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Outreach Schools: An Educational Innovation

To benefit those students who cannot or will not pursue their educations in traditional high schools, that is, to prevent their leaving before graduation or to facilitate their return if they do leave prematurely, educators continue to address the problem of providing alternate educational programs. This study of Outreach Schools, a current system of alternative education, was conducted through staff and student interviews, student questionnaires, school visits, and an exploration of related literature. The school philosophy is outlined, the teachers and students are described, the operation of the schools is explained, and a case is made for this type of educational alternative.

Les enseignants continuent à chercher de nouvelles possibilités quant aux programmes éducatifs dans le but de répondre aux besoins de ceux qui ne peuvent pas ou ne veulent pas poursuivre leurs études dans des écoles secondaires traditionnelles (c'est-à-dire soit pour les empêcher d'abandonner avant la fin de leur douzième année, soit pour faciliter le retour à ceux qui auraient décroché). Par le biais d'entrevues avec du personnel scolaire et des étudiants, des questionnaires adressés aux étudiants, des visites d'écoles et la consultation de la documentation du domaine, cet article étudie un système d'éducation alternatif nommé Outreach Schools (l'enseignement hors école). On y dresse une esquisse de la philosophie du système, décrit les enseignants et les étudiants, explique le fonctionnement des écoles et présente le bien-fondé d'une telle alternative.

For more than three decades, teachers in innovative, alternative schools and programs have attempted to meet the needs of students who either cannot or will not pursue their educations in traditional high schools. Alternative programs have taken many forms and borne various titles including *open schools*, *mini-schools*, *schools without walls*, *free schools*, *magnet schools*, and *community schools*. They have experimented with learning models ranging from fundamental "back to the basics" teaching and behavioral modification to individualized instruction and open education (Ascher, 1982). Schools have had to take on something of a customer service approach to the delivery of education in response to the rapidly changing world of the 20th century (Kushner, Carey, & Jensen, 1994). The recognition that it may be necessary to serve students as customers, giving them what they feel they need, rather than simply what others decide they need, has led to an assessment of the capacity of schools to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body and to the development of innovative educational alternatives. Alternative schools (November, 1998) have worked, in systems, with systems, and even apart from systems to provide outlets for students who do not quite fit into schools. The term *outreach*, which applies to community outreach and outreach counseling and refers generally to "efforts to increase the availability and utilization of

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services, especially through direct intervention and interaction with the target population," has been in use since 1974 (Educational Resources Information Centre *Thesaurus*, 1997). A greater understanding of how outreach schools, successful from the perspectives of both students and staff, are implemented represents a step forward in the development of educational alternatives.

This study of Outreach Schools originated in conversation with a teacher who drew attention to the schools and has worked extensively with at-risk adolescents. Answers were sought to the following research questions:

1. What are the defining attributes of Outreach Schools?
2. What features of Outreach Schools and similar educational alternatives contribute to their success?
3. What characterizes members of the Outreach staff and their perspectives?
4. Why do students enroll in Outreach Schools, and how do they judge their school experiences?
5. Why should educational alternatives like Outreach Schools be provided?

The study is reported in five parts describing in turn the philosophy and organization of the schools, the research methods employed, the characteristics and perspectives of the staff, the profiles and responses of the students, and finally the significance and benefits of this alternative including some associated educational implications.

Outreach Schools

In Poplar School Division (all names of places and persons are fictitious), which encompasses a city and several towns and villages, an assistant superintendent, Mr. James, with the support of a change-minded superintendent, Dr. Clarke, was in charge of four Outreach schools, one of which also operated a home schooling service. Senior management and the elected board provided opportunity for a group of teachers and staff to operationalize a particular philosophy of education for the benefit of students. The schools were answerable to divisional authorities in the major management areas including student personnel, faculty and staff personnel, finance and business management, community relations, and educational programs (curriculum, instruction, evaluation). They were, however, informally organized and managed. Teachers and staff in the four schools and jointly across schools addressed day-to-day and longer-term management problems without in-school or interschool hierarchical, top-down, administrative structures, but instead through collaboration and in a spirit of trust. They approached management the way they approached students—openly, flexibly, reasonably, and caringly, playing down authoritative relations in favor of "influence" relations. Although the schools differed, they all attempted to be community places where young people who might be uncomfortable or feel unsafe in institutional settings could gain self-confidence and continue to be educated. Describing the Outreach philosophy, Mr. James said, "The bottom line is service to the student.... The student comes first, and our job is trying to create places for students to learn effectively, to learn efficiently and to find safety."

Students under 19 could register in an Outreach school in Poplar School Division at any point in the year on payment of a yearly \$75 fee that entitled them to take as many courses as they wished. During orientation, students were engaged in setting goals and making choices, laying the foundation for

self-directed learning, the keystone of the Outreach program. Some subjects were approached in an individual, teacher-student-negotiated fashion in order to secure initial success and motivate students; however, the program was not designed to be less academic or demanding. Many subjects were delivered in provincially available study modules consisting of lessons interspersed with tests. Local libraries and community sports facilities were used, and community businesses provided placements for work-experience programs that, as an integral part of the learning experiences of students, provided a valued link with the community. Students progressed at their own pace, attending only as they wished, the latter being one of the most dramatic differences between these schools and most other high schools. Every two weeks they were required to prepare and discuss brief, written progress reports. Some students came in only to report, pick up new materials, and submit completed work. Others came in to study, to participate in voluntary extracurricular activities, or for discussions and social contact. Teachers provided assistance as requested, encouraged progress, recognizing it might not be immediate, and neither judged nor criticized slow improvement or even complete lack of progress. Students who could not adapt to the self-directed learning mode could elect to take "leave of absence" at any point, thereby becoming inactive. No failing grades were attached to this decision; they could return if and when they felt ready to start again.

Method

The case study is useful in education for "exploring the processes and dynamics of practice" (Merriam, 1988 p. xi). Educational innovations are often the subjects of descriptive case studies because the method helps to amass "thick description" for additional study and comparison. Interpretative case studies go further and attempt also to analyze and explain the phenomena described. Merriam (1988) defined a case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit" (p. 16), a description that well represents the purposes of this study. And, as Yin (1984) specified further, a case study permits the use of multiple sources of evidence, an element of this study, and "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 23). The case study, therefore, appeared to be an appropriate means of attempting to understand the nature of Outreach Schools and investigate the research questions listed above.

Consent to study these schools was secured according to university-prescribed protocol for research involving human subjects. The district superintendent, assistant superintendent, and staff, on receipt of letters of invitation to participate, gave unanimous consent. In mid-September 1996 each staff member (10 teachers, an administrative assistant, and a social worker, here identified A to L) and the assistant superintendent were engaged in one-hour, semistructured interviews. This approach, which enables the interviewer to ask a set of strategic questions and yet permits the participants to develop their ideas, is endorsed by Bernard (1994) for participants who might be considered "elite members of a community ... accustomed to efficient use of their time" (p. 210). New and continuing students, as part of their orientation, were asked to complete questionnaires and to indicate their willingness to be interviewed.

Each school arranged interviews with two beginning and two continuing students. In each category a male and a female, who had enrolled before or during the first part of September, were able to keep appointments while the interviewers were to be present, had consented to be interviewed and had secured parental consent, where applicable. (Students who lived independently typically did not seek parental consent.) Fifteen students, identified here by number, were interviewed on site, there being one who did not keep the appointment. Questionnaires from incoming students, 61 beginning male, 68 beginning female, 31 continuing male, and 38 continuing female were collected before the chosen cut-off date, November 30. The remaining sections of the article report these questionnaire and interview data, conjointly with relevant literature and with reference to the research questions.

Skilled, Caring, Self-Directed Mavericks: Staff Profiles and Responses
Maturity and Skills

Outreach teachers were mature (aged 31-55), experienced (8 of 10 teachers had more than five years of teaching experience), well-qualified individuals. Haberman (1992, 1995a, 1995b) cited the importance of maturity as a prerequisite for teaching children of urban poverty, a somewhat more circumscribed population than Outreach students, but similarly at risk. He advocated selecting mature adults for enrollment in teacher education programs for at-risk students, pointing out that the necessary maturity of thought and acquisition of life experience may not occur until age 25 or later. An experiential background that would permit teaching in several subject areas and provide the means to critique pedagogy was one of the Outreach recruitment criteria applied by Mr. James. Nine teachers held one or more undergraduate degrees in arts, science, education, or physical education; one had a graduate degree, and another had completed equivalent graduate course-work. Three teachers credited a broad life experience as useful preparation for their current roles. Three others had worked in First Nations settings, as youth workers, or in family and community support positions. Several had worked in other occupations. Some had parented or were parenting adolescents or younger children. When asked what was required of them beyond what is required of all teachers, these mature, well-qualified individuals most frequently mentioned the need to be caring and compassionate.

Care and Community

It is sobering if not surprising to learn that the self-esteem ratings of students rise when they drop out of schools (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), a finding that strongly supports the need for comfortable, safe, accepting learning environments. Over 20 years ago, Duke and Perry (1978) found that the skills and psychological characteristics of teachers in alternative schools—patience, sensitivity, sincere interest, and humor—contributed to the establishment of such a climate. More recently, caring has been directly named as important in the learning environment (Bosworth, 1995; Diero, 1996; Elbaz, 1992; Morse, 1994; Noddings, 1992). Green (1997), even more specifically, urged that schools become more nurturing and “stop blaming the victim for needing assistance.” The Outreach staff was about equally divided as to the major contribution of these schools to students, one group assigning top priority to dimensions of

caring such as rescuing students, accepting them as persons, and building their self-esteem, and the other emphasizing assisting and enabling students to pursue academic and vocational success. Because they pursued the two goals simultaneously, neither group underestimated the importance of the alternate priority. Agne, Greenwood, and Miller (1994), in a study of the relationships between teacher effectiveness and teacher belief systems, matched and compared Teachers of the Year from every American state with inservice teachers in similar positions. They discovered that "star teachers" had better qualifications and more humanistic pupil control beliefs. The latter parallels a caring attitude. Similarly, Burke (1995) investigated the connection between subject matter content and student motivation, often a poor connection for many students who gravitate to alternative settings. He observed that the focus in classrooms is generally first on the cognitive and then, time permitting, on the affective domain, when in fact if motivation is at issue, the order should probably be reversed. Similarly, in a study of uncommonly successful teachers of at-risk students, Peterson, Bennet, and Sherman (1991) discovered an "emphasis on students honestly connecting their learning and feelings" (p. 182) and observed that one of the commonalities of the practice of these teachers was to interrupt academic work to address student problems as seemed necessary. From a British perspective, Sammons, Thomas, and Mortimore (1997), reporting on effective schools and departments, stated,

A student-focused approach is indicative of a positive affective environment, an emphasis on the quality of staff-student relationships and enjoyment in the process of learning. It is related to high levels of student motivation. Our results demonstrate that a student-focused approach is important. (p. 174)

A discussion of caring would be incomplete without some exploration of the sense of community in Outreach schools. "Everyone recognizes being part of a larger community," according to Teacher F, who pointed out that the location of the schools in community centers or malls encouraged students to monitor their behavior on behalf of the schools to assure acceptance and yet permit individuality. Teachers observed that students were less likely to engage in put-downs and more likely to help others if competition were minimized and they themselves received help. Barr (1981) and Raywid (1983) both observed that there are few rules regarding student conduct and few disciplinary problems or violence in alternative schools. Duke and Perry (1978) explained the infrequency of discipline problems as significantly related to the convergence of two important factors, student decision-making power and teacher acceptance and approval of student assertiveness. As a part of what the Outreach schools designated their *companion curriculum*, which centered on relationship skills including conflict resolution and negotiation, monthly meetings were held in some of the schools to pursue consensus decisions. Therefore, regarding optimum size, the staff understandably favored a two- to three-teacher school organization with 30 to 40 students per teacher. Generally, small schools are viewed as more comfortable for students and more likely to provide the quantity and quality of help needed (Foley, 1983; Newmann, 1989). The centrality of community is clear in Teacher C's statement that, "We take the kids that are considered 'bad actors' and enable them to accomplish something worthwhile and thereby demonstrate that, if they can work in the school

community, then there is hope for them in the larger community." This is equally obvious in Teacher G's maxim, "It takes community to raise a child." Commenting on good teaching by both elementary and secondary teachers, Clark (1995) remarked that for them, "teaching is good when a class becomes a community of honest, nurturant and mutually respectful people" (p. 14), a prominent goal in the Outreach companion curriculum.

Self-Directedness

Self-directedness (Areglando, Bradley, & Lane, 1996) is central to the Outreach philosophy and was also one of the staff recruitment criteria, the rationale being that self-directed teachers can more readily adapt to a changing, flexible learning environment and model self-directedness for students. According to Dembrowsky (1990), our first responsibility as educators is not to deliver instruction, but rather to motivate students to learn. Many of the students who come to Outreach Schools are not self-starters (Hughes, 1995) and have found it difficult to function in a mature manner in regular classrooms and develop realistic, long-term visions of their lives. Outreach schools are places where students have the support and resources needed to begin to build internal motivation, which allows them to feel in control of the course of their lives, as opposed to external motivation, in which events and the actions of others seem to control their destinies. Staff-member D observed, "students have options, where they can make choices," and as Teacher I stated, students can "become independent decision makers and get the love of learning back and take control of their lives." Dembrowsky (1990) describes internally motivated students as putting forth effort "because they realize that by such effort they are stretching their potential" (p. 4). Faced with the expectation that they will take ownership of their learning or take leave of absence, some students experienced frustrations "taking hold," and "getting in gear." Once successful, however, they delighted in the then possible mutually respectful, adult, egalitarian relationships with their teachers.

To facilitate student self-directedness, Outreach teachers themselves made profound role changes. Their working conditions became much more flexible, and the structure of daily classes disappeared. They recognized the need for students to set goals, monitor their own performances, and experience the satisfactions of self-reinforcement (Burke, 1995; Covino & Iwanicki, 1996). For this to happen teachers themselves had to abandon the traditional teacher role and become nonjudgmental and neither coercive nor punitive. Like teachers in the "gentler school" described by Haberman (1994), they "met no power needs through teaching" (p. 135). The freeing effect of these conditions is evident in Teacher I's declaration, "I just love getting up in the morning and coming to work here! It's an exciting place for the students to be," and Teacher A's observation, "It feels right and so much better than when you have the upper hand." The self-directed learning design does not depend directly on parental support. Staff views regarding the effects of parental involvement on school success were mixed. Whereas parents of Outreach students may assist greatly as mentors and providers of emotional, financial, and academic support, if students were in conflict with or living independently of parents, the lack of parental involvement was not viewed as problematic. Similarly, the self-directed learner may or may not feel the need of peer support. Staff-members

reported that some students were working, some were already a part of small friendship groups in the school, and some were loners, either by choice or through having been excluded earlier. Whatever the case, there was opportunity for, but no pressure exerted toward, socializing with peers. Mutual respect and self-directedness were the critical expectations.

Maverick Sensibility

Self-directedness, creative problem-solving and a "maverick sensibility," a term used by Mr. James to describe the essential propensity of Outreach teachers to take risks, "to stick out one's neck and be willing to do that time and time again," have some similarity. A thesaurus lists terms like *nonconformist*, *independent*, *radical*, and *self-styled* as substitutes for maverick. To a degree, they fit Outreach teachers. Teacher G described herself as "a bit of a rebel," citing it as an asset. Other teachers more cautiously observed that there are sometimes difficulties with the traditional high school approach to problem students, and that, having had tough times themselves as teenagers, they were better able to understand students. Outreach teachers appreciated their "system" in which it is the norm to work with like-minded colleagues to meet diverse student needs, provide the necessary student learning time, give one-to-one assistance, and assign highest priority to empowering students. Yet it is unconventional, if not radical, to relinquish the established direction-giving teacher role, put responsibility for education totally in student hands and overturn the traditional teacher-role. Teacher D commented, "It's just neat to be able to see the reaction of kids when they understand that I'm not telling them what to do!" Haberman (1995b) observed that "experienced 'star teachers' find themselves involved in a continuous day to day struggle to redefine and broaden the boundaries in which they work" (p. 779). Outreach teachers benefited by a program design in which the boundaries had been somewhat redefined and broadened, yet they sought to negotiate still further changes to benefit students. Like "star teachers," they persisted. For example, it may have taken months to help a student begin to be self-directed, yet no credits and associated funding were supplied until courses were actually completed. Why, they asked, could such a success not be registered more directly in the accounting system? They pinpointed irrelevant curricula, poor teaching, and an overly bureaucratic school system as possible reasons for the large number of at-risk students; however, they also acknowledged their own limitations in challenging, inspiring, and exciting students, and rather than blaming others, they tended to take ownership of problems and pursue solutions. Lindley (1990), urged teachers of alienated students "to distinguish between the possible and the impossible; that is to separate problems where [their] work in classrooms can make a difference from problems over which [they] have no control" (p. 26). This was a problem for characteristically persistent Outreach teachers. When they encountered students with overwhelming personal problems and learning difficulties requiring more specialized assistance than could be provided, they were forced to recognize that Outreach is not a panacea and that not everyone who enrolls continues and succeeds. Staff observed that some students, though attracted by freedom, found it too much to handle; some who lacked financial support left to survive; and some who had overwhelming personal problems had seriously limited possibilities of success unless their problems were addressed. Some

who attended only to pacify parents or to meet the conditions of probation lacked motivation and left, whereas others left for a "real bonanza" (Teacher B), be it a first job or the perfect relationship. In addition, for students who had even moderate reading deficits and the often accompanying severe lack of self-esteem, the amount of teacher assistance and student effort required to turn them around, could be excessive. Whatever their reason for leaving, the door remained open for students who wished to try again.

The Wounded, the Workers, and the Wise: Student Profiles and Responses

Outreach students were diverse. Some had experienced minimal success and saw themselves as misunderstood and unfairly treated. Negative views of themselves, of educators, and of other authorities were debilitating to the point that one might see these students as wounded, a descriptive term used by Mr. James. Teacher F referred to such students as having been "beaten fairly badly by many different systems" and being quite dubious when it appeared they would be respected and heard in the Outreach program. Another group of students, the workers, attempted to pursue a high school education while working at one or more jobs, either by choice or through necessity. A few students in a third group, the wise, had it seemed chosen wisely to work in the Outreach pattern either to avoid being held to average pace when they could proceed more quickly, or to escape from a painful social situation. These are rough descriptors and students could belong in more than one group; for example, a so-called wounded student might have been at work, as might a student enrolled to accelerate the pace of his or her education.

Overcoming Obstacles to Success

Whether beginning or continuing in the program, Outreach students could not or would not attend local high schools for a variety of reasons. As shown in Table 1, they may not have attended by reason of health, age, or the need to work, but by far the most common reason for not attending a regular high school was conflict with teachers, administrators, and/or peers, which frequently led to truancy and exit from the system through suspension and expulsion procedures, counseling, and both subtle and not-so-subtle suggestion. Most charitably, students professed general dissatisfaction, stress, or recognition that the regular school no longer met their needs. Some students, however, were more explicit, as was 15-year-old Student 1 who said that his leaving high school was based on "understanding the hopelessness of it." Speaking about a particular teacher, he said,

With him I realized I was fighting a battle I was not going to win. I was fighting to keep my head above water when I had two anvils tied around my ankles. I would have tired out eventually. I figured I'd make it a quick ending, and I left.

Similarly, a young woman (Student 14) told a story of having been through every school in the city, confessing, "I just never learned. It felt like jail!" Another set of reasons for not attending regular high schools can be categorized as specific difficulties in the regular system, including the pace of instruction, the availability and quality of help, the selection of courses, and the size of classes. Personal problems such as pregnancy, child care, conditional probation, and drug use comprised a further category, and a few students actually said they could have attended the local high school.

Table 1
Reasons for Not Attending Local High School

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>Student Percentage</i>	
	<i>Beginning</i>	<i>Continuing</i>
School conflicts	38	44
Work	19	16
School limitations	13	12
Personal problems	14	11
Health	6	9
Age	3	8
No reason	7	

As shown in Table 2, Outreach students acknowledged many obstacles to learning. Perhaps continuing students as a group were more realistic in that fewer of them discerned no learning impediments, and more of them acknowledged that social life, lack of motivation, and personal problems interfered with learning. Both groups reported specified and unspecified personal problems and aggravations related to interactions with family, teachers, friends, and others; instruction that did not mesh with perceived learning styles; and confusion and lack of understanding rooted in specific subjects like reading or mathematics.

The flexibility of the Outreach system and the response of teachers, as shown in Table 3, were perceived to offer a solution to some of the difficulties described above through allowing students to set goals and make choices with regard to subjects, assignments, pace of learning, place of study, and mode of explanation, thereby assuring their being treated as responsible adults working to self-imposed deadlines with guaranteed individual help and no fear of reproach. These findings closely parallel those of Smith, Gregory and Pugh (1981) who found that students in alternative schools were more confident their needs were being met than students in conventional schools, and they identified free choice as the most important factor underlying their satisfaction. Outreach Student 1 enthusiastically commented, "Yep, it's really funky. You get to take your coffee break whenever and your lunch hour whenever." In Outreach the constant support, encouragement, and nonjudgmental attitude of

Table 2
Student Identified Barriers to Learning

<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Student Percentage</i>	
	<i>Beginning</i>	<i>Continuing</i>
Social life	18	25
Work	12	9
Personal problems	13	21
Learning difficulties	11	16
Low motivation	7	13
Criticism	10	6
None	21	10

Table 3
Student Identified Outreach Features Enhancing Learning

<i>Features</i>	<i>Student Percentage</i>	
	<i>Beginning</i>	<i>Continuing</i>
Flexibility	49	49
Staff attitudes and behaviors	18	25
Work itself	14	12
Learning environment	12	14
Novelty	7	

staff, the individualized character of the work, the learning environment of the school, and for some the element of novelty were seen to address learning problems. Student 12, whose grades doubled in Outreach, commented on her experience in a traditional high school,

I was always mad because I put up my hand, and I'd always wait for hours, and they'd go to the smart kids. They would never give people like me a chance. It was really aggravating. Here, I just go up and say that I need to talk.

Perspectives on Work

Work was important in the lives of many Outreach students. Some were self-supporting and a few supported their children. Others were driven to earn spending money or to purchase a vehicle. A substantial group reported looking for work, a category not compiled for the study. As shown in Table 4, male students were more frequently employed. They worked on average more hours per week than their female counterparts. Having more than one job was not unusual, particularly if they had chosen the Outreach program to permit work. For example, a 17-year-old beginning male student (Student 7), who completed most of grade 11 at a regular high school the previous year, had two jobs, one driving a bus transporting disabled students, and the other a full eight-hour shift at a service station. His goals were to buy a vehicle, "a little truck or something just to go around in," live with his partner, and possibly pursue a career in fish and wildlife management. Owning a ranch was really his greatest desire. Motivation? Not a problem!

What sorts of jobs were held by Outreach students? Table 5 reveals that over 40% of employed beginning and 25% of employed continuing Outreach students worked in food service occupations, largely fast food outlets. Retail jobs, including pumping gasoline, comprised the next largest job category for begin-

Table 4
Student Employment Rates and Weekly Hours of Work

<i>Student Group</i>	<i>Employed</i>	<i>Average Weekly Hours</i>
Beginning male	52	30
Beginning female	38	25
Continuing male	71	31
Continuing female	44	20

Table 5
Student Employment Categories

Category	Student Percentage	
	Beginning	Continuing
Food service	42	25
Retail (includes gas stations)	33	23
Recreation	5	
Childcare/cleaning	10	19
Heavy labor	10	33

ning students followed by recreational, child care and cleaning tasks, and finally heavy labor jobs. Continuing students held more heavy labor and fewer retail jobs. Not surprisingly, these young people, not yet high school graduates, worked in a limited number of fields. Beginning Student 9, who got her first job at age 12 making pizza, recognized she needed an education for more secure employment and declared, " Well, I'm like my dad. I want to make money. I don't want to sit around and go to school all day, but I need my education to get money, so ..."

The students' vocational aspirations for themselves five to 10 years hence presented a broader employment spectrum, as shown in Table 6. High-school graduation disappeared as a vision for female continuing students, whereas for some members of the other three groups it remained the significant goal. A substantial percentage of continuing female and especially male students cited wealth, or at least a good paycheck, as aspirations. More female than male students aspired to professions and, as has been traditional, only women saw marriage vocationally. Fewer continuing than beginning male students envisaged staying in heavy labor jobs, and no continuing female students held a view like beginning Student 6, who wanted to work as a truck driver or on a rig like her dad and commented, "You know they have all these stereotypes, like chicks should work in banks or be salespersons for jewellery or Avon or what

Table 6
Student Vocational Aspirations

Aspiration	Student Percentage			
	Beginning		Continuing	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
High school graduation	14	4	6	
High salary	3	9	41	21
Professional status	23	29	15	36
Service	8	5		
Arts/sports	8	11	9	
Trades/clerical	19	9	9	14
Marriage (happiness)		22		7
Heavy labor	11	4		
Business	14	7	3	11
Other			17	11

have you, but that's not for me. I want to do something different." The work study program provided students with some remuneration while they acquired work skills, gained closer contact with the workplace, and established credibility in the community.

Self as Learner

Concept of self as learner is known to be important for student success, so students were asked to describe themselves as learners. In Table 7, beginning and continuing students' descriptions of self as learner are categorized as positive, conditional or average, and negative. Some examples of positive descriptors, beyond the most frequent "good" and "quick," were "confident," "thorough," "determined," and "hard-working." Average or conditional descriptors, most commonly stated as "average," also included, "good when I want to be," "varies," or "off and on." The most frequent negative descriptors were "slow" and "easily distracted," although a few students defined themselves as "bad" or "unmotivated" learners. Student 2 said, "Everybody else in my family was perfect, but then there was me. I was just kind of slower." More female than male students described themselves positively, and more male than female students described themselves negatively. The larger number of conditional and average descriptors among continuing students may signify a maturing understanding of self as learner.

Continuing students were asked whether their views of themselves as learners had changed during the Outreach program, and if so, how. Their responses, as shown in Table 8, were striking. Nobody saw himself or herself as having become a poorer learner; moreover, 87% of the female group and 64% of the male group reported having become more effective learners. Of the male students who reported no change, half viewed themselves positively and the other half negatively. In the smaller group of female students who reported experiencing no change, those who originally viewed themselves positively as learners initially outnumbered those who viewed themselves negatively about 3 to 1. A successful young woman said, "In high school I was a nobody in a class of 30. Here I'm a somebody with a future! I was scared; I viewed myself as a failure" (Student 12). There is equal pride and acceptance in Student 10's declaration, "I finally view myself as a learner. Period!"

The process of improving one's concept of self as learner is complex, lengthy, and hard to uncover. In that direction, continuing students were asked what problems they had faced in the Outreach program and how they had worked to overcome them. Sixty-two percent said they had faced motivational problems, 10% cited personal or social problems, and 6% mentioned school

Table 7
Student Ratings of "Self as Learner"

Rating	Student Percentage			
	Beginning		Continuing	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Positive	56	76	61	61
Average or conditional	8	8	25	29
Negative	36	16	14	10

procedures as problematic, whereas 22% identified no problems. Their descriptions of how they tried to solve these problems were more telling. One quarter of the group had not yet solved the problem. Another quarter described specific schemes like planning self-rewards; seeking teacher support; and altering the pace, the course load, or the place of work to improve performance. Half of the students described the intriguing process of having "taken hold of themselves." Their remarks included "got mad at myself," "got out of bed," "got in gear," "set goals," "did work and passed," and "feared I'd have to go back to the regular school." Claiming to have become adult, a continuing student wrote in a questionnaire response, "In order to change my own situation, I had to come clean about past wrongs and allow my own perspective to change from a child's to an adult's." She continued, "I figured in this life there isn't always going to be someone to tell you what to do, so I decided I should start being my own motivator."

Relationships with Teachers and Peers

The relationship between teachers and students was a significant aspect of the Outreach experience from the perspectives of both staff members and students. A beginning student reflected this when she wrote in a large hand on the back of her questionnaire, "I really like this school! I will work my hardest because it is a cool environment and we have totally awesome teachers!" Similarly, Teacher B recognized the success of Outreach is "acceptance and the maintenance of those human characteristics that foster approval and success." The central themes of both beginning and continuing students detailing how they liked to be treated by their Outreach teachers are displayed in Table 9. In both groups about 40% of the respondents expressed a desire for mutually respectful, adult, egalitarian relationships. Seven of 9 beginning student interviewees focused on adult treatment or not being treated as a children. Another large response category, "normally, as an ordinary student and as currently," may imply something similar. Other responses centered on fairness and tolerance or the provision of attention and assistance. Student 10 observed, "The way teachers treat me is a lot better than the high school teachers. They didn't really view me as a separate entity, just part of the class." A smaller portion of beginning students were divided, some seeking freedom and others recognizing their need for supervision. A few continuing students emphasized the friendliness of teachers in questionnaire responses. Among interviewees, however, the mention of teacher as friend was more frequent. Altogether, the responses were similar to the themes located in an in-depth study of at-risk high school girls (Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997). Two central themes were the

Table 8
Changes in Continuing Students' Learner Self-Ratings

Change	Student Percentage	
	Male	Female
Improvement	64	87
No change, still positive	18	10
No change, still negative	18	3

Table 9
Student-Desired Treatment by Teachers

<i>Treatment</i>	<i>Student Percentage</i>	
	<i>Beginning</i>	<i>Continuing</i>
Normal (as before)	15	17
Respectful/adult-like	40	39
Fair, tolerant	11	21
Helpful, attentive	18	15
Freeing	10	
Traditional	6	
Friendly		8

desire for adults to communicate with them in a nonhurtful way and to talk "with" them not "at" them.

The appreciation of helpful staff attitudes and respectful treatment by teachers also emerged in the responses of continuing students when they were asked to cite three things they *would not change* in the Outreach program. Other large categories, as shown in Table 10, were attendance policies, hours of operation, and flexibility. As one student wrote, "There were so many options. I could read books that interested me and write essays about things that I thought were important." An appreciation of meaningful learning was another central theme in the study of at-risk adolescent girls mentioned above (Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997). Asked what they *would change*, 15% of the same group would have changed nothing. Others suggested changes in facilities (size, decor, space allotment, furnishing), policies (admission, hours of operation, number of staff), location, subject and materials availability and privileges, most notably smoking and listening to music. In the suggestions for change the sense of appreciating the schools and, in a spirit of belongingness and ownership, seeking to improve the facilities and increase access were apparent.

The students who were interviewed were questioned about the role of friends generally and in learning in the Outreach school experience. Almost equal numbers of students attached priority to building community and togetherness in the school or expressed concerns about the distraction of friends. The important role of peer acceptance in the decision to stay at school is widely acknowledged (Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & MacDougall, 1996). Possibly some of those who desired friendship had been denied it, and others had not been able to manage time to both study and socialize.

The questions asked about friendship differed between the two groups. Beginning students were asked if it is easier to learn with other students. Their responses indicated that males were about equally divided, Yes and No, whereas only 3 of 10 female students answered in the affirmative. Student 7, a beginning male, who is always helping others out, said after a couple of weeks in the school, "Oh, I have a lot of friends here now. It's a blast," and Student 1, also a beginning male, declared "I'm just a completely different person," and Student 5, a continuing male, said of his situation in high school and currently, "Nobody hated me but nobody warmed to me or anything either. I'm pretty reserved most of the time." The important point is that Outreach students

Table 10
Features of Outreach Continuing Students Would NOT Change

<i>Features</i>	<i>Student Percentage</i>
Teacher behavior and attitude	38
Organizational flexibility	20
Policy re attendance etc.	18
Location (ambiance)	15
Curriculum and pedagogy	9

could place whatever emphasis they wished on friends and establish contacts as they chose.

For the wounded many “bruises” were healing. For the working, both improvement in skills and growth in self-confidence were happening. For the wise, Outreach frequently brought the satisfaction of working at a comfortable pace and with good results.

Conclusions and Implications

According to Ascher (1982), alternative schools are characterized by volunteerism, small size, egalitarianism, humanness, participatory decision-making, organizational flexibility, individualized learning, and school community commitment, a series of descriptors that precisely portray the Outreach alternative and appear to contribute to its success. Small, flexibly organized schools in which young people who choose to attend are treated with consideration and allowed an equal and fair share in decision-making may, it appears, cultivate the degree of acceptance and sense of community necessary to provide a foundation on which some floundering learners can begin to rebuild their self-respect and, with individualized assistance, continue their education. Coleman (1998), analyzing British Columbia proposals for alternative public schools of choice, now commonly called traditional schools, cautioned that most of the proposals may not have struck an appropriate balance, favoring as they did academic press over communitarian values. Goodlad (1994) pointed out the imbalance in power that characterizes many classrooms and the accompanying reduction in student initiative and increase in subdued passivity produced by teacher dominance. Outreach schools as described in this study sought to reverse this process, encouraging students to make decisions and

Table 11
Features of Outreach Continuing Students Would Change

<i>Features</i>	<i>Student Percentage</i>
Facilities/Location	22
Policy	25
Availability of courses and materials	21
Distractions	11
Privileges	6
None	15

take responsibility for them. As Kaczynski (1989) asserted, "Through choice, a feeling of control over one's own direction emerges" (p. 21). And as Teacher I observed, "Students want to have that responsibility ... They may fall, trip and stumble but, as they take on that responsibility, they're going to have ownership in the school and become part of the community, and *that* is the key to success."

Outreach staff appear also to have taken seriously the conclusions of Dewey (1966) with respect to designing an appropriate educational environment. Recognizing that we educate indirectly through the environment, Dewey concluded that the school environment should be simplified, what is undesirable in it should be weeded out, and it should be linked with the community for the purpose of gaining a broader social experience, all of which appear to have happened in this alternative educational scheme.

For as long as schools are perceived as authoritarian by adolescents relishing feelings of independence, some students may be expected to exit schools prematurely. To serve the public good, programs preventing their departure and enabling their return are needed to increase the possibility of their becoming contributing members of society. One broad implication is the need for teachers and administrators to be caring persons (Noddings, 1995); therefore, the inclusion of a demonstrated caring attitude both as a selection and a performance criterion in teacher education is timely. Another implication, endorsed by Proudford and Baker (1995) in a study of school effectiveness, is the need for all teachers to have the "capacity to critically appraise the process of schooling particularly in terms of the questions: *Whose interests are being served? Who benefits? Who is being disadvantaged?*" (p. 290). These questions, answered truthfully and to the benefit of all students, may strengthen and enhance interventions with at-risk youth.

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