay, no one's listening to me, but if I lie, someone will care. (Jennifer Hogan)

It is tempting to judge students as not serious about their learning, particularly when they lie about their absences or failure to complete assignments. Knowing more about survival strategies students have learned may support teachers to understand students' choices and avoid deciding that students simply don't care when they continue to use these survival strategies in school.

Counselling supports need to be easily, and confidentially, accessible for students and teachers alike. Where there is access to supports and everyone is familiar with and able to trust available resource people, students and teachers will be more likely to be able to understand their own and each other's struggles, and to focus on respectful connection to support learning.

Build hope

[Teachers] took the time to get to know who I was. They didn't see me as some girl that needed to be pitied. They saw that I had so much potential and so much to offer, and they tried to harvest that potential. They encouraged me to be the best that I could be despite my circumstances.

Everybody comes from different walks of life. Sure, you may have a couple of people who are being bullied in your classroom; you can't treat them as one person. Everybody has individual circumstances and histories, and so you should try to cater to those people. To work one-on-one with them, and not to—it's not about solving their problems, but to continually encourage them. Treat them as an individual, and not as "somebody who's being bullied." (Susan)

Over and over again, students described occasions where a teacher had helped them hold onto hope, build their confidence and believe they could learn.

Showing people small things, telling them "good job" when they do something. Not telling somebody "you can't do that."...keep up that type of confidence in them so that they can do it, if they set their mind to it. (Marcus)

Like the student quoted above, many argued that encouragement was the most important single factor in supporting students' ability to learn.

As another student said:

The reason my grade three teacher—I did so well that year. He was the only teacher that took what I was good with and ran with it.

"Oh, you like to read? Great! An hour a day, I'm reading to the class. An hour a day, you read by yourself. I'll let you read wherever you want in the school. Wander off if you want, you don't have to sit in the classroom." Which I loved, 'cause there was a perfect spot underneath the stairs for me. ...And he was the only teacher that wasn't scared of me. 'Cause all my other teachers were, they'd seen me behave so badly, they were scared. And he was the first teacher who went "You know, she's probably not that scary, there's probably something wrong, and if I just let her do what she wants to do I'm sure she'll figure it out. She seems quite intelligent." And he said to me the first day—I had all these panics about going into grade three, and he was like "You seem to be intelligent. I'm not sure why no one else has noticed this, but you seem to be very intelligent. You can read and you can write, and this is pretty much what they expect of you in grade three. You seem to be able to do that. So we'll just let you do that..." He was very excited. He told my mom...I felt so good because he would tell me all these things. He was like "You're doing great." Even for participation...instead of having to work your way up, he was like "We'll work your way down. Everyone starts this with an A. Everyone's perfect here. Everyone's good." In one year I went from being this horribly shy, violent child to being perfect and shocked the hell out of everyone. (Francine)

The importance of encouragement, metaphorically (and sometimes literally) picking up a student who falls and encouraging him or her to keep going could not be stressed too strongly by the students who spoke to me:

There were very few [teachers who worked with what you had]. One was in grade two. He was the best teacher I think I've ever had, I still remember him. He had me in choir, and even though I was tone deaf he said it was okay. He taught me how to snowshoe, and when my snowshoes fell through the snow even though they're not supposed to, he picked me up and carried me back into the class and told me I did a good job. And that it's okay to fall in the snow. And this is the thing, it's the constant encouragement...we'd do a reading time and each of us would read, and if one person stumbled, he'd be like "You know what? It's good that you stumble. If you all read perfectly, my job would really have been taken away." (Jennifer Hogan)

However, in interviews, students explained that it was only the occasional teacher—many students told of one teacher from their entire school career—who believed in them and helped them discover their brilliance. I also heard many stories of teachers (and guidance counsellors) who discouraged students and put them down, sending them repeatedly to the office, limiting their sense of possibility, and contributed to students' anger at a school system which discounted them.

I think a really major problem that is faced in schools today is not so much the teachers, but certain teachers, the way they look at things. A lot of teachers do bring bias into the classroom and it's kind of

discouraging because if you have a teacher that disagrees with you in any way, it's not so much that they'll give you bad marks, but they'll always be down on you when it comes to certain things...I mean, I had a guidance counsellor that, she was nice, in fact I think she was head of the department at one point, but I'd come to her with certain things and she'd just discourage me. You know what I mean? I'd be like "Okay, I want to be a lawyer." "Okay, well, I see," and then she goes through my marks and my work, and "Oh well, you don't have this and you don't have that, and you didn't get a very good mark in this," and it's kind of like, why don't you suggest what I do then? 'Cause I'd even ask her, "Okay, I want to be a lawyer, but I know that I'm not good in math. I personally don't think that law has anything to do with math, but I need it to get into university. What course do you suggest I take that will help me get into university but still have the math?" Instead of her suggesting things, "Maybe you should look at a different career." ...It can be very discouraging for somebody. And then that can also tie into violence. You're going through all this violence at home, let's say, or violence in your community, or violence at school, and the only thing you can think about right now that takes your mind off of it is trying to get somewhere where you don't have to be around that violence any more, and then you go to a teacher or your guidance counsellor to say "What can you suggest I do?" And because that guidance counsellor is at a loss, they tell you "Well, you know, I don't think there's that much you could do. You should pick another career." or "Maybe this school isn't the type of school for you," or "Maybe you should be taking these type of courses." No, you don't tell me what I should be doing, I'm telling you what I would like to do, and your job as a guidance counsellor is to suggest—you're supposed to guide me, help me figure out what choices are appropriate for what I need. (Alternative school social studies class)

In contrast, a student spoke with praise of the way staff in her after-school program helped her believe she could do anything. It was this sort of encouragement and enthusiasm that students craved. Where they received it, as those in the LOVE leadership program all did, they glowed and spun dreams of their futures that were varied, creative and reflective of their hopes to make a difference in the world:

They make you believe that you can do anything you want. [By] their support—they talk to you. Say [you're] into producing, they would hook [you] up with somebody, an agency or somebody that they're working with so that he or she could talk to [you]. They just help you in every which way. When I applied for college, I was torn between these two programs. They sat down, they weighed out the pros and cons with me, they were like "If you do this program, it's a wider variety." They don't make decisions for you, but they give you enough help and support that you feel your decision is one that was well thought out. You feel like you know, I'm making the right

decision...They're so happy for you, they get so excited for you, you really feel good. (Tammy)

When students have access to support and encouragement, they are remarkably effective at holding on to hope that they can learn, succeed in their own lives and make a difference in society, even when they face daily challenges negotiating violent, unsafe, and inconsistent home lives and dangerous communities in school and/or on the street.

Focus on respect

The teacher-student relationship should be all about respect. A student will, I mean, not to sound cheesy, but just absolutely blossom and grow if they feel like their teacher will respect them even when they fail. Because everyone fails, and only through failure, and through darkness and desert do we learn and grow. (Clara Locey)

Many students spoke about the enormous difference that receiving respect can make for each student. Sometimes they asked simply that teachers look students in the eye, and they see that as showing respect they didn't always receive. The student quoted above, Clara Locey, was very clear that respect is crucial, however much the student is messing up¹¹. Although it is important to notice that the experience she praises is from a special program for addictions and may be more acceptance than many programs can offer, it does reveal clearly the importance of valuing the student until they can begin to believe in themselves:

Interviewer: how do you know someone respects you?

It's hard to pinpoint specific things that symbolize respect for me, but it's probably the little things that make the biggest difference. My experience in the drug addiction program; that's probably the best example I have for a teacher that truly respected me. If I even made it in on Monday morning, (I would be coming down from really hard drugs,) the teachers would say: "Hey, I'm so glad you're here today! How are you?" They were never angry with me. They never said harsh words. They were never, ever impatient. Things like that really made a difference.

It wasn't even we're glad you're here, but we're so proud of you that you made it in. They were just so delighted that they meant something to me. That I would make it in even when I was obviously so sick, and just needed to sleep. Other teachers, when you come in late, when you come in, clearly wasted, they're like "Get out. We don't want you here

¹¹ The value of creating a climate of respect and a caring community has been noted by other researchers and seen in many alternative programs (e.g. Bridge over Troubled Waters 2003, McDonald 2002). McDonald also argues that this approach would serve all students well, not just those judged "at-risk."

like this.” it’s absolutely the wrong thing to do, because the student should be there to learn. Even if the teacher is just reinforcing good qualities like attendance, and participation, the student will learn that the teacher sees something good in them, and they’re going to want to come back to be recognized for those qualities again.

If somebody does fall behind, it shouldn’t be the teacher constantly berating you. It should be, look, I really want you to be in this class, but you seem to be having some troubles. Is there some way that we could talk about this? Are there things that you’d like to be learning in this class, so that I can get you to come? I really want you in this class. I really appreciate your input. So let’s talk about this. Why aren’t you coming?

Ken Klonsky’s recommendation, quoted earlier, echoes this description, stressing the value of checking in with a student and then seeing the challenge, to support that student’s learning as a shared one.

Some students felt they did not receive respect, even from office staff, and I wondered how much cutbacks and work overloads come to look and feel to students like disrespect and limit the possibility that anyone in the school system will take the time to encourage them. To help them believe in themselves, students who are mistreated at home are even more in need of respect from adults they come into contact with in the school system. Students want teachers to engage - share a joke, answer questions even if they are not specifically related to their class – and build a relationship to see if they are safe to trust. Many felt this was almost impossible in a large school.

[The school] needs to know their students. I really feel that’s so important. If you can establish trust and a relationship with the student, then they’re much more likely to learn. (Clara Locey)

Students spoke of the difficulty of building trust and feeling seen in a school when teachers had too many students to know each one personally.

I think schools really need to be smaller. You can’t cram 3000 kids into a school. It’s just insane. It makes you into a number. It makes you into a sheep. We used to joke about it in the halls because there were so many people rammed into the halls in between class change. You’re just streaming through the hallways to your next class; you feel like a cow. And the vice-principals are like the cattle herders. (Clara Locey)

In contrast, the experience of a small after-school program where rules could be bent and the students consequently felt valued and respected was key in helping students make crucial changes in their lives:

It was the only time I spent that was positive. I never went there high, even though I had gone to school high, I had gone home high, I’d

gone to church high, I'd done everything high. Except somehow I had enough respect for this place that I just didn't do it. So that got me through. And they let me come to camp, even though I hadn't been in the program for a year...They just speeded me through everything... so I felt like they really needed me, and they respected me when nobody else did. (Clara Locey)

Students often spoke of respectful teaching where their knowledge is valued. Students were insulted when their knowledge was discounted and dismissed and in turn dismissed the teachers who did not believe they could possess knowledge. Lessons with more interaction and class discussion were seen as respectful of students' knowledge:

I understand about using different parts of your brain, and why you go to school, and why you learn things like math and science even if you're not interested in it. 'Cause it's like working the muscle of your brain, it's like massaging a muscle, basically. So I understand the importance of school and everything, I think it's great, but I also think that we need to make it more interactive. In the school I go to now, most of the class work is discussion based. And that makes it so much easier to learn. I don't skip school any more. I go to every class because I want to go. (Clara Locey)

When students felt respected they were more able to respect the realities that limited the possibilities for teachers, but I was awed by how often the students did pause to wonder what made it hard for teachers to modify curriculum to make it interesting, or what struggles of their own teachers might be contending with.

Teachers struggling to show respect are also aware of some of the limitations created by the large institutional setting of the school:

There's other things that make it really hard for them to be seen as people, too... we can't have food in the classroom. Now I get it, cockroaches, mice, mess, janitors are overworked. But there's something profoundly human about offering someone a bite of your apple. Or saying "What? You had soccer practice this morning? That means you haven't had breakfast yet, doesn't it? Here, have some of this." That's so rich. And I'm not allowed to give anyone any food. So that opportunity for engagement's gone. When I was in home economics, I used to be able to send them into the kitchen and say "If you haven't eaten, go get some food." And they'd feel cared for. My stuff/your stuff, that's another thing that I think makes them feel not very human. Like they're not allowed to use the photocopier in a regular school. Again, it's a numbers thing. One thousand eight hundred students using the photocopier, it's going to get broken...(Julianne Hodgins)

This same teacher, after listening to accounts of what makes a difference to students, summed up what is needed with these wise words:

There's something just really humbling, too, about realizing how vulnerable we are and how absurdly it's those really small things that make such a difference. In some ways I don't have to have a B.A. to be a good teacher. I have to be somebody who is caring, and kind and respectful, and a reasonable facilitator ...so why am I spending so much time trying to master the argumentative form of the essay? (Julianne Hodgins)

While stressing the value of respect, I don't want to dismiss the value of a solid knowledge of curriculum so that a teacher may then be able to be more open to letting it go, shifting lesson content based on students' interests. The rigidity of the current curriculum can make it increasingly difficult for teachers to respect students' knowledge and interest.

Every respectful interaction can make a difference to any student, but for those whose self-worth has been damaged through violence, respect may be vital for survival. Pat Capponi explained what it meant to her that her English teacher treated her with respect:

Before that man, whose name is Stan Asher, no one had ever looked at me or spoken to me as though I had value. For that's the key. Otherwise, I probably would have gone on believing that I was intrinsically bad, with nothing to offer. (1992:207) (Quoted in Horsman, 1999/2000 chapter 6)

Clarissa Chandler describes how she envisages the positive interaction:

So I want to also project what I think of as a positive presence, because that is the thing that they are most likely to have not have had, so I want to be providing and contextualizing this warm experience that the trauma is most likely to have limited or constricted in some way in their lives. I want to be able to acknowledge, contextualize, neutralize and not get connected or attached to the shame or humiliation and disrespect associated with the trauma and be able to build and connect to the part of them that is alive and able to go on. (Interview, Toronto, November, 1996) (Quoted in Horsman, 1999/2000 chapter 6)

The idea of teachers and others involved in working with youth holding firm to the idea that they must be a positive presence to build and connect to the part of a student "that is alive and able to go on" is a powerful image that could guide us all.

Support students to value themselves

[School] should be a place where kids can go, even if their home life is bad. The teachers are there to boost their self-esteem, to make them feel good, to tell each and every child how worthy they are. To teach them values like sharing, like peace, how to resolve conflicts. Right from the time when you're in kindergarten to grade 12. (Clara Locey)

Helping students to feel they have worth may be the most crucial factor in supporting learning. As well as schools taking on that role in every way possible, after-school and out-of-school programs can make an enormous difference in students' lives. Students I interviewed through the LOVE after-school leadership program were inspiring. Although they told horrendous stories of their experiences of violence, they had hope, they believed in their ability to complete their schooling, they were clear about career dreams and felt confident in their ability to make a difference in the world.

One student spoke of his experience:

I had all this stuff going on in my life, too. When I hit the middle of grade nine, I never used to talk to nobody. I had stuff at home going on. I had my stepmom really abusing me, not physically, but emotionally...just bringing me down as a person. So I started feeling like I didn't have no meaning here, and it just started affecting my general life but also it was affecting school the most. 'Cause I couldn't concentrate on things, my brain was stuck on one thing...so I wasn't concentrating on my schoolwork at all. I don't know, my brain was just—it would come in, but it would not register. 'Cause I wasn't giving it time to register, I wasn't giving myself time to really figure out what's going on.

My friends noticed I was going in the wrong direction, I was doing a lot of stupid stuff. So they decided to bring me here. For the first three months, things were basically the same, I was just sitting here and listening. But I realize at the same time—right now I realize that I needed that three months just to take in stuff and listen to what people were saying. I wasn't reacting to it, but at the same time I was listening. When I started reacting to it, talking about it, I realized that I was feeling better as a person, my brain was going, flowing more. I could feel stuff going through. I could feel myself learning more.

At school, I never had that chance to express myself that much. Just in the back, sitting there not saying anything. But here people were actually caring what I was thinking about or caring what I had to say. They made me feel that I was important, that I had some role on this earth. I had something to do... [I was starting to think about] what should I write about? What pictures should I take? You know, my mind

started moving faster, I started generating more stuff in there, so it took my mind off of [the abuse].

I go to school...and teachers always try to tell you that they're right. Most teachers, that's how they think. "I'm right, so I don't have to listen to you," or "I'm the one who has the power, so I don't really have to listen to what you guys are saying." But here, when I came here, we're equals...we care about what you have to say, we see what we can learn from what you have to say as well as you can learn from what we have to say. So that was a big difference.

I think because it's like a group, you see other people with more problems than you have. And you see how they deal with their problems, and you're saying "Why can't I do the same thing?" (Marcus)

Another student made it clear why such a program can make such a huge difference:

They [LOVE] made me feel like I had worth. They always treated me with so much respect —they were always so happy to see me and so excited with the work that I did, even the few pieces that I handed in. And they started me on outreaches in September...so I've been doing outreaches now for a year and a half. They were so impressed with the way that I spoke, and presented myself, that it made me feel like I had a real purpose, that I was helping mankind in some way. And that drove me on. I found something that made me as happy as drugs had. And now I don't need drugs anymore. I've got this instead. (Clara Locey)

School activities and after- and out-of-school programs which help students who have experienced violence and mistreatment to value themselves may be fundamental in helping students to develop their own sense of worth and to avoid some of the more dangerous routes they might otherwise take to try to feel better about themselves

Explore ways to teach that acknowledge the presence of violence and its impact on learning

Many new approaches for teaching remain to be explored in practice with youth. Exciting and creative ways forward could emerge from a school or youth literacy program taking on the challenge to work collaboratively with a team of students to identify what might make a difference. One key challenge will be to find ways to avoid confrontations around control, while still maintaining clear structure and boundaries. Appealing to students' sense of justice or fairness may be fundamental in developing systems that work creatively to support learning without leading to conflict around issues of control.

Creating diverse opportunities for connections among students and between youth and adults is widely known as crucial to support learning (e.g. Grobe et al. 2001, Lewis, 2003). Focussing on how to build this connectedness in an era of cutbacks and policies which limit connections is a challenging goal. A crucial element of new approaches will be to create opportunities to challenge the meanings which students make of their own worth and potential when they are mistreated at home or at school. Similarly, there must be space in schools and literacy programs to challenge the meanings that personnel make of students' misbehaviour, inattention and absences, all of which can easily be misinterpreted as lack of interest in learning.

Students and professionals argued for the importance of recognizing the impact of life on students' learning. Traditional approaches to teaching adults recognize the importance of students' life experiences and the need for relevant materials. Teaching youth also requires recognition of the lives students' lead. It is important to understand that there may be "a lot going on" for students which can limit how they are able to participate. Teachers should not expect all students to fit the norm and judge them negatively if they don't. Schools and youth programs need to normalize every experience. Student participation is not a measure of how serious or capable students are. A vice-principal spoke of the disadvantage of teachers not often knowing what students are contending with at home:

Also, the downside of that [teachers not knowing a student's history] is we often see that student who's gotten into some kind of trouble, and we see the whole family and constellation of their life. And are often amazed at how well they've done. And we say, "Oh, my goodness. I met the mother, and I can't believe it. I look at her through totally different eyes now." For example: "How did she make it this far, and how has she done so well?" And that's not uncommon, but the teachers aren't going to see that. (Secondary school vice-principal)

Teachers may know nothing of the specific struggles students are contending with, but need to accept as "normal" whatever students are coping with, and assume their difficult behaviour is a product of that reality rather than a result of lack of interest in learning or innate badness.

As mentioned earlier, students talk about the importance of ensuring that there are pleasurable aspects to school, even for those who are failing:

[Not] punishing kids for acting out in ways they can't help. So you're getting bad grades, that means now you can't participate in football, or cheerleading, or the drama club, because you're not smart enough to do that. Then the child has nothing left to come to school for. You're keeping them there by a thread and now you're taking it away because they're not smart enough. (Jennifer Hogan)

When instructors and tutors can relate to the challenges students are going through, they can help students themselves understand how their experience may be affecting their learning:

People here at [this program] are really dedicated to their students. And they help us out, they make us understand—like, tutors—they're dedicated to us. They help us, they make us understand what we're going through...coming here is a different thing, it's a different aspect for me. People welcome, people are telling me to come in, have a coffee, or you know, they were nice to me. So I've been here ever since. (Karen)

It is especially important to be consistent in an environment where students are not getting consistency at home and to offer safe retreats:

[Inconsistency] is the sign of bad parenting. They've seen enough of it. One day the parent is a terrific person, and the next day they're drunk. They don't even know the kids...inconsistency is sort of frightening for them. The reason I like behavioural classes with integration into the regular system as a model is that they can always go back to that behavioural class and be treated in that consistent way. The behavioural teacher can say to them "Look, these other teachers are going to treat you in all these different ways because they don't have time, but I do. When you come back here you know how you'll be treated, so if you haven't been able to successfully make it through today in Mr. Whozzit's class, come back here and we'll talk about it." It's like a home base for them. (Ken Klonsky)

Where stresses of students' current or past life experiences make it hard to get to the classroom on time, or to sit in the classroom, they may have difficulty being "present" enough to learn. Teachers need to explore ways to help students to become "present" at the beginning of a class and to come back to a focus on the class material when they have wandered. Although it may not be easy to find ways to support this that won't make students more embarrassed or distract other students, exploring approaches such as stretching, breathing, meditation, brain gym (Hannaford, 1995, Promislow, 1998), movement and retreat spaces might help students begin class with more presence and return to presence when focussing on learning in class is stressful.

Through my earlier research with adults (1999/2000), I came to see the value of holistic education to support learning for those who have experienced violence (Chapter 6). During the current study, one student also stressed the value of approaches that help students to bring their whole selves to learning:

I think that [art is] very therapeutic. All kinds of art...I love to dance. I love to draw and paint and sculpt. Lately I've been really into photography, and I love to write stories...Arts and sports need to be an absolute component in the school system. Youth need that so badly. You can't focus solely on the brain as a muscle. You have to focus on the mind, body, spirit, and emotions in order to help in the development of well-balanced, happy students. (Clara Locey)

The challenge with young people may be the way they tend to make fun of each other and their discomfort with anything too unusual. Nevertheless, approaches that support students to bring their whole selves to learning might make an incomparable difference to learning. Engaging students in helping to generate creative approaches for drawing on body, strengthening spirit, recognizing emotion, and supporting all students to believe their minds can function well, would make it possible to develop innovative approaches which students would enjoy. Schools would then be more able to support learning more effectively.

One teacher offered a wise caution. Students must not be encouraged to believe that they will be able to bring their whole selves, or to believe that teachers care about them, and then find that this is not truly possible, that schools have incorporated only superficial change.

It's really horrible to be teased with the possibility of a space where you show up as a whole person, heart and head intact, and then get disappointed or worse still, betrayed. It's easier to show up for school and say "It's a meaningless or largely meaningless exercise, there's several hoops that I have to jump through, I'll simply endure it and then I'll be on." But to show up with expectations and then have them dashed is really hard, so I think that's part of the resistance too, because the minute you start talking about the impact of violence on learning—the minute you said to me that my students actually care about what I think about them, I mean, I'm really relieved, but the stakes are much higher. And I imagine for them, too, the minute they acknowledge to themselves that they care, and they don't have the defence of "This is stupid, who cares, and I'm just getting through it." It's painful. (Julianne Hodgins)

Creating "space"—physical, emotional, spiritual and mental—for students and professionals in the school is a huge challenge. Students and teachers spoke of the lack of physical space to retreat to in the school. Students reminded me that there is no space that is their own, aside from their locker, and even that may be vulnerable to attack. The area in front of the locker is contested space. Where schools have created physical spaces students can retreat to, students reported this has made a huge difference in their ability to learn¹². Yet with funding cuts, libraries and learning centres are rarely open full time. There are few spaces where students can quietly retreat, and few staff available to keep an eye on students who need time alone.

Bronwyn Davies' work, cited earlier, (Davies, 2000) also suggests possibilities for new ways of relating to disruptive students. If teachers pay careful attention to the discourses in operation in the school and explore ways to avoid confirming the "bad" student identity that can so easily become fixed, students have a chance to get their needs met in more positive ways. Though learning to notice

¹² During my earlier study I also heard about an elementary school with a retreat room. The option for students to go there whenever they chose dramatically reduced the tendency for students to act out in the classroom.

the specific discourses and how they play out would be extremely time-consuming, it may offer exciting new possibilities for creating different sorts of interactions with students and generating a possibility of agency for students beyond flouting teachers' authority and rejecting school rules.

A starting point for innovative programming will take into account that many students have a lot going on in their lives. These students need school and educational programs to become a place they want to be, where staff can help them understand their issues and offer safe spaces where they can retreat. Schools need to develop new responses to the learning needs of students who have experienced violence. A variety of holistic approaches might support learning. If school personnel and a team of students interested in developing approaches that can work in the school setting had opportunities to collaborate, creative and effective approaches could be developed.

Summing it up

Create a safer environment

Seeking to remove students from violent homes, removing violent students from schools and avoiding the possibility of abuse by restricting one-on-one connections between students and professionals all look as if they would increase student safety. Instead, these approaches tend to restrict important talk about experiences of violence. This silence decreases safety for many students who are denied any possibility of exploring the meaning of their experience. For these students, connections to build trust with adults become limited, and if they act out or become violent themselves, they are likely to experience repeated confrontations and continually decreasing control over their learning environment.

Opening up talk about violence can create a safer environment. In the long term, policies with regard to child welfare and safe schools should be opened up to extensive research and reviewed. In the meantime, student isolation can be reduced by adopting approaches that normalize experiences of violence and provide information on actions and supports that can be accessed following disclosures of violence. Schools and youth programs need to acknowledge the complexity of students' lives and recognize that families may not be supportive of student learning. Schools need to be cautious about how and when to engage families in students' education, and always recognize that this may increase violence in the home. When school personnel are careful to make the policies visible, to engage students in identifying "consequences," and to clearly separate the behaviour from the person, they decrease the chance that students may feel they are being judged as bad and punished unfairly. Exploring possibilities of reframing students' "bad" behaviour and enabling students to test out alternate identities might prevent escalations of bad behaviour and violence. After-school programs such as LOVE offer an exciting model for addressing violence issues in the lives of youth and for supporting students to reframe their identity. They learn to see themselves as leaders with a role to play in reducing youth violence rather than as trouble-makers or victims of violence.

Community-building work and anti-violence work are both essential to creating a safer learning environment. To reduce interruptions in learning and

increases in violence when students move schools, schools need to explore creating programs with older students acting as mentors for younger students and a range of supports to help new students adjust to all aspects of the new school community. When students are engaged in a process that addresses problems in the school—attendance, misbehaviour and complaints—their sense of justice and fairness can become an asset to their own learning and that of other students. “Space” is important. It is a tool to reduce tensions and violence. Possibilities for creating both psychological and physical spaces need to be explored.

Create a learning environment

A focus on teaching or accountability does not create an effective learning environment. This research reveals that the focus on attendance and narrow concepts of what count as teaching do not serve students who have experienced violence well, but limit possibilities for creating a viable learning environment. Students who have experienced violence need a range of supports in place and easily available. Easily accessible, trustworthy counselling, such as that offered by the Delisle Youth Service pilot project, is needed in every school and youth program. Supports are needed not only for students, but also for teachers, to enable them to understand and respond well to the range of challenging behaviours they may experience from students who have been through violence.

Helping students to hold onto hope, treating them with respect, and supporting them to value themselves are crucial elements in a successful learning environment. To create this environment, teachers and youth workers need supports themselves. They, too, must be able to hold onto hope, be treated with respect, and provided with the supports necessary to do their work and to show it is truly valued in society. It is crucial that students who have been through violence are not simply labelled as having learning disabilities or medicated because of diagnoses of “disorders” without recognition of the role played by violence in creating learning difficulties. Students with learning disabilities need a range of supports to help them learn, otherwise labels of disability become simply another way that students are dismissed and given the message they cannot learn.

Students need careful, supportive attention around absence and lateness. Rather than “consequences,” they need help so they can reduce the consequences of missing or coming late. Responses must show that professionals notice and care that the student has a problem. Successful responses will help the student re-engage with learning wherever possible, rather than increasing their disengagement. Anna, a student quoted earlier, spoke eloquently of how the disengagement begins:

I could sit in class and write the notes and pay attention and participate in class, and all of a sudden, I'm not even here. I don't even want to be here. I don't want people to look at me. (Anna)

It is enormously important that students are offered a range of supports before they lose connection with school and the possibility of successful learning. Anna might be much more likely to be able to stay in school and focus on learning if she knew that her teachers were familiar with the effects of violence on learning and understood the difficulties she was having, if she had access to retreat spaces in the school where she could go when she needed to be alone or to feel safe, if she could get support to fill in the gaps in her knowledge caused when she was unable to pay attention, and if she was offered help to see that her reactions were ordinary responses to violence. If she was unable to stay in the class, an approach that focuses on how to help her catch up when she returned—whether that was two days or two years later—would be crucial to avoid having her feel ashamed at her failure and to support her future learning.

Students who appear not to be learning in schools are still learning something. Are they going to learn that they are stupid, bad, don't belong in schools and can't ever learn, or can we make the changes needed in schools so that teachers have a clear "teaching" task, even when students are temporarily unable to learn the curriculum as it is designed? This research clearly indicates that instead of a downward spiral of failure and confrontation, students who have experienced violence can be learning that their learning difficulties are "normal" reactions to violence and that they are struggling "normally" to survive violence. They can be learning approaches that help them to learn, they can be learning about themselves as learners and what works for them, and that the doors will be open for them to learn later if they are unable to learn the curriculum now. If schools and youth programs acknowledge the widespread presence of violence, make it possible for students to move away from believing they are bad, support them to create connections with trustworthy adults, and to take control of whether they will disclose the violence they experience they will create safer environments where this learning can take place. If they offer a wide range of accessible supports and approaches to help students feel valued and respected they will create learning environments where students can learn that they can learn.

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INTERVIEW LIST

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